Critical Thinking Through Participatory Learning: Analysing The Nature Of Freedom Of Expression In Makerere University Lecture Theatres

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Abstract
Participatory learning is the active involvement of the learner in teaching and learning process. It entails participation by all partners in the learning situation. Successful learning outcomes result from supplementing lectures with active learning strategies and engaging students in discovery and scientific processes. Active engagement in learning processes allows students to shape their own learning path and places upon them the responsibility of making their education meaningful. The process shapes their critical thinking, and also places them in better position to critically encounter social, political and economic challenges. This study investigates the nature of learner's freedom of expression in lecture theatres in Makerere University. Basing on students' voices, we find that interactions are still very restricted and depriving the right to expression. The study recommends establishing policies that promote learner ownership of interaction, free expression, and change of teacher mind-set.

Keywords: Critical thinking, participatory learning, academic freedom, freedom of expression

INTRODUCTION

Students' perception of freedom in learning has called for a lot of debates and how teachers facilitate the learning process in academic institutions. One of the remedies to solve this issue was participatory approach to teaching and learning. Participatory method is an active approach that encourages students to think for themselves. Participants actively contribute to teaching and learning process rather than passively receiving information from the teachers. This approach motivates the learners and also sometimes makes them read ahead of the lecture. It encourages learners to share information with each other and work together to solve common problems. As learners continue to master the approach, they take increasing responsibility for planning their own learning sessions. Students develop good perception of freedom in learning.

In recent decades, many researchers have focused on fostering learning competencies and on developing thinking skills amongst and in the highest level. This study goes further to focus on the nature of freedom of expression in teaching-learning interactions. Although freedom of expression is enshrined in the constitution and a fundamental right, it may be rhetoric in intellectual interactions between students and lecturers in some Higher Education Institutions (HEI). We followed this assumption in studying the nature of student participation in lecture theatres in Makerere University.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Students' freedom in learning processes is critical to the purpose of Higher Education (HE), to the creation of solid opinion and to the search for truth. As asserted by Gibson [1] at the level of HE, the purpose of education is to teach facts, i.e. learning the basics of reality. The purpose of HEI is to teach students how to think. Learning amongst students varies and is largely dependent on the methods of teaching and learning as employed by both the lecturer and the students in relation to what is being taught. The participatory method of teaching responds to the individual needs of the learners and therefore makes a difference in their learning process for it improves learning and knowledge retention (Handelsman et al, [2]).

Critical thinking can easily be promoted when there is an environment of freedom of speech during the interaction. Students who have developed their capacity to think are more likely to develop solid opinions and have the skills to analyse other controversial issues (Ghorbani et al, [3]). Not only does freedom of expression in academic environment help individuals to refine and articulate their ideas, it also encourages free market place of ideas. When students are not allowed to freely express and debate their opinions, truth becomes endangered.

Academic freedom according to Finkselstein (2007, cited in Simbulan, [4]) incorporates "professional autonomy, where colleagues are the best judge of once technical competence, in order to pre-empt outside interference by economic, political or religious forces". He adds that academic freedom is part of our "liberty of speech". This liberty is for both teachers and students. Academic freedom is a right that enables the community of scholars – individually or collectively - to express diverse perspectives over contentious, controversial and critical topics free from intimidation by administration or by the political repression of the state (Simbulan, [4]). In every learning process, students ought to feel the freedom not only in choice of what they learn and how it is taught, but also in relating all concepts taught to their other lives outside studies. This may include knowledge construction, socio-cultural learning environments to mediate learning (Land and Hannafin [5]).

More fundamental is the inherent responsibility of the institution to use whatever influence it has to maintain a set of conditions in which teaching and learning are most effective and freer. Black et al [6] assert that the participatory method of teaching personalizes teaching and learning not only to meet the individual students' needs but also to foster free expression on diverse issues. Thus participatory learning occurs when the lives, knowledge, interest, bodies and the energies of young people are at the centre of the classroom and school (Thomson and Comber, [7]). This encourages all members to be active learners and it can be best achieved if the learners are granted freedom to express their opinions.

