The Influence of Assessment in Constructing a Hidden Curriculum in Higher Education: Can Self and Peer Assessment Bridge the Gap between the Formal and the Hidden Curriculum?

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Introduction

Faculty and curriculum experts in higher education institutes are focusing on designing a curriculum for each subject that achieves the learning objectives of the subject and aligns with the learning objectives of the programme as well. In addition to the formal curricula, there are hidden curricula that influence the learning process of higher education students. In order to study the outcomes of the teaching-learning processes, the hidden elements in the curriculum should be defined, refined, and articulated. Bennett et al. (2004) define the hidden curriculum as the regulations, rules, and routines that teachers and students learn in order to be successful in the social community of the university. The hidden curriculum may have either a positive or a negative impact; in some instances it reinforces the formal curriculum and in other cases it exerts a countervailing influence (Bennett et al. 2004). This paper highlights a 'hidden curriculum' in higher education, focusing on students' perceptions and experiences and emphasizing innovative assessment. Becker, Geer, and Hughes (1968) argue that the strategies that students develop in order to get high marks are a hidden curriculum that hinders students from learning the material of the formal curriculum.

According to Snyder (1971), when the grading system is very powerful students tend to emphasize on a hidden curriculum of memorization even the formal curriculum tends to focus on analysis and innovative thinking. Assessment methods dramatically influence the teaching-learning process and the culture of the university. Rowntree (1987) claims that assessment procedures give an actual portray of the educational system in any educational organization. Ramsden (1992) warns that wrong approaches of learning are taken if assessment methods are not appropriate. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the influence of assessment in creating a hidden curriculum in higher education and analyzing peer and self assessment in bridging the gap between the hidden curriculum and the formal curriculum. The first section shows the impact of powerful grading systems on creating a hidden curriculum of the examined material that dominates the designed curriculum that students are supposed to capture. Entwistle and Entwistle (1991) state that examination preparations prevent students from genuine learning in higher education; Sambell, McDowell, and Brown (1997) found also that unsuitable assessment methods deteriorate students' understanding.

The second section proposes a framework of peer-assessment that faculty can adopt in order to encourage deep learning through group case presentations and assessment. Carless (2006) insists on the importance of peer-assessment as a learning process through discussion and defense and not a product of students marking each other. Ramsden et al. (1992) argue that peer-assessment is a deep learning assessing method opposite to examination that promotes surface learning. The third section suggests self-assessment as another type of assessment that higher education students should be taught to adopt in order to take responsibility of their learning and eliminate the hidden curriculum. Hendry (1996) argues that self-assessment empowers students and creates interest in the learning process; Van Krayenoord and Paris (1997) have similar thoughts about self-assessment and argue that it reduces extrinsic motivation of passing the exam and students become intrinsically motivated to learn and develop more skills for a better self-esteem.

The influence of Assessment on creating a Hidden Curriculum

In higher education and between the lines of official curricula that faculty and specialists design, lie hidden curricula that impact the teaching- learning process and the development of skills among higher education students.

There are different types of hidden curricula that students may or may not be aware of but certainly influence them in a way or another. Wachtler and Troein (2003) found a hidden curriculum of cultural competency at the medical programme at Lund University in Sweden; their study points out that there are other hidden curricula in medical programs such as professional and medical ethics, palliative care, and communication skills which are not clearly defined but integrated in an unstructured way. According to Skelton (1997, p. 188) the hidden curriculum is

> [t]hat set of implicit messages relating to knowledge, values, norms of behaviour and attitudes that learners experience in and through educational processes. These messages may be contradictory, non-linear and punctuational and each learner mediates the message in her/his own way.

Searching back in higher education history, Snyder (1971) was one of the first who brought the term 'hidden curriculum' to the higher educators attention when he studied the formal curriculum in Massachusetts Institute of Technology that includes problem solving abilities, analysis, and independent thinking; however he found that the hidden curriculum emphasizes memorizing theories and facts when it is assessment time. 'Hidden curriculum' is an extensively used expression to describe an embedded nature in the educational experience which is opposite from the formal curriculum that describes the educational interaction. Generally, 'hidden curriculum' was defined in history as an unfavorable coercive social mechanism that impact the perfect liberal philosophy of education and the learning process (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Meighan, 1986). According to Sambell and McDowell (1998, p. 392) the hidden curriculum conveys the difference between the official curriculum that the educational system states and particularly "what is meant to happen" and what teachers and students in fact experience "on the ground", a defect in the curriculum. Becker, Geer, and Hughes (1968) portrayed a university situation in the US where students developed strategies to get high marks and gave little attention to grasp the subjects' material when the grading system was powerful. Hence, when the university's system gives a great emphasis to assessment results, a hidden curriculum evolves which gives priority to grades more that the content and structure of the material in the official curriculum.

