

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED ABOUT TEACHING FROM PROFESSOR GARY N. McLEAN

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated higher education students' perceptions of their classroom learning and explored Professor Gary N. McLean's teaching methodology. The research studied what Ph.D. students, in the International Graduate Studies Program, Burapha University, have learned from the "Future Trends in HRD" course thought by Professor McLean. Twenty Ph.D. students enrolled in this course in June 2009, participated in this study. Qualitative methods were used with interviews and open-ended written evaluation comments provided at the conclusion of the course as the means of data collection. The class environment encouraged students to participate by sharing what they know with their classmates, asking questions when they had doubts about any topic discussed in class, and disagreeing with ideas raised in class. The right source of referencing was emphasized for writing papers. Students were taught to analyze what they had heard and, especially, what they had learned before, believing it to be true. To build new knowledge and share it with other scholars was one of the expectations. Information obtained from the study's findings demonstrates that students can, and did, learn to be scholars.

Keywords: Teaching methodologies, learning approaches, scholar development.

INTRODUCTION

Learning is an important area that both researchers and business practitioners recognize as important to organization development. There are many studies supporting its importance, including those on learning organization, transfer of learning, and knowledge management. Many of these studies have taken place in business settings.

One learning community that is interesting to examine is the university classroom, in which knowledge is often learned, shared, and captured. From June 6 to July 5, 2009, the International Graduate Studies Program (IGSP), Burapha University, invited the world famous Professor Gary N. McLean to teach the "Future Trends in Human Resource Development (HRD)" course to the second cohort of Ph.D. students. McLean is a Senior Professor and Executive Director of International Human Resource Development Programs at Texas AandM University. He has been teaching and advising students in several master and Ph.D. programs in HRD in many universities around the world, such as France, Korea, Taiwan, China, and Malaysia, in addition to universities in Thailand and the United States.

In August, 2007, I attended the same course as a student, and in 2009 I was part of this course as McLean's teaching assistant. The deputy director of the program asked me to write about what I learned in these experiences. Many topics were brought up in the class by McLean and discussed among class members. One thing about this class that impressed me and other students in class was the way in which McLean led the class. He was persistent in encouraging students to think, share what they have learned with the class, and critique what appears to be common knowledge and use in business that might not be supported by research and theory. The students seemed a bit uneasy about doing these things in the beginning, but it became familiar to them after awhile, and the class environment became exciting and collaborative, for an excellent learning environment. Students shared lots of their experiences in class; I saw lots of hands raised and heard lots of stories regarding the topic. This is my perspective; it was interesting

to see how students in class felt and what they learned from the course.

Traditional lecture-centered classrooms have been the means of organizing classes for a long time. It is challenging for teachers to move away from a direct teaching method to one that ensures that learning will take place. In Thai society, it is common to "avoid imposing on other people and to avoid confrontation which suggests dissent" (Maguire, 2002, p. 1). The Thai way of respecting elders serves as the central ideology that is embedded in the Thai way of life. Therefore, it is difficult for Thai students to question or argue when they disagree with an instructor. But, according to McLean (2009a), "If we agree on everything we hear, we gave up learning." Many post-graduate programs have been offered in Thailand, both in Thai and English. The environment should be different from ones we have been exposed to in undergraduate programs in the way in which ideas are shared in class discussions. According to McLean, it is not good to agree with everything the teacher says because the professor is not always right and the amount that is learned is diminished. This is contradictory to the Thai way, which makes it uneasy for Thai students who are used to and comfortable with the unquestioning Thai way. As such, the job of facilitators in higher education in a Thai university is not easy. They have to be able to encourage students to go beyond their comfort zone and speak up. This is one of the big challenges of not only people in educational institutions, but also HRD professionals. Globalization has brought changes to every corner of the globe. Western cultures have been adopted by people around the world. New generations are more outspoken. Therefore, it is interesting to explore today's class environment, how the classes are conducted, and what students learned about classroom instruction. This study aimed to investigate the phenomenon in the higher education classroom, what knowledge students has learned about how they learn, and what kind of teaching methods was used.