The concept of freedom in learning
Participatory interaction allows student to learn independently with the guidance of an expert (Machemer & Crawford, [8]). Within this approach, students are given options in shaping their courses and in choosing particular units within their study programme. Rather than devoting much effort to teaching students what to think, participatory interaction fosters the idea of

teaching them how to think (Tsui, [9]). In this type of interaction the emphasis is put on cooperation rather than competition between students. As part of this approach students are given the opportunity to compare their ideas with their peers and their teachers, whilst contributing to developing their curricula in a meaningful manner. In this context the student is encouraged to ask questions and be inquisitive and the lecturer is seen as a facilitator and guide, rather than as the main source of knowledge, supporting and guiding self-regulated learning (Van Eekelen, Boshuizen & Vermunt, [10]). Participatory interaction less utilises lecture theatres and focuses more on peer collaboration, together with a broader perspective and openness toward lifelong learning. Participatory interaction is primarily geared towards enhancing students' critical thinking, thus grooming individuals to become independent lifelong learners (Tsui, [9]). However, participatory learning may not be confused with self-regulated learning characterised by, namely; setting specific goals for oneself; adopting powerful strategies for attaining these goals; monitoring one's performance; restructuring one's time effectively; self-evaluation of one's methods; attributing results to causation and adapting future methods (Zimmerman, [11]). Although the tone of student centred learning may be the same in self-regulated learning, the characteristics differ, and in its application, participatory learning can take different forms; for example, being team learning, problem-based learning and the like.

When experience does not fit with individual's knowledge access, a mismatch may occur whereby the learner cannot adapt theory to practice. As Maclellan and Soden [12] maintain, all knowledge is credited as individuals (and groups) adapt to and make sense of their experiential worlds. Learners are supposed to construct and reconstruct knowledge in order to learn effectively. Learning is supposed to move away from knowledge transmission to knowledge construction. This is becomes a preserve of the learner. Learning is most effective when the learner experiences as constructing a meaningful product (Papert, [13]). Therefore, constructive learning obviously discourages traditional approaches. It encourages more flexible learning approaches and outcome-based assessment of learning. Although constructive learning may be prominent in many other contexts, it has not permeated institutions in other contexts where conventional methods are still cherished. In most of these contexts there has not yet been a paradigm shift from focusing on teaching to focusing on learning (Rust, [14]). Nunan, Rigmor & McCausland [15] perceives shift in paradigm of approach as a shift in focus, the need for a new headset, and a set of changes of practical and political significance. This widely recognized paradigm shift has shown a move from instruction or teaching to producing learning within universities.

Participatory approach is innovative teaching, which has as its main focus, the way by which students can learn best and which promotes teaching methods which lead them to do so. This implies re-engaging the teachers into professional development so that they can appreciate the different approaches suggested. Gibbs & Coffey [16] avers that training can increase teachers focus, training can improve a number of aspects of teaching as judged by students and most importantly training can change teachers such that their students improve their learning. The participatory approach also calls for re-designing the interactive physical contexts, infrastructure and facilities in order to accommodate the mode of interaction (Trowler, [17]).

Whilst the onus is on the student to undertake the major part of participatory interaction, it is unlikely to be possible for the student without having a context that allows freedom of expression. The approach encourages active learning, which refers to anything fundamentally being other than passively listening to a teacher. It is important to note that the call for active

learning provides opportunities to reflect, evaluate, synthesize and communicate on or about the information presented in such lectures (Fink, [18]).

Policy and Law Perspective
The UNESCO [19] world conference in Paris on Higher education emphasizes that higher education institutions, through their core function (research, teaching, and service to the community) carried out in the context of institutional autonomy and academic freedom should increase their interdisciplinary focus and promote critical thinking and active citizenship. It also states that this would contribute to sustainable development, peace, wellbeing and realization of human rights, including gender equity. The conference declaration also emphasized that academic freedom is a fundamental value that must be protected in today's evolving and volatile global environment. In its call for action for member states it stresses that they should ensure active student participation in academic life, with freedom of expression and the right of the organization and provides adequate student services.

