

# Factors Influencing Quality Teaching in Higher Education

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## Abstract:

*The purpose of this paper is to investigate the role of faculty behavior, student-faculty interaction, collaborative teaching techniques, enriching educational activities, and instructor creativity in ensuring quality teaching in higher education. Implemented successfully, the above-mentioned indicators may serve the higher education sector. Moreover, and discussed separately in this paper, the added value of each sets a criterion for quality teaching in the average classroom. First, faculty behavior, when dealing with students, has reported gains in institutional characteristics and practices. Second, appropriate and efficient student-faculty interaction in the classroom has also been reported to positively impact student perception of the learning experience, providing gains in personal/social development, and allowing active learning to take place. Third, the use of collaborative learning has actively engaged students in the learning process, rendering it of quality and of high caliber. Furthermore, studies have shown that with the use of active learning, quality teaching is utilized to its fullest capacity, creating ample space for instructor creativity within the classroom.*

## Keywords

*Faculty behavior, student-faculty interaction, collaborative learning, quality teaching, creativity, active learning.*

## 1. Introduction

According to Henard (2008), institutions are showing interest in quality teaching. They are also emphasizing professional development courses, pedagogy counseling and program evaluation, and robust policies to encourage quality teaching. In addition, institutions try to convince their teaching staff of the added value quality teaching brings to growing educational entities.

In the past decade, the quality and value of an undergraduate education were put under the scope for investigation by various stakeholders in the higher education sector. According to Umbach and Wawrzynski (n.d.), faculty members are the most

evident variables in the teaching and learning process of undergraduates. Administrators rely on faculty, to the extent that they conjure myths about their abilities in securing student engagement to great extent. The question now lies in the degree of correctness of the role of faculty, and how well they are trained to keep up with their alleged powers in teaching.

In other words, universities are aiming at making their campuses student-centered with the help of faculty. Furthermore, universities are keen on “knowing how students learn, understanding barriers to student learning, and developing classroom techniques that promote learning among college students” Umbach and Wawrzynski (n.d.).

In an attempt by the Education Commission of the States in Making Quality Count (1995) to foster new ways of measurement and monitoring the quality of undergraduate education, there was little evidence perceived in regards to the indicators of educational practices that highlight student engagement (Pascarella, 2001). However, it was proven that student engagement is an indicator of educational quality and student-centeredness (Kuh, 2001).

What is the role of faculty in this process? According to Umbach and Wawrzynski (n.d.), findings revealed that students have higher levels of engagement and learning at universities where faculty members use active and cooperative learning methods, involve students in classroom activities, and highlight higher-order mental activities in the classroom, create rapport with students, challenge students academically, and show prosperity in enriching educational experiences. Ewell (1997) suggested that faculty engagement be improved for student performance to be elevated.

## 2. Quality Teaching and Level of Engagement

In showing what faculty has to offer to its university and students, the next point is the measure of quality of education within the university. Umbach and Wawrzynski (n.d.) claim that apart from the traditional measures of quality, such as selectivity in admissions, the number of PhDs among the faculty, library holdings, financial resources, and institutional prestige from faculty research, there are other traits that need to be identified in order to

salvage the perceived excellence of undergraduate education. The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the traits that higher education faculty members need to possess, being either personally achieved or as depicted by prospective universities.

Multiple policies and strategies have been placed for the betterment of the student-centered approach in higher education; therefore, improving the quality of teaching. Henard (2008) suggests enhancements in technological application in the classroom. Alongside that, and according to Henard (2008), “senior management must be committed to capturing all the dimensions that affect quality teaching.” Fostering leadership at an executive level is also looked at, with emphasis on evolving faculty deans in the decision-making process, in order to set teaching quality as priority in the university. Furthermore, students are to be involved in the course assessment process through giving their input on the quality of teaching.

Do faculty members alter their teaching based on student engagement behaviors, student perceptions of their learning environment, and student self-reported gains? Are faculty behaviors and attitudes correlated with institutional characteristics? These questions are to be addressed in this paper in terms of projected models used to help faculty decide on how to reach out to students.

