TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION – TEACHER-CENTERED OR STUDENT-CENTERED

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Abstract

We are witnesses to the massiveness of the current higher education system, in the quantity of students, which incredibly divides the student population in their quality. On the other hand the question is how to implement learning environment that puts students in focus. Under time pressure teachers often make quick and hasty choices for their teaching. The purpose of this paper is to examine how students perceive faculty teaching (lectures and exercises) in terms of whether they are focused at the students or to the teachers. In this research 203 students were included from 3 different faculties of the University "Ss. Cyril and Methodius "Skopje, such as: Faculty of Philosophy (N = 97), Faculty of Philology (N = 56) and Faculty of Architecture (N = 50). The perception of student`s teaching were measured with one questionnaire prepared for purposes of this research, and Cronbach`s alpha is .83. Students estimated teaching on 19 assertions (separately for lectures and exercises and teaching directed to the teacher and to the student) on the Likert`s scale from 1-4, where minimum score is 19, and maximum 76 of each subscale. Following results are obtained: there is no difference in the assessment of teaching focused to the teacher and to the student, among the students of Faculty of Philosophy ($t = -.558$; $p > 0,05$), while students from the Faculty of Architecture (-5.743; $p < 0, 01$) and Faculty of Philology ($-5,870$; $p < 0,01$) teaching was assessed as directed to the student more than to the teacher.

Key words: *teaching focused to the teachers, teaching focused to the student, students, teachers.*

INTRODUCTION

Education is a process of transferring values, knowledge and skills from one set of people to another one in order to model contemporary and competent individuals who will contribute towards the life of society, as well as towards its improvement. Primary schools, secondary schools and faculties as institutions in charge of the formal education aim at forming competent individuals in society by using various approaches, i.e. manners of teaching. In it understood that the teacher is the moderator of that process, but his/her level of activity in transferring knowledge depends on the teaching method he/she uses. The question arises whether and to what degree there is a need for teacher-student interaction in that process. Modern teaching, as a contemporary approach in schooling, increasingly puts its focus on the student, i.e. considers this process to be reversible, wherein the student activity is a key factor in the entire process.

We are witnesses of the reforms in the education system made so far, which among other things, insist on using modern teaching, namely active learning where the student learns through conversation and discovery, whose emphasis, however, was more on primary and on secondary education. When it comes to teachers in higher education, under time pressure, they often make hasty and ill-advised choices regarding their teaching. Most often, the teaching is of directive nature, as an oral lecture. It is wrong to think that the occasional involvement of the students in

pair-work, or being given tasks, sometimes even without clear instructions, is a step forward towards student-centered teaching. Student-centered teaching is much more than that. The educational efforts need to be directed towards promoting student-centered teaching, since higher education institutions have a responsibility to enable the students' effective learning. Actually, teachers create a university's institutional reputation based on two pillars – quality research and strong pedagogical base.

Therefore, it is important to underline what the term student-centered teaching actually means, and to think about which rules need to be implemented so as to provide our students with good learning experience.

In order to explain some of the meanings included in the student-centered teaching/learning, they will be compared to the traditional manner of teaching called teacher-centered teaching/learning. Richard Felder wrote numerous papers on the usefulness of the active, cooperative and inductive methods of teaching (Felder, 2003,1994). Some of them are reports from his own research on the use of active learning methods in the classroom, and others are theoretical research of literature (Bullard & Felder, 2007).

According to the EIC Guide (2004), the student-centered learning/teaching guide, there are four basic characteristics: first, student-centered teaching is not only a method or a strategy, but is a philosophical paradigm reflecting the nature of learning, teaching and knowledge. This means that every step we decide to make needs to be informed and consistent, and not only one of the ways to make a lucky choice. The choice to be made when transferring from teacher-centered teaching/learning towards student-centered teaching/learning includes two important points: a) from thinking about **what** we teach, towards the question **how** and **why** we teach something (**what**, **how** and **why** have to be the main questions when preparing for teaching/learning); b) from thinking about our presentation as teachers towards thinking about the teaching process which should guide the student to learn more effectively. It is not always easy to make a change and it requires a lot of thinking and work. Second, teacher-centered teaching and student-centered teaching do not always exclude each other. They create a continuum. The choice is dictated by contextual factors. In the condition we work with, it is not always possible to use the student-centered teaching in its radical form. Pragmatism will always prevail, especially if we teach mega programs and modules. Thus, in those cases ''classic'' teaching will be the most economical choice. Nevertheless, even when we organize the lectures, we need to put efforts and make them as student-centered as possible (our speech and thought being interactive with the speech and thought of the students – asking them to give illustrative examples, or giving them mini assignments). There are many ways to make the students interactive when presenting their information and ideas, as compared to the lectures. In that sense, problem-solving tasks, workshops and seminars are best for students, since they encourage each other to discuss, as interdisciplinary as possible, by using several sources and various skills for the purpose of solving the given problems.

