

Co-constructing Outstanding Classrooms in Higher Education: Lessons from Positive Psychology

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ABSTRACT

This study stems from the authors' belief that in order to have classrooms that not only impart learning but are also enjoyed by students, it's important that teachers as well as researchers of pedagogy make a concerted effort to let students' voices shape their work. This is precisely what the present study does- it asks students several questions about teaching practices they have encountered and particularly enjoyed in higher education (undergraduate studies and above), and attempts to find common threads in their answers to stitch together a fabric for 'an outstanding classroom'. Data is collected from 400 participants (200 online; 200 face-to-face) from universities all over India using a qualitative survey constructed by the authors based on Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954). It is then analysed using Content Analysis and Thematic Analysis with the help of Nvivo software. Several themes emerged which are pertinent from a Positive Psychology framework, for example, students' preference for emotionally intelligent teachers and Positive Education which is "education for both traditional skills and for happiness" (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich & Linkins, 2009). This study has implications for rethinking higher education teaching practices in India. It also expands the knowledge base of Positive Psychology in the Indian context by applying its principles to higher education.

Keywords: *Education, Positive Education, Pedagogy, Positive Psychology*

Teaching that aspires to be effective must be solidly grounded in pedagogical research, and research in pedagogy must make a concerted effort to include more and more students' voices. The first part of the argument is easy to agree with; it makes intuitive sense that teaching practices stay close to what research says are effective teaching practices. "Research has taught us a great deal about effective teaching and learning in recent years, and scientists should be no more willing to fly blind

in their teaching than they are in scientific research" (National Academy of Sciences, 1997, p. 5 as cited in Alters & Nelson, 2002). The second part of the argument, though it also makes intuitive sense, doesn't seem to enjoy as much agreement. There are alarmingly few studies done on pedagogy that ask students about effective and ineffective teaching practices. The present study is borne out of that gap.

There is another manifestation of this seeming disregard of students' voices, particularly in the Indian context. On studying the hiring and promotion process of teachers in higher education in India, one finds that students' perception of the quality of teaching seems to be nowhere in the picture. It's as if whether students find a particular teacher's teaching practices effective or ineffective is immaterial. This paper is based on the authors' belief that in order to have classrooms that not only impart learning but are also enjoyed by students, it's important to listen to the students. It's important for teachers as well as researchers of pedagogy to make a concerted effort to let students' voices shape their work. Furthermore, this needs to be a constant and iterative process. Teachers cannot continue to fall back on teaching how they were taught. Classrooms are a microcosm of the society; as social demands change, pedagogies must change in response. The present world is characterised by rapid and considerable change, and if universities are to retain their role of preparing students for the outside world upon graduation, they must evolve in tandem with the changing times. "A higher education for the twenty first century not only calls for a pedagogy of super-complexity, it calls for new thinking about higher education itself" (Mortimore, 1999; p.152). One way to stay in touch with what students need out of their teachers and their universities, is to simply ask them. That is precisely what the present study does.

The world is created by interaction among human beings. Interaction gives rise to thoughts, power relations and institutions. Classrooms, just like the society, are also created by interaction- interaction between teacher and students. However, a common

belief is that classrooms are created by the teacher and her use of power. Contrary to this common assumption, power arises from the interaction between students and teachers (Manke, 1997). This belief is shared by the authors and was influential in designing the present study.

Method

This study is grounded in the idea of co-construction of learning. This stems from a social- constructivist epistemology and is reflected in the method adopted by the study. Using the Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954), a qualitative survey was constructed by the authors and given to 400 university educated students (pursuing or passed out of undergraduate/post-graduate courses). The idea for the same was derived after thorough review of literature in the area of educational psychology. The Critical Incident Technique (CIT) has been used in various psychological research areas including education, health, organisational behaviour etc. It encapsulates behaviours of a particular phenomenon critically, from the observer's perspective. It allows for rich data taken from various vantage points. The survey constructed had various questions regarding the role of both teachers and students in the 'best class that they had ever had.' Nvivo software was used to analyse the data, and the data analysis involved Content Analysis of individual meaning units. Codes were created and they were used to create frequency tables and Word Clouds, and then a thorough study of the codes led to the formation of themes and sub-themes. Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 represent the sample distribution.

