ON DEFINING THE QUALITY SCHEME OF A TEACHING DEVELOPMENT PROJECT: "ENHANCING THE EFFECTIVE DELIVERY OF THE MASS LECTURE-TUTORIAL APPROACH"

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Abstract

This article reflects the author's experience in planning and in advancing a teaching development project that focuses on the promotion of a new mass lecture-tutorial teaching method for three core modules of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction. The project, which was implemented from July 20, 2006 to August 31, 2007, was supported by a departmental Teaching Development Grant. In applying this teaching initiative in the issue of quality in higher education, the article describes how the author performed the initiative to enhance teaching quality by encouraging teachers to improve the outcome of their practices, while expecting other staff members in the department to follow in their example. The article also discusses how the author regarded this project as a professional inquiry into a social practice in which a whole range of human issues should be considered to exhibit good practices, instead of an examination of a technocratic-rational model for provision of universal rules and answers that are often indispensable in the current environment of higher education.

Quality of Teaching in Higher Education

Concerns about the quality of teaching in higher education have been strong since the 1990s. In Hong Kong, the Teaching and Learning Quality Process Reviews (TLQPRs), carried out by the Hong Kong University Grants Committee (UGC) in 1995 to 1998 triennium, comprise the first extensive quality scrutiny program for teaching in higher education. The purpose of the reviews was to assure quality and value for money in higher education. In terms of providing quality enhancement on learning and in teaching, the institution-wide Action Learning Project (ALP), which was implemented from 1994 to 1999, became an impressive program as many teaching innovations were fulfilled by self-starting individuals. Over 50 projects were funded at the first phase of ALP, offering a support structure and forming a circle of quality action researchers, when teaching quality was perceived as an important issue in higher education (Biggs, 2000). In the same period, from 1994 to 1995, UGC launched the Teaching Development Grant (TDG) as a mechanism to encourage university teachers

to embark on teaching innovations and on high-quality practices (UGC, 2000). The demand for quality in teaching was also due to the fact that university teaching had been prioritized second behind research. While teaching was being promoted, strong quality control and assurance and enhancement of teaching and learning were also extensively pursued (Kember et al., 2000).

Attention on the quality of teaching in higher education was drawn to university teachers at the frontline. Higher education in Hong Kong gradually moved initially from an elitist system to a mass system since the 1990s. In comparing the figures in 1981 with those in 2001, the number of people belonging to the 17 to 22 years old age group who entered local universities increased from 2.2% in 1981 to 18% in 2001 (UGC, 2002). The number of student intakes from the Hong Kong Institute of Education was clearly behind this increase. In comparing the figures for the academic year 2001 to 2002 with those for 2005 to 2006, the number of students pursuing a full-time bachelor's degree program almost doubled (UGC, 2005). This increase in the number of students implies that changes in teaching methods are necessary and that teachers are expected to adapt to the characteristics and to the needs of their students. Another change was the expected learning outcomes of students, which are now focused on knowledge transfer (UGC, 2002). This new demand is societal. The Hong Kong government agrees that the vital role of education is to prepare each individual in the society for the emergence of a knowledge-based society, as stated in the Policy Addresses (1997, 2000). University education is assumed to receive the same challenges as those being encountered by secondary and basic education reforms. While extending the period of university study for the expansion of the post-secondary sector and for the establishment of 334 new academic structures, the cultivation of high intellectual abilities, language proficiency, and capabilities to contribute to the future economy of Hong Kong is strongly emphasized (EDB, 2003; UGC, 2002). As the flexible curriculum structure is promoted to provide variety and diversity for student development, changes on new modes of delivery and new assessment techniques become necessary in higher education teaching in Hong Kong (UGC, 2002; EC, 2002).

