

TEACHING THE 21ST CENTURY HIGHER INSTITUTION STUDENTS IN NIGERIA FOR BETTER COMPREHENSION OF LEARNING CONTENT: THE PERSPECTIVE OF COLLABORATIVE INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY

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Abstract

The kind of instructional strategy used for teaching students at all levels especially higher institution students contributes immensely to the level students' comprehension and academic performance. For any successful teaching to take place therefore, the teacher does not only need to be adequately equipped with sound knowledge of the subject matter but good choice of instructional strategy that is characterized by students' active engagement, knowledge generation, participation and cooperation among other factors remains also very fundamental. Hence, this work focused on teaching the 21st century higher institution students in Nigeria for better comprehension of learning content: The perspective of collaborative instructional strategy. This work critically explored the concept of collaborative instructional strategy as perceived by different scholars. The tips/techniques of using collaborative instructional strategy were also extensively discussed from diverse perspectives. The importance of collaborative instructional strategy as well as the challenges of employing collaborative instructional strategy were discussed in details. Conclusion was also offered.

Keywords: 21st Century, Higher Institution, Learning Content and Collaborative Instructional Strategy.

Introduction

The act of teaching simply refers to the process of imparting knowledge, skills, values to the learners; thereby resulting positive behavior modification. Sequeira (2010) perceived teaching as "a set of events, outside the learners which are designed to support internal process of learning". According to *Christensen, Garvin and Sweet (2011)*, teaching is fundamentally about creating the pedagogical, social, and ethical conditions under which students agree to take charge of their own learning, individually and collectively. **It is an** engagement with learners to enable their understanding and application of knowledge, concepts and processes. It includes design, content selection, delivery, assessment and reflection. To teach is to engage students in learning or getting students involved in the active construction of knowledge.

The aim of teaching is not only to transmit information but to also transform students from passive recipients of other people's knowledge into active constructors of their own and others' knowledge. Hence, a teacher may not adequately transform the students without their active participation. The essence of teaching in the opinion of Elvis (2014) is to improve students' academic performance, instill in the students intrinsic motivation to learn, behavior modification, instill positive action into students' cognitive, affective and behavioral learning domains, develop all-rounded students (physically, intellectually, psychologically, socially and emotionally) and to promote good mental health in students etc.

Thus, the extent to which the aims and objectives of teaching as highlighted above among others can be maximally achieved may be largely dependent on the kind of teaching strategy often employed by lecturers and the level engagement of students in the teaching-learning process. The teaching strategy could be teacher-centered or learner-centered. The former is that in which teachers are the main authority figures in the class while students are viewed as being empty vessels whose primary role is to passively receive information for the purpose of assessment. In learner-centered strategies, both teachers and students play an equally active role in the learning process. The teacher's primary role is to coach and facilitate students' learning and overall comprehension of material, promote learners' active engagement while the learners generate the knowledge. According to Okafor (2014), the application of learner-centered teaching strategies ensures that learning is collaborative, interactive, active, participative, practical and engaging; thereby promoting students' retention, remembrance, academic performance as well as reducing boredom and abstract learning.

This work therefore examines collaborative instructional strategy as one of the learner-centered teaching strategies that could be employed by lecturers in higher institutions for better comprehension of learning content. What then is collaborative instructional strategy?

Concept of Collaborative Instructional Strategy

Collaborative instructional strategy is a teaching technique which involves bringing together learners of diverse abilities or levels of comprehension to study together for the purpose of interaction and generating their knowledge by themselves. Johnson and Holubec (2018) maintained that collaborative instruction does not just entail bringing the students to sit in groups but it rather encourages working and interacting together to achieve collaborative work goals. Hence, it is the responsibility of the teacher to build a classroom atmosphere which is characterized by cooperation and maximum understanding among the students. In the same vein, Laal and Ghodsi (2012) posited that in order to ensure that collaborative instruction is successfully carried out, the teacher should emphasize on basic elements such as positive interdependence, understanding, individual responsibility; direct interaction, friendliness and active participation by every group member.

Collaborative instructional strategy is highly rooted in constructivist theory which believes that knowledge can be created within a population where members actively interact by sharing experiences and take on asymmetry roles. It is a teaching strategy which emphasizes on joint intellectual efforts by students while the teacher plays supervisory role. It requires the teacher or user to split the class into two or more working groups depending

on the class size for the students to engage in mutual search for knowledge and understanding or finding solutions to an identified problem in the class (Mitnik, Recabarren, Nussbaum & Soto, 2019).

Collaborative learning represents a significant shift away from the typical teacher centered or lecture-centered milieu in classrooms. In applying collaborative instructional strategy, lecturing/listening/note-taking process may not disappear entirely but it exists alongside other processes that are based on students' discussion and active work with the course material. Teachers who use collaborative instructional strategy tend to think of themselves less as expert transmitters of knowledge to students and more as expert designers of intellectual experiences for students as coaches or mid-wives of a more emergent learning process. Collaborative learning environments is that which the learners engage in a common task and each learner depends on and is accountable to each other. It involves groups of learners working together to solve a problem or complete a given task (Moses, 2015).

