

Instructional Learning Versus Action Learning: A Grounded Theory Study of Vietnamese Students' Perspective in an International Educational Program

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The IAFOR International Conference on Education, Dubai - 2015
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The theoretical stand about learning has evolved greatly over the last century from the belief that the learner is passive and only motivated to learn by rewards and punishments to the belief that the learner is a processor of information and thus the goal of education becomes to increase the amount of learner's knowledge. Later, John Dewey introduced the concept of the "active learner" (Dewey 1911) where the learner is a constructor of knowledge with a process of selective acquisition of relevant knowledge that is coupled with interpreting this knowledge by relating it to previously existing knowledge. (Mayer 1992)

Action learning is the preferred method of teaching in most exported programs from the global north to the global south and thus many scholars studied course design methods based on action learning but few researchers studied students' perspective of this method. This paper presents the results of a grounded theory research in Vietnam studying students' perceptions about active learning in an international Australian college in Vietnam. The results of analysis of the research findings in Vietnam show that students value participation and active learning more than passive traditional teaching methods and link this with their future career success. Comparing the results with other outcomes from similar researches in the same field confirm these findings and support the conclusion. The paper concludes by presenting recommendations to exporting educational institutes about how to better adapt course design of their programs to Vietnamese students' needs and expectations.

Keywords: Technology enhanced learning, Vietnam, Internationalization of education, action learning, grounded theory

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Introduction

This grounded theory study addresses the problem of export of education from western countries to developing countries and the challenges that may be faced in using online learning tools in their teaching methodology. The point of departure for this study was the case of a Danish Business School “International Business School of Scandinavia” (IBSS) that exports its educational programs to developing countries and uses blended learning as the teaching methodology for these programs. IBSS faced many challenges in exporting its programs to developing countries and this study attempts to provide possible solutions for overcoming them.

These challenges go beyond the obvious language barriers to more complicated cross-cultural barriers and infra-structural problems like access to internet and internet speed. The fact that these educational programs are developed in one country and therefore rooted in its cultural values and belief systems and furthermore affected by the social and political system of the society in which it is produced, may in itself pose a challenge in getting students from other cultural backgrounds to adopt and engage in these programs. Students may feel alienated from the program, as it does not conform to their own traditions, values and beliefs.

The current study approaches the problem by studying the differences in the learning practices of students in different countries through exploring and comparing the different educational systems and learning practices in the three countries under study in this research, Denmark, Egypt and Vietnam. I examined the contexts in which higher education in the three countries take place, and the factors that affect students’ concepts of learning in them. By observing the natural settings in which learning takes place and making descriptive analyses of selective learning situations in the three countries, I attempt to develop a better understanding of the different relations between the key players of learning in these countries, namely students, teachers and teaching materials.

Coupling the non-participant observations with other methods of qualitative research such as in-depth interviews and focus groups led to better insight into the reality of how students and teachers (the key players in the learning process) understand and feel about learning, and how this can differ greatly from one culture to another thus affecting their reaction to e-learning tools. The results of this study aim at helping exporting educational institutions to understand how these differences in learning practices affect students’ approach to learning and consequently their acceptance of new tools, as e-learning, and new pedagogies used in teaching.

The purpose of this study is *first*, to identify cultural issues and their impact on students’ as well as teachers’ views of learning in general and how these views affect their acceptance and usage of the e-learning component of blended learning programs. *Second*, to study the educational system and educational practices and traditions in the countries involved in this study, namely, Denmark, Egypt and Vietnam and how these three countries compare to each other in that sense. *Third*, to provide suggestions for western educational institutes involved in exporting of education to developing countries in general and to IBSS specifically, about how these institutes can modify their programs’ structure to suit other cultures.

Literature Review

Scholars who study the field of internationalization of education vary in their views about the effects of internationalization of education on the economies and development of developing countries. Some scholars, as Philip G. Altbach, believe that internationalization of education represents a form of “colonization” or efforts of the major forces in the world to control the brains of young people in less powerful parts of the world, a concept that he named ‘new neocolonialism’ (Altbach 2004). Yang shares the same views of Altbach, in a critical review about the effects of globalization, Yang suggests that internationalization of education may be responsible for the loss of the original cultural values that students believe in and “the relentless imposition of Western values” and thus could be seen as “the new colonizer”.(Yang 2003)

Internationalization of education is thought to be responsible for “brain drain” of developing countries, which is defined as the uneven distribution of the world’s intellectual wealth. Statistics reported by OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) show that around 15-20% of international students migrating from developing to developed countries to enroll in western educational programs continue to live and work in these countries. This out-migration of internationally educated citizens may cause brain drain in developing countries if there was no corresponding in-flow of equally competent citizens of developed countries (Parey and Waldinger 2008); (Lowell, Findlay et al. 2004).