Positioning the Departmental TDG: Quality Control or Quality Enhancement

While the quality of teaching is considered as important and is included in the evaluation system, teaching is defined in academics using more political terms in various quality schemes that are usually imposed in a top-down manner. One of the quality schemes is known as quality assurance. As defined by UGC, quality assurance is "the maintenance of the highest possible standards, both in teaching and learning and in research, commensurate with an institution's agreed role and mission" (UGC, 2002). Universities usually conduct quality assurance by assessing the level of acceptability of a teacher's performance according to the particular standard criteria. This measurement is compulsory and is being monitored every academic year as a regular practice for teachers. Another quality scheme that runs parallel to quality assurance is teaching enhancement that aims to achieve a value-added increase in teaching quality, referring to the development and to the dissemination of innovative quality practices. To encourage the development of this quality scheme, UGC disbursed TDG to all institutions through the earmarked grant at each triennium (UGC, 2000). Institutions are encouraged to develop innovative teaching methods to enrich the learning environment and to share the results across institutions (UGC, 2000). This strategy formalizes the structure that can facilitate quality enhancement. Experimenting with new ideas in teaching and in sharing practices was carried out individually and voluntarily and is formalized in a project-type activity that promotes accountability. This also means that there is more demand for teachers. In fact, professionals from other industries in Hong Kong contend with structured accountability measurements as a result of the strong emphasis of efficiency and of productivity in the society.

The implementation of the departmental TDG project in the summer of 2006 has provided the author a chance to reflect on the prevailing quality schemes in higher education in Hong Kong. The project aimed to perform a new mode of delivery, using the combination of mass lecture and small tutorial groups for practice. This new teaching mode was unlike the normal practice in modular delivery of the programs, in which students were taught in groups of approximately 30. The idea of this new mode was to change the current mode of course delivery that will be carried out by the senior management. The motive was essentially administrative, that is, for universities to benefit from conserved resources such as time and to invest them into other teaching development and academic activities (refer to Chapter 1). Therefore, the new mode will be beneficial for academic practitioners in saving time between teaching

and research, which is always essential in their lives. Our department, the Department of Curriculum and Instruction (C&I), was one of the departments who initially volunteered to pilot this new mode. The participation of staff members at the departmental level during the pilot implementation was voluntary. Three module teams with a total of 10 colleagues willingly engaged in the challenge using three core modules of C&I. The reasons behind the participation of staff members varied, but for the author, the main incentive was the time efficiency in holding a one-time mass lecture for almost 200 students instead of multiple sessions for a number of small groups. Time convenience may have also been one of the reasons for some participants to positively respond to this proposal not long before its announcement in the department.

After forming a group of colleagues who agreed to participate in the pilot-testing of the new mode, the department sought for resources that can support this initiative, with the recognition that the combined mass lecture and tutorial mode will result in a substantial change in the curriculum design and in teaching methods and that concerned tutors will have to quickly adapt to this change in a few months' time during the summer break. A TDG proposal was finally forwarded as a department venture to support the execution of this new mode as a pilot study. The author was one of the members who designed the plan for this TDG project and was one of the action learners of this practice. The author had subsequently realized the notion of quality in teaching. While planning for the TDG project, the author recalled two big questions: (1) "Should the audience be provided proof that this new mode was successful, such as success stories from colleagues who had adopted this new mode?" and (2) "By adopting the new teaching model this semester, what are sensible actions and channels can I create to determine the needs of participants (teachers and students) to improve the implementation process?"

These two questions became a choice and a decision at a later stage, though not totally exclusive, and were highly indicative of the influence of the two quality schemes on a professional scale. Given the importance of practicality, the author realized that the paradigm of scientific measurement was very powerful and therefore very influential in diverting the goal toward outputs, good practices that imply universal law, and definite answers in promoting a teaching development project. The author's approach at that time was patterned from the positivist research paradigm as a tool to achieve the expected results by narrowing the problems to simple hypotheses and to controlled variables and by testing out a universal answer from the obviously unorganized and ill-defined classroom features that the author was aware as a teacher. However, as a

practitioner, the author has a wide appreciation of the complexity of learning and of teaching as a social practice rather than as a delivery system. Therefore, teachers must listen to feedback from their students and colleagues as part of their professional assessment on their teaching performance. This concept represents the critical approach of studying phenomena by emphasizing on human discourse (Hebermas, 1974) to justify a certain practice. A methodology such as action research is thus more suitable for the author and for the project team in carry out in this TDG project.