The student-centered teaching is not only the interaction in the classroom. It has implications in the curriculum, the syllabus design and the grading. Therefore, all this requires a change in the entire culture of the institution. The syllabus and the curriculum need to be in agreement with the students' prior knowledge. And most importantly, the student's learning process needs to be taken into consideration, just the same as the content itself that needs to be learned, because the continued academic and professional development of the student is of utmost importance. A good practical work needs to be introduced together with the teaching and learning, as well as class group work, group discussion, forums, etc. These changes can be

achieved only through the involvement of all students (by colleague comments and observations and following contemporary literature).

It is also important to discuss with the students on ow they perceive teaching/learning in the faculties. This makes the teacher more sensitive of the actual individuals before him, with their different personalities, experiences, learning styles, values and expectations. On the other hand, this makes students understand the teacher's teaching style. There is also danger for students not to take this approach as seriously as the teacher-centered teaching, simply because they are accustomed to a "serious university teaching".

In the end, we as teachers should avoid considering the student-centered teaching as being imposed by the government or the institutions, and it should really be in the center of our preoccupation as educators.

The American Psychological Association established fourteen principles of student-centered teaching which can be summed up through the following five domains (Lambert & McCombs, 1998, Alexander & Murphy, 1993):

• **Knowledge base –** determines what new information the student can gather, how he/she will organize and present them, and how he/she will filter them through his/her experience

• **Strategic processing and executive control –** ability to think in order to regulate their thoughts and behavior. Successful students are actively involved in their own learning, they think and take responsibility about learning (Lambert & Mac Combs, 1998)

• **Motivation –** the greater the satisfaction from studying, the greater the success.

Research shows that personal involvement, inner motivation, personal dedication, confidence in the ability to succeed, and the perception of control over learning all lead to more learning and high achievements at school (Alexander & Murphy, 2000)

• **Development and individual differences –** individuals develop through development stages which are inherent and environment-influenced.

Depending on the task content, changes occur in the way people think, in their beliefs and values, or in their behavior, nevertheless still in conjunction with their inherent abilities, level of development, individual differences, intelligence, experience and environment (Alexander & Murphy, 2000)

In order to examine the state of affairs at our faculties with regard to the teachers' focus on teaching (teacher-centered or student-centered), a research was carried out trying to answer the main question: *Do the students from the Faculty of Philosophy, the Faculty of Architecture and the Faculty of Philology in Skopje, within the Ss. Cyril and Methodius University regards teaching (lectures and exercises) as more student-centered or teacher-centered.*

METHOD

Research participants

The research covered 203 students, from 3 different faculties within the Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, as follows: Faculty of Philosophy (N=97), Faculty of Architecture (N=50) and Faculty of Philology (N=56). The testing was carried out in the academic 2014/15.

Instrument

A student-intended questionnaire "Scale for teacher-centered or student-centered teaching" was composed for the aims of this research. The questionnaire contains 38 statements, divided into two subtests, where 18 statements refer to measuring the teacher-centered teaching (lectures and exercises) and 20 statements refer to measuring the student-centered teaching (lectures and exercises). Some of the teacher-centered teaching statements are: In class, the teacher (teaching assistant) is center of knowledge, and the focus is almost exclusively on the content being taught; Students are seen as "empty" receptacles, and teaching is seen as a knowledge-transferring process; As a result, there is no (or there is a small) effort to take into consideration the prior and/or implicit knowledge of the students (though "incompletely" or "wrongly") on the topic; The teaching is aimed at the "average" student and everyone is forced to advance with the same pace. Examples of the student-centered teaching statements include: The teacher (teaching assistant) thinks that students come to class with their own experience and knowledge; The focus in class in not only on what was taught, but also on how to learn that effectively; The main preoccupation of the teacher (teaching assistant) is whether the students will understand the content, and not his/her performance as a teacher that only transmits facts; The teacher (teaching assistant) considers the students to have different styles of learning, so individual answers are encouraged, which helps boost their creativity; In class teaching is presented as an active dynamic process in which connections occur between various facts, ideas and processes; These connections occur through dialog between the teacher and the students, as well as among students.