The Constitution of the Republic of Uganda (Government of Uganda, [20]), chapter 4 article 29 (1) states that, every person shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression. The assumption is that freedom of expression extends to institutions of learning, in this context HE, to provide for academic freedom to teachers and learners in matters of intellectual opinion and expression. Nevertheless, the Makerere University [21] Learning and Teaching policy states that the learning and teaching policy is grounded on the requirement to prepare students effectively for life, work and citizenship so that they will be able to contribute to economic and social development, adapt to change and provide leadership. Further, in section 2.2 on philosophy of learning and teaching, it emphasises the principle of "intentional learning" which puts emphasis on pedagogical strategies that encourage active learning, the achievement of learning outcomes and development of self-directed independent learners. Intentional learning entails an overriding focus on learning and teaching strategies that enable students to ascend through levels of study in diverse academic programmes to activate their learning outcomes. It also requires the University herself to be highly intentional about the kind of learning her students need. The Makerere learning and teaching policy emphasizes learner-centeredness which entails learning and teaching processes that should adapt existing methods and techniques and adopt new ones and adjust to the learners' style and pace of learning and focus on the achievement of learner outcomes. The policy emphatically states that, learning and teaching should be committed to promoting free and critical thinking including reasoned dialogue and debate while accepting a diversity of beliefs and ideologies. This is a policy underscore of academic freedom in Makerere University.

THEORETICAL BASIS
Constructivist belief by Brunner underpins the argument of the study (Ertmer & Newby, [22]; Ormrod, [23]; Davis, Edmund & Kelly-Bateman, [24]). Knowledge is constructed through socially interacting with others and by sharing what every interacting party knows based on their lived world of experiences.

METHODS AND MATERIALS
Semi structured interviews were held with some selected students from two carefully selected colleges in Makerere University. The choice of colleges was based on the fact that different colleges have different academic programmes some of which may warrant different methods of instruction. Thus the selected samples were from the College of Education and External Studies (CEES) and College of Business and Management Studies (COBAMS). The samples were carefully selected to provide transferable findings which may be important to other students and the way they perceive learning in institutions elsewhere in the world. Ten students were

interviewed; 5 from each college to seek their views about students' perception of freedom of expression in learning. Labels A-E represent participants from COBAMS and F-J represent participants from CEES.

(i)   Who decides on how to interact in teaching-learning encounter?

(ii)   When and how do you participate in teaching-learning interaction?

(iii)   What are the benefits of your or other students' participatory contributions?

FINDINGS

College	Participant	Who decides on how to interact in teaching-learning encounter?	When and how do you participate in teaching-learning interaction?	What are the benefits of your or other students' participatory contributions?
COBAMS	A	It is the lecturer that determines how the students learn in the course of the lecture	I participate when asked by the lecturer and I contribute my knowledge on the subject matter discussed	When participating in class discussions this opens up my mind and also gain from the experience of other classmates as they discuss their views
	B	The lecturer decides	When asking for clarification where I have not understood and give an answer, by making presentations when group work is given, and by supplementing in presentations	Our participation gives a wide range of ideas and experiences from different students. It enriches the lecture notes given thus better understanding
	C	Lecturers use lecture method most of the time	I rarely participate in class discussion	Student participation positively contributes to learning
	D	Lecturers decide the way to teach	When we raise hands to answer questions, only few are picked and the rest are left behind	It helps in sharing knowledge and ideas which provides a wider knowledge field amongst students
	E	Lecturer	When I am asked to give an answer, or to share my experience	Improves my knowledge, increases the way I think, and builds my perception
CEES	F	Obviously lecturers decide on the way to interact	The lecturers ask questions and we respond by giving our opinions, we exchange ideas	It widens my knowledge of the matter discussed
	G	Not all lecturers prepare how to teach, the reason why they opt for lecture method	I do participate in discussions during lectures by contributing my opinion when asked by lecturers	Participating in class discussion opens up my mind and I become more active and learn from others experiences
	H	Whichever way I learn is already stipulated in the curriculum	The instructor (lecturer) poses a questions or statements to students and then students answer in the best way they feel individually	It contributes much to students' knowledge and creativity specially during question answering
	I	The lecturer decides	Once the lecturer asks me a question I respond by giving my opinion in relation to the question asked	Whatever I discuss sticks into my mind, and I easily retrieve it in examinations
	J	Lecturer	I do participate by contributing my opinion when lecturers require them	It positively contributes to the knowledge I already have