During the conceptualization of the teaching development project that involved the pilot-testing of a new mode of teaching, the standard-sized class was increased to a maximum of six times, such as from 30 to 190 students. Teachers then had to reconsider the curriculum, lesson design, and teaching methods, on top of the management and of the administrative collaboration at the module team level. While implementing the plan as a trial in a complex environment such as a classroom, practitioners were expected to primarily have an understanding on human issues involved in the practice. By ensuring the participants' understanding, the action introduced by the teachers can be interpreted as an improved version. To increase the receptiveness of learners in the combined mass lecture and tutorial mode, teachers should not only rely on the results of paper-and-pencil evaluation surveys that are carried out during or at the end of the implementation. In view of the fact that teaching is a social practice (Biggs, 1993; Brown et al., 1993), teachers should importantly grasp the entire range of human issues in teaching and in learning, such as the attitudes of their students, the politics within their departments, and the morals adopted by their institutions, to improve their practice.

While designing the TDG project, a dilemma was met on members being often conditioned by the scientific model of conceptualizing education frequently practiced by quality controllers or positivist researchers. This model assumed that what we produce should be concrete and definite to fulfill the expectation of measurement and of rating, instead of a mere professional inquiry into complicated social practices intended to attain good practice and excellence. All funding bodies and quality assessors, however, do not need to comply with the technical-rational model. The positivist paradigm will most likely dominate in education research, highly resembling the scientific quality control system that affects professional decisions and restrains professional practices at the frontline. Through a professional inquiry, teachers cannot provide the audience with answers to the following questions: "Is the combined mass lecture and tutorial mode better than the usual practice?" "Is a small class better than a large class?" "How is mass lecture connected to tutorial mode?" "Is

it better to have one tutor handling all the lectures than to have more than two tutors taking turns in facilitating the lectures?" Answers to these questions will certainly increase the effectiveness of the combined mass lecture and tutorial mode as a method of learning for the participants and will encourage professional sharing and support culture for teachers who are involved in addressing all possible issues in the context of teaching.

The author believes that the TDG project should follow the stance of professional inquiry and adopt a methodology of critical approach such as action research. TDG should be framed within the political situation of the funding directives to justify the position of the project. The purpose of TDG, as specified by UGC, is to encourage institutions "to adopt innovative approaches to teaching, improve the quality of the learning environment, and underline the recognition and strong support of UGC for student teaching and learning" (UGC, 2002). TDG also aims to cultivate among the institutions "a more overt awareness of the importance of teaching and learning" to address concerns in the quality of teaching. These objectives are emphasized by the Institute and are specified in the guidelines for teaching development projects (HKIEd, 2007). The main objectives of the teaching development project are not indicative of a quality control mechanism, but of a quality enhancement scheme. Kember et al. (2000) specifically addressed the spirit of quality enhancement in teaching as "to encourage teachers towards higher quality and more innovative practices, and the practice is expected to be shared by department faculties and to make a knock-on or trickle down effect to the majority"(p.7). As mentioned at the beginning of this article, universities are subscribed to two different quality schemes. One is quality control, and the other is teaching enhancement that includes activities such as workshops and seminars. Teaching development motivates teachers in sharing their common problems, concerns, and practices. Elton (1992) differentiated quality assurance and teaching enhancement and concluded that the latter can result in empowerment, enthusiasm, expertise, and excellence. The teaching development project is a present requirement for staff appraisal, and support to the teaching initiative is now formalized in TDG of UGC. In addition to quality control assessment on teaching performance, both quality schemes had produced tension in the academic community.