In the opinion of Dooly (2018), collaborative instructional strategy is a means through which the whole teaching-learning process is highly interactive and cooperative; as students teach the teacher, students teach one another and the teacher teaches the students in return especially in areas where the students fail to get it right. Characteristically, collaborative instructional strategy ensures that students take full responsibility of their learning on one hand and towards another learner on the other hand; such that students try to assist each other to learn and understand.

Learning Tips/Techniques of Collaborative Instructional Strategy

There are several tips, fundamentals or techniques which users of collaborative instructional strategy should understand and apply while try out the strategy. Some examples: build trust, establish group interactions, keeps in mind the critics, include different types of learning, use real-world problems, consider assessment, create a pre-test and post-test, use different strategies, help students use inquiry and use technology for easier learning.

Ruiz (2016) identified the following tips on how the strategy could be used by teachers. i. The teachers could ask students to split into small groups. ii. Give students an interesting topic to work on. iii. Give enough time to students to-ponder over the topic/problem and discuss amongst themselves. iv. The teacher should advise the students to select a group leader who assigns tasks to individual members of the group and regulates discussion pattern. v. The teacher should encourage individual student to switch to another group if so desired or intended for variation. vi. The teacher could grade individual groups based on creativity, investigation ability and scope, abstract reasoning skills, ability to coordinate tasks, leadership skill, inter-personal skill, communication skill and cognitive skill etc. vii. The students should accommodate one another' views by being open-minded and flexible in thoughts, careful and appreciative of other views to avoid conflict. viii. The students must be responsible and determined to work together. Students should freely raise constructive criticism and relevant questions during group activity. ix. Students should be encouraged to report any act of violence, strong disagreement or controversy. Burns (2016) pinpointed three tips to encourage effective use collaborative instruction to include:

i. **Create learning activities that are complex:** Students do not need to collaborate if the task/assignment is too simple; as they can easily do it alone. The real reason students collaborate is because the task is complex or may be too difficult and has too many pieces to complete alone. Johnson, Johnson and Holubec (2008) therefore maintained that complex activities are more challenging, engaging, stimulating and requires positive interdependence.

Prepare students to be a part of a team: Collaborative groups are usually built and nurtured. Hence, students often need to learn how to work effectively with others and as a part of a team. The teacher needs to help the students understand the benefits of collaboration and what a successful collaboration looks like. The teacher should guide students through the stages of team building and also teach students active learning skills.

Minimize opportunities for free riding: Students often complain about the free riding of one member who lets others do all the work and then benefits from the group's grade. The teacher can eliminate this by creating small groups of not more than four or five people. When there is less room to hide, participation is more eminent. The teacher should ensure there is a high degree of individual accountability by assessing students both individually and as a group.

In the same vein, Clifford (2016) identified several tips or techniques of using collaborative instructional strategy by teachers. Among the techniques are:

Establish clear group goals: Effective collaborative learning involves the establishment of group goals as well as individual accountability. This keeps the group on track and establishes an unambiguous purpose, it is best to define goals and objectives to save time.

Keep group mid-sized: Small groups of three or fewer usually lack enough diversity and may not allow divergent thinking to occur and groups that are too large create a situation where not all members participate. Thus, a moderate sized group of four or five may be ideal.

Build trust and promote open group communication: Successful interpersonal communication must exist in teams. Building trust is very essential. Deal with emotional issues that arise immediately and any interpersonal problems before moving on.

For larger tasks, create group roles: Decompose a difficult task into parts to save time. You can then assign different roles. The students might as well be allowed to choose their own roles.

Create a pre-test and post-test: A good way to ensure the groups learn together is to engage the students in a pre-test and post-test. This is used to determine if group members are learning.

Focus on enhancing problem-solving and critical thinking skills: Assignment/task should be one which allows for varied interpretations. Different types of problems might focus on categorizing, planning, taking multiple perspectives or forming solutions.

Keep in mind the diversity of the groups: Mixed groups that includes a range of talents, learning styles, backgrounds and experiences are best. Rotate groups so students have a chance to learn from other.

Consider demographics: While grouping the students except in a non-mixed school, balanced gender groups should be promoted.

Technology makes learning easier: The teacher should try and incorporate tools for online collaboration such as Google groups, an online shared whiteboard space, and online meetings.

Value diversity: For collaborative strategy to work effectively, students need to respect and appreciate each other's views for. Thus, the teacher should create a classroom environment that encourages value for multiplicity in thoughts

Importance of using Collaborative Instructional Strategy for Teaching Higher Institutions Students

There are several benefits which students generally and higher institution students in specificity could derive from being exposed to collaborative instructional strategy. In the view of Dumas (2018), "the inherent structure of collaborative learning creates an environment which motivates learning". The strategy therefore often motivates students not only to learn but also encourages all group members to understand the basic underpinnings of the knowledge; thereby fostering positive interdependent relationship between group members. Since students enjoy learning when they are allowed to express themselves and relate freely with each other during group discussion sessions, collaborative strategy helps students to ask questions among their peers, express their doubts and confusion, share their thoughts and discoveries. When students are grouped in small settings, the learner has the opportunity to rehearse his understanding with others and to be exposed to other conceptual construct; thereby helping in building the students' courage in themselves.

