HOW TO IMPROVE UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION 7 GOOD PRACTICES

Omer Farooq

16

Abstract

If we take into account the qualitative problems facing Pakistani students, we see low morale, illiterate graduates, low standard of teaching practices and personal incompetence. Unfortunately, its been observed that, there are neither enough carrots to improve undergraduate education nor enough sticks to threaten students with unless there is commitment and action of both students and faculty. The question arises: how to improve this prevailing situation of undergraduate education?

The author recommends seven best practices in order to exit this quagmire of cyclic educational incompetence. These include: to encourage contact between students and teachers; to develop reciprocity and cooperation among students; to encourage active learning; to show prompt feedback; to emphasize completion of tasks on time; to communicate high expectations; to respect for different talents and learning methods.

1. For correspondence Email: danish.mba@hotmail.com

Introduction

If we take into account the qualitative problems facing Pakistani students, we see low morale, illiterate graduates, low standard of teaching practices and personal incompetence. Many years of reports and studies have identified these problems. If we want to improve we have to respond quickly, and move out of the carrots and sticks approach of work and reward.

Unfortunately, its been observed that, there are neither enough carrots to improve undergraduate education nor enough sticks to threaten students with unless there is commitment and action of both students and faculty. The improvement of undergraduate education depends heavily on both these valuable resources.

But the question arises that how to improve this prevailing situation of undergraduate education? Various institutions have raised this question across the country and showed their concern. I reinforce research based seven principals to good teaching institutions in order to enhance and improve teaching mechanism and to provide focus for their work.

Proposed Best Practices in undergraduate education include
1.   To encourage contact between students and teachers
2.   To develop reciprocity and cooperation among students.
3.   To encourage active learning.
4.   To show prompt feedback.
5.   To emphasize completion of tasks on time.
6.   To communicate high expectations.
7.   To respect for different talents and learning methods.

A View towards Improvement

The seven principles mentioned above are not absolute words written in stone. They are guidelines for staff, students and administrators of national institutions and their trustees to improve teaching and learning.

They look like simple concepts readily visible to common sense, and they are – because many teachers and students have experienced them, and because research supports them.

Although these principles are powerful forces in themselves, together they display the concept of 'sum-of-the-parts-is-greater-than-the-whole'. Together they merge into the following qualities:
1.   Activity
2.   Expectations
3.   Cooperation
4.   Interaction
5.   Diversity
6.   Responsibility

The best practices mentioned hold equal importance in all types of programs, including both professional and academic. They apply to all students from all backgrounds, whether they are rural or urban, rich or poor, senior or young, women or men etc. The difference is in the implementation, which depends upon the institution and its target student market, and the situation the institution is facing at the time. Next, we introduce several good practice has been used on a variety of settings in the past year. In addition, the strong influence of these principles means the state foundations and management of higher education institutions and operating condition are discussed briefly at the end.

These best practices are introduced in the next section of this paper, with a brief discussion on the influence of these on colleges and universities.

This paper aims to discuss the methodology and practical implementation that can be used to implement the best practices mentioned above, rather than the content and theory. Teaching, no doubt, is a multidimensional, complex system of disseminating information, with not only a number of content delivery methodologies, but also the very content differing based on religion, culture, and national ideology. However, it must be kept in mind that not only is the content of the lecture important, but the delivery

17

mechanics as well. While enough has been written about *what* to teach, little work has been done on *how* to teach it. This is the reason that this paper focuses more on the delivery methodology rather than the content.

All university education basically prepares students for real life. The classroom is the first real taste of independence that students get after college. This is the most important, and often the last, chance to help students become effective citizens of the country.

The Best Practices

18

1.   To Encourage Contact between Students and Teachers

If students and teachers are in constant communication with each other, student motivation and involvement in the course will increase. This contact does not have to be limited to the classroom, nor does it have to be verbal. Even the regular use of the notice board will keep students and faculty in touch with each other, and keep the level of interest of student piqued in the course.

Also, social interaction between faculty and students is vital for improving student motivation, and the intellectual level of students. Taking the teacher to be a role model, the student can, through these interactions, gain an insight into their own future plans.

2.   To Develop Reciprocity and Cooperation among Students

Team based learning is better than individual tuition, since it promotes collaboration, exchange and interchange of ideas, and reduces the boredom of students when learning dry concepts. Learning, if it aims to be effective, must be both social and collaborative.