Also, there are many cultural issues that face exporters of education, particularly to Confucian Heritage Countries (CFC) as China, Korea, Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Viet Nam. Some of these issues relate to the use of online learning either isolated or as part of a blended learning program. These issues are mostly related to the difference in cultural values and expectations of students. These countries have common cultural traits which are rooted in Confucius teachings, for example the unequal relationship between students and teachers, placing a high value on relationships and group identity and placing higher value on ascription (who one is) than on achievement (what one does). (Nguyen, Terlouw et al. 2006)

Although the body of literature found on the studied problem in these countries show that this is an under-studied field, yet some studies (published in English) were worth studying before embarking on this research project. For Example, in Hong Kong, where the learners are highly influenced by the Confucius tradition in education and all learning practices are teacher-centered, a study was done in an open learning institution that used blended learning mode of delivery. The study concluded that it is advised to use face-to-face teaching methods more than online, since students prefer to interact directly with the teacher. This shows how students value and appreciate the teacher’s presence and consider him/her to be the center of the e-learning process (Aylward 2004)

Language was another issue that was shown in literature, in a study done in Malaysia, many Chinese distance learner participants mentioned in interviews that language barriers were the reason they experienced difficulties in their academic studies. In the same study, Malay learners complained of not having enough time to learn the new technologies associated with online learning (Dzaldria and Walker 2003).

Another study shows that Asian students from CFC prefer to work in groups and they expect the teacher to provide regular feedback on the group performance. Individual feedback should not be provided publicly whether positive or negative, as positive feedback would draw attention to individual students not to the group, which is not appreciated in Asian cultures, while negative feedback would make students “lose face”.

Students prefer structured classes with structured specific assignments and clear expectations from the teacher (Strother 2003). In a study comparing Singaporean and Australian students, findings show that Singaporean students prefer face-to-face interaction to online interaction. Students regularly meet with their peers and review their assignments working together for hours while Australian students prefer short group encounters (Munro-Smith 2002). This shows the importance of group activities and interaction between students and between students and their teacher in CFC cultures.

Methodology

This study uses the “constructive grounded theory ethnography” research methodology (Charmaz 2006) to study the teaching and learning practices within the higher education systems in Denmark, Egypt and Vietnam. The aim of the study is to identify the difference between the pedagogical approach in e-learning settings and the actual sequence of events happening in the learning process in these countries.

By observing the natural settings in which learning takes place and making descriptive analyses of selective learning situations in the three countries, the researcher attempts to develop a better understanding of the different relations between the key actors involved in the learning process in these countries.

Coupling the non-participant observations with other methods of qualitative research such as in-depth interviews and focus groups led to developing a better insight into the reality of how students and teachers understand and feel about learning, and how this can differ greatly from one culture to another.

Inspired by Adele Clarke’s work on “Situational Analysis”, I developed a model which I called the “Learning Situation” (LS) model, where LS represents the relations between the main core constituents of the higher education institutes’ social world. Inside this learning situation, different issues are fought, manipulated, negotiated and agreed upon inside the boundaries of the broader learning system Arena in every country (Clarke 2005).

According to Adele Clarke, the most important focus of negotiations and discourses is the ‘situatedness’ of action and interaction and accordingly, the conditions of the situation are in the situation, where everything in the situation both constitutes, affects and conditions everything else in the situation. (Clarke 1991). The learning situation model represents the unit of analysis in focus in this research, where the main human actors represented are the teacher and student and the non-human actants are the materials and technology (Fahmy, Bygholm et al. 2013). The model also shows other factors that may have an influential effect on the situation, as values, gender roles and context of education. (Figure 1)

