

Describing an Excellent University Instructor: Towards Developing a New Paradigm

JOEL T. ACLAO

ORCID No. 0000-0001-5507-5868

joeltaclao@gmail.com

Misamis University

Ozamiz City, Philippines

AIDA G. ABASOLO

ORCID No. 0000-0001-7998-971X

aidagabasolo@gmail.com

Misamis University

Ozamiz City, Philippines

MARC WILL L. VILLACORA

ORCID No. 0000-0001-7503-6217

marcwillvillacora@gmail.com

Misamis University

Ozamiz City, Philippines

CHRISSA FAITH M. MAÑEGO

ORCID No. 0000-0002-2838-8495

chrissafaithmanego@gmail.com

Misamis University

Ozamiz City, Philippines

ABSTRACT

Universities and colleges use different constructs in describing excellent instructor. The study aimed to analyze students' descriptions of excellent instructors, to report the descriptions as themes, and to develop a new paradigm of an excellent university instructor. The researchers reviewed comments from the 836 Learning Environment Survey results completed by the students coming

from the 44 classes of the subject instructors. A total of 22 excellent instructors coming from the different colleges composed the subjects of the study. This qualitative study used thematic analysis to report the emergent themes. The study revealed that students describe excellent university instructors as content expert, facilitator, motivator, and role model. As an output, the study develops a new paradigm of excellent university instructor. However, the constructs of the paradigm need further study for validation.

Keywords - Higher Education, excellent university instructors, content expert, facilitator, motivator, role model, thematic analysis, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

Interest on determining the common descriptions and attributes of an excellent instructor with the use of different approaches has increased recently. Defining excellence in teaching is a strenuous job because it linked with the observable and technical aspects of the profession (Simendinger et al., 2009; Hammer et al., 2010; Exley, 2011; Arikan, et al., 2008). Conceptions regarding excellent instructors vary depending on a host of variables, such as the individuals defining it, the learners, subject matter, methods used, and other important factors (Hammer et al., 2010). Excellent teachers emphasize intangible values that contribute to student success (Rinaldo, 2009).

Teacher quality is the most significant school-based factor in determining student outcomes (Ibrahim, Aziz & Nambiar, 2013). It is essential to maintain workforce of effective teachers who can establish an environment conducive for learning to achieve and sustain high quality teaching and learning (Arikan, et al., 2008). This supports the idea that teachers demonstrate awareness of a wide range of conditions that impact students and they must have full control of these things (Bramwell, Reilly, Lilly, Kronish & Chennabathni, 2011).

Most universities make use of systematic student evaluations of classroom teaching among other methods (Simendinger et al., 2009). In addition, the increasingly popular student-oriented customer approach to instruction in colleges and educational institutions contributed to the reliance and dependability of student evaluations for teacher effectiveness (Simpson & Siguaw, 2000).

In this context, instructors' qualities must be analyzed to provide reasonably precise measurement of instructor performance.

FRAMEWORK

Teaching is a two-way communicative process primarily facilitated by the teacher who has in depth knowledge of the subject matter, demonstrates a caring attitude towards the students, and maintains classroom control for keeping the students actively involved in their learning (Cakmak, 2009). Studies pointed out two important components of the ideal teacher: professional knowledge, both of the content and didactic information and an appropriate personality (Arnon & Reichel, 2007).

Excellent instructors are those that hold strong discipline and deep content knowledge; have pedagogical skills appropriate to the environment and discipline, and have personal knowledge and concern to students and with a firm moral code. They are also those that own intimate knowledge of the context in which they were teaching (Hammer et al., 2010).

The studies reviewed dealt with different descriptions of excellent instructors in general from different evaluators such as teachers themselves, administrators and students. The studies failed to present common descriptors of high performing instructors. The study, therefore, aimed to develop a general construct of excellent university instructors.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study analyzed students' descriptions of excellent instructors in Misamis University, reported the descriptions as themes and developed a new paradigm.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed qualitative method of research employing thematic analysis in analyzing students' descriptions of excellent instructors and in reporting data in themes. Thematic analysis is a flexible technique that can be used to analyze data, and it is relatively easy and quick for new qualitative researchers to learn (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researchers cautioned themselves not to form a priori hypotheses or expectations with respect to students' description of what an excellent instructor is (Bengo et al., 2012).

The documents for analysis were the Learning Environment Survey Forms completed by the 836 students (44 sections) coming from the classes of the subject instructors. A total of 22 excellent instructors coming from the different colleges composed the subjects of the study. The students rated these instructors

“excellent” during the second semester of the school year 2012-2013. The study was conducted from August to September 2013 in Misamis University, Ozamiz City, Philippines.

The researchers asked permissions from the Vice President for Academic Affairs and different deans prior to the data-gathering process. They also personally approached the subject instructors and requested them to sign an informed consent.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis yielded the following themes of students’ descriptions of an excellent university instructor:

Theme 1. Content Expert

We cannot give what we do not have as teachers cannot teach what they do not know about. With the same reasoning, we cannot effectively teach content we know quite well if we lack knowledge of teaching. Content expertise includes teachers’ knowledge of the subject and understanding of curriculum standards (Hofer & Swan, 2009). Researches on teachers’ content expertise in the subject areas of mathematics (Ojose, 2012; Asikainen, Pehkonen, & Hirvonen, 2013) and science (Lee and Luft, 2008) concluded that teachers with sufficient knowledge about the contents of the subject matter able to describe teaching enactments as convincing, innovative, and interesting. Mastery of the subject matter and pedagogical knowledge and skills, therefore, make an instructor content expert.

The finding implies that a university instructor needs to pursue graduate studies, conduct research to keep him abreast in the field. The activities will help instructors to enrich and advance his content knowledge, thus, ensuring that students learn most from him.

The great majority of the students describe a content expert teacher as the one who:

- “Is intelligent and knowledgeable in his field.”
- “Provides/cites clear and best example of the lesson’s concept.”
- “Digs deep to what matters most in the lesson.”
- “Demonstrates a good quality of teacher as a catalyst of knowledge.”
- “Inspires students through his expertise in the topic.”
- “Can explain and relate the lesson to real life things.”
- “Has a lot of information/knowledge that he can share to anybody.”
- “Gives clear information about the topics.”

“Teaches the lesson in a refreshing perspective.”

“Masters the topic as well as the subjects he handles.”

“Uses various techniques and strategies to help students understand the lesson.”

“Teaches many things including current events.”

“Involves himself in school activities and always attends seminars and trainings.”

Theme 2. Facilitator

In the learning process, an instructor possesses not only knowledge on what to teach but also on how to teach. Students viewed excellent instructors as good facilitators. Instructors in the classroom do not just only tell students the things they need to learn. They have ways and means in delivering instruction. Teachers as good facilitators know various methods and strategies helpful in maximizing student learning. Teacher’s ability to facilitate learning is not only bounded on having the knowledge but also on the application of the appropriate methods and strategies to varying learning situations.

A facilitator selects the most appropriate technique for a context (Mann, 2011). He values the division of tasks among members to attain the maximum output. He effectively manages group interaction to maximize individual contribution toward the attainment of a goal. Great facilitators acknowledge the idea that there is no best single method or technique: they know which tool and technique work best in a context. In addition, a good facilitator is skilled in terms of time management.

The following statements illustrate excellent instructor as a good facilitator:

“Teaches students with different strategies according to our learning styles.”

“Provides opportunities for students to participate in the class activities.”

“Very competent and proficient in teaching.”

“Knows how to facilitate learning properly.”

“Provides a variety of learning activities for us.”

“Simplifies tasks for the students.”

“Gives students the opportunity to explore and share new life discoveries.

“Presents his ideas in a manner that a student could never forget.”

“Has a good teaching procedure.”

“Provide learners a conducive learning environment.”

Theme 3. Motivator

Motivation deals with students' beliefs about their competence, the "quality of task engagement," as well as "goals or reasons for learning," and the duration, intensity and direction of academic behaviors (Freeman, Alston & Winborne, 2008).

An instructor is a good motivator if he can positively affect students' feelings of competence, particularly for students who may struggle academically (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). He is someone who can alleviate students' self-efficacy through praises and encouragements. A recent study (Jenkins & Hewitt, 2010) has found that a teacher can motivate students if he succeeds in developing a cherished bond with them. This is because they do not feel restricted and bogged down for the atmosphere is friendly.

To students, an instructor who is a good motivator is one who:

"Motivates students to pursue learning."

"Never fails to encourage."

"Makes the students motivated to study well."

"Never lets students feel sleepy."

"Has charisma or charm that motivates students to listen"

"Is the reason why we HRM students like and love this course."

"Inspires us to become a better person."

"Keeps on encouraging students to perform well in the class and other subjects."

"Gives encouragement to her students to participate in the class."

"Encourages students to be good in their studies and challenges students to excel."

"Is a nice teacher and motivates us well through her good attitudes."

Theme 4. Role Model

It appears in the present investigation that excellent teachers are being looked up by the student as role models. A role model, as defined in Kaahwa (2009), is a person who possesses the admirable traits one would like to have and influences other individuals to be better. Teachers establish clear pictures of what truly a teacher is and make use of these as their guiding principles (Stuart, 2009). Students value and love instructors who dressed smartly and presentable (Kagoda, 2011). This suggests that the teacher's pleasing personality is a part of the students' description of an excellent instructor.

Students consider instructors who come to school early, compassionate to students, diligent and passionate about their profession as good (Stuart, 2009).

Hurd (2009) indicated that role models greatly affect in the development of resilience among African American adolescents reared in a home with negative nonparent adult behavior. Adolescents with an identified role model received higher grades and had higher self-esteem (Yancey, 2002). Other researches also revealed good effects of role models to adolescents. The effects include reduced risk behavior; more positive academic outcomes; decreased aggressive behavior, anxiety and depression (Aspy et al. 2004; Hurd, 2009; Oman et al., 2004; Vesely et al. 2004; McMahan et al., 2004). Thus, teachers who are role models are paragons of virtue hence, influential to students. Students describe them as the one who:

“Gives us advice on how are we going to solve problems.”

“Has good values.”

“Follows rules and regulations in the classroom.”

“Teaches moral lessons.”

“Inspires and aspires.”

“Adheres to the code of ethics of a good teacher.”

“Has a very good attitude.”

“Teaches from the heart.”

“Possesses both positive professional and affective traits needed for teaching.”

“Encourages us to be honest of what we do and follow our dreams.”

A New Paradigm of an Excellent University Instructor

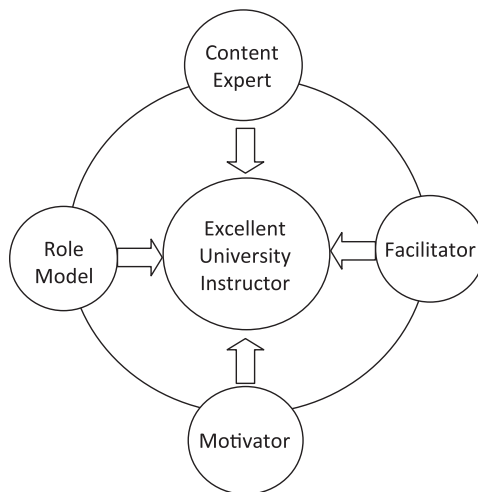


Figure 1. A New Paradigm of an Excellent University Instructor

The results of the analysis prompted the researchers to develop a paradigm for an excellent university/college instructor (Figure 1). The paradigm illustrates that to become an excellent university instructor he has to be expert in his field, a facilitator, a motivator and a role model to students. The overarching circle connecting the four subscales shows the interrelatedness of the concepts. A university instructor has to equip himself with these four indicators should he strive to excel. This means that content expertise, motivational skills, facilitating skills and role modeling make up an excellent university instructor.

Content expertise is at the top of the circle because the proponents believed that as a university instructor, first and foremost he has to equip himself with knowledge of the subject area he is to teach (Hofer & Swan, 2009). An excellent university instructor endeavors to keep abreast in his field through pursuing further studies, conducting research and sharing his knowledge to appropriate audiences (content expert). He scaffolds to help students make own meaning (facilitator) and encourages them (motivator) to pursue and participate in the higher level of knowledge construction (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Mann, 2011; Lam, Cheng, & Ma, 2009; Jenkins & Hewitt, 2010). Further, an excellent instructor diligently leads and learns by example (role model) and strongly influence others to be better (Kaahwa, 2009; Stuart, 2009; Kagoda, 2011).

CONCLUSIONS

The study provided information on how students describe an excellent university instructor. The study advanced the idea that an excellent university instructor must be content expert, facilitator, motivator, and a role model. Excellent university instructors promote and maintain quality instruction. Hence, universities and colleges have to consider these qualities or descriptions in hiring, developing, assessing and promoting instructors. The paradigm developed herein as an output of the study, clearly defines an excellent university instructor, however; the constructs need further study and validation. A follow-up quantitative inquiry in the different universities could be done in the future.

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