The assessment was made based on Likert scale from 1 (disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The subscales consist of statements intended for: general assessment of teaching, regarding the expected results from teaching, regarding the teaching strategies and the learning environment. The minimum score on the teacher-centered teaching subscale is 36 (together with the lectures and exercises assessments), with the maximum being 144. Thus, the minimum score separately for the lectures and for the exercises on the teacher-centered teaching subscale is 18, while the maximum is 64. For the student-centered teaching subscale the minimum score is 40, and the maximum is 160 (together with the lectures and exercises assessments), while the minimum score separately for the lectures and exercises for the student-centered teaching assessment subtest is 20, and the maximum is 80. Cronbach's alpha for the teacher-centered teaching assessment subscale is 0.70, while the reliability of the student-centered teaching assessment subscale is 0.95. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the inner consistency of statements of the entire instrument is 0.87, indicating that the instruments may be used in research purposes.

RESULTS

In order to answer the question whether the students from the Faculty of Philosophy, the Faculty of Architecture and the Faculty of Philology in Skopje regard teaching (lectures and exercises) as more teacher-centered or student-centered, the data received from the questioners given to students were statistically processed. Table 1 presents the results of the Faculty of Philosophy students' assessment of teacher-centered teaching and student-centered teaching. They indicate that the arithmetic mean of students' assessment of the teacher-centered teaching is higher than the arithmetic mean of the student-centered teaching assessment. Their difference,

though statistically insignificant, can still signal that students regard teaching (lectures and exercises) as more teacher-centered, and less student-centered.

Table 1. Difference in arithmetic means of the two variables for the Faculty of Philosophy students (N=97)

	M	SD	t	significance
Teacher-centered teaching	104.89	17.68	-.558	.57
Student-centered teaching	106.64	23,36		

The results suggest that the students almost equally assess the teaching with regard to the focus being on the student or on the teacher.

Table 2. results present the two variables analyzed for the Faculty of Architecture students.

Table 2. Difference in arithmetic means of the two variables for the Faculty of Architecture students (N =50)

	M	SD	t	significance
Teacher-centered teaching	94.0377	14.32	-5.743	.000
Student-centered teaching	112.80	17.70		

The above shows that the Faculty of Architecture students perceive the teaching as student-centered.

Table 3. results present the two variables analyzed for the Faculty of Philology students.

Table 3. Difference in arithmetic means of the two variables for the Faculty of Philology students (N =56)

	M	SD	t	significance
Teacher-centered teaching	97.46	14.87	-5.870	.000
Student-centered teaching	115.60	18.70		

The results presented in Table 3. indicate that the students from the Faculty of Philology also assess teaching as more student-centered than teacher-centered.

CONCLUSION

The new way of life requires schools and faculties in which teaching is focused on the person learning, rather than on the teacher. New approaches in guiding and teaching insist on adjusting the teaching to the needs of all pupils and students, having in mind their individual

differences of intellectual or personality nature. Also, much research has been done in the area of teaching in order to improve our understanding of teaching, and how the educational system can change in terms of providing support to learning. Nevertheless, the transformation of the educational system is a difficult task.

Our research covered students from tree faculties within the Ss. Cyril and Methodius University: Faculty of Philosophy, Faculty of Architecture and Faculty of Philology. The students assessed the teaching (lectures and exercises) at the faculties as being teacher-centered or student-centered. The results have shown that the students from the Faculty of Architecture and the Faculty of Philology experience teaching as more student-centered, compared to the students from Faculty of Philosophy who assess the teaching as more teacher-centered. If defining the term teacher-centered teaching implies traditional teaching where the emphasis is on the person doing the teaching (Weimer, 2002), it follows that such a manner of teaching results in passive students who do not take responsibility for learning, compared to the student-centered teaching in which the student as the basis of knowledge with his/her prior knowledge and experience, is able to think in order to control his/her thoughts and behavior, personal involvement, inner motivation, personal dedication, confidence in the ability to succeed. The perception to control the learning leads to more learning and higher achievements in the faculties, helping individuals to grow through development phases which are both inherent and under influence of the environment. Still, it is encouraging to know the students from certain faculties experience teaching as more student-centered than teacher-centered, especially in the faculties (Faculty of Architecture and Faculty of Philology) where certain skills are developed, such as foreign languages learning and architecture, in which the students' practical work and participation is necessary for acquiring the foreign languages speaking skills, or the models construction and plan drawing for different architectural solutions, thus making these results expected. It is understandable that the teachers in faculties such as the Faculty of Philosophy, who develop a different set of skills, such as critical opinion, client work techniques, primarily being based, of course, on theoretical knowledge in the relevant area, more easily give in to the teacher-centered teaching than to the student-centered one. However, this must not be a justification for the teaching approach used with the Faculty of Philosophy students, i.e. the student-centered teaching also needs to be applied at the faculties developing critical opinion skills and teaching certain professional skills.

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