

Thinking Classroom: A Case Study of Education for Empowerment in Thailand

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Abstract

This research aimed to study an integrated approach to learning and teaching of students studying communication arts and empower their potential by exchanging the normal classroom for a thinking classroom. The research method employed for this study the integration of learning and teaching suitable communications for participatory development was a first phase process that included: 1) textual analysis course materials suitable to impart knowledge and meet the goal of developing students' potential; 2) designing activities and a teaching and learning process that fits with communication for participatory development; 3) taking students to a community to train in a learning environment outside their normal classroom that has similar conditions to actual life as part of the project: "Communications for Participatory Development; 4) having students design activities and campaigns to solve community problems under the concept of participatory communications and 5) measurement and evaluation of learning results. The results of this study in which students participated in the project, "Communication for Participatory Development", to determine how well a thinking classroom can contribute to student's developing their potential can be summarized as follows. First, the majority of the students, 62.1 %, felt the project activities were fun or enjoyable. Next, the entire sample, 100%, said they liked the learning process when doing it at an actual site. Finally, 89.7% felt that they developed their ability to think and analyze to the highest level.

Keywords: thinking classroom, empowerment

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Introduction

In the conventional classroom, the teacher will lecture the students to impart knowledge, but for education in this new era, the roles of the teacher and learner have changed as the focus has changed from the teacher to the learner. Today, the teacher is there for the student, as the role of the teacher has changed to be a coach, or learning facilitator, whose role is to inspire students to learn by doing. It is a team effort. (Vicharn Panich, 2012).

“The method of teaching for the student of the 21st century can be divided into five classifications (Vicharn Panich, 2012): authentic learning, mental model building, internal motivation, multiple intelligence and social learning.

These changes in teaching and learning methods have had very profound results on developing the standards of education. Now, students are not just learning from their books, chapter by chapter, as the focus has turned to learning action in the community. Learning methodology is now based on what is required for success in work, including, morality and ethics, intellectual skills, human relations and responsibility, analysis and statistics, teaching and use of communications technology.

The course, Communication in Rural Development, has as its goal giving students the ability to use many different forms of communications to benefit the local community and society in different any aspects, for example, politics and governance, economics and social welfare, agriculture and public health as well as others that fit with local demands. The stress is on participatory communications that is ethical. The course description states that it is designed for students to study the process, roles, responsibilities and problems faced by communication in rural development.

From the course objectives and description, the approach to teaching and learning fits perfectly with the newly developed ‘Thinking Classroom’, which has been designed based on the learning process in which students put what they are studying into practice, as they learn critical thinking, to question before taking any action. This is the basis for this study, “Thinking Classroom: A Case Study of Education for Empowerment in Thailand”.

This research is also based on two strategies included in the 11th National Economic and Social Development Plan (2011-2016), which are: to develop a society of sustainable, lifelong learning in the field of communication arts that will lead to a Bachelor’s degree, especially in producing entertainment that satisfies demands of local communities, including the organizing of activities and learning that focuses on relevant theories and a curriculum with objectives to produce entertainment that educates (edutainment) based on the theories and principles of communication arts. Students need to be able to analyze and understand how to apply the right methods as well as gain a deep understanding of the profession and its processes in order to develop the quality of the people so they can contribute to the develop of their local communities and the nation.

Objective

To develop the potential of students majoring in communication arts through the “Thinking Classroom”

Research Definitions

The development of potential is defined as taking action to help students use what they have learned to gain further knowledge, skills and attitudes to perform to a still higher level. Here, this means in the participatory communication process, which includes the development of critical thinking, human relations and teamwork, and communications skills. Students is defined as 47 students majoring in communication arts in the Faculty of Management Science enrolled in the course Communication in Rural Development, section 2 of the second term of 2014 academic term. Thinking Classroom can be defined as a classroom designed to encourage and stimulate students’ thinking process, which employs critical thinking, a question and answer system, in a learning environment that is as close as possible to a real life situation in which the teacher acts as the students’ coach, or learning facilitator.

Scope of Research

Content

The process of developing the potential of the communication arts students begins with moving from a traditional classroom to a ‘Thinking Classroom’ focusing on participatory communications.

Demographics

The study included 47 students majoring in communication arts in the Faculty of Management Science enrolled in the course Communication in Rural Development, section 2 of the second term of 2014 academic term.

Period

The study was conducted during the second term of the 2014 academic year.

Research Benefits

1) Communication Arts students will gain in knowledge and develop their potential through the change from a conventional classroom to a “Thinking Classroom”.

2) The research process can serve as one part of quality assurance for the course, curriculum and Phranakhon Rajabhat University.

Research Method

This research, “Thinking Classroom: A Case Study of Education for Empowerment in Thailand” was designed to study the integration of teaching and learning through a qualitative and quantitative approach. The sample included 47 students of the Communication Arts Department of the Faculty of Management Science who registered for the course, “Communication in Rural Development” for the second term of the 2014 academic year.

The method of integration of teaching to best convey the required course knowledge of participatory communications can be divided into five steps, as follows:

Step 1: Consider the material that would be necessary to impart the required knowledge and meet the course goal to develop students' potential.

Step 2: Design activities and a teaching-learning process that focuses on participatory communication.

Step 3: Have students move to a location where they can gain onsite experience outside their conventional classroom. The site should be as close to a real life experience as possible to conduct the project, "Communication for Participatory Development".

Step 4: Students design activities and campaign communications to solve community problems under the concept of participatory communications.

Step 5: Measure and evaluate the learning of students, group friends and classmates together with the project's results as well as have the teacher/lecturer measure and evaluate the results from developing students' potentials through the change from a conventional classroom to a "Thinking Classroom" using an online questionnaire and student observation while they participate in the project.

The research tools employed to collect data on the integration of teaching and learning for the course "Communication for Rural Development" comprised an student observation form to be completed by the researcher, who is also the teacher for this subject. It covered student behavior as they work on designing activities and campaign communications to solve community problems under the concept of participatory communications as well as an online questionnaire that students complete once the development project is completed.

For the analysis of the qualitative data, the researcher uses a step-by-step analysis based on the project process discussed previously. The quantitative data is analyzed using value percentages, which are presented in charts.

Research Results

The research results can be divided into classifications:

- 1) Development process of students' potential
- 2) Results of development of students' potential

1) Development process of students' potential

The process for the development of student potential began when the researcher examined the course description and content to see how well it fit with the course's body of knowledge to be imparted and course goals to develop students' potential as well as the design of activities and the teaching-learning process that focuses on participatory communications. After this, the project was assigned to the students during which they were to the actual site outside of their normal classroom to train and gain actual experience in what can be termed a "Thinking Classroom", which is as close to a real-life situation under the project concept, "Communication for Participatory Development".

As far as the course content for participatory communications, the important knowledge the students should gain through the project is all based on participation, as follows:

1) Participation in Implementation

The target group has to be motivated to participate in the formation of the development plan, which includes accepting a role in offering suggestions, donations and resources or materials that can be used in the implementation of the development plan.

2) Participation in Evaluation

This means inviting the target group to participate in the review and critique of the project and campaign communications, their success and/or failures.

3) Participation in Benefit

This means the benefits gained through participation, including the success of the project or campaign communications.

4) Participating in Decision-Making

This means the target group participating in creating their project and choice of goals, i.e. production of campaign communication materials, implementation and evaluation of what has been done.

For the students' project, each group had to decide what would be the solution for the problems they encountered and then produce communication materials to achieve this.

In addition to establishing target groups to implement the project, there were other stakeholders affected by problems the target groups had chosen to focus on.

Design of Activities

For the project assigned to the students based on "Communication for Participatory Development", students need to employ critical thinking first and then determine their workload, or responsibilities. Meanwhile, the teacher had to encourage participation of all students in coming up with solutions for problems. They were then divided into small groups of 4-5 students who must set a time frame, which must include the presentation of data and information to their teacher, or 'coach' for specific periods.

The students were assigned their workload, as follows:

1st Period

1. Survey the two Phranakhon Rajabhat University canteens to determine their problems and methods to solve these.
2. Interview those who use the university canteens as to what they feel are their problems and how they feel these can be solved.
3. Summarize the data from the interviews and survey and present this on A4 sheets of paper as well as an oral report.

2nd Period

1. Each group together had to select the problem they wanted to solve and consider together this problem as well as the stakeholders.
2. Interview the stakeholders to collect the data of the problems and solutions from the viewpoint of those affected and then focus on producing campaign communication materials to solve the problem(s).

3. Summarize the data from the interviews and suggestions for communication materials of each group.

3rd Period

1. Present the proposal for the campaign communication materials for group review and evaluate the communication results through group exchange and the Facebook communication channel.
2. Interview stakeholders to evaluate the campaign communications.
3. Produce, implement and then evaluate the communications materials by questioning stakeholders.

Onsite Training for Students in Participatory Communications

The students selected as the community two canteens at Phranakhon Rajabhat University: Old canteen adjacent to the Faculty of Industrial Technology, (Hot Canteen) and the new canteen, or Phra Nakhon Market Place, (Cool Market). The students then employed two methods for their surveys, observation of problems within the canteen and interviews with stakeholders according to the points they had selected such as the market closing early, which affects stakeholders, including stall owners and canteen managers, or there not being an organized queue system or people cutting lines, in which students are the primary stakeholders, or there not being sufficient seating, which then requires the expansion of the canteens. In this case, university administrators are also affected stakeholders.

From the problems and solutions determined during the first stage, the students in each group had to develop a campaign communications production plan to solve the problem(s) they had chosen. This plan was the result from collecting data from their surveys and interviews during the first stage.

After this, they moved to the second phase of the project in which they interviewed and discussed the problems and solutions with the stakeholders to together develop communication content and design to, for example, reduce the congestion (density) in canteen services during lunchtime when there are insufficient tables and chairs by encouraging students with vinyl signage to use the service on the second floor, which had not previously attracted patrons, or from observations and interviews, have the students solve congestion caused by students remaining in their seats for a long time after finishing their meal or what students called in the interviews, other students 'chilling'. So they chose to produce stickers for a campaign that said, "Don't sit and chill!"

One group of students chose to produce stickers to solve the problem of insufficient seating in the canteens as well as not clearing tables once finished so they had students in their same year show what they thought and had them comment on the communication materials' designs. In addition, they found that the language the students selected was fun and humorous to replace more formal and polite language as the stakeholders, or the target group of the campaign, were students as well, and the data from the interviews with students who use the canteens showed they do not like formal communications, but like bright, light, humorous text and visuals to grab the target groups' attention, so they will read it and change their behavior.

After the students began to produce the campaign communication materials, they would test them on site and see stakeholders' reactions. In addition to the benefits gained producing the campaign communication materials together, they would also participate in the campaign evaluation.

Thus, from onsite observation and interviews with stakeholders, it was found that in addition to the knowledge gained on communications for community development, potential in other areas was also developed such as the development of their critical thinking, the practical application of their knowledge to develop a communication plan and design executions, development of teamwork skills, becoming more responsible and development of communication skills, speaking, writing, listening and presentation.

2) Results of Development of Students' Potential

When the students had completed the project, a very important phase followed, the measurement and evaluation of their learning and the development of their potential by changing from the conventional classroom to a "Thinking Classroom" that played an integral role in the project, "Communication for Participatory Development" as part of the course, "Communication for Rural Development" for communication art students under the code 55 for the second semester of the 2014 academic year. The results for the development of student's potential after self-evaluation are as follows.

100% of the students felt they liked the teaching-learning process in which an actual site was used as their classroom.

For participation in the project, "Communication for Participatory Development", 69% of the students that felt their level of knowledge and understanding was high, followed by 20.7% who said it was highest and 10.3% who said it was mid level.

For the project teaching to students to understand stakeholders, 48.3% said they had a high level of understanding, while 27.6% said the highest and 24.1% said mid level.

The results from participating in the activities that made them think and create materials based on the data they collected and presented in text and orally, 44.8% said they had gained amid level of understanding, followed by 39.9 gaining a high level of understanding and 13.8% the highest level.

The results from participating in developing the activities and materials on their own, 51.7% felt they could work well or cooperate with others to a high level, 34.5% to the highest level and 13.8% to the mid level.

As for the results based on a scale from the highest to the lowest level for participating in the implementation of the project, "Communications for Participatory Development", 89.7% felt they were able to develop their ability to analyze, 72.4% felt this for situation evaluation, 65.5% felt this for developing strategy, 41.4% for synthesizing data and 3.4% for other topics.

As for continuing the project, "Communication for Participatory Development" as part of the course, "Communication for Rural Development", the communication art

students under the code 55 for the second semester of the 2014 academic year felt the following:

1. The students felt that this form of teaching-learning was very different as they learned at the actual site, and that this helped them to analyze problems by collecting data and information, which are skills they can incorporate into their daily lives.
2. The students felt that they better understood about participatory communication because they were able to use it on site and could encounter real problems that they could actually work to solve.
3. The students felt the teaching-learning activities were fun. They didn't feel at all stressed. Furthermore, they felt that actual practical training helped them to learn and understand real problems and how to solve them, and this also helped them to change their thinking. They saw that they can work out of a fixed frame and develop critical thinking skills and creative ideas in their group. They said they would then be more motivated to do their work and felt less board.

Conclusion

To develop the potential of students studying communication arts and help them learn the process for participatory communication, critical thinking skills and understanding are important as other human relations skills, particularly when it comes to teamwork as well as communication. This can be better accomplished by changing from the conventional classroom to a "Thinking Classroom". The process of developing students' potential begins when the researcher considers the content for a course that fits with the knowledge and objectives of course to accomplish focusing on developing student potential. This is then followed by designing activities and a teaching-learning process that stresses participatory communications. After this, the course should provide students with a project where they can work and learn outside the classroom at an actual site to train and gain practical experience in a "Thinking Classroom", which is virtually the same as real life. This was possible through the project, "Communication for Participatory Development", which had as its focus motivating students to find answers to questions beginning with, "Who are the stakeholders?" which they asked after determining, as a group, the problem they wanted to solve.

As far as the results for the development of student potential for communication arts students studying outside the conventional classroom in a "Thinking Classroom", 69% felt that they understood participatory communication to a high extent, followed by 20.7% to the highest extent and 10.3% to a mid level.

As for human relations skills and working as a team, 51.7% felt they understood this at a high level, followed by 34.5% who felt they understood this to the highest level and 13.8% to a mid level.

As far as participation in the implementation of the project, 89.7% felt they had developed their potential in critical thinking, 72.4% felt they had developed their skills in analyzing a situation, 65.5% felt they had developed their potential in using strategy, 41.4% in synthesizing data and 3.4% in other topics.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. Collaborative research on teaching and learning methods should be conducted to combine the study and development of teaching-learning methodology that is best for the students.
2. Different research methods that combine different approaches should be applied, or there should be comparisons made between a large number and broader range of different student sample groups.

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