In collaborative learning situations, students are not simply taking in new information or ideas. They are creating something new with the information and ideas. These act of intellectual process of constructing meaning or creating something new is crucial to learning and immensely improves the academic performance of students. For knowledge to be internalized and a framework established, a social discourse must first take place. Grouping students for collaborative learning allows them to share their ideas and learning experiences and further promotes the learning performances of the group as well as that of the individuals (Huang, Wu and Chenn, 2012; Wang & Hwang, 2012).

Collaborative learning team is said to attain higher-level thinking and preserve information for longer times than students working individually. Groups tend to learn through discussion, clarification of ideas and evaluation of other's ideas. Shen, Hiltz and Bieber (2008) cited in Andrew (2016) found a significant relationship between collaborative instructional strategy and students' exam scores; as the collaborative class achieved higher exam scores than the individualized class. The study also discovered that students who collaboratively worked on scientific problems earned significantly higher scores than those who worked alone. Utama, Marhaeni and Putra (2013) reported that the use of collaborative instructional strategy allows for students' development of self-confidence, leadership skills, communication skills and the ability to solve problems.

Okafor (2015) identified the benefits of collaborative instructional strategy to include: removal abstract learning, enhancement of students' understanding, retention, self-esteem and academic performance, development of higher-level thinking and oral communication, promotion of student-faculty interaction, self-management and leadership skills among others. In the same vein, Elvis (2014) stated that the application of collaborative

learning goes a long way encouraging peer/team learning, improves critical thinking, promotes problem-solving skills, communication skills, listening skills and leadership skills.

Challenges of using Collaborative Instructional Strategy

Several factors tend to inhibit effective application of collaborative instructional strategy in higher institutions and in schools generally. According to Adancoello, Tobar, Faria, Menezes and Feritas (2011), since collaborative instructional strategy requires splitting the students into sub-groups for interaction and discussion, individual group member's learning styles might affect their peers' interactions. This is because learning style is often habitual and quick adjustment by every student to suit the heterogeneity of the group may be very difficult. The instructional strategy is also highly time consuming; as nothing much may be achieved if there is no enough time for each course/subject. Moses (2015) also stated that students who are slow in learning and have poor communication skills may be dominated; as they are very likely make little or no inputs for fear of shyness or lack of what to contribute. Moses added that Nigerian tertiary institutions which are characterized by over population may not be very easy to employ this instructional strategy; as often times students are seen standing by windows and doors due inadequate space to accommodate all the students.

Freeman and Greenacre (2010) posited that creating a collaborative learning classroom can be a fully rewarding opportunity but it is also full of challenges; as it is characterized by unequal individual participation in group tasks. Some students may also lack communicative and collaborative skills; thereby making the application of the strategy less effective. In the same vein, Gillies and Boyle (2010) admitted that collaborative instructional strategy could pose serious challenge to users/teachers in terms of organization and coordination of groups, proper management of class time as well as designing appropriate group tasks suitable for collaboration. Hamalainen and Vahasantanen (2011) stated that the act of stepping out of the center and engaging the students in a group activity may be very difficult for some teachers/user. Also, the various activities that are involved in using collaborative strategy make it time consuming. Designing group work requires a demanding yet important rethinking of the syllabus in terms of course content and time allocation. Teachers may feel the stress of trying to meet the demands of their syllabus in the limited time they have and thus be frustrated by the slow progress shown in some group activities.

Another constraining factor for the effective application of collaborative instructional strategy especially tertiary institution is lack of classroom management strategies by some lecturers. Kayode (2018) maintained that the explosive number of students per class in tertiary institutions in Nigeria makes the application of the strategy very challenging; as some lecturers who are not good in classroom management will allow students to make the whole process become too rowdy. Collaborative learning also complicates the evaluation process because the public nature of the group work makes demonstration of students so continuous. Not only is course content reshaped, so is the definition of student competence. Weaker or low-level students may be at disadvantages while the clever partners dominate the discussion. Also students who prefer studying alone might find it challenging to learn in groups. Sometimes, groups will tend to rebel and will refuse to work with one or another member. Some students will always work better alone, some groups may reinforce stereotypes of race and gender and thus defeat the real purpose of the activity. Students may

find it impossible to overcome their deeply embedded competitive instincts as they look for individual rewards.

Conclusion

One of the ways of determining an effective lecturer is not limited to his/her sound knowledge of the subject matter or his/her discipline. He/she also needs sound knowledge of each individual learners and proper choice of functional instructional strategies among others that could suit the needs and interest of the learners. Thus, the choice of collaborative instructional strategy as one of the learner-based instructional strategies by higher institution instructors remains more promising and fundamental; it encourages peer/team learning, reduces abstract and rote learning, enhances knowledge generation, taking responsibility for one's studies, improves critical thinking, promotes problem-solving skills, communication skills, listening skills and leadership skills.

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