This paper aims at identifying experiences and knowledge acquired about learning that Ph.D.

students received from this course with McLean. This study was guided by this research question: What have Ph.D. students at IGSP at Burapha University learned about how they learn from Professor Gary N. McLean in the “Future Trends in HRD” class and what was the experience like?

There are many Ph.D. programs being offered in different disciplines in Thailand, in both Thai and international (usually, English language) programs. Human Resource Development is one of the emerging popular disciplines in master and doctoral programs. There have been high expectations of new knowledge that graduates, especially Ph.D. graduates, will contribute to academic and business societies in Thailand. There have been concerns about the need for indigenous theories and practices in human resource development in Thailand (McLean, 2010). HRD theories and practices have come almost exclusively from the U.S. and other western countries, according to McLean (2010), and there is a lack of evidence that such theories and practices are applicable in other contexts, such as Thailand.

Learning organizations

There have been extensive research studies and reviews of the literature concerning organizational learning. A number of researchers have engaged in describing the learning organization. For example, Senge (1990) defined learning organizations as places “where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, where people are continually learning how to learn together” (p. 3). According to Daft and Marcic (1998), a learning organization can be viewed as one place in which, by enhancing collaboration and collective identification, the organization has the capacity to cope with change and continually grow and learn. Galer and van der Heijden (1992) described the learning organization as being able to promote members’ continuous learning and the application of learning outcomes. According to Watkins and Marsick (1993), the learning organization is “one that learns continuously and transforms itself” (p. 8), and “has embedded

systems to capture and share learning” (p. 9).

Classroom learning is recognized as one kind of learning organization (Cahill, 1997; Rosile and Boje, 1996). Many features listed by Rosile and Boje (1996) are features of a learning organization; the instructor provides a lesson plan that encourages instructors and students to engage in discussion; instructors encourage students to question; underlying values are clearly stated in the material; and the methods encourage student discourse and critique. Christensen (1991) stated that an organization in which “diverse backgrounds blend and individuals bond into an association dedicated to collective as well as personal learning” (p. 19), is called a learning community. According to Garvin (1991), the learning-centered classroom (organization) works well when learning organizations are sought as “true ends of education—the ability to use knowledge, to think creatively, and to continue to learn on one’s own” (p. 5). Christensen (1991) talked about a discussion-based classroom that builds a learning community; this may be a first step towards creating a learning organization. The teacher is the key to success in a learning-based classroom. The traditional teacher-centered lecture classroom, where the lecture is an efficient method of transferring information, should not be the only means of organizing today’s classroom (Cahill, 1997), especially in higher education.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used a positivistic descriptive perspective by investigating the learning processes used in the “Future Trends in HRD” class taught by Professor McLean.

Instruments

Qualitative methods were used with interviews and open-ended written evaluation comments provided at the conclusion of the course as the means of data collection. Interviews were conducted to find out what students learned and how they experienced the course. A quantitative method using a class evaluation form was also used. The evaluation form was the standard form used in Burapha university’s HRD Ph.D. program; it consisted of three sections:

students' opinions towards their own learning, students' opinions about the lecturer's instruction, and the open-ended question asking students to provide their opinions and suggestions about the class. Sections 1 and 3 were used to describe what students learned, and sections 2 and 3 were used to describe how they experienced the class. Sections 1 and 2 used a Likert-type scale ranging from 1-5, with 1 reflecting the highest score.

Participants

Twenty Ph.D. students enrolled in the "Future Trends in HRD" class at Burapha University in the June, 2009, semester were the participants in the study. There were 3 males and 17 females enrolled in this class with a variety of backgrounds. Participants were university lecturers, a teaching assistant, academic staff, a faculty administrator, consultants, human resource directors, a flight attendant, a finance manager, an automobile company's customer relations senior manager, an airline customer service representative, manufacturing managers, and a full-time student. The age of the participants ranged from 27 to 60. While most students were Thai, one was from the United States and one was from China.