Rowntree (1987, p. 1) states that "If we wish to discover the truth about an educational system, we must look to its assessment procedures". Ramsden (1992, p. 68) argues that "[u]nsuitable assessment methods impose irresistible pressures on students to take the wrong approach to learning tasks". Frederiksen (1984) highlights the negative impact of conventional assessment in the US that damages the teaching and learning objectives. Entwistle and Entwistle (1991) made a note that students' attempts to genuine learning of course material are hindered by examinations preparation. Even higher education students reported in some instances that assessment "contaminates" their understanding (Sambell, McDowell, and Brown, 1997). This shows that the hidden curriculum takes place as an outcome to the responses of students to instructors' behaviour. Boud (1995, p. 39) states:

> Every act of assessment gives a message to students about what they should be learning and how they should go about it. Assessment messages are coded, not easily understood and are often read differently and with different emphases by staff and by students.

Students build a hidden curriculum through their actions, perceptions, and interpretation but they don't respond to it. Bound (1995, p. 39) considers that the hidden curriculum is constructed through previous educational experiences: "Students are not simply responding to the given subject… they carry with them the totality of their experiences of learning and being assessed". We find all around us that when some students realize their weaknesses in test taking, they express negative behaviour in classrooms that would be harmful to their teacher, peers, and their selves and subsequently may make them quit their higher education studies. Allington (1994) believes that when student achievement is on the rise and learning is fun, more effective learning takes place and delight teachers and students similarly. There have been many methods that instructors used for assessment in higher education: written exams, open book examinations, individual projects, group research projects, presentations… A paramount support was given to improve studnets' assessment for the sake of limiting its negative impacts and to recover the alliance between the official and the hidden curriculum.This paper highlights the importance of peer- assessment and self-assessment to bridge the gap between the official curriculum that includes the learning objectives and the hidden curriculum that only covers the expected material in the assessment. There are different types of assessments and the teacher should choose the suitable assessment for each learning objective. This paper recommends using self and peer assessment since these methods are suitable in assessing values and functioning knowledge like cooperation and teamwork.

Peer-Assessment Bridging the Gap between Formal and Hidden Curriculum

Outcomes centered assessment is taking a huge attention from curriculum designers and scholars in the 21st century. Biggs and Tang (2009, p. 7) state that faculty members need to "systematically align the teaching/learning activities, and the assessment tasks to the intended learning outcomes, according to the learning activities required in the outcomes". Designing a curriculum in alliance with the learning objectives of a degree, program, and course doesn't guarantee constructive alignment; constructive alignment is only achieved when graduates acquire the information stated by learning objectives. The importance to designing assessments that don't create a hidden curriculum of examination preparation and short-term outcomes is proliferating in the educational literature (Boud and Falchikov, 2006; Gibbs and Simpson, 2005; Boud, 2000). This section of the paper suggests peer-assessment method in bridging the gap between formal and hidden curriculum. In order to guarantee that students possess the learning outcomes of a course, instructors need to create innovative assessment methods that would involve all students in an interesting educational environment.

Peer- assessment through group case presentations would be a suitable assessment process if done in the right manner. Gibbs (1999) confirmed that peer-assessment reduced marking time for teachers by eighteen hours and summative marks for students increased by twenty percent. According to Cope and Staehr (2005) peer-assessment has two advantages: First, students are required to work throughout the semester and second, students are exposed to various approaches of solving problems. Using case studies in the assessment criteria includes high cognitive processes since students are involved in the learning process (Bonwell and Eison, 1991); the advantage of case analysis is in the role of students in applying the theoretical concepts that they learn (Davis and Wilcock, 2008). Indisputably, the value that case studies add to higher education learning is in using real situations from organizations, addressing problems, evaluating taken actions, and recommending solutions. Nonetheless, lower cognitive processes are involved when case assessment is limited to a presenting group who submit a report that gets evaluated and marked by the instructor. The downside of typical case presentations is that each student prepares his/her part that will be tested and marked by the instructor which evolves the hidden curriculum of preparing and learning what the students will be only examined in.

In this instance, the suitable recommendation is to substitute descriptive case presentations with analytical case presentations and add a peer-assessment component at time of presentation. Each student should experience being a member in a presenting group as well as an assessing group at different times. Working in groups would improve students' communication skills and teach them consensus decision making which they would definitely deal with in their workplaces after they graduate. The most significant part of this method is having an assessing group to assess the presenting group. In typical group case presentations, each member would be able to answer the instructor's questions related to the section the student prepared which hinders integration, analysis, and deep learning. Peer-assessment is demonstrated through assessing groups who can discuss any arguments with any individual in the presenting group. This requires from all the presenting students to understand all the course content and structure to be able to give analytical answers and thus eliminate the hidden curriculum of preparing limited information for examination.