Tinto's (1993) model roams around how the decisions of students of withdrawal or commencement are the variance of their academic achievement and social integration in college. Students' sense of belonging to a university makes them engaged in the learning process. For example, the student in an average classroom will decide to drop the course if he or she feels that the instructor is not cooperative. Furthermore, Astin's (1993) model highlights the influence of institutional practices on student outcomes. In other words, Astin mentions how student learning influences faculty-student contact and engagement. On a different but related note, Chickering and Gamson (1987) mentioned seven indicators that directly influence the quality of teaching, “encouraging cooperation among students, encouraging active learning, communicating high expectations, encouraging contact between students and faculty, and using active learning techniques.”

As for the Blackburn and Lawrence's model (1995), it suggested that teaching productivity by faculty be enhanced in order to cultivate institutional characteristics and faculty inputs (e.g. behaviors, satisfaction, experience, and

student contact). This was all backed up by the psychological, sociological, and motivational theories.

According to Henard (2008), and after institutions define their institutional policies, fostering quality teaching is not left in the hands of institutions, but faculty need to be allowed to invest their own creative teaching styles. “A flexible framework teaching autonomy, and collaboratively working with students and staff are common and likely to generate all kinds of actions for improvements of the teaching-learning process” (Henard, 2008).

Faculty members need to be aware of the mission and their respective duties in the university they work in. Not only that, most contemporary faculty members are aiming at improving their pedagogical skills. Quality teaching is raising the bar for teachers everywhere, ensuring that the quality in learning outcomes is being met (Henard, 2008).

Two instructional communication theories of immediacy and clarity prevail when speaking of effective communication and pedagogy (Ginsberg, 2007).

The first type of instructional communication is immediacy that is characterized by being both verbal and non-verbal. This type of communication is said to increase and improve cognitive and affective learning. For example, and under the category of non-verbal immediacy, the instructor may use head nods, smiles, enthusiasm, and/or a relaxed appearance during instruction. In short, immediacy refers to the communication aspects that affect the perception of psychological and physical closeness between teacher and student (Frymier, 1994; Frymier and Weser, 2001; Moore, Masterson, Christopel, & Shea, 1996).

On the other hand, clarity is the second instructional communication theory that is defined as the mechanism employed by faculty to ignite learning in the minds of students using adequate verbal and non-verbal messages (Chesebro & McCroskey, 2001; Myers & Knox, 2001). In addition, clarity facilitates the learning process through instructors using proper presentation techniques to stimulate student interest and learning (Hativa, 1998).

According to Ginsberg (2007), faculty members who show good immediacy and clarity are regarded as good observers of student learning and conduct. Moreover, through immediacy and clarity, faculty can communicate their humanism to their students, which fosters a trusting relationship between the teacher and student. This relationship bred inside the classroom is an

added value to the learning experience. Ginsberg (2007) mentions how humor, a relaxed appearance, and familiarity with the students' names can yield an 'engaged' environment within the classroom. A downside to low immediacy and clarity – and this is due to lack of the instructor's interest to keep students engaged- is the spread of pessimistic views of students, leading to an unmotivated class with carelessness to learning.

### 3. Student-Faculty Interaction

According to Umbach and Wawrzynski (n.d.), positive perceptions of students were collected, and they positively correlate with the engagement of faculty and the support of respective campuses. Furthermore, gains in personal/social development was also observed when faculty interacted with students via active learning and other mediums of student-faculty interaction. With all this being said, it was noted that out-of-class student-faculty interactions were less effective than the in-class interaction due to institutional controls.

Umbach and Wawrzynski (n.d.) stated that there is a relationship between the utilization of collaborative learning techniques and student interaction. In short, students feel more support when faculty use active learning methods. Moreover, "first-year students and seniors reported greater gains in personal social development, general education knowledge, and practical competencies on campus, where faculty members engaged them using active and collaborative learning exercises" (Umbach & Wawrzynski, n.d.). Moreover, Umbach and Wawrzynski (n.d.) emphasized that higher-order cognitive activities practiced in the classroom help students in their educational needs.