We asked students on who decides the way to teach. Save participant H, the rest unanimously put the responsibility on lecturers that they decide on the teaching and learning interaction.

Particularly, participants C and G indicated lecture method as the most favourite mode for most of the lecturers. Participant H, however, said that the curriculum which is authorised by the National Council for Higher Education, already stipulates how lecturers should interact with students when teaching. The participant said that, "whichever way I learn is already stipulated in the curriculum."

On the issue of when and how students participate in the teaching-learning interaction, we obtained varying responses. The response by participant A that, "I participate when asked by the lecturer" was re-echoed by almost all participants, apart from C. However, an aspect of sharing opinions or knowledge was added by some of them, namely; A, F, G, I, and J in particular who said that "I do participate by contributing my opinion when lecturers require them". Nevertheless, participants perceived their participation in form of "sharing experience" for participant E or "exchanging ideas" as by participant F. Perception of how and when they participate in teaching-learning encounters was stretched to when they are seeking "clarification where I have not understood" as said by participant B. Participant B further perceived it in terms of "making presentations when group work is given, and by supplementing in presentations". There was a contra position however, by participant C who said that, "I rarely participate in class discussion". Since every voice provided a positional outlook to the reality of how and when students participate in teaching-learning interaction, we regarded this participant's response as unique to them but telling a certain contextual possibility.

The students ably opined how they benefit from participating in the teaching-learning interaction. The participants A, E, G, and I, articulated that interaction in learning helps not only to open up one's mind, but also as participant E said, "increases the way I think and builds my perception". The interaction regards the rich knowledge background that learners draw on when sharing with others in an interaction. In this relation, participants D, E, F, shared similar thinking by H that participating in teaching-learning interaction "contributes much to students' knowledge". This suggests as B, G, and particularly A articulates, that they "gain from the experience of other classmates as they discuss their views". Those who participate in sharing, widen their own knowledge base due to the contributions of the peers. C and J affirmed that this is a positive contribution to what they already have and to learning. The factor of creativity and being active was especially emphasised by participants G and H. Participating in learning changes them from passive to active members in the process. Only participant B was able to add the benefit of enriching the lecturer's notes when one puts on paper what others contribute on an issue. "Whatever I discuss sticks into my mind, and I easily retrieve it in examinations" as intimated by participant I, was a factor worth noting indicate that there is better intake for easier retrieval of knowledge that has come through the means of active participation of the recipient.

DISCUSSION

Students have the potential to actively participate in teaching-learning interactions. It is a way of expressing their opinions which is a constitutional right (Government of Uganda, [20]). The findings indicate that if let to exercise this right, students can succeed in shaping their analytical and critical faculties which consequently boost their learning (Zimmerman, [11]).

Participatory learning has been defined most simply as an approach to learning in which, learners fully and actively take part in the encounter, giving opinions, sharing experiences and supporting peers (Rogers, [25]). In other words, the learning environment has learners' responsibility and activity at its heart, in contrast to the emphasis on instructor control and the coverage of academic content found in much conventional, didactic teaching (Fowlkes et al,

[26]). The findings emphatically suggest students' awareness of the limiting conventional approach whereby the instructor simply slots in their input only when required. On the contrary, as already noted by McCombs & Whistler [27], participants also opined that they find the learning process more meaningful when topics are tailored to their lives, needs, and interests, and when they are actively engaged in creating, understanding, and connecting to knowledge.