As scientific measurement is always based on numbers and on tangible outcomes, this paradigm is powerful to influence the academic community on how they handle their jobs and on their teaching development practices that start as indicators and then transform to become means to an end. High-stake measurements are perceived dangerous as they consume a large amount of time from university teachers who

naturally give up their time for events that are not assessed or appraised. Informal sharing, workshops, and seminars for cross stimulation will inevitably be discarded from their professional lives and routines. The less we share, the less we can benefit from each other, and the more we are bound in our horizons without measurement indicators. This circumstance is largely contradictory to the mission of UGC in supporting teaching innovations and in creating better student learning conditions. However, this reflects the present environment in higher education, thus the starting point of any teaching development project should be appropriately considered because it will eventually lead to good practices. Action research can provide the best ingredients in encouraging good practices.

Reaching a Direction: "Enhancing the Effective Delivery of Mass Lecture-Tutorial Approach"

Rationale and Objectives
To utilize TDG for quality enhancement, the project team considered the elements of action research in designing the project activities and the following characteristics:

- Concerned with social practice
- Aimed toward improvement
- A cyclical process built into practice
- A reflective process
- Participative
- Determined by practitioners

(extracted from Kember et al., 2000)

The project was titled *"Enhancing the Effective Delivery of Mass Lecture-Tutorial Approach for Three Core Modules of the C&I Department"* to reflect the spirit of the teaching development initiative. The title highlighted two points, namely, (a) the word "enhancing" was used as a keyword to specify the concern surrounding "quality," and (b) the term "delivery" of the new approach identifying the topic or the object of study in the project. The approach was conceived as a social practice that involved human issues rather than as a technical delivery mode in a controlled environment. Thus, the project was initiated in a participatory manner that utilizes reflection and communication to encourage change and continuous improvement on the action.

The project was carried out for an entire academic year, with the planning and the

execution of the actions during the first five months of the project period. A number of objectives were developed to guide the study, which were focused on support, communication, and reflection.

a. to support the design, development, and delivery of the ML-T approach in three core modules[1]
b. to generate useful pedagogical practices and teaching techniques related to the ML-T approach
c. to enhance sharing of good practices among project teams across modules
d. to enhance reflection among participants in the implementation of the ML-T approach

[1] 4-BEd(P) Approaches to Teaching and Learning (CUI2001), 4-BEd(P) Classroom Management Strategies for Effective Instruction, 4-BEd(P) Curriculum Development and Assessment in Schools (CUI3012)

(extracted from "Enhancing the Effective Delivery of Mass Lecture-Tutorial Approach", a teaching development proposal, Lam and Tsui, 2005)

A Cyclical Process of Plan, Act, Observe, and Reflect
Table 1 outlines the activities of this project, which are categorized into two main stages, namely, development and implementation.

Table I   Project Activities

Stages		Activities
Development ←→ Implementation		*Formulation*: ● module team members participate voluntarily in the project *Preparatory Meetings*: ● participants brainstorm and share ideas in carrying out the new mode *Curriculum Development and Management:* ● planning and coordination *Action-Observation-Plan Cycles* ● continuous observation and interview in lessons ● ongoing team sharing and discussion ● reviewing actions
Consolidation – Dissemination and Further Development		

The spirit of action research was weaved into various project activities of this teaching development project. A trial of the new mode, "mass lecture plus tutorial," was offered in three different modules of the teacher's training program. As shown in Diagram 1, a spiral of different components, namely, reflect, plan, act, and observe is presented to illustrate the spirit and the element of action research for professional inquiry. In actual practice, the spiral process may not operate as smoothly as presented in the diagram. For example, in formal and in informal discussions, modifications of action are applied at the appropriate time, instead of at a rigid schedule. The project was carried out to ensure that sufficient information was gathered for action adjustments. Similar to some modules, more than one tutor took turns in delivering the lecture, and the modules were presented in a consecutive ten-week cycle. Communication between tutors was very intensive, and the cycle of reflection was not as efficient as expected because time was insufficient for lengthy and prolonged discussions.

