

RE-ORIENTATING INSTRUCTIONAL DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY OF SULTAN QABOOS UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

The goal of any educational system is to produce an educated citizenry, capable of contributing positively in the scientific and technological developments of the nation and the world at large. Higher education plays a significant role in the production of human resources necessary to achieve national goals. In order to achieve quality education, instructional development must play a leading role in improving teaching and learning. Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), in achieving its vision and mission is consciously and vigorously pursuing quality teaching and learning through its recent huge investments in the state of the art technological ware to facilitate educational development. The new thrust in technology infusion is a necessary and inevitable challenge to the traditional educational system. The prospects are many and the ultimate gain is an increase in the quality of human resources (graduates) output of SQU into the national economy.

Introduction

Instructional development may be ordinarily described as the process of assembling learning materials necessary for teaching in the classroom. That was in fact the traditional age-long description, no longer be tenable in the modern practice of teaching and learning. The art and science of teaching have changed in several folds in the light of research and developments in human learning and technological explosion. The various systems approach models and principles for the design of effective instruction have emerged through scientific research activities (Dick, W. and Carey, L., 1990; Gagne, R. M., Briggs, L. J. and Wager, W. W., 1992; Gagne, R. M. and Briggs, L. J., 1979; Heinich, R., Molenda, M., Russell, J. D. and Smaldino, S. E., 1999) A careful study of advances in mass communication alone would show a line of development paralleling that of scientific knowledge explosion. In the last ten years alone, we have witnessed technological developments in various sectors. Sophisticated computers and communications systems, the cellular technology, the internet, www, the digital technologies etc, etc. have all come to stay and are fast becoming part and parcel of our existence.

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All these technological escalation has bestowed upon education a proliferation of equipment and materials capable of assisting in the reorganization and definition of educational experiences. Bajah (1993) lists the function of a University as:

- a) Development of personnel (training function)
- b) Development of knowledge (research function)
- c) Provision of necessary services (public service function)

and states the functions of a University lecturer as:

- a) Authority in his/her discipline
- b) Planner and manager of time
- c) Academic guide to students
- d) Adviser and counselor
- e) Researcher and
- f) Consultant

All the University and lecturer functions are important and deserve some form of reorientation or another if teaching and learning must be improved.

In higher education, as well as other educational levels, curriculum revision is an on-going process simply because no curriculum can remain static. Such revisions for improvement in education lean heavily on materials and devices of instruction. The much publicized systems approach to instruction provides a realistic definition for instructional development in view of its all-encompassing attribute. As a set of organized and integrated techniques, theories and materials/equipment, systems approach enables education to be engineered to provide necessary conditions for effective learning. Innovation and educational technology are closely related. This is true not just because much of present day educational innovations are indeed technological but because the practitioners have adopted from modern technology the working hypothesis that a sort of engineering effort is effective in solving educational practical problems by research, design and development. It is from this perspective that the Instructional Development Unit (IDU) of the Center for Educational Technology (CET) will like to base our instructional development assistance to the faculties and units in SQU.

Instructional Development in Higher Education

In the article “Why teachers fail?” Skinner (1972), states that for reasons too numerous to list what has been taught in schools, as pedagogy, has not been a true technology of teaching. Further, the article reveals that College teaching has not been taught at all as many lecturers (subject matter experts) had not received professional preparations before becoming ‘lecturers’. Such is the practice in many Universities and SQU is not alone in this situation. This is regrettable as no enterprise can improve itself to the fullest extent without examining its basic processes. A really effective educational system cannot be set up until we understand the processes of teaching and learning. Human behavior is far too complex to be left to casual experience or even to organized experience in the

restricted environment of the classroom. Teachers need help and in particular, they need the kind of help offered by a scientific analysis of behavior obtainable through either one form of staff development practice or another (formal training or short in-service training programs).

The philosophy of training hinges on the fact that :

- a) Everyone needs training
- b) Every place needs training and retraining in a dynamic system
- c) Everyone must be trained and retrained in order to be current

In the light of the above philosophy, even veteran teachers need training and retraining in order to keep them current. In these days of technological explosion, when 'everything.com' and 'e-everything' have become the order of the day!

Besides the issue of untrained subject matter expert, another fundamental reason advanced by Skinner relates to teachers' heavy reliance on aversive control, which took the form of corporal punishment. The list includes; canning, ridicule, scolding, sarcasm, criticism, incarceration, ostracism, forced labor etc, etc. Because the teacher has the 'authority' of a Police or Parent, it is possible to maintain law and order and perhaps, coerce students into reading texts, listening to lectures, and participating in school works as required. In this way students merely submit themselves to control to avoid the resulting aversive stimulation of the teacher. Even when moderately used, aversive practices interfere with the kind of relations with students, which make more productive techniques feasible. For example in College and graduate schools, the aversive pattern survives in the now almost universal system of 'assign and test'. The teacher does not teach, he/she simply holds the students responsible for learning. The students must read books, study texts, perform experiments, and attend lectures.....or will suffer aversive consequences (Skinner, 1972).

No wonder why students have resorted to all sorts of undesirable practices of cheating and all forms of dishonesty – examination malpractice is in the news in many parts of the world and plagiarism on the Internet has reached an alarming proportion. All these call for an aggressive training and retraining of teachers at the college level. The golden philosophy of teaching should be that "When students have not learnt, the teacher has not taught". Teachers should by now be able to distinguish between pedagogy (the art and science of teaching children) and andragogy (the art and science of teaching adults). In higher education, the aversive tools in the hand of lecturers are not as many and common as those used in coping or dealing with children. The most common of these is 'the threat of failure' which may either be overtly or covertly communicated to the mature learners. University lecturers need training and exposures to the principles involved in andragogy so as to make them more effective in the classroom.