#### Influence of Pedagogy

As Henard (2008) states that faculty members are given a sharper view on the kind of teaching delivered in an institution. And this is done through launching quality teaching initiatives and establishing institutional policies. In addition, Henard (2008) highlights the importance of teaching practices at course level, description of course design, and the implementation and monitoring of course programs. According to Umbach and Wawrzynski (n.d.), "the level of importance placed on co-curricular activities [...] was positively related to student-reported gains. Students on campuses where faculty emphasized these activities reported greater gains in

personal/social development, general education, and practical competencies."

Pedagogical practices have been evolving in the academic realm, especially in higher education. There are several impact criteria that Henard (2008) mentioned, and they are the following:

1- IT in pedagogy improvement is an added value, and exploring its applications **is a benefit to accomplishing an institution's mission.**

2-Collaboration among teachers of the same department, or even from various departments, is vital for effective pedagogy.

3-Having a diverse student audience allows faculty to acquire a positive notion about different backgrounds in their classrooms.

4-With the right pedagogical practices, students are expected to acquire knowledge of the subject-matter, methods of quality teaching, and languages.

5- Employing the appropriate assessment systems in alignment with the learning outcomes is vital for institutions seeking quality in the performance of their graduates.

### 4. Faculty Development

Faculty development is a "strategic lever for institutional excellence and quality, and a critically important tool for fostering institutional readiness and change in response to the array of complex demands facing universities and colleges" (Austin & Sorcinelli, 2013, p. 97). In the light of identifying the aura of today's faculty skills and knowledge in technologies, which are enforced by the needs of the 21st century student, technologies are becoming integrated in higher education classrooms. In fact, teaching practices and the curriculum of higher educational institutions should not fall short of using educational technology in a contemporary classroom (Austin & Sorcinelli, 2013). According to Camargo (2015), and through investing in faculty development, educational institutions are most likely choosing quality education for their students.

Faculty development in improving teaching is the most common type of institutional development in higher education. In addition, professionals and educators identify their competencies at a certain level to further develop them in their respective fields (Hodgson & Wilkerson, 2014). It is noteworthy to mention that these urges of faculty to engage in development programs was due to the increasing

use of student evaluations of instructor. As a result, universities started to foster development programs, and the first to do so were the Netherlands in the 1970s (Metz et al. 1996). As the development process deployed, the emphasis in training was focused on cognitive theories of learning and information processing (Shulman, 1986).

Apart from the interest in cognitive theories and social constructivist theories, teaching improvement activities included extended seminars, workshops, interactive exercises with other faculty members, peer coaching, etc. Along with this mix of training and developmental activities previously stated, Hodgson and Wilkerson (2014) reported that comprehensive teaching programs can be developed through the use of online interactive modules and social media.

In understanding the competencies to be enhanced in the career development of faculty in higher education, Kern et al. (1998) identify six steps to curriculum design to faculty development, and they are as follows: (1) Problem identification and general needs assessment, (2) Targeted needs assessment, (3) Goals and objectives, (4) Educational strategies, (5) Implementation, (6) Evaluation. With this process of continuous development of the curriculum in higher education, the second competency is teaching and supporting learners, used to utilize faculty development in their curriculum design and teaching practices. According to Hodgson and Wilkerson (2014), the process to go through when faculty is being trained includes implementation of teaching and learning methods, adhering to the learning environment, getting feedback on teaching, using active learning in the classroom, and finally, the reflection of the overall process. In other words, and as Steinert et al. (2006) concluded:

Key features of effective faculty development contributing to effectiveness included the use of experiential learning, provision of feedback, effective peer and colleague relationships, well-designed interventions following principles of teaching and learning, and the use of a diversity of educational methods within single interventions (p. 497).

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the vision of the institution is in the heart of its faculties' enthusiasm and classroom instruction. In the light of the above, the environment that is provided by faculty members is what defines the efficiency of

classroom instruction. Student involvement is also a variable in this study where the students are considered 'customers' with needs to be met inside the classroom. Once met, the students have been reported to show positive interaction upon faculty showing efficient instruction. Furthermore, the classroom is to be considered as medium for creative teaching where the instructor can showcase multiple teaching strategies to cultivate the student learning experience. In short, student-faculty interaction and faculty development are the two essential factors in fostering high quality education in higher academic institutions.

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