There has been increasing emphasis in recent years on moving away from traditional teaching toward student-centred learning in which approach every learner benefits from effective interaction, no matter how diverse their learning needs (Stewart, [28]). This paradigm shift has encouraged moving power from the instructor to the learner. The learner is treated as a sharer in the teaching-learning process. The new paradigm puts to the front the voice of the learner and seeks to see them in control of their learning. McCombs & Whistler [27] note that learner motivation and actual learning increase when learners have a stake in their own learning. Instructors who deliver student-centred instruction include the learner in decisions about how and what they learn and how that learning is assessed, and they respect and accommodate individual differences in learners' backgrounds, interests, abilities, and experiences. The role of the teacher in student-centred interactions is to encourage learners to do more exploratory learning and to learn from each other; the teacher focuses on constructing authentic, real-life tasks that motivate learner involvement and participation (Weimer, [29]). This refines their level of critical thinking and promotes the academic freedom to make choices in learning as well as voicing out their experience-based opinions. Learning interaction becomes a constructive process that is relevant and meaningful to the learner and connected to the learner's prior knowledge and experience. As McCombs & Whistler [27] discuss, the learning environment supports positive interactions among learners and provides a supportive space in which the leaner feels appreciated, acknowledged, respected, and validated.

In the findings, participants often emphasised their experiences on which knowledge bases. They asserted that active participation in learning encounters enable to unearth rich knowledge possessed by every participant. During interaction, they share their experience-based knowledge with the peers, under the guidance of the instructor, and in turn enrich their current level of knowledge basing on the rich experiences of the instructor and fellow learners (Moffett & Wagner, [30]).

CONCLUSION

The study findings indicate a very restricted interaction forum in some HEIs. Participants indicated that their only participation is when prompted by the lecturer to contribute. In an era where there is much stress put on academic freedom, a conceptual change from teacher-centred to learner-centred interaction has to take place. It becomes a constitutional right if freedom of expression is granted to all citizens and a violation of the right if the teaching-learning interaction does not sustain the students' right to speech.

The participants (F, G, I, and J) in CEES particularly indicated that they participate in interaction when sharing opinion or knowledge. This was an addition to what their colleagues (A, B, D, and E) in COBAMS had simply noted as participating when asked to. This was the only aspect peculiar to academic units. It may allude to the fact of the professional element in CEES where teachers and produced. In CEES there is high likelihood of instructors trying out other approaches that enable students participate more.

Participants highlighted many benefits for a learner if allowed to participate in the teaching-learning interaction. It indicated an awareness of the deprived benefits. It becomes an unjust practice which subjects participants to situations that do not suit their wishes. Learning processes should be more than simply accommodating. The processes should make every participant feel comfortable and included.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Higher Education institutions need to go beyond simple rhetoric of academic freedom of students and lecturers. Particularly, in Uganda academic freedom in participating fully and actively in class encounters is enshrined in Constitution. It is a right. Therefore, it becomes incumbent on institutions to establish policies that safeguard this legal right.

Many contexts claim that HEIs produce more job-seekers than job-makers. There is a wave of encouraging science-based subjects over and above humanities in all ways including facilitating academic units and rising salaries of science teachers. However, despite the promotion, there are more cases of even science graduate job-seekers. Many graduates feel that their acquired skills have to exactly be used in the exact area of expertise. Basing on the study findings, we suggest that the deep-rooted cause may not be lack of skills but critical ability to apply the skills in various contexts. This could be blamed on the conventional approaches which do not allow refinery of the critical faculty that enables knowledge and skills transfer. We recommend that HEIs embrace the approaches that encourage development of critical thinking and practice. This calls for change in mind-set of academic staff. They have to appreciate student abilities and sustain confidence and trust that they have enormous experience based knowledge to share and critic.

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