Data collection and analysis

Participants, after being assured of anonymity, were interviewed after they finished the course. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes. Participants were asked to describe what they learned from this class and how they experienced it. Class evaluation forms were given to students at the end of the last meeting and were completed anonymously and voluntarily.

Data analysis of the Likert-type questions consisted of frequencies, means, and standard deviations for each item. For the qualitative data, the verbatim interview transcripts were reviewed several times and were coded for commonality of themes.

Description of course content and processes used

The "Future Trends in HRD" course at Burapha University is a required course that is an exploration of the trends in human resource development and the factors influencing them.

The course aimed to encompass a broad range of issues that are international, national, professional, organizational, and individual foci (McLean, 2009b). Student performance evaluation consisted of classroom dialogue, team facilitation of a group presentation of a trend, and an individual project.

According to McLean (2009b), for classroom dialogue, students were expected to cooperate with the session facilitator, conduct themselves as professionals in the field of Organization Development, use inclusive language in speaking and writing, raise relevant questions, contribute relevant observations, be responsible for assigned readings, practice good constructive group participation processes, and treat information shared in class with respect and sensitivity. In the team-facilitation session, each team was responsible for facilitating a half-day session. Each session included presentations, discussion, case studies, exercises, videos, and other approaches to enhance exploration of the topic. Possible topics were provided in the course syllabus. Feedback was given to each team at the end of each session. As for individual term papers, students were required to write a scholarly paper of publication quality on any topic dealing with a trend in HRD that was pre-approved by Professor McLean.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the finding from the class evaluation form, showing that participants had learned how to study more effectively with 11 participants selecting 1 and 9 participants selecting 2. The majority of participants were satisfied with the variety and quality of learning materials and the course. When participants were asked if they asked when they had questions, 6 participants answered 1, 8 answered 2, 3 answered 3, and 3 answered 2.

Class evaluation form part two shows participants' opinions about Professor McLean's instruction. It shows that Professor McLean paid careful attention to students by listening to their opinions, provided useful comments and feedback, and encouraged them to search for more knowledge by themselves. The finding shows that participants were highly satisfied with Professor McLean's instructions and class conduct.

Table 1. Class Evaluation Form Part One Descriptive Statistics (n=20).

Item	Mean	Std. deviation
I am prepared for studying in this course.	2.25	0.18
I pay attention in studying this course.	1.35	0.11
I ask when I have questions.	2.1	0.20
I always review the lessons of this course.	2.35	0.15
I search for additional information (knowledge) from other sources.	1.95	0.15
I have learned how to study more effectively.	1.45	0.11
I have good attitude towards and have contributed much of my time in this course.	1.45	0.14
I am satisfied with the variety and quality of learning materials.	1.6	0.13
In general, I am satisfied with the study in this course.	1.45	0.14
I have gained advantage in studying this course.	1.5	0.14

In the class evaluation form part three and the interview, participants expressed different things that they had learned from the course. The class environment encouraged students to participate by sharing what they know with their classmates, asking questions when they had doubts about any topic discussed in class, and disagreeing with ideas raised in class.

They had been encouraged to question others' ideas, not to accept ideas right away, and learn to critique ideas in a constructive way. Many lessons were learned by the professor's "it depends" statement. Participants said that the way they view things had changed due to the fact that the outcomes can be different depending upon the influencing factors. They also learned how to work, deal with, and learn from problems as a team.

When it came to writing papers, the right style of referencing was emphasized. Students were told to ensure that the information that they are using in their papers comes from good sources. If any information is used in their papers, from published or unpublished sources, they must ensure that proper credits with proper citations are used. They also learned that it is their responsibility to

be scholars in creating new knowledge and sharing it with others by publishing and presenting at conferences.