Such kind of learning improves the students' social skills as well, since they understand how to treat both reasonable and unreasonable people, and keeps students

politically sharp and insightful.

3.   To Encourage Active Learning

Learning cannot be done from the outside, and one must get their hands dirty in order to obtain proper education. Only theory can be learnt, in the form of rote learning, or simple memorization without understanding through directed study and reading.

Ideally students should be encouraged to discuss what they have *understood* rather than what they have simply *read*.

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

4.   To Show Prompt Feedback

Prompt or timely feedback plays a major role and focuses learning. It is vital for the students to know what to benefit from the course and what not and it is only possible if students are assessed on their current knowledge and competence followed by the timely and constructive feedback. Students require ample opportunities to perform at class level and should receive suggestions for improvement which enables them to improve and enhance their competence and make them aware to focus on the particular subject area they lack on.

It is also to note that no feedback can occur without through assessment because assessment without timely feedback doesn't contribute much to the learning process. It is quite sad of a practice that an entry test is enforced at graduate level but without any feedback, student have little or no knowledge of what they lack in their subject area. There are very few of colleges where students with poor grades are offered additional introductory courses in order to raise the current level

of their academic skills.

There is a general practice in use at the corporate ladder where employs are assessed on their performance on quarterly, bio-annually or annually basis followed by the constructive feed back by their managers or supervisors which helps them to focus on the areas they lack on. If similar or somewhat same practice is followed at undergraduate level where feedback after assessment is provided to groups or individual level in order improve their learning.

5. To Emphasize Completion of Tasks on Time

Effective learning is subject to best utilization of time and completion of task on time. Utilization of effective time management is critical at both student and professional level and there is no alternative for time on task.

Time + Energy = Effective Learning

Effective time management can minimize the workload and can maximize the learning procedure and is an effective way at both student and faculty level. In order to determined the performance of an institution, we need to take into account the way they allocate and define time expectations for students, faculty members, administrative staff and other professionals. Curriculum and courses should be divided in a way during the session where institutions and faculty provide students with opportunities to incorporate studies throughout their lives.

Different mediums such us seminars, workshops, e-learning, audio video instructions, intensive residential programs should be adopted to provide different medium of instructions which emphasizes on students to complete their task on time.

6. To Communicate High Expectations

The more you expect, the more you get. It is a very simple way to improve one's performance, especially

for the students who are not well prepared or unwilling to show commitment or exert themselves and also for those who are brilliant and motivated enough. It is strange to witness that when faculty members or institutions hold high expectations form students they ultimately end up in raising their own standers resulting in better results and performance from both sides.

Low grades students have an ability to outperform good students only if they are expected right and given contrastive feedback promptly but this whole exercise would involve parents and counselors as well.

7. To Respect for Different Talents and Methods of Learning

Learning is a very diverse in its capacity and it can adopt many methods depending on the suitability of one's interest. It is very much possible that students who are more expressive in practical subjects may not be as good in theory. So it is important that students should be provided with the platform that works for them and then slightly pushing them towards adopting new ways.

Students should be provided with enough options, like selection of text book learning or lecturing, e-based learning or text book and class room learning, by doing so one can easily select and show their talents according to their own capacity and abilities. Having an option of diverse learning can be very effective for both on student and faculty level. Different modes of instructions have been identified like individual degree programs and contract learning and focus on different aspects of learning procedures. For example individualized degree programs focus on personalized way of learning where student have an opportunity to work or learn at their own pace, like wise contractual learning focuses more on defining their own objectives and learning activities and also provides them with an opportunity to define the evaluation method.

Final Comments

The whole system of undergraduate education can be

19

improved if both faculty and students take on the responsibility and share the same strong sense of purpose. They also require the support of administrative staff as well as faculty leaders with adequate funding for this purpose. Over all we need an institution with faculty members who are more inclined towards being educators rather than mere teachers and system should be in place where enough opportunities are provided to students, faculty and administrative staff to celebrate and reflect their shared purpose and where faculty members are provided with enough professional development activities to support the purpose. Institution should make sure that departments, programs and class strength is small enough where faculty and student communication ratio is higher so they can have adequate sense of duty towards this purpose.

Now when we talk about funding, we can't neglect the fact that whole education system requires some government sources of support as well. Such support is helpful in encouraging environments for good practice and in undergraduate education. Government can stream line policies that are inconsistent with good practices, can hold high expectations for institutional performance and allocate enough funding for new undergraduate programs and professional development of faculty members and administrative staff.

20