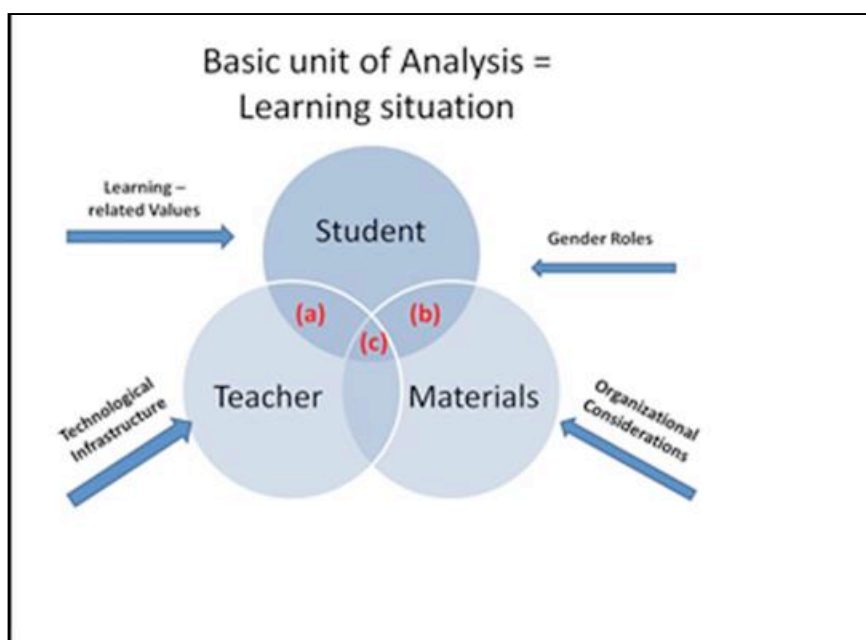


Figure 1 - The Learning Situation Model (LS)

In Vietnam, the sample studied included 24 students, 3 teachers, a private international college and 3 public universities. Tools used in gathering of data included: an initial non-participant observation, interviews with 3 students were also conducted initially, results were open coded and accordingly modifications were done to the sample criteria as well as to interview question guides.

Atlas.ti software was used as an aid for the line-by-line coding, memo writing and category formation processes. The coded materials included: text of observations, transcribed text of audios and video, the audios and videos themselves, and photos taken by the researcher during field study. This paper presents the results of one focus group done in an international Australian College in Ho Chi Minh City where 11 students participated.

The formation of categories, as customary in doing constructive grounded theory research, was done by performing a more focused coding by extracting the codes with the highest incidence of co-occurrence, placing codes into groups of codes within similar concepts and eliminating the codes that seemed of peripheral or isolated relation to the main ideas expressed by respondents.

This process, coupled with the constant comparison between the resulting core categories from the analysis of the currently examined data with other data from similar research projects resulted in the formation of theories which are presented in separate publications.

Research Findings

These research findings were concluded from the data collected from one focus group in Vietnam and compared with data collected from the other two countries, Egypt and Denmark. This category rose from the correlation of related super codes after comparing them with the respondents' quotes and relevant observations. The category and the super codes that led to it were diagrammed as a network view (aided by atlas.ti software) as shown in the following diagram (Figure 2):