Dialogue

Participants strongly agreed that Professor McLean encouraged open communication in class. This is a significant mechanism for building and maintaining a learning organization, given that organizational learning is a process of social construction requiring interaction and understanding (Pimapun Sri, 2009). According to Watkins and Marsick (1993), "inquiry is a dialogue in which people mutually explore ideas, questions, and potential actions" (p. 37).

Critique

Another theme that emerged was the emphasis on making critical assessments, which means that nothing should be taken for granted. Participants learned to analyze what they had heard and read, and, especially, what they had learned before, believing it, unquestionably, to be true. This is one of the features of a learning organization. According to Levitt and March (1988), complacency

traps occur in successful organizations that rely too heavily on accomplishments of the past to guide the future. It is undeniable that it works the same way for both individuals and organizations when it comes to complacency traps. Past success sometimes becomes a barrier to individual or organizational future success. We all know that both individuals and organizations are required to interpret the environment to survive, and the environment is constantly changing. Therefore, theories that work today might not work tomorrow due to the changing environment. It is important for scholars to be able to assess theories critically before concluding whether they might be useful.

Publication

As a scholar, one of the duties is to build new knowledge and share it with other scholars. One way to share the knowledge is to publish the research. Professor McLean encouraged everyone in class to write articles and do research, especially in the Thai context and publish them. This refers to his concerns about the need for indigenous theory and practice in human resource development in Thailand that he stated in his article, "Indigenous Theory and Practice in Thailand" (McLean, 2010). McLean urged HRD scholars to be aware of the need for local theories and practices, not only in Thailand, but also in other countries. Adopting theories born in western countries and implementing them in a different context with many differences, such as culture, economic situations, and practices, is not practical. According to McLean, it is not always practical to adopt HRD principles developed in one culture and apply them in another.

Plagiarism

Even though publication was encouraged in class, the avoidance of plagiarism was also emphasized. Not only was plagiarism discussed in class, but Professor McLean also mentioned scholastic dishonesty in his course syllabus. According to McLean (2009b): Scholastic dishonesty includes (but is not necessarily limited to) cheating on assignments or examinations; plagiarizing, which

means misrepresenting as your own work any part of work done by another; submitting the same paper, or substantially similar papers, to meet the requirements of more than one course without the approval and consent of all instructors concerned; depriving another student of necessary course materials; or interfering with another student's work.

Plagiarism means writing facts, quotations, or opinions from someone else's work without identifying the source. Students were told that they must always name the source when someone else's words or ideas are used in their writing and put quotation marks around exact quotes, with page numbers, to avoid plagiarism.

Limitations of this study should be stated. Participants were a group of Ph.D. students enrolled in the "Future Trends in HRD" course with Professor Gary N. McLean at IGSP, Burapha University during the summer of 2009. The information obtained may represent only one part of the story. Future researchers might conduct this kind of study in other courses, in other programs, with other instructors, in other institutions, to explore more about how Thai doctoral students learn.

DISCUSSION

It is well demonstrated how a higher education classes might be conducted to enhance learning. It has been stated in the past that in high power distance countries like Thailand, China, and most Asian countries, students are not comfortable with questioning or disagreeing with the instructor. Given study participants from Thailand and China, two high power distance countries, this study has shown that students became comfortable and preferred an instructor who provided opportunities for students to interact in class. Instructors in higher education classes might try to conduct discussion rather than a lecture-type class which is a one-way-communication class. By doing so, students will be given opportunity to share their experiences with the class, express their opinions, and agree or disagree with whatever topics are discussed in class. In higher education, this

may be a more effective way for students to learn, that is, learning from each other and developing critical thinking skills.

Besides learning, students are also entitled to share what they know with others by producing articles and publishing them in acceptable journals. As members of an academic institution, Ph. D students should be encouraged to conduct research in their countries and publish them. This will be one of the first steps in the emergence of theories born and used in Thailand.

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