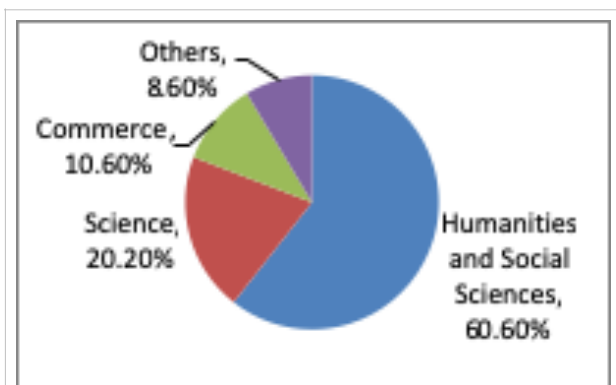


Fig. 1. Educational stream wise sample distribution

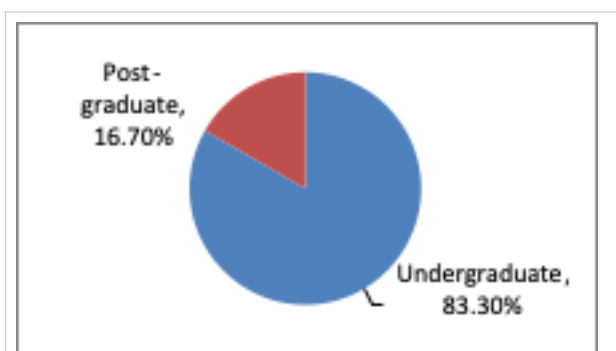


Fig. 2. Course wise sample distribution

Results & Discussion

All the data that was collected was first entered into Nvivo software, and then analysed using Content Analysis. All the data was in the form of responses to questions framed using the Critical Incident Technique, which were used to unravel the threads that comprise the fabric of ‘the best class ever’ experienced by each of the participants. The use of Nvivo software facilitated the analysis of a large number of responses in a short period of time as well as in novel ways, as depicted in Fig.3.1, and Fig.3.2.

The font size of the various words in the Word Cloud above corresponds with the frequency of usage of the words in participants’ responses.



Fig. 3.1. Content Analysis of responses for ‘The best class ever’

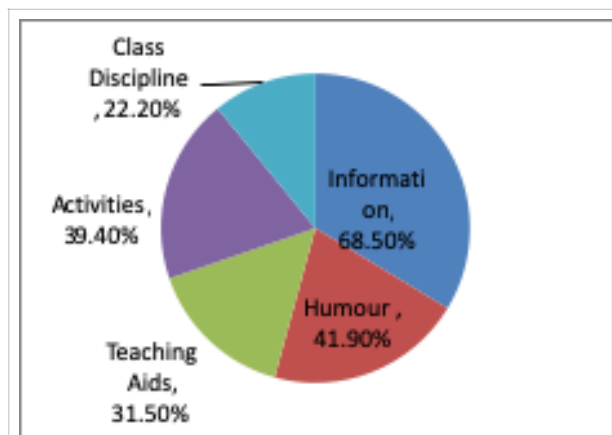


Fig. 3.2. Content Analysis of responses for ‘The best class ever’

Content Analysis (Elo & Kyngas, 2008) was done in the following steps: a) identification of meaning units, or sentences expressing a single essence, and condensing them wherever required, b) generating codes for every meaning unit i.e. a short summary expressing the essence of the meaning unit in language close to the participant’s, c) clustering codes and creating categories/sub-themes, d) generating themes that go beyond manifest content and tie up multiple sub-themes together in an interpretive or latent level. This was a cyclical process; new data was analysed in terms of already identified codes and categories, while simultaneously

looking out for new codes and categories. The themes have been discussed under two headings: ‘What do teachers do in an outstanding classroom?’ and ‘What do students do in an outstanding classroom?’. An attempt has been made to weave the experiences of students with psychological concerns and concepts, in order to stitch together a fabric of what constitutes an outstanding classroom. The discussion is divided into two parts, and themes under each have been discussed separately at first, and together in a dialogic fashion in the conclusion.

Part I: What do teachers do in an outstanding classroom?

Emotional climate of the classroom

One of the most prominent themes to emerge out of the data has to do with the relationship between the teacher and the students. There’s overwhelming support for the desire of a caring and friendly relationship between the teacher and the taught:

“She was understanding, non-judgmental, took feedback, allowed questions to be asked, wasn’t arrogant that she knew more than the rest, was patient with her students, smiled often, made students feel at ease like we had a relationship more than just a student teacher, warm and extremely helpful”

“It involved a lot of real life examples and stories that helped me to understand the topic better. She was always friendly with each one of us which made more of us attend her classes. She had always appreciated answers from the students, whether it be wrong or right, which boosted more of confidence in us.”

This is in line with Antonio Gramsci’s call for an “organic adhesion” and a “sentimental connection” between the teacher and the students, going beyond the formal and the pedantic, in his seminal works on hegemony and education (as cited in Trentin, 2018). The responsibility for this rests squarely on the shoulders of the teacher because of the inherent power dynamic between the teacher and the student. In India, the teacher is usually placed on a pedestal and respect is shown in the form of distance and formality. Unless the teacher actively breaks down the hegemonic power bestowed on her owing to how we culturally perceive teachers, the classroom would remain a space that can breed detachment between the teacher and the students.

Going by the data, it also appears that an outstanding classroom is one that allows and encourages the creation of lasting and authentic bonds between the teacher and the students:

“I wish teachers knew that they do have the opportunity of making positive difference in our lives. My favourite teacher is an example for me and a major part of the person I am today.

I also wish for them to know that the way they treat their students in class ends up becoming a great part of them and which they carry on with them, hence it’s important to treat each student rightly and be just and make sure you’re not harming a student’s confidence.

A teacher should know her subject, know her class and accordingly discover ways of making learning interesting and interactive.”

Lasting intellectual and emotional ties are what keep certain teachers and classrooms alive in the minds of students long after they have graduated. The following quotes reflect this:

“I do have experience of a very good class. The teacher was very kind and amazing. I liked her so much that I am still in contact with her”, “She was friendly, enthusiastic and always encouraged us...and I personally had very deep bonds with my teacher, so much so that I could go to her at any time.”

Humour as a pedagogical device also seems to be highly favoured by the students (41.9%). This is interesting considering that discipline is also one of the most favoured responses (22%), like humour, to the question ‘what was it that made a particular class the best class I have ever had’ as depicted in Fig. 4. The authors posit that a classroom that is high on discipline and high on humour is most likely the one in which the teacher has an ‘authoritative style’. Authoritative style is one of the four possible styles of parenting based on varying proportions of control and nurturance (Baumrind, 1966). Walker (2009) proposed the use of parenting style theory as an explanatory framework for understanding teachers’ influence on student learning outcomes. In Baumrind’s parenting style theory, the four styles of parenting are: authoritative (high on control, high on nurturance), authoritarian (high on control, low on nurturance), permissive (low on control, high on nurturance) and negligent (low on control, low on nurturance). In several studies done on school and college students, the authoritarian style has been shown to be the most successful when it comes to fostering academic and social competence in students (Walker, 2010; Coldren & Hively, 2009). In the present study, the teaching style of preference in students seems to be the authoritative style marked by high level of warmth and high level of discipline.

Dialectic relationship & feminist pedagogy

Teachers’ openness to co-construction of learning is fundamental to the co-construction of an outstanding classroom. For co-construction of learning to occur, it’s crucial that teachers examine their philosophy about teaching and their ideas about the roles of teachers and students. The notion that an older, hence wiser person, the teacher, should have total control over dissemination of knowledge, including the ‘what, why and how’ is an antiquated idea; expectation of unquestioned authority hardly seems to be welcomed by students in higher education in the present age:

“My teacher is always welcoming, she doesn’t think of herself as the head, she treats everyone and herself equally with no difference”

The sharing of power with students need not be a grudging choice; sharing expertise can be liberating. “Every teacher is always a student and every student, a teacher” (Gramsci, 2001; p.399 as cited in Silveira, 2018). Such a dialectic relationship is the founding stone for co-construction of learning:

“Her behaviour & attitude was positive towards us students were also encouraged to partake in the discussions which gave us a chance to be more than just passive recipients of the knowledge being shared.”

“I think the best I found was when the teacher understood us, she could relate with us and moreover didn’t have any realistic expectations. She knew who can do what and how much and assessed everything on that basis. She was extremely fair and non-judgemental. She was supportive and explained a thing hundreds of times if students didn’t understand. And

obviously used practical ways and exercises and activities to explain concepts. She made class interactive by conducting discussions”

As is evident from Fig. 4, a key element of an outstanding classroom is high level of interaction between the students and the teacher. This is another manifestation of the sharing of power- the sharing of pedagogical space, resulting in the co-construction of learning.

The idea of co-construction of learning can also be understood as a logical outcome of, as well as a critical foundation of, feminist pedagogy. Feminist pedagogy envisions classroom as a liberatory environment in which a “community of learners is empowered to act responsibly towards each other and the subject matter” (Shrewsbury, 1987; p. 6). The following quote from a participant encapsulates this sentiment well:

“Teachers could become more relatable to the students, understanding their psyche and the lecture much more interesting rather than just talking about some alien concept with no backing of ground reality.”

Feminist pedagogy also believes that “teacher and student alike bring texts of their own to the classroom which shape the transactions within it” (Portuges & Culley, 1985; p. 2). This means that teaching is not just about delivery of information, rather it is a “complex intellectual and emotional engagement... in a charged space” (Culley & Portuges, 1985; p. 2) that is the feminist classroom. Going by the data in the present study, students appear to appreciate this:

“This professor is very well read but has no arrogance about it. She is very receptive and

understands the psychology of a student very well. She used to have a structure but that structure in itself was never concrete. As students, we had the freedom to have the class as close to our day to day life experiences.”

Furthermore, homogenising all students into one category would be an artificial, and perhaps, myopic attempt if one is genuinely interested in co-constructing learning as a teacher. Individual identities must be allowed to shine through and influence the teaching-learning process. This also gels well with the central idea behind Vygotsky’s theory- that learning is not an individual phenomenon, rather it is embedded in the social and cultural context in which it is supposed to take place (Vygotsky, 1978).

A culture of high expectations

Most respondents picked a particular class as the best class they had ever had, because it was high on the knowledge component, as evident from Fig. 4. Thus, a key element of an outstanding classroom is good teaching in the traditional sense i.e. in terms of imparting new knowledge to the students. A teacher’s subject-matter mastery is thereby indispensable for an outstanding classroom:

“She was extremely confident and assertive (in a positive way). She knew what she was talking about and she just held our attention in such a way, that it couldn't waver”

“She was intelligent. Knew what she was doing and it seemed like, enjoyed the process of teaching it to us.”

This is connected to a teacher’s passion for her subject and her belief that the students can grasp the ideas being discussed. A teacher’s

perception of how much content delivery or sharing of knowledge is appropriate needs to be in tune with the students' desire and ability to grasp the knowledge being shared and to participate in the creation of learning. A common danger that teachers face with regards to this is underestimating students' capabilities. According to research, this is an important factor that is related to student learning outcomes (Peterson & Deal, 1998). A risk free, non-challenging learning environment in which the teacher and the taught conspire to keep the classroom free from "unpredictability, stress, openness and multiple contending voices" is one that is inadequate to prepare students for the challenges of the real world (Mortimore, 1999; p. 147). In contrast, if teachers have high expectations of their students, the classroom space becomes an energetic, dynamic space where both the teacher and the taught push each other's boundaries and excellence becomes a part of the fabric. Expect excellence and you beget excellence; or so says the self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 1948).

We propose that a classroom with a culture of high expectations is also likely to be one that is headed by a teacher with a Growth Mindset. According to Dweck (2007), our mindset can take two forms: Fixed Mindset, or the belief that our abilities are carved out in stone, and Growth Mindset, or the belief that our abilities can improve with effort. A teacher's mindset is highly communicable; through her words and actions, she can encourage or discourage either type of mindset in her students. A vast body of literature now supports Dweck's (2007) contention that Growth Mindset would be associated with success in all walks of life (Ricci, 2013; Dweck, 2014). Only a teacher who has a predominantly Growth Mindset will

strive to push her students beyond their current levels of understanding and competence, towards cultivating Growth Mindset themselves.

The emotionally intelligent teacher

There's overwhelming support in the data collected for this study for a classroom that is responsive to students' emotional needs:

"I think the best I found was when the teacher understood us, she could relate with us. She was extremely fair and non-judgemental. She was supportive and explained a thing hundreds of times if students didn't understand."

"She also understood that in a class there are people with different minds, feeling things in different ways and hence she was conscious about the things she said... keeping it neutral, still somehow managing to make us all reach to the person inside us"

"I personally feel that you like a class if it manages to make you feel something and such a thing is possible if the teacher is able to use the right words and sentences that capture the feeling of the message being passed on. My teacher was able to do all of these things and I wouldn't exaggerate when I say she was able to reach every single person in the class."

Studies have shown that students respond differently to different teachers depending on their perception of how much teachers care (Crabtree, 2004). Research also shows that teachers with strong Emotional Intelligence "create classroom environments that support more effective and efficient student learning than those teachers with only limited Emotional Intelligence" (Powell & Kusuma-Powell, 2013; p. 5). Thus, treating the classroom as the arena

of the intellectual-rational and overlooking the role of emotions can be erroneous. “Emotions permeate classrooms while instruction is taking place” (Powell & Kusuma-Powell, 2013; p. 6). Furthermore, students tend to work harder for some teachers than they do for others (Crabtree, 2004). Personal qualities of teachers thereby gain a lot of importance when it comes to student satisfaction with teaching as well as student learning outcomes. A number of such personal qualities emerged in the data viz. ‘funny’, ‘humble’, unbiased, passionate, supportive etc. If these were to be interpreted from the VIA Character Strengths framework (Peterson and Seligman, 2004), the most preferred character strengths in teachers emerge to be ‘wisdom’, ‘social intelligence’, ‘humour’, ‘love’ ‘humility’ and ‘kindness’.

Broad repertoire of instructional strategies

Use of teaching aids is one of the most popular elements of an outstanding classroom going by the data in the present study (refer Fig. 4). This includes use of videos, powerpoint presentations and diverse activities including role plays, bonding exercises etc.

“And obviously used practical ways and exercises and activities to explain concepts. She made class interactive by conducting discussions”

“He used video clips and presented real life examples not verbally but with aid of videos and research papers”

“The class was highly interactive, almost like a group discussion going on among 30 people. I learnt so many new perspectives and ways to examine things, including popular media trends.”

Positive education

Bridging the gap between the world of the college and the personal worlds of the students is another preference that emerged predominantly in the data. Students appear to prefer classes that go beyond the prescribed syllabus and teachers that go beyond ‘just teaching’:

“So many new things that weren’t given in the book... real life examples... such an amazing class, loved it very much”, “he would give us knowledge that went beyond the books.”

This can be looked at using the Positive Education framework which is essentially education for both traditional skills of achievement and for happiness (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich & Linkins, 2009). This is where the intersection of teaching and Positive Psychology becomes most apparent. Many scholars believe that teachers and researchers in positive psychology are actually fellow travellers on the same journey. This is because at its core, education is about nurturing strengths, about growth and learning, and about psychological and social well-being, much like positive Psychology (Shankland & Rosset, 2017). For instance, making concerted efforts to encourage student flourishing would be a part of Positive Education, and would contribute to the co-creation of an outstanding classroom as well. Many respondents in the present study indicate their wish for something similar to Positive Education though they may not have been able to articulate it in those exact words:

“hamein jeene ke tarike sikhaye, na keval padaya” or “taught us ways to live life, not just taught us.”

The authors wish to make a call for research in pedagogy in India using the Positive Education framework in higher education in order to establish the effectiveness of such an approach. . Presently, what can be said for certain is that students definitely seem to have a preference for it.

Part II: What do students do in an outstanding classroom?

Share pedagogical space with teacher

If the teacher is disconnected, the students are affected, similarly when the students are distracted the teacher is affected. In an outstanding class, students share the responsibility of making learning effective for all.

“I grew the most during these classes as I was able to self-reflect and express freely which is majorly because of the safe space my classmates created. My classmates understood the importance of confidentiality especially when people in class were talking about personal things. Never did I feel I was being judged or laughed at. Surprisingly during those classes everyone was conscious of their behaviour and also interactive. I’ve had the best conversations during these classes with different ideas and emotions. My classmates shared their experiences and stories providing a lot to learn from.”

Active and Competitive Space

“Sharing one's own ideas and responding to others' reactions sharpens thinking and deepens understanding” (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; p.3). Students appear to appreciate those classrooms in which fellow students show interest and enthusiasm for learning:

“Most of the students were studious and we had a healthy competitive environment”, “I liked that spirit in me of competing with my classmates in every single thing, say giving answers, maintaining notebooks etc.”, “The classmates were very competitive in themselves. They listened to teacher patiently and did the competition of giving first answer to whatever teacher asks. Besides they were friendly too and discuss problems.”

No Social Identity Left Behind

Vygotsky (1978) had pointed out that learning is a social process. Within a classroom there can be various cliques and sub-groups, and many times these come to be based on various identities that students have. Movies like Kung Fu Panda, Duff and Mean Girls showcase this idea effectively where a particular student is isolated because he/she doesn't fit in with the rest of the students. Having a friendly and supportive environment is crucial to the development of every student. The following quotes highlight the crucial role played by the classroom environment in participants' memory of the best class they had ever had:

“Extremely supportive of each other. Everyone wanted to see each other do their best”

“I think that what made a difference was the fact that there were no sub groups within the class. In the sense that I, or anyone else for that matter, was not automatically looking out for a friend whenever there was an activity or some sharing to be done or a joint task to be undertaken. No one was left alone. The class by itself was a collective group and an open space.”

Creating Memories and Unbreakable Bonds

Classrooms are sites of creation of common memories and strong bonds that at times last upto adulthood.

“Everyone stood for everyone. There was unity in class. Friendships were made for life”.

Students often communicate without words, so strong is the understanding between them. An outstanding classroom is thus witness to new friendships being forged and lasting relationships being fashioned:

“We used to roll our eyes by seeing each other if we wanted to convey anything to our friend and make the other understand that we are referring to this. This was the bond between us!”

Epilogue: Reflexive Account & Conclusion

This study is a product of a teacher and a student passionate about pedagogy coming together to understand what makes a class enjoyable, memorable and effective for students. In a number of ways, this study has been influenced by who we are and we have tried to be aware of the various ways our role as ‘teacher’ and ‘student’ may have influenced our work as co-researchers. It was interesting to reflect on our daily practices in classrooms viz-a-viz what our analysis of the data was informing us on best practices by teachers and students appear to appreciate. We made space for disagreements and we allowed ourselves to be surprised by the data: we bracketed our personal ideas of outstanding classrooms in the quest of interpreting the data as researchers, and not as student or teacher. As is true of any qualitative research, in this one as well the

whole research process is bound to have been influenced by our positioning as researchers. In the interest of reflexivity, however, we attempted to maintain an explicit recognition of all the possible ways in which we could influence this research right from its conception. We also attempted to exploit our unique positioning, with one researcher being a student and one being a teacher, throughout the research process.

We believe that classrooms are excellent ways to understand as well as correct social order and manage the world, and the results have been interpreted with that implication in mind. Classrooms are the centre of expectations, opportunities and development. It was thus interesting to see what teachers can do for co-constructing an outstanding classroom: how emotionally intelligent teachers working with a dialectical pedagogy help create a culture of high expectations and work with a broad repertoire of instructional strategies while giving due attention to positive education as well as the emotional climate of the class. It was also interesting to see what students can do for co-constructing an outstanding classroom: sharing pedagogical space with the teacher, making the classroom an active and competitive space, allowing everyone a supportive environment regardless of their social identities and letting the classroom become an arena where memories and unbreakable bonds are created. Higher education practices that are shaped in a way to provide space for and reinforce such students and teachers could result in an education system that is truly student centric.

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