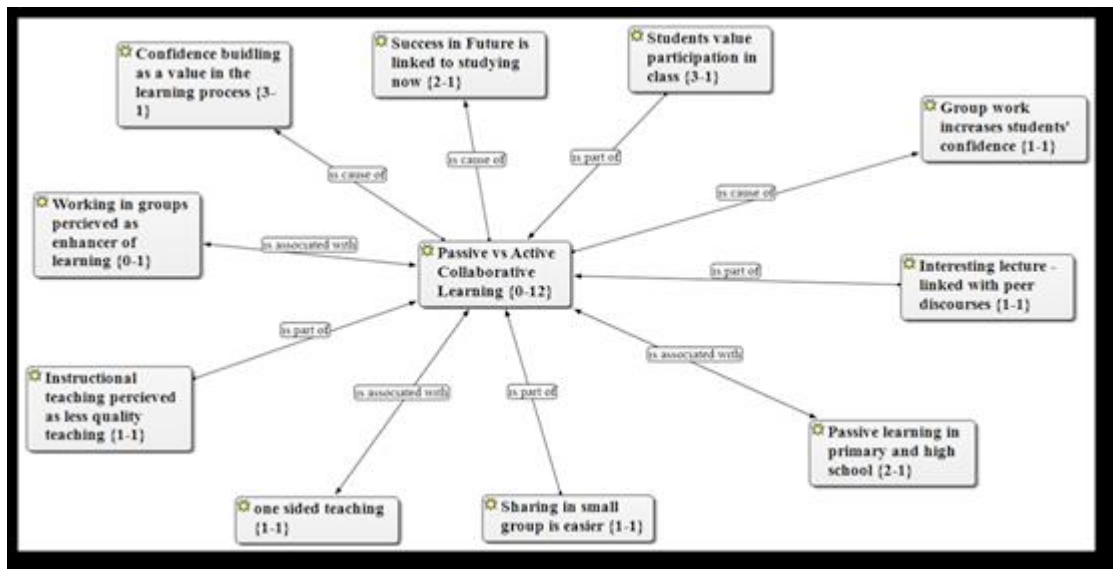


Figure 2: Passive versus Active learning Category and the codes related to it

Students' responses to questions about their preferred method of learning indicated that students preferred classes where they can practice useful activities that would build their personal competency levels. One student explained the reason by saying:

"I like most the presentations because when I present I can build up my confidence"

In the same vein, another student added:

"I also like the presentation part because it gives me a chance to present my ideas and this gives me more confidence and it also gives me support for my future career because when we go to an interview they ask us to make presentations and we must show confidence. When we do a presentation we can show other people our knowledge and our ideas".

Students linked practical activities with building their self-confidence many times as another student said in response to the same discussion:

"I like the activity in class because sometimes we have art or we go to some place new so we can experience what we haven't had before so I think it's a good thing that we do activities in class and to make the students more active and more confident".

The same results were seen in recent empirical data results from a qualitative study done in Taiwan to measure the different motivations for students in getting a university degree. Responses from International students (the majority of which were

Vietnamese) indicate that the main motivation for them to get a university degree was to get a good job in the future. Their responses included comments as:

“In our country, it is not easy to get a college degree. I remember my parents only have the opportunity to study up to secondary education. Taiwan students are very fortunate”... “Having a university degree is a dream come true. In order to realize your dream, you need to pursue it. I believe that after graduating and having a good job will help you accomplish your dream”. (Ao, Ching et al. 2014)

Vietnamese students have constant worries about their future career and they express this by linking their perception about good teaching as based on practice that prepares them for their future careers, as one of the students expressed this by saying:

“I also love Mr Mike. He teaches us how to become a good speaker in front of everybody. He teaches us how to be confident and hide our worry”

Another student elaborated more on the same idea by saying:

“Mr Mike’s class in presentation skill was very good because he is very confident and he knows what the society needs and he gets us to do that. I think that in the future it is very practical. For example, how to be confident when in front of a lot of people, we can control what we say, what we act, what we do”

Students express the natural feeling of students as unconfident and that’s why they appreciate teachers’ efforts to train them on how to act and present in a more confident manner as one student expressed it:

“Students are very shame to talk with a lot of people but he (Mr Mike) teach us how to talk well.”

This is in line with Vietnamese students’ responses in other empirical studies, where students used very similar words by saying:

“In my faculty, the teacher often creates different activities for us to develop presentation skills and team work skills. We can work together in small groups; we can present our work in front of the class. We feel much more confident after all” (Tran 2013).

This reflects the awareness of the decreased level of competencies acquired by university students in Vietnam as compared with the level required by employers in Vietnam. In an empirical study carried out in 2008, 3 surveys were done with 251 department managers, 717 final-year students and 1838 students in different years of four different Vietnamese universities to evaluate their competencies’ levels. The results of the survey showed that students’ level of skills, and especially soft skills was much lower than that required by employers, as the author put it:

“By and large, skills development provided in universities has not matched employers’ needs. This is the inevitable consequence as employers’ needs are, for the most part, neglected in universities’ curriculum objectives. For instance, communication skills, while being highly valued by employers, have not been paid much heed by the universities” (Trung and Swierczek 2009).

The discrepancy between what students learn in universities in Vietnam and the real life skills and competencies required to prosper in the business world has been discussed by other authors as Diane Oliver:

“At the micro-level, the greatest challenge for Vietnam is to balance the curriculum between skills training and education” (Oliver, Thanh et al. 2009).

Vietnamese students’ responses in this focus group reflect this awareness as they keep stressing things like:

“We study with Mr Monroe. He is a really funny guy. You know, he motivates us a lot in class. He teaches us of course how to present, how to work, how to stand in front of everybody, how to please people in front of you, how to make them calm down. He does not teach us just in the book, he teaches us a lot outside like: what is the changing in the world now. He teaches us a lot and he really motivates us. Like when we come back home we have to study more. If you want to have a good future we must study. And he is really a good teacher to us”.

