Perceptions held by selected Allied Health Sciences academics on Student Centered Learning and barriers to their adoption

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Abstract

Despite presence of novel learning techniques, many academics are still using traditional teaching methods and how many adopt Student centered learning (SCL) approaches is not reported. Thus, the aim of the study was to investigate the academics perception on SCL. A mini workshop of SCL was conducted for the academics of a Health Sciences Faculty of a Sri Lankan university. Using a questionnaire comprised of open-ended questions (given before and after the workshop), data on type of teaching methods used and types of teaching methods they wished to incorporate into their teaching introduced by the workshop were collected. The participants (n=20) included senior and junior academics in areas of Nursing (n= 6), Pharmacy (n=6), and Medical Laboratory Science (n=8) degree level programmes. Among them only 15% (n=3) had received a training on SCL. However, majority (70%) were using SCL related activities (group discussions, question and answer sessions, student presentations, active reading and practical demonstrations). Minority (n=3) were of the belief that traditional teacher centered learning is more beneficial to students. After introducing different SCL approaches during the workshop, 100% of the participants said they will adopt SCL activities including active reading, active writing, role plays, small group discussions, jigsaw method, question and answer sessions, posters in their teaching. Majority (95%) of participants believed that SCL will facilitate deep insights and will make an interactive learning environment for the learners. However, 35% of participants believed that SCL adds additional work to the teacher. Limitation of the space of the classroom, time and difficulty to teach theoretical aspects and concepts were the identified limitations for SCL adoption by the participants. All participants believed that having similar workshops to share the novel teaching methods used by peers will be beneficial to uplift the quality of teaching.

Even though academics believe SCL is more effective, few academics (30%) still practice teacher centered approaches. Introducing more workshops on SCL and teaching methods will be beneficial to improve quality teaching.

Background

Previous studies have confirmed that appropriate teaching-learning style enhances students' academic performance (Komarraju *et al,* 2011). Preliminary studies conducted on

student centered learning (SCL) approaches have also proven that students have explicit positive views on active engagement in the classroom. Many students have expressed that giving time to prepare for special sub-topics and presenting their findings to peers helped improve their presentation skills, self-confidence and deep understanding of the concepts. Thus, students have indicated active reading, small group discussions and Jigsaw methods as effective teaching methods (Akalanka, 2019). SCL helps the student in active engagement of the learning process and also helps in deep and lifelong learning.

However, regardless of novel learning techniques, many academics prefer traditional teaching methods over SCL methods. The facilitators need an open mind to accept the challenges associated with transformations of teaching practices. During the transformation of teaching practices to student centered manner, facilitators also need to add some extra effort to preplan the lesson to confirm that all the intended learning outcomes are covered from the used SCL techniques/ activities.

Research reveals that teachers' beliefs about teacher and student roles are still very much teacher centred. Various reasons are identified for the same, including system-wide barriers hindering the adoption of SCL and teacher trainings offered. The findings draw attention to an urgent need for alternative teacher training programmes that would focus on changing teachers' traditional beliefs enabling them to put theory into practice and adopt student-centred roles (Aliusta and Bekir, 2017).

Staff Development programmes in majority of Universities in Sri Lanka have now incorporated many pogrammes on novel teaching trends to enhance the quality of teaching of academics. As the authors of the study obtained the training of trainers from University of Leicester, United Kingdom, on SCL, it was anticipated to disseminate the knowledge gained with the academics among the same Faculty by organising a workshop. Since how many academics adopt SCL approaches is not reported, the aim of the study was to investigate the academics perception on SCL before the workshop.

Methodology

A mini workshop on SCL was conducted for the academics of a Health Sciences Faculty of a Sri Lankan university. Using a questionnaire comprised of open ended questions (given before and after the workshop), data on type of teaching methods used and types of teaching methods they wished to incorporate into their teaching introduced by the workshop were collected. Each participant was given a time to explain the teaching methods they use, while they were asked to recall the best teachers they had met in life and to recall their teaching strategies. It was discussed why those teaching strategies were effective. Within the workshop, participants were actively engaging in pair work, mini group discussions, Jigsaw method and poster presentations.

Results

The participants (n=20) included senior and junior academics in areas of Nursing (n= 6), Pharmacy (n=6), and Medical Laboratory Science (n=8) degree programs. Among them only 15% (n=3) had received a training on SCL. This was due to majority of participants, being senior academics, not having attended the staff development programmes, or being newly recruited academics, they have not had a chance to follow staff development training at the time the workshop was conducted. However, majority (70%) were using SCL related activities (group discussions, question and answer sessions, student presentations, active reading and practical demonstrations).

Minority (n=3) were of the belief that traditional teacher centered learning is more beneficial to students. They believed that a lecture is 'content full', as lecturer prepares it with considerable effort to cover all the intended learning outcomes.

When participants recalled the qualities of the best teachers they had met in life, the identified teaching techniques/ qualities were: being simple when explaining, telling stories or bringing up examples/jokes that made them remember the theories behind, ethical behavior and kindheartedness and also the friendly nature they developed within the classroom.

After introducing different SCL approaches during the workshop, 100% of the participants said they will adopt SCL activities including active reading, active writing, role plays, small group discussions, jigsaw method, question and answer sessions, posters, in their teaching, while stating that they were not feeling that they were in the learning process as the workshop was filled with interactions. Majority (95%) of the participants believed that SCL will facilitate deep insights and will make an interactive learning environment for their learners. However, 35% of the participants believed that SCL added additional work to the teacher. Limitation of the space of the classroom, time and difficulty to teach theoretical aspects and concepts were the identified limitations for SCL adoption by the participants. All participants believed that having similar workshops to share the novel teaching methods used by peers will be beneficial to uplift the quality of teaching.

Conclusion

Even though academics believe SCL is more effective, in the sampled group, few academics (30%) practiced teacher centered approaches. Introducing more workshops on SCL and teaching methods will be beneficial to improve quality teaching.

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