On the other hand, many researchers discussed the inadequacy of peer-assessment; it has been argued that this type of assessment is invalid. The main reason is lack of time and poor assessment skills of students taking the role of assessors (Sivan, 2000; Liu and Charles, 2006). Some scholars also consider that peer-assessment increase competition among students which hinder collaborative mindset that group presentations seek (Lopez-Real and Chan 1999). To address these issues peer-assessment should be done using specific innovative techniques such as instructor's supervision to assist the assessing group in the assessment process and to question the assessing students about the rationale behind their questions to the presenting team. According to Biggs and Tang (2009, p. 19) "it is not what teachers do, but what students do that's important". Biggs and Tang (2009, p. 33) also argue that grading students individually like ranking and following a curve is competitive for students where each student has to beat another student to get higher mark.

Ramsden et al. (1992) clarifies that assessment design establishes a surface or deep learning approach. When students study specific information to be tested in, they capture surface learning rather than deep learning. Surface learning happens when the teaching-learning process including assessment fail to make students grasp the learning outcomes of a specific course. Biggs and Tang (2009) believe that deep learning is facilitated when students have active roles in assessment by presenting problems, hypothesizing and asking questions.

According to Boud and Falchikov (2008, p. 4) assessment influencing surface learning rather than deep learning including that traditional examination assessment reduce learners to passive recipients and hinder them from taking ownership of their studies and thus fail to equip students with the required skills. Gibbs and Simpson (2005) present similar argument and consider that assessments should be designed in a manner to make students spend adequate amount of time to produce learning activities giving advantage to group work since group discussions add more value to learning than the project's outcome that the group is preparing.

Trigwell, Prosser, and Waterhouse (2000) discussed the relationship between assessment demands and learning style. Their study revealed that altering assessment demands will impact the learning approach adopted, and students' interpretation to the assessment method determines the learning approach more that the demand itself. This is the reason why surface learners prefer MCQs and deep learners prefer reports and essays (Entwistle and Entwistle, 1991). This paper recommends peer involvement in the assessment process but not in the assessment product which means that the assessing group will critically discuss and question the case with the presenting group but not grade them. The discussion will be supervised by the instructor who will mark the students. Carless (2006) claims that peer-assessment is not an end by itself but it is a mean to an end; Cheng and Warren (2000) also state that peers should only be involved in grading when they have the knowledge and understand the assessment standards and criteria, in addition to practicing how assessment is applied. Indisputably, the aim of peer-assessment is not creating completion and grading of students to each other; however it is a deep learning tool that happens through dialogues, questioning, critical thinking, and defending arguments. This assessment method helps students to bridge the gap between the formal and the hidden curriculum, to learn independently, and to improve skills in their higher education studies as well as their professional and personal life.

Self-Assessment Bridging the Gap between Formal and Hidden Curriculum

Self-assessment has a great impact on deep learning in case it is accompanied with the right skills and competencies. During the academic career of students, they develop effective self-assessment skills; inexperience students should be involved in self-assessment processes in order to learn self evaluation (Simon, 2007, p. 313). When students master self-assessment skills, they develop their ability of independent learning. As a result, this process creates self awareness among learners and capacity to monitor performance. Self-assessment is helpful especially with large classes where critical feedback from the instructor becomes difficult to be communicated to each student individually. Boud (1995) defines self-assessment as involvement of students in developing assessment criteria and evaluating their performance as per the developed criteria. This will help students to know what good work consists of and what learning outcomes are required to achieve. Boud (1999) also suggests applying self-assessment even if it is not included as part of the formal assessment since it is a valuable learning tool- it boosts students' acceptance to be responsible for their own performance and learning activities. Students should primarily know the effectiveness of this method and the value it adds to their learning, they should also be given the opportunity of developing those skills. McAlpine (2000) defines self-assessment as self- reflective, metacognitive, and emphasizing thinking that helps in learning- based on past experience and critically assessing present performance to plan for future progress. Entwistle and Tait (1996) identify four approaches of learning "deep, surface, strategic, and apathetic". Cassidy (2004) considers that self-assessment has a great impact on the strategic approach of learning since it helps students to set strategies to organize their studies, manage time, and plan for future improvements. In a study about effects on academic achievement, Cassidy and Eachus (2000) found a positive correlation between perceived academic proficiency and academic achievement with a strategic learning approach.