This shows how much students appreciate the value of acquiring skills and competencies that are relevant and needed in their future careers, not just to get a graduate certificate. These results are in line with results from other empirical studies, in an exploratory study on students and graduates in Vietnam using focus groups and in-depth interviews to test the gap between students’ skills and the skills required by employers, many of the students’ responses in this study were very similar to what students express in the current study. For example, one responder said:

“Employers all understand that our knowledge is poor, after employing us, they will have to train us from the beginning, but they always want to know what skills we have, what we are good at and what we still need to develop (graduate—sales manager)” (Tran 2013)

Vietnamese students appreciate applied learning more than theoretical learning as clear in one student’s response by saying:

“I like studying business with Mr Liem, when he teaches he usually gives examples, real examples in the real situations. Like when you are supposed to go to an interview or you apply for a job, how you can communicate with the interviewer in the right way and make a good impression. He also gives examples from real business cases like the way a Chinese company arranges the equipment to bring luck and attract more customers. Something like this”

Vietnamese students learned the difference between passive and active learning by comparing the traditional methods of education that they were used to during primary education level to the more active and practice-focused learning methods that they get in international colleges. They also compare it to how their colleagues who study in other countries learn, as one of the Vietnamese students from a public university said:

“My friend is studying in Holland, he studied abroad and I think he has a very good place to study. Because he’s studying Business Agriculture. He can go to a company, they produce chocolate and he learn how to advertise it and how to make a good marketing project and all things about business. He does not just study in class but in a real company. And at the end of the

semester, he will have the test; he said that, it would be like making a project like what he had learned in the company but about another product like the flowers or something. I think that it's practical and interesting".

All these results show how Vietnamese students appreciate the active learning method more than the traditional instructional method because they realize that practical active learning develops their skills and competencies which results in higher chances of employability for them. They would rather study in an international college that uses active learning than study in a public university that uses traditional teaching methods although they would pay much more money in the public university.

Conclusion

Scholars' understanding about learning has evolved over the last century from the belief that the learner is passive and only motivated to learn by rewards and punishments to the belief that the learner is a processor of information and thus the goal of education becomes to increase the amount of learner's knowledge. In light of these recent advances, action learning was introduced as a method that respects and uses the learner's existing experience and knowledge.

In action learning a process of reflection and action take place within a social context and thus the outcome is learning from experience through this process (McGill and Brockbank 2003). Action learning is the preferred method of teaching in most exported educational programs from western developed countries to developing countries and thus it is important for course designers of these programs to understand the view of students in recipient countries of these programs.

The results presented in this paper show that Vietnamese students prefer the interactive action learning method where they can engage in activities that would help develop their competencies and skills. Unlike the common belief that students from CFC countries like to memorize the contents of the books, this study shows that there is a shift in the younger generations' attitude towards learning.

As much as they still appreciate the presence and authority of the teacher in the classroom setting, they also appreciate being treated as active participants in their own learning process rather than being passive recipients of information. Vietnamese students are becoming increasingly aware of the demands of the workforce market and the required skills for getting a good high paying job and thus they are keen on acquiring these skills rather than being concerned about obtaining a certificate of education without any real development.

Previously published results from the same study have shown that students from Vietnam prefer the teacher-centered learning style, which is represented in the learning situation model as type "a" (Figure 1), where most learning-related interactions are in the "student-teacher interface" and are controlled and dominated by the teacher.(Fahmy 2014).

Both results have implications for course designers who develop curriculums and educational programs to be exported to Vietnam as International Business School of Scandinavia (the host company for this research project). It is highly recommended to use a constructive teaching approach (as Problem Based Learning) rather than the traditional instructive pedagogy. Vietnamese students are open to trying new methods of learning and consider memorizing and instructional teaching to be a sign of a lack of appreciation of their skills and mental abilities.

Exporters of education using blended learning as their teaching methodology are advised to design their programs so that they would include a considerable deal of encounters with the teacher as well as to be based on action learning pedagogies where students are encouraged to develop their skills and competencies.

This study shows that there is a good opportunity for exporting educational institutes from Denmark and Scandinavian countries to Vietnam since the preferred Danish/Scandinavian method of teaching is the interactive method and problem based learning-teaching pedagogy.

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