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21st Century Learning Skills: Nurturing the minds of SACEi students in Taylor's College

ABSTRACT

In this digital era where online communication is a lifestyle, educators are increasingly finding it more challenging to fully engage students in traditional style teaching and learning (Irvine, V.; Code, J.; Richards, L., 2013). This trend has resulted in a much lower attention span among this generation of students (Morrison, 2012) and an increase in their expectation to have immediate feedback on their learning (Blair, 2012). Thus, this paper argues that educators will need to change their pedagogical approaches in order to have better student engagement in the classroom. This paper captures my experience as a SACEi Legal Studies lecturer with emphasis on the gaps that I have observed among my students and the strategies that I have used to close the gaps.

1.0   INTRODUCTION

The SACE Board of South Australia is an independent statutory authority of the South Australian Government that provides the South Australian Certificate of Education. In response to the changing needs of the society, the Board constantly aims to improve their curriculum to equip the students with 21st century learning skills. In order to develop these skills, the assessment framework is divided into 70% coursework and 30% external exam weightage. For the 70% coursework tasks, there is much emphasis on the development of students' soft skills (SACE Board of South Australia, n.d.) to prepare students to be able to compete in a globalized workforce (Stevens, 2011). This effort certainly resonates among all fields and we have increasingly heard of the acknowledgement from business leaders, politicians and educators on the vital role these skills play in the workforce (Rotherham & Willingham, 2010). In other words, it is not only knowledge acquisition that is important but the ability for the students to apply the knowledge that they have acquired is crucial (Silva, 2009). In the context of this paper, the four skills that are required in this era are critical thinking, collaboration, creativity and communication (Applied Educational System, n.d.).

Most of the students who enrolled in the SACEi programme are from the Malaysian public schools who sat for the '*Sijil Peperiksaan Malaysia*'. In recent years, an increasing number of students who enrolled in this programme are also from the private schools who had sat for the Cambridge IGCSE (International General Certificate of Secondary Education). Both these programmes have a 100% exam-based assessment.

In view of the students' educational background, journeying with the students who undertook the SACEi program (formerly known as SAM or South Australian Matriculation) in the last three decades have been both challenging and rewarding for me. Notably, it is the need to shift the students from the traditional mode of 'rote learning' to 'critical thinking' that posed as a challenge. It is an experience that stretched me, constantly reflecting and thinking of ways to engage the students and getting them to think critically.

2.0 THE GAPS & STRATEGIES USED

The following areas are the common challenges observed among the students in my class.

- Understanding the response required in exam questions.
- Application of knowledge acquired.
- Confidence in presenting and defending their own opinion.
- Written Communication.
- Collaboration.
- Critical thinking.

2.1 Understanding the response required in exam questions.

It is interesting to observe that most of my students failed to recognize the task words in a question. Task words such as "why", "what", "how", etc. were constantly being ignored. Consequently, the same answers were given by my students for these questions despite the fact that the task words may be different. They appeared to draw conclusion from just one word in a question, without reading the whole question.

In response to this challenge, my students were asked to reflect on simple questions where they could relate to in the first week of class. Questions such as "What did you eat for breakfast?" followed by "Where did you eat breakfast?" were some examples of the questions asked. The different responses required in these two task words, "what" and "where", was highlighted and explained. In order to ensure that my students understood the different requirements pertaining to the different task words, a sample response, which showed the common mistake of just focusing on *one* word such as 'breakfast', was given to the students. Often, this will elicit a smile from the students. Once the students have a good understanding of the different responses required for different task words, they were subsequently exposed to subject-specific questions throughout the course.

2.2   Application of Knowledge acquired.

It was observed that most of my students have a tendency to regurgitate 'memorized' information. Consequently, stereotyped answers were normally seen. Most of them appeared to have difficulty in extracting relevant information from the knowledge acquired to support their arguments in essay.

In response to this, class activities which focused on student-centered learning were conducted. Students were given exam questions where a *step-by-step essay writing* skills was taught. The class activities gave opportunities to the students to extract relevant information from case-laws or other related sources to support their arguments.

2.3   Confidence in presenting and defending their own opinion.

Students, who come from the Malaysian education system, were observed to be more passive. They would not voluntarily present their opinion in class even if class participation was required. A study conducted by Mustapha, Rahman and Yusuf in 2010 revealed that the common factors that inhibit students' participation in class are lecturers' traits, classroom setting, comprehension of content and classmates' behavior. In addition, the fear of making mistakes is also an underlying issue (Salim, 2014).

In encouraging students to participate and defend their opinion, students need to be assured that the classroom is a safe place for them to present their opinion and even, to make mistakes. This was constantly being communicated to my students. It was observed that lecturer traits, tone and body language were significant as students could pick up from these non-verbal cues as to whether the classroom was truly a safe haven where they would feel comfortable in sharing their opinions.

In addition, class activities that used Kagan's cooperative learning such as '*think-pair-share'* and the *'jigsaw'* method (AdLit, 2018) were employed in my classes. These activities encouraged students to exchange their opinions with their team before presenting their idea. A study conducted in Bangkok University revealed that such cooperative learning helps to reduce stress and boost the confidence of students in sharing their ideas in class (Wichadee, 2010).

2.4   Written Communication.

The common problem seen in my students, particularly those who do not come from an English-speaking background, was the inability to communicate their ideas in written form. Evidence of this problem was seen in their work where grammatical errors, usage of wrong choice of words and lack of coordination in sentences were common.

In response to this problem, a *step-by-step* guide in essay writing was taught and constantly being practiced in class at the end of every sub-topic. For *take-home* assignments, students were monitored closely through *one-to-one* consultation. The benefit of this supervision was that it allowed me to identify the gaps that the students need to close before the submission of the assignment such as grammatical errors or lack of coordination of sentences.

