

A Phenomenological Study on Experiencing In-class Discussion among University Students in Hong Kong

Shui Kau Chiu, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong

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Abstract

Adoption of various type of information and communication technologies in different teaching and learning activities have been a common practice all over the world. One of its adoptions is to facilitate an interaction among students through online discussion forum. While such practice wins a lot of adherents in higher education, there is a concern over justification of the employment by arguing that it may not help much or even discourages interaction among students. Instead of adopting information and communication technology, conventional in-class discussion is recommended. In a sense, it is subjected to how students perceive the activity. Experience shapes our perceptions on many things, including the way we perceive the outside world. As phenomenology is one of the theories in probing meaning of experience to a person, it is adopted as theoretical framework for this paper in understanding the experience of in-class discussion among university students in Hong Kong. Collecting data from semi-structured interviews, this paper proclaims that how students perceive in-class discussion is not solely decided by themselves. Their perceptions towards the learning activity and even learnings are shaped by their past experiences in the society. When educationists trying to arouse learning motivation and increase learning effectiveness among students, finding from this paper suggests that past experience of students should be one of the factors for considerations.

Keywords: Phenomenology, in-class discussion, higher education, Hong Kong

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Introduction

Discussion, which is an “effort of a group of individuals who talk informally together in order to solve commonly recognized problems or to arrive at an understanding of values”, is one of the widely adopted pedagogies (Walter & Scott, 1968, p. 186). Discussion can help students recognize their shortcomings, improve their critical thinking and establish a co-operative environment (Gritter, 2011, pp. 445-446; Piro & Anderson, 2015, p. 2). Because of the strengths, discussion is widely practiced in classroom. However, such practice is built upon almost without concerning students’ perception on it. Understanding students’ perception of in-class discussion is important as it can unveil the way of adopted pedagogy in facilitating students’ learning. Therefore, this study was proposed. In the following, there will first be a literature review with a general description on phenomenology. After that, research questions, methodology, analyses and discussions will be presented. Lastly, contributions of this study will be suggested followed by conclusion.

Literature review

Many researches had been conducted over in-class discussion. For example, Lin et al. (2013) used in-class discussion targeting at improving interaction skills among Taiwan’s nursing students. Apart from enhancing students’ interaction skills, Lin et al. (2013) found that adoption of in-class discussion also improved students’ learning contentment at the same time (pp. 679-681).

Isgitt and Donnellan (2014) employed in-class discussion in mathematic class hoped to polish middle school students’ capability in tackling problem (p. 81). Through advancing students’ capability in resolving difficulty, Isgitt and Donnellan (2014) pinpointed that employment of in-class discussion facilitated students in grabbing tough mathematical ideas (pp. 84-85).

Jackson and Chen (2018) interested in exchange students in Hong Kong and looked into their inclination of taking part in in-class discussion (p. 293). Jackson and Chen (2018) pointed out that students’ cultural background was a force that hindered their readiness in joining in-class discussion (pp. 298-299).

In short, attentions from past major literatures focused their concerns on how in-class discussion help to improve students’ learning outcomes without equipping much with theoretical support. Although the study from Jackson and Chen (2018) addressed on students’ inclination in taking part of in-class discussion and was thus relevant to this paper, their focus was beyond local students. Meanwhile, Hong Kong university students’ experiences of in-class discussion can be interpreted as their perceptions of a typical environment at their outside world. At the same time, phenomenology addresses at the way of one’s experience in shaping one’s view towards external world. In view of that, phenomenology was therefore deployed as theoretical approach in this paper.

Research questions and methodology

Based on the above discussions, with a view of probing into Hong Kong university students' perceptions of participating in-class discussion, two research questions were set:

1. How university students in Hong Kong perceive participating in-class discussion?
2. How experience mediate university students in Hong Kong in perceiving participation of in-class discussion?

With a view of collecting students' perceptions of in-class discussion from their own perspectives, data was collected through conducting semi-structured interviews (Byrne, 2012, p. 209 and 215). Four local students (S1, S2, S3 and S4), including three females, were recruited to attend semi-structured interviews. All the interviews, which lasted from around one hour and twelve minutes to one hour and thirty minutes, were conducted in Cantonese, mother tongue for all the students.

Analyses and discussions

All students in this study showed their approbations over in-class discussion. One student said:

“My experiences in attending lessons think that students like face-to-face discussion more” (S1, female)

While the student based on her experiences and suggested her preference over in-class discussion, another student offered an interesting but also challenging viewpoint on that.