Diagram 1 The Curriculum Organization of Mass Lecture-Tutorial Showing a Dynamic Relation
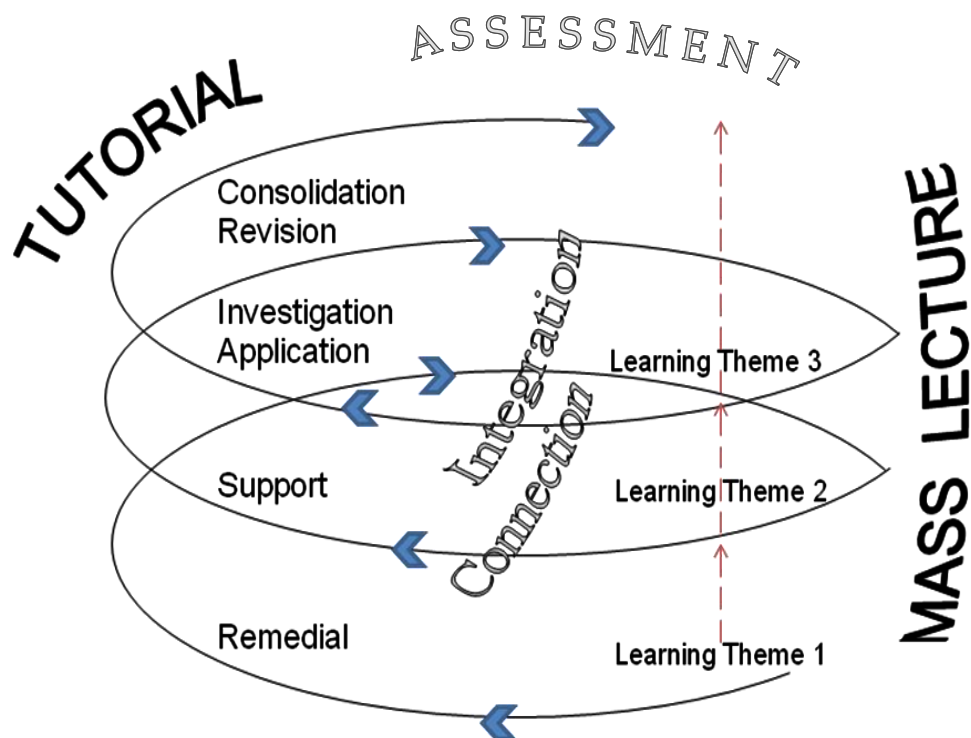
Reflective Practice

To ensure that the teacher can perform the best teaching practice, he or she must have the key element of reflection. Reflection results in understanding (Schon, 1987), which is an important element in quality enhancement because it can cause attitude change. Mezirow (1981) refers to "perspective transformation" during reflection (quoted in Kember, et al, 2000). However, researchers who studied thinking behaviors of teachers suggested that the transformation of beliefs is hard to achieve (Samuelowicz and Bain, 1992; Martin and Ramsden, 1992) because to affect change for better teaching quality, a change in perspectives is required. This change is more likely to come from a group discourse rather than from self-reflection.

In our project, several meetings were held to allow teachers, students, and observers to express their views and observations on the lessons. In these meetings, opinions, questions, feelings, knowledge, and demographic qualities were solicited to guide the participants in speaking out their views and in sharing their comments. A discussion was initiated to identify the values of the participants and at the same time to assist them in possibly changing their perspectives.

Participatory Approach in a Social Practice

Education and classroom events are viewed as social practices because they can

exceedingly complicate human interactions (Biggs, 1993; Brown et al., 1993). Parties, for example, contribute to the formation of situations in which knowledge on the views of participants is crucial to understand a new and preliminary teaching method or mode. The present project involved students and teachers, who are either participated or not in teaching the modules, in formulating comments, and in sharing their ideas at various stages of the execution of the modules during the study period. During pilot-testing on the new mode of teaching, students were more involved in general and focused feedback channels at various stages. All these trials were carried out to find out the complexity of learning and of teaching processes in classrooms.

