

LECTURERS' UNDERSTANDING AND TEACHING PRACTICES IN EMBEDDING SOFT SKILLS INTO COMPULSORY COURSES

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Abstract

Since Vision 2020 has been established in 1991, the paradigm in education system in Malaysia has been shifted from teaching to learning. Teaching paradigm is synonym with teacher-centered learning while learning paradigm is for student-centered learning. Starting from the year 2006, Ministry of Education Malaysia (KPM) has obligated the implementation of soft skills in Higher Education Institution (HEI) while Institute of Teacher Education (IPG) has taken their initiative by embedding soft skills into the teaching and learning of compulsory courses in Degree of Teaching Programme (PISMP). Soft skills embedding into the teaching and learning of compulsory courses has raised issues that can address both the challenge to teach compulsory courses and at the same time to embed soft skills as prescribed by IPG. This study was undertaken to obtain answers for the research questions; (i) What are the lecturers' belief in the teaching of compulsory courses in embedding soft skills at IPG? and (ii) How the lecturers practicing the teaching of compulsory courses in embedding soft skills at IPG? The study used the case study methodology through a qualitative approach. Respondents were five lecturers with different backgrounds and teaching experience. Data were collected through several methods; (i) individual interviews; (ii) the observation in the classroom; (iii) stimulated recall interviews; and (iv) document analysis. The findings resulted in improved understanding on lecturers' understanding about soft skills embedment and how the actual process of embedding soft skills occurred. The results of this study allow those involved in the development of student-teachers soft skills to generate ideas to develop models for soft skills embedment that are in line with the interpretation of PISMP soft skills.

Keywords: Teaching Practice, Active Teaching, Embedding soft skills, Transmission teaching, Facilitative teaching.

1. INTRODUCTION

Researchers like Barr & Tagg (1995), Campbell & Smith (1997) and Fink (2003) state that changes in teaching and learning in the educational model as a paradigm shift. The new paradigm of learning environment is challenging and in line with the concept of cooperative and collaborative learning, while teaching paradigm creates a competitive and individualistic class (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Fink, 2003). The paradigm of learning requires students to work together with the management of education in developing the knowledge by being actively involved in developing, exploring and modifying knowledge for their own usage (Campbell & Smith, 1997). Cheng and Mok (2008) reinforced this view by stating that learning paradigm has to have factors such as positive learning aptitude, using a range of learning method, effective learning strategies, various thoughts about learning and satisfaction in the learning environment. The learning environment is not traditional and there is an active learning method to motivate students to get involved in the learning process. The intended environment is open, flexible, locally- and globally- linked and provides unlimited learning opportunities for students (Mok & Cheng, 2001).

In the process of implementing the goal to change the education system, teachers are involved as the main agent of change, who plays their roles either at schools or educational institutions. Educational change can be viewed as changes in knowledge, beliefs, aptitude, understanding, self-awareness and the practice of teaching (Bailey, 1992; Darling-Hammond, 1990; Jackson, 1992; O'Banion, 1997, Richardson, 1990). Reviews on

related literature for educational change of educational theory relate the displacement of education as a change in teachers' belief, knowledge, aptitude and perception (Borg, 2009; Doyler & Ponder, 1977; Fullan, 2001; Guskey, 1986, 1988; Harris, 1980; Richardson, 1990; Tobin, 1987). Besides education, teachers have widely accepted the statement about changes in teachers' practices in the classroom is an expression of belief, and that their educational philosophy and beliefs play major roles in conceptualizing the tasks and activities of teaching (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Dobson & Dobson, 1983; Fenstermacher, 1979; Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992).

In term of embedding soft skills study at Institute of Teacher Education (IPG), before one implements a student-centered pedagogy for soft skills embedment, it is important to review the existing main beliefs among lecturers. Studies on lecturers teaching experience are expected to contribute toward understanding whether or not lecturers will change their educational beliefs. Lecturers' understanding is very important in the implementation efforts by the Ministry of Education (KPM) to adopt a student-centered approach in embedding soft skills in the Degree of Teaching Programme (PISMP). Although educational change can occur at various levels such as at the individual lecturer, educational institutions, community and country levels (Fullan, 2001; Richardson, 1990), the lecturer is still regarded as a great agent of change and plays a role in changing the role of educational institutions (Beck, Czerniak & Lumpe, 2000).

Thus, the study on understanding lecturers' belief structure is essential to improve teaching style and also enhance professional teaching preparation by the lecturers (Fenstermacher, 1979; Nespor, 1987). This is further supported by Pratt (1998), who stated that beliefs and values are not a small things, it is basic; beliefs and values are like a large icebergs that sink, in which the particular teaching methods is situated.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Higher Education Institute (HEI) soft skills development programs have generally been introduced by one of two models or a combination of both (Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi, 2010; Roselina, 2009), namely the bolt on model as identified by Dunne (1995) and the embedded model (embedded), which provides an opportunity for soft skills elements to integrate within the course of the studied subjects (Bath et al., 2004, Chaple & Tolley, 2000).

Through the bolt on model for soft skills subjects, the teaching and learning of soft skills run in parallel with existing compulsory courses. The advantage of this model is its ability to introduce the soft skills without changing the compulsory courses curriculum. The weakness of this model occurs when the soft skills are developed out of context because of lack of opportunity to transfer the skills (Bennett et al., 2000) across the curriculum.

The embedded model is advantageous as the skills can be developed within the context and based on knowledge, but it is disadvantageous in terms of needing to adapt the soft skills curriculum to the current compulsory courses curriculum. Marina and Aminuddin (2012) studied lecturers' readiness to embed soft skills into PISMP compulsory courses and found that majority of lecturers were interested and willing to apply soft skills into the compulsory courses. But, they expressed concerns in terms of losing focus on teaching and learning, such that whether the focus should be on the content of the compulsory courses or the content of the soft skills, which varied in elements. Therefore, it is critical to understand lecturers' understanding of the embedded process so that soft skills embedment can be implemented and the objective to develop soft skills can be achieved.

Studies about soft skills within Malaysia and abroad are similar in terms of the success reported in the implementation of soft skills development among students (as if there is no problem in the implementation of soft skills), but lack of reports or studies on the methods of teaching and learning soft skills in the current formal curriculum. Results from a compilation of research related to soft skills in HEI by Ahmad and Mohammad Zaid (2010) indicated that the scope of soft skills studies conducted in Malaysia was more focused on the survey of soft skills profile among graduates, students and teachers compared to the teaching and learning of soft skills. The lack of reports or studies on soft skills teaching and learning methods in teacher training curriculum creates a gap in developing soft skills among student teachers. There were concerns that the situation would persist until the school as the finding from Wan Azlinda & Mohamed Hafis (2009), that teachers also found it difficult to embed soft skills in students due to lack of understanding about soft skills.

Bowden et al. (2000) stated soft skills should be explicitly related to the content of learning or discipline of study, rather than implicitly. The main practices that need to be addressed are by embedding soft skills competencies into the curriculum disciplines. The study's findings consistently showed that soft skills competencies in HEI were more effectively developed in the context of disciplinary knowledge and embedded

into the curriculum disciplines (embedded model), rather than through a stand-alone subjects and isolated from the context of the discipline of study (Bowden et al., 2000; Thompson et al., 2008; Star & Hammer, 2007; Sin & Reid, 2005; Barrie, 2004; Bath et al., 2004 & Drummond et al., 1998). The separation of soft skills from the disciplinary learning environment may lead to superficial technical approaches in teaching and learning of soft skills (Star & Hammer, 2007).

Therefore, this study aimed to fill the gap between the processes of embedding soft skills to teaching among lecturers. This study used a qualitative approach to explore the experience of lecturers in teacher education programs at the institute. Thus, this study explored how teaching approaches among lecturers were aligned with the soft skills development for student teachers.

3. PURPOSE

The aims of the study were to:

- 1) Understand how lecturers understand the embedment of soft skills into the teaching of compulsory courses
- 2) Understand the relationship between lecturers' perceptions toward the embedment of soft skills and the actual teaching practice.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative inquiry because it used a naturalistic approach that sought to understand phenomena in the context of a specific environment, like a real-world environment (where) the researchers did not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2002).

An emphasis on the uniqueness of the individual, and the focus on understanding the participants from their own perspective led to the use of case studies. According to Merriam (1998), a case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single unit or limited system. Yin (2003) defined a case study as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in a real life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clear. This study used a case study strategy for the embedment of soft skills into the teaching of compulsory courses at one of Malaysian IPGs, whereby IPG as the case (limited system) to explore the experience of teaching among lecturers.

Two clear criteria in the selection of the participants were followed. First, all participants were lecturers at the IPG. Second, lecturers were involved in the teaching of compulsory courses to student teachers.

Five lecturers were involved in this study. The sample size was believed to be sufficient as the interview answers provided the saturation data, diverse, dense and deep, which allowed the researcher to explore the teaching views and experiences of the lecturers' core course.

Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary source of evidence. It was further supported and triangulated with other sources, such as document analysis, classroom observations and stimulated recall interviews.

In this study, the researcher used M & H's Interactional Model of Qualitative Data Analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to analyze the internal data and each data source (individual interviews, documents, observation and stimulated recall interviews). This model shows that data analysis involved three interrelated activities starting with data collection. These activities involved reducing data manually, displaying data using Atlas.ti software and producing a conclusion and validation by interpreting the data.

5. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Beliefs About Soft Skills Embedment

5.1.1 Soft Skills Was Readily Embedded Into the Teaching of Compulsory Courses

The first theme emerged from the data was the belief on embedding soft skills from the perspective of teaching compulsory courses. According to the perspective of teaching compulsory courses in PISMP, all subjects in the compulsory courses should be able to introduce basic knowledge, generic skills, and soft skills that must be mastered by a teacher. In PISMP, embedding soft skills concept should dominate all aspects of subject content and teaching methods of compulsory courses. An excerpt from an interview with Safwan reflected his understanding about embedding soft skills into his teaching.

Co-curricular teaching emphasizes... skills, coaching, staffing and management. He (the student teachers) must have the skills, can train, can become an officer and can manage the tournament. Students have to make on their own from writing the paperwork, meeting, committee members discussion, looking for venue until completion. While doing it on his own he will learn indirectly... lecturers become a place for reference and mentors... (Safwan)

5.1.2 Transmission Teaching Approach (Delivering)

The second theme extracted data suggests the belief existed amongst majority of the interviewed lecturers about teaching as a transmission of knowledge. According to the transmission perspective, an effective teaching begins with a commitment to the content or subject matter. From this perspective, students are considered as the containers to be filled with knowledge. This perspective can be seen through some passages of dialogue with the participants, *"I have to convey knowledge and give information, especially to students who are comfortable learning in a passive way"* (Anita). This was supported by Safwan, *"... when it came to the implementation stage from lecturers, we directly focus on what we want to present..."* (Safwan) and Sofia, *"... as a teacher, I feel responsible to impart knowledge and skills to students with the emphasis on the subject syllabus to help students prepare for exams and tests"* (Sofia).

When lecturers believe that they are responsible for imparting knowledge, their teaching practice would also be influenced by this perspective. Lecturers would be ready with having clear lesson objectives, providing a well-planned lecture, using class time efficiently, answering students' questions and formulating the desired standards of student achievement. The excerpt of the interview with Lizarnor reflected this belief, whereby she said that although she used active teaching strategies, she also used the transmission approach sometimes such as giving lectures and notes. She also agreed that transmission is useful as an approach for a more effective learning.

5.1.3 Facilitative Teaching Approach (Lecturers' Role)

The third theme emerged from the data was associated with facilitative approach toward teaching as opposed to transmission teaching approach (the second theme). Facilitative teaching involves the lecturers facilitating the student teachers learning by encouraging them to be active in constructing their own meaning. Lecturer is a facilitator for student teachers in developing their skills, not only in term of learning outcomes, but also how knowledge is used.

a) Lecturer as a Facilitator

Feedback from lecturers demonstrated their understanding that the role of a good lecturer is a facilitator, so that student teachers continue to build their own learning experience. Interview data showed that the lecturers supported the features of a facilitative lecturer.

Based on observations on a respondent, Sofia, researcher realized that the lecturer worked to facilitate the learning of student teachers in the classroom by helping and guiding them in a group discussion. She also provided guidance on the topics covered and encouraged student teachers to use their own creativity to make the discussion more meaningful. The lecturer also frequently butted discussions among student teachers by asking questions or providing feedback. When asked during a stimulated recall interview about her teaching style, she said;

Through student teacher group discussion, I can help student teachers learning rather than just presenting the information during my lecture... I gave them problems to be solved, and I give them space to find a solution by means of exchanging ideas and opinions in the group... but I think I still need to raise the level of their thinking by asking questions and giving comments. My teaching seems to be able to lead students to the development of the concepts being discussed... (Sofia)

For some participants, their role as a facilitator meant they have to know how to study and facilitate the student teachers learning ability. Some of them stated that lecturers needed to know the needs of student teachers and be aware about their learning problems.

b) Lecturer as a Skills Builder

Apart from the role of the lecturer as a facilitator for student teachers learning, some participants were comfortable with the term 'skill builder' to describe the role of the lecturers. In their opinion, the lecturer was not only responsible for delivering lessons, but also in developing behavior and the desired skills for student teachers. This can be seen from the following passage:

While lecturers work on imparting knowledge to students, they also need to develop skills and behaviors needed in a student stands... meaning that the lecturers also act as a skill builders, responsible in building skills, study skills and any essential skills in their life (Adam)

Lizarnor linked skill development with the objective of the national education philosophy, which aims to promote the development of the students in all aspects of life.

At the same time we have to build their skills and behavior (student teachers)... our role is not limited to cognitive development but also skills, emotional and behavioral as defined by the national education philosophy. (Lizarnor)

For some participants, they needed to become builders as they needed to instill the skills in student teachers through the curriculum. They said that they were expected to play the role of facilitator or skills builder through soft skills embedment. This reflected their support for soft skills embedment introduced by the KPM that must be implemented on all undergraduates at higher learning institutions.

Now there is soft skills embedment into PISMP. We embed soft skills in all core course subjects. Students were embedded with a variety of generic skills (KI) such as how to handle a group during a group discussion in the classroom, using learning technology... implementation of soft skills can actually help the overall development of students. We need to give special attention to and build skills by teaching... to be facilitators and skills builder... Otherwise we will just be a purveyor of knowledge, just focus on the purely intellectual aspects and ignoring other aspects such as emotional and physical development. They (student teachers) will be a teacher in the future; we want them to be a good teacher and balanced in all aspects of human capital development (Adam)

The above expressions by Adam suggested that his teaching philosophy was that lecturers should be responsible for developing student teachers soft skills just like developing student teachers knowledge.

The themes revealed two perspectives on soft skills embedment through teaching among lecturers, which were through traditional didactic teaching (transmission teaching approach) and active teaching (facilitative teaching approach). The emergence of student-centered perspective in this study suggested that lecturers were in the process of transforming from transmission to facilitative teaching approach.

The analysis revealed the existence of an integration process between didactic and active teaching approaches among the lecturers. Researcher found that lecturers believed that teaching should not be a mere lecture, but should use student-centered teaching as well. They also believed that these two approaches were complementary of, rather than conflicting, each other. This suggests that lecturers' beliefs and teaching practices are being transformed. This is in line with Bailey's (1992) arguments stating that the change in teaching practice is a result of changes in teachers' beliefs. According to Bandura (1986), a decision in human life is greatly influenced by their belief. Similarly, Pajares (1992) asserted that belief is "*the best indicators of the decisions made by individuals throughout their lives*" and the belief among lecturers influenced them and affected their behaviors in the classroom. This is reflected in the participants' understanding and practice.

There is evidence that the lecturers understood teaching as a means to transmit and facilitate knowledge. These were reflected in their teaching practice. From classroom observations, researcher realized that they used both transmission and facilitative teaching approaches. They started the class with a lecture and followed it with active teaching strategies that required student teachers to be involved in specific activities.

6. CONCLUSION

Based on these findings, the implications are discussed in term of the construction method for a more effective embedding soft skills method. This study suggested that lecturers' understanding about teaching was a reflection of their beliefs and philosophy towards embedding soft skills in teaching and learning. In time, they see teaching and learning as teacher-centered and/or student-centered, results also showed consistency in the strategy for soft skills embedment. Thus, to understand a teaching style, it is important to understand the lecturers' beliefs about education.

The findings suggested that lecturers associated their role with the process of embedding soft skills. The lecturers acknowledged that they needed to play the role of knowledge experts and to be role models for their student teachers. At the same time, they also accepted their roles as mentors and facilitators. Their philosophy about teaching and learning, which was found to be very strong, should be enough to suggest to the KPM and IPG to accept the important relationship between a teaching method and an effective strategy for soft skills embedment. The mere focus on student teachers training and increased computers usage in the classroom are not the strategies to embed soft skills. This study suggested for IPG to develop a teacher training program,

which embeds soft skills elements into teaching and learning, emphasizing on the concepts and holistic integration through their teaching. Further, IPG may seek to consider teaching and learning approaches that can be associated with strategies to embed soft skills and to reconsider student-centered learning as a parallel strategy with embedding soft skills strategy. A greater emphasis on beliefs about embedding soft skills strategy among lecturers is noteworthy because most lecturers choose to adopt teaching and learning in line with their belief system.

Since lecturers' beliefs about teaching and learning may form the fundamentals of their behavior and the behavior changes with changes in belief, then teacher training courses that are able to encourage participants to reflect on their beliefs and make explicit belief will most likely boost professional development (Pajares, 1992). IPG (via In-Service Training Unit) has been conducting courses and training on the development of student teachers soft skills for the lecturers throughout the year, but the courses have not been able to integrate teaching courses with teaching beliefs. Most courses relate lessons on pedagogical knowledge (such as problem-based learning workshops, lessons for adult learning) and the importance of information and communication technology (ICT) in learning (such as e-learning or blended learning). Thus, this study suggests that IPG and teacher training programs implement changes in the identification of professional knowledge, skills and values. This is important to keep it in line with the lecturers' belief, so that lecturers can teach smoothly through student-centered teaching and learning context.

Another implication on IPG is to construct student-centered definition that may reflect the values of developing soft skills. This study showed that lecturers accepted student-centered teaching approach as a very useful and effective teaching approach, which reflected their willingness to change toward student-centered teaching. However, this transformation may vary from one lecturer to another. Therefore, to maximize the potential advantages of student-centered approach in teacher training programs, the challenges faced within the learning culture such as lecturers' attitude towards student-centered teaching, time constraints and large class size should be solved first. Based on these factors, IPG should introduce a more systematic teacher training program that can integrate a student-centered model with a model that embeds soft skills. This can be accomplished using an interpretation of the student-centered learning by applying embedding soft skills philosophy and taking into account the conditions of all student teachers and lecturers. Therefore, it is important that the issue is taken care of to encourage effective skills construction. The findings produced a critical view of the management of teacher training programs at the institute, and also provided an opportunity for the management of the institute to design and develop an appropriate teaching and learning model with a teacher training program that is based on soft skills embedment, while still using the student-centered approach.

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