According to Elwood and Klenowski (2002), self-assessment is as self- knowledge about perceiving, recalling, thinking and taking action. Metcalfe and Shimamura (1994, p. 12) defines metacognition as "what we know about what we know"; thus metacognitive skills are highly developed through self-assessment. Vockell (2004) found that when metacognitive skills are over learned and automatic, they become controlled by the unconscious and thus more effective. According to Hendry (1996), when instructors emphasize students' self- assessment, they are empowering their students and developing better learning skills. Self-assessment is significant in developing autonomous learning and intrinsic motivation (Van Krayenoord and Paris, 1997). Boud and Falchikiv (1989) found that more capable students underestimate their ability and underrate their work; however, less capable students tend to overrate their performance. The teachers' role is to help enhance familiarity with self-assessment among their students and how they rate their performance in order to prepare them for this assessment method that would create ownership and responsibility and more intrinsic motivation.

Students should be encouraged to apply the theoretical content they learn in classrooms to case studies from real organizations in their domain. Self-assessment would be the bridge between the official curriculum that student should acquire and the hidden curriculum of wash back.

Conclusion

Faculty and curriculum experts are focusing on designing a curriculum for each subject that achieves its learning outcomes, and the learning outcomes of each subject should align with the learning outcomes of the program as a whole. In order to assure that the learning outcomes are attained, faculty should choose the right assessment. According to Kelley, Tong, and Choi (2010, p. 299):

Faculty frequently participate in assessment tasks, including defining the learning goals of the degree program, developing instruments to measure student learning, and creating and implementing changes to improve student learning. Major causes of faculty resistance to assessment include the demanding time commitment and the lack of appropriate knowledge required to conduct assessment.

New innovative forms of assessment may lead to better learning achievements. Brown and Knight (1994, p. 12) point out that [a]ssessment defines what students regard as important, how they spend their time, and how they come to see themselves as students". Chickering and Gamson (1987, p.3) state that:

Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just by sitting in class listening to teachers, memorizing pre-packaged assignments, and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences, apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves.

Dissatisfaction of stakeholders in higher education and their instance for the need of student to teach students what they will face and deal with in the real life pushed higher education institutes to set specific learning objectives and design a curriculum to achieve them (Martell, 2007). Nevertheless, learning outcomes cannot be achieved if students undergo the wrong assessment. Since learning methods and targets are evolving, assessment should evolve in the same manner and pace. If assessment is done through traditional examination, both the students and the teacher will be preparing for the examination deviating to a hidden curriculum away from the learning objectives in the official curriculum.

This negative influence of a hidden curriculum in higher education is discussed in this paper; it is the hidden curriculum that assessment methods create. This hidden curriculum consists of the strategies and tactics that students adopt in studying for examination and directing their learning by the assessment method. The paper suggests peer and self assessment as a method to foster deep learning and align the hidden curriculum with the formal curriculum. Carless et al. (2006) insist that assessment tasks should be learning tasks, and assessment designs shouldn't only facilitate learning but also involve learners through self and peer assessment supported by teacher's feedback about the standards and criteria of assessment. Self-assessment and peer-assessment help in developing critical thinking skills and skills related to the ability of self evaluation and evaluating others (Higgins et al. 2002). Struyven, Dochy, and Janssens (2002) discuss an 'assessment culture" in higher education that embraces integration of teaching and learning with assessment where students are active participants and the process and the product of learning are the main focus. When self-assessment and peer- assessment take an essential role, the educational culture becomes student centered more than teacher centered.

Although many researches show the importance and value of self-assessment and peer-assessment, yet it is not fully integrated in many universities and this may be due to different reasons. Students might be reluctant to undergo self and peer-assessment if they consider those types of assessments are ways for teachers to alleviate from assessment pressures, if they think that they are not capable enough do participate in this exercise, or if they feel that they wouldn't be rewarded by their teachers (Walker, 2001). Thus, students need to be educated about the value that self and peer assessment add to their learning processes and skills. Gibbs (1995) also emphasizes that students in their first year of higher education do not necessarily have the skills for a reliable self and peer assessment; a downside of self-assessment is also presented by Savin-Baden (2003) through its subjectivity since students reveal a tendency to evaluate what they mean rather than what they achieved. In addition to that, students in their first year of higher education are considered inexperienced by many scholars and need to be assisted in developing self-assessment skill, yet some students are aware of metacognitive skills in their pre-university education studies at their high schools or even with their parents at home.

Those students would encourage to have a self and peer assessment culture in higher education and to develop metacognitive skills among their inexperienced peers where students at different levels can benefit from self and peer assessment to cover the intended curriculum and eliminate a hidden curriculum of surface learning.

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