Critical Friend

All team members in the project identified themselves as "critical friends" of one other. Critical friend is a jargon first mentioned by Stenhouse (1975) in his article on the idea of collaborative curriculum development in the Humanities project. Kember et al. (1997) further expounded and defined the role of critical friends based on their experience in supporting academics in teaching development action research projects in Hong Kong. Six metaphors were distinguished to describe this type of "friend", namely, rapport builder, coffee maker, mirror, teaching consultant, evaluation advisor, and research advisor. These metaphors illustrate the "critical friend" as someone who we can have close relations with and as someone who we can talk to regarding academic matters. While academics may sometimes block discussions in universities, the objective of the critical friend is to break through these discussion barriers.

In this project, the team members were working together in the same department, but some members played the role of core project team members who monitored the progress of systematic data collection and of the overall planning of the project. One member in the team assumed the leadership role in the department. As critical friends, other members helped each other to become free from the constraints that bind them to the bureaucratic structure. The project produced results that portrayed inner reflections, intentions, and expectations of staff members on teaching and on learning in general or in specific projects, which they may not express in formal departmental occasions. This finding validates the commitment and the participation of the members in this project. Stenhouse (1975) indicated the participants' inputs in teaching as their basis of understanding and self-evaluation. Kember et al. (2000) further explained the idea that comments from critical friends should not be regarded as unqualified recommendations, but as provisional speculations for experimentation. At this point, the reflective capacity of the teacher as an action learner in teaching is viewed as essential because it sharpens our understanding and perception of the

scenario. Evidently, reflective capacity does not come from a vacuum, and the teachers' willingness and continuous effort to engage in social dialogue on learning and teaching can be one of the abundant sources of teacher reflections.

Quality Outputs on Teaching and Learning

After a period of intense communication and refinement of practices, action researchers consolidated ideas and materials from the project, which, in turn, produced outputs in various forms. Aside from intangible actions that occurred during the project period on interaction, sharing, and professional support, the intensive study of action can realize teaching ideas and strategies that can be shared to other members who work in the same field. Formal sharing can be organized in a faculty or in a department to further the impact of any endeavors for quality enhancement. Apart from communication and sharing between members during the study process, wider discussions were carried out in different forms, such as conferences that were open to all staff members in the institute and the publication and distribution of reports. These results demonstrated that the project, which was based on an inquiry, was able to develop insight and stated practical recommendations on the teaching mode being pilot-tested, not only on the action, but also on the entire learning and teaching system. The effort was commendable in enriching the professional experience of those who were involved and in enhancing the quality of teaching. Those who participated in the trial of this teaching mode may share and benefit from the ideas for future teaching development initiatives. Those who would like to experiment with this idea can make a reference to our project, and those who are working in the same field and have insights on this teaching mode may also contribute to other users of this information. Participants in the project can disseminate these pieces of information to farther areas, such as to local and overseas audiences.

Conclusion

This article introduces a teaching development project that pilots the combined mass lecture and tutorial mode of teaching in the Hong Kong context. The methodology of the study and how this relates to the quality schemes in the current higher education environment are also discussed. The article begins with a discussion on the quality of teaching that have now perpetuated into higher education. As teaching quality is the concern of universities, teachers, and students, a professional inquiry on teaching enhancement should be preserved, shared, and promoted among staff members. Project type activities should focus on the process of formulation, development, execution, and evaluation. A paradigm that stresses on social discourse can be a reference model in creating a teaching development project, as it encourages

participants' contribution to make any teaching development initiative professionally meaningful and educationally beneficial. The project on "Enhancing the Effective Delivery of Mass Lecture-Tutorial Approach in Three Core Modules in the C&I Department" shares these perspectives, and the path that the author went through with colleagues from the department has reached a platform of sharing with other colleagues. The project may bring in a new perspective for future endeavors on teaching innovations by introducing more discussions that benefit professional decisions and practices. The current higher education environment may have placed measurement and assessment higher in its agenda, but serving the best interests for student learning in our classrooms is important in many ways. To students, this can shape their perspectives in learning and in their approaches to study. To teachers, this brings a professional culture in which we are inspired by thought-provoking ideas to always make teaching a challenging yet enjoyable job.

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