 In order to capture students' potential in learning, the Legal Studies department has improved their assessment design in 2018 in *one* of the school-based assessments. This was to give opportunity for students to choose whether to submit their work in written or multi-modal form. From my observation, this option has benefitted the students who do not have good written communication skills. The assessment that allows such option saw a stark improvement in the students' academic performance.

2.5   Collaboration

Often, the terms 'collaboration' and 'cooperation' are used interchangeably. It is significant to note that these two terms are different. Cooperation refers to an exchange of ideas and information, in support of each other's goal. In contrast, collaboration is "working together to create something new in support of a new vision" (Huff Post, 2017). Collaboration is an essential skill in this era of globalization where there is an increasing demand for such skill (Stoner, 2013).

Collaboration is an area that I found most difficult to achieve. Besides the fact that Malaysian students come from a culture where passive learning is the norm, there are many factors which serve as hindrances to the development of this skill. One of the major obstacles faced in my classroom was the inability of students to work together towards a shared vision. For instance, presentation of new ideas or solution by a student often lead to tension especially if the idea was not well-received by their peers.
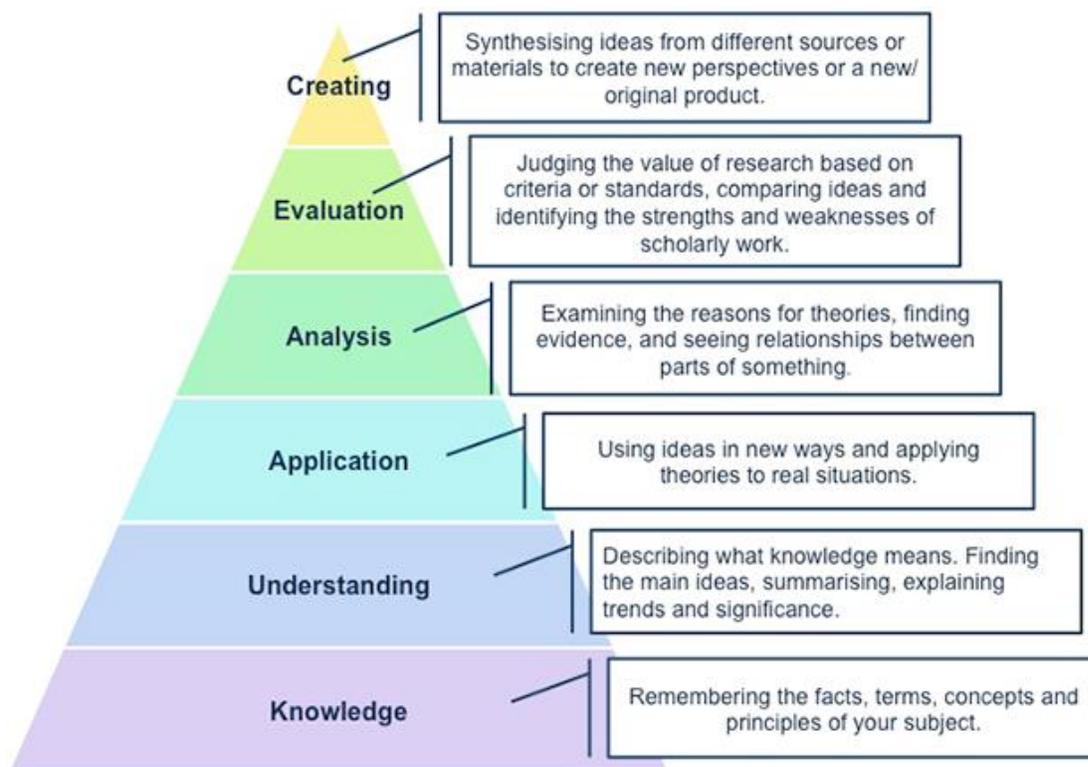
In view of this, students were constantly being reminded to respect each other's opinion and to provide objective as well as constructive feedback. As collaboration is a synchronous activity that is a consequence of a continuous attempt to construct a solution to a problem, with a shared vision (Huff Post, 2017), attempts have been made in my classes to allow students to have greater degree of control

during class activities. It was observed that when I learn to 'let go' and 'step back', it created a 'space' for the students to collaborate. This was significant as it empowered the students in their learning.

2.6   Critical Thinking

The need to demonstrate perceptive evaluation on a legal issue through discussion and opposing arguments is one of the criteria of a good legal response (SACE Board of South Australia, n.d.). Handling high order thinking skills (HOTS) questions will require a number of skills. As seen from Figure 1, critical thinking skills include application, analysis, evaluation and creation of new ideas. Critical thinking is one of the areas that appeared to be a challenge among most of my students.

Figure 1 - Bloom's taxonomy.

Creating — Synthesising ideas from different sources or materials to create new perspectives or a new/ original product.

Evaluation — Judging the value of research based on criteria or standards, comparing ideas and identifying the strengths and weaknesses of scholarly work.

Analysis — Examining the reasons for theories, finding evidence, and seeing relationships between parts of something.

Application — Using ideas in new ways and applying theories to real situations.

Understanding — Describing what knowledge means. Finding the main ideas, summarising, explaining trends and significance.

Knowledge — Remembering the facts, terms, concepts and principles of your subject.

Source: Critical Thinking Guide in UNSW

In response to this challenge, HOTS questions were assigned to my classes at the end of every sub-topic. Students learnt to present their opinions and challenge the arguments put forth by their peers. They were taught to put themselves in different peoples' shoes, looking at the same thing from different

perspectives. Opportunities to '*think on their feet'* were given. At the end of the sharing session, coordination and 'