THE DISCUSSION TEACHING METHOD:
AN INTERACTIVE STRATEGY IN TERTIARY LEARNING

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The traditional known method of teaching in tertiary institutions is the lecture method. In this method, the lecturer has a body of knowledge to communicate to his students who are more or less silent participants. In effect, there is an obvious gulf or barrier between the lecturer and his students. However, the focus in this article is to represent teaching in tertiary learning as one that could be more interactive and cooperative with students and teachers as participants. Together, they share ideas, knowledge and information. Significantly, this strategy creates a connection between the students and the curriculum and provides opportunity for open discussions with students (student to student) as well as the teacher. This helps to stimulate imaginative and conceptual thinking, and sharpens logical reasoning among students. It is a design that makes students more active and participatory members of the teaching–learning process, and not mere passive recipients of knowledge.

My first experience as a University teacher may have started the way I was taught. As a teacher-in-training I was taught via the traditional lecture method. A situation where the lecturer as solo performer communicated knowledge to his students, who merely listened with rapt attention. Between the lecturer and students there was an obvious gulf or barrier. As a student then, it was an arduous task being a silent listener who could not question, argue or share knowledge through debates or conversations.

Having to go that route now as a university teacher, I did not feel too comfortable doing what gave me so much academic pain in the past. I decided to adopt a totally different teaching strategy. I started by empathizing with my students. This changed my attitude. I discovered that with every passing day my beliefs and practices about teaching changed. In my quiet moments I renewed the aim of education and appreciated more, the need to make meaning to my learners. I had to go more interactive in my teaching strategies. I allowed myself to be drawn into a more participatory world of learning, with hopes of making my teaching meaningful. My focus since then has centred on teaching, listening to students and together, discuss lesson taught.

Introduction

There have been debates over time to establish whether teaching is a skill or an art. Some students believe in their teacher’s performance as quite brilliant, others get motivated and excited with the presentation and teaching. For some others, their teachers bore them making the lesson dry, hard and leaving them more confused. All of these enthusiasms and opinions are eventually translated into students’ academic
achievement. However, what is pertinent in teaching and learning is the ability to apply skills to the art of teaching with an aim to motivate the learners. A blend of skills and art in teaching is also manifested in clearly structured lessons and manner of presentation. A teacher who can effectively do this is an active constructor of learning, who can, and should transmit knowledge, but should allow students voices to be heard as contributing members of class. This is typical in a discussion class. The teacher teaches, asks questions, and in doing so, he hears his voice. But he does not stop at that. In hearing his own voice, he begins to appreciate the need to hear the voices of those he teaches. This elicits a more participatory teaching, which can stimulate imaginative and conceptual thinking amongst students. In this case, students in tertiary institutions who had hitherto been used to the lecture teaching method, where they are, but, passive listeners.

The Interactive Nature of the Discussion Teaching Method

Most teachers of tertiary institutions tend to be more comfortable with the lecture method of teaching. As a teaching method, lecturing in tertiary institutions is a tradition. The level of students’ maturity may be one of the reasons for using this method at that stage of learning. However in this article, the argument is for a more interactive teaching strategy that crosses all barriers and gulf peculiar with the lecture method. The focus here is the discussion method. It is a teaching strategy in which the teacher brings students face to face as they engage in verbal inter-change of ideas. The teacher in his interactions with his learners performs a variety of roles. He is firstly a teacher whose business is to transmit knowledge, and in doing this he specifies the objectives of his lesson and examines the needs and background of the students for relevance of the topic and its suitability. Importantly too, in applying the discussion strategy to the teaching-learning process, the teacher plays the role of a manager, guide, initiator, referee and a summarizer.

The discussion teaching method is a design that provides opportunity for discussion between teacher and students, and students to students. It is a strategy that centers on shared conversations, discussions, and exchange of ideas in class. It gives opportunity for all to sit and listen, as well as talk and think, thus emphasizing the process of “coming to know” as valuable as “knowing the right answer”. In other words, students in a discussion class are not passive listeners neither is the teacher a sole performer. Students are allowed to develop critical thinking ability, learn to evaluate ideas, concepts and principles, procedures and even programmes and policies on the basis of clearly set criteria. For instance, a student who participates in a discussion lesson learns to support his views rationally, based on facts, too. He appreciates the need to argue logically, define clearly - concepts and terms, and examine critically - rules, principles and constructs. Such a student learns to develop value processing skills in relation to changes that occur in his society.

Essentially too, the discussion strategy encourages cooperative team work
between teacher and students and amongst students. It emphasizes the need for all to work cooperatively while developing societal relationships. Students see themselves as contributory members of the group, instead of separate and odd. According to Bennett (1995), such cooperative learning improves both academic achievement and students’ interpersonal relationship. He goes on to argue that in most cases all students (including high, average and low achievers) tend to benefit from cooperative learning and team work. In the same vein, Johnson, Johnson and Holube (1988) have affirmed that such cooperative spirit in learning help students work together to complete a task successfully. This is also important in promoting students’ independence.

Generally, in appraising the interactive nature of the discussion teaching method, the cooperative spirit of learning inherent is quite crucial. It emphasizes (students) individual and group accountability, with the teacher giving the feedback. Also, through such shared learning students develop shared responsibilities for leadership functions. Significantly too, interaction in the discussion strategy encourages rational arguments and logical reasoning. In doing this, the teacher helps to develop in his learners skills in conflict management and listening. Johnson and Johnson (1987) have also suggested that such interactions in the classroom that promote cooperative learning are successful strategy for reducing stereotyping and social rejection across disability, race and gender lines. In other words, all see themselves as members of a group as they participate in discussions, listen to each other, resolve differences, make suggestions and critically examine issues for the benefit of all. As students formulate their own views in the act of give and take, they also learn to resist the influences of their personal prejudices, commitments, stereotypes; likes and dislikes, at the same time continue to focus attention on the theme of problem at hand.

Besides its emphasis on a high level of interaction for possible cooperative learning, the discussion method is quite important in bringing about meaningful increase in students’ achievement. Basically, teaching strategies stem from teacher’s behaviour. This, in itself is further manifested in the teacher’s effective use of academic learning time. Sadker and Sadker (1991) have argued that allocating adequate time to academic content is not enough. It is the teacher’s ability to effectively use allocated time in classroom teaching that is the real key to student achievement. It is on this score that Berliner (1984) looks at academic time as three major parts. First is the allocated time. This, he describes as the amount of time a teacher schedules for a topic or subject. There is also the engaged time. This is actually that chunk of time in the whole of the engaged time that students spend in active involvement listening to lesson taught, participation in class discussions, question sessions, writing etc. Good and Brophy (1994) have asserted that the more the engaged time spent within the allocated time, the better students’ achievement. Finally, there is the academic learning time which Berliner (1984) simply describes as “engaged time with a high success rate”.

Looking at the above within the con-
text of the discussion teaching method, even though this teaching strategy may be seen as a complex activity, it is quite engaging. Thus, a good teacher can exploit that engaging nature of this method to the advantage of his student as well as his own teaching. Such a teacher could employ an interactive discussion strategy, where he, as manager, guide and initiator creates opportunities for his students to participate actively, not stand on the sideline as mere volunteers.

Ensuring Participation by all in the Discussion Teaching Strategy

Just as the topic for discussion is important in this teaching strategy, so is the seating plan and arrangement of participants clear definition of teacher’s roles, precise determination of students’ role, all with an aim to ensuring academic achievement. Generally, the emphasis on seating arrangement in the teaching-learning process, is the need for students to participate actively. Sommer (1967) has further identified direct visual contact between members of the participating group as the critical variable that leads to increase in communication and participation by students. This has implication for increased learning achievement. In the same vein, in a discussion class, the sitting arrangement, the frequency and depth of eye contact are important variables that are determinants to students’ level of participation and learning. It is in line with this that the teacher should pay attention to the type of communication network in which students are organised for a discussion class. Importantly, the communication pattern has its effect on the quality and frequency counts of student participation, and by implication, the quality of learning that occurs.

Generally, two major sitting patterns have been identified that can be adapted in a discussion class. They are the centralized sitting arrangement and the decentralized.

The centralized sitting network could
take three forms namely the wheel configuration, the chain configuration and the Y-pattern. In the wheel configuration the interaction is such that the teacher takes the position of the hub of the wheel. The position is also privilege to any student who wants to be moderator or discussant. The position of teacher or moderator at the hub is to announce topics that would generate discussion among participants, ask for and receive signals from participants. It is also his duty to examine and present conclusions arrived at by all.

This sitting network can be quite ideal in discussion sessions if effectively managed by the teacher. He can achieve this by being more interactive and cooperative with his participants, thus, playing less a dominant role as the 'hub of the wheel' without which the wheel cannot turn. In effect, he is seen to play a dominant role when he receives signals, oral and non-verbal messages, offer solutions to problems, resolves conflicts and sends messages down the various channels of communications to participants. When he plays all such roles, he assumes a new posture as lecturer, thus employs the lecture method which is less interactive with students as passive participants.

Another centralized sitting network is the chain configuration. Here the teacher takes his place at the apex of the chain. In his position, inputs on discussions are fed back to him, he filters ideas, concepts and rules, and sends back to other participants at the periphery. He also sends back decisions arrived at, corrects obvious fallacies in arguments encountered, and proffers solutions to problems arrived at. Even though this sitting arrangement may make the teacher seem like one in charge, and a repository of knowledge, an interactive discussion method takes cognisance of the importance of shared conversation and discussion. Thus, whatever decisions are
reached are indeed a joint effort of all participants. Such decisions are usually impersonal, objective, outcome reasoning and logical arguments.

Finally is the letter “Y” patterned sitting arrangement. Taking a centralized position with two or three channels of communication, the teacher plays a role of meeting the needs of all participants. He moderates opposing views, filters ideas, gathers information from all, offers solutions, comment on decision etc. He manages discussion in such a way that no line of communication is at disadvantage.

Generally, the teacher or moderator in any of the centralized sitting network may be seen to be in a vintage position and playing a dominant role. But in an interactive discussion classroom, the teacher’s dominant role is limited to serve other participatory roles. He plays the initiator, manager, referee and summarizer. He can always hover from one of these roles to another. Significantly, the beauty of the interactive centralized sitting arrangement lies in the high degree of participation and agreement, centrality and opportunity for a blend in verbal and non-verbal

The Decentralized Sitting Arrangement

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exchanges.

The decentralized sitting arrangement is also very effective for a discussion teaching strategy. This sitting position is characterized by an all channel network sitting position.

In a sitting arrangement of this nature, no one individual, not even the teacher is in a position to dominate discussion. A topic is given and any student who is knowledgeable on it, or the teacher could direct or even dominate discussion. The effectiveness of this sitting arrangement is that students can freely participate. Ideas can be exchanged by all, using eye contacts to receive and send a variety of signals. Like the centralized communication network, the decentralized also aims at an interactive, discussion class session where all participate with greater academic success.

One Final Line on the Interactive Discussion Strategy

• The organisation of a discussion lesson is as important as the topic of discourse. The discussion lesson should be well organised to enable teacher analyse and evaluate issues raised.
• In a discussion lesson, the less the teacher talks, and with less interference too, the more students participate.
• The teacher in managing and directing a discussion session, should watch out for the logical drift of the discourse, and the relevance of points raised especially as it relates to set objectives.
• In the trend of discussion, it should be ensured that all participants are carried along. Pauses at intervals by the teacher or student moderator, give other participants time to be good listeners, think, digest thoughts and take down notes and salient points.
• Other ways of students’ participation include an examination of teacher’s subject content, in relation to students’ contributions, and evaluation of comments made.
• For a more active, participatory discussion class, the teacher should acquaint himself with the names of his students. This creates a more relaxed and friendly class.
• Time allotted to discussion class should be eventually spread. Teacher should be cautious not to rush any part of discussion, especially the last part. There is the tendency for teachers to rush through the last part of discussion. By so doing an otherwise beautiful summary could be destroyed, and vital information even distorted.
• A discussion class can be most complete, effective and interactive, if at the end of discussion, a separate session is set aside to summarise and evaluate content and topic discussed. This could be done in the same class session or separate period(s).
• Finally, the teacher or student should always prepare ahead, his content and topic. This enables him to be logical in his presentation and rational in his arguments, as he effortlessly drives home his points.

Conclusion

So far, an attempt has been made in explaining the concept of the discussion method of teaching. The interactive nature of this teaching strategy was also exam-
ined and appraised. To further express the level of participation by all, in this teaching method, a brief analysis of the sitting arrangement network was made.

Basically, the main intent in this article is to articulate the discussion teaching method as one that is interactive, cooperative and participation by all. It is also a teaching strategy that could stimulate imaginative and conceptual thinking amongst students. Importantly, it is anticipated that a method of this nature will be appreciated in tertiary institutions. It will be quite exciting especially for students who are hitherto used to the traditional lecture method which is sometimes quite less interactive.

REFERENCES