“When the discussion does not carry marks, basically no one do it.” (S2, female)

In the context of Hong Kong, usually in-class discussion does not carry marks and does not affect students' academic outcome in the course. At most, it is counted as class participation which just accounts so little proportion of total results that usually students neglect it. Because of this, S2's view could be regarded as challenging to S1. In other words, students in Hong Kong should not like in-class discussion and almost no one is willing to participate as it does not carry marks. Another student seemed to offer her support by pointing out that:

“Most of us lack much incentive on studying. move a bit only when you tell them to do so. (We are) not willing to do.” (S3, female)

By suggesting “lack much incentive on studying” and “not willing to do”, S3 already described a common phenomenon among Hong Kong university students that mark is a significant motivation for their studying. Without mark, students are even inclined not to participate the learning activity. That perception not only applies on students'

willingness in participating in-class discussion but is also consistent with S2. In view of this, further considerations have to be made before arriving a better sociological imagination on why all students in this study indicated their endorsements on in-class discussion.

Meanwhile, a student proposed the followings:

“If you need to do some discussions or need to discuss, sometimes it can be done in lesson very quickly.” (S4, male)

By saying “it can be done in lesson very quickly”, S4 associated participation of in-class discussion with the amount of time she spent on and even total effort that she needed to exercise of. Reason for S4 proposing and highlighting such an association maybe attributed to her experience. While this study has argued that such association is also applicable to other students in this study, phenomenology offers an explanation on the rationale behind it.

Since primary school, Hong Kong students have already been evaluated not by their competencies or characters but by the achievements that they are able to attain. Students’ achievements, however, have always been expressed, measured, compared and judged in term of quantifiable indicators such as their academic performances, the number of certificate or diploma that they have acquired and so on. Nevertheless, personal disposition and ethical practices have almost been excluded from the evaluations and judgements. Owing to keen competition on various educational opportunities and resources, students’ achievements in return have been translated and understood as a way to secure a better prospect. Students are fully aware of it and that have made most of them eager on their studies. Driven by their awareness, generally speaking, students have developed a sense of realistic mindset of just concerning on those activities that help them to attain achievements. For instance, students are much eager to submit their assignments on time because it carries marks. Failure to do so may affect their academic performances. On the contrary, students have tended not to exercise so much effort or even neglect other activities, like in-class discussion, especially when they do not carry mark as those activities cannot help them to attain achievements. Based on students’ past experiences, many of them have perceived that in-class discussion is neither meaningful nor helpful for them to attain achievements. S2 directly put it in the following manner:

“In-class discussion does not help much for learning. Like what I just mentioned, because no matter me or friends around me, actually we would prefer spending time in writing an essay or PowerPoint rather than wasting time in doing this discussion.” (S2, female)

When applying and appreciating students’ perceptions of in-class discussion, however, this realistic mindset has been revealed in a different format. In most of the cases, university students in Hong Kong are compelled to attend lectures as adequate attendance are required before they can get a pass in those subjects. In other words, students’ attained achievements will be affected if they do not attend the lectures. Under this setting, participating in-class discussion turns to be students’ favours. Since students have already attended the lectures, participating in-class discussion

does not require them to spend any additional efforts. On the contrary, when comparing with participating in-class discussion, students have tended to be more unwilling to spend more time and efforts out of their private life in completing the assigned activities after lessons. Because of the tendency of avoiding an extra burden, all students in this study therefore showed their favours of in-class discussion even though it does not carry marks and contributes almost no meaning to their achievements.

In short, based on the afore-mentioned denotations, university students in Hong Kong have perceived participating in-class discussion as something neither meaningful nor helpful to them. Nonetheless, students have tended to show their preferences over in-class discussion because it does not load further burden to them. This study has argued that students' perceptions in return have been mediated by their past experiences of stressing achievement.

Contributions

This paper has helped educationists to realize an existence of contrast between their motivations in employing in-class discussion and students' perceptions of it. Through recognizing the contrast and appreciating the way of experience in shaping students' perceptions towards learning activity such as in-class discussion, educationists not only can review on their existing teaching practices but also enable them to have a better selection, integration and implementation of various teaching and learning activities in the futures.

Conclusion

To sum up, even though in-class discussion has been perceived not useful and unhelpful, university students in Hong Kong still cast their vote on it because most of the time it does not increase their burden. Students' perceptions of participating in-class discussion reflected their mindset which, in return, has been mediated by their previous experiences. Once educationists can make use of students' mindset when formulating pedagogy, students can be really benefited from the involved teaching and learning activities.

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Contact email: ssivan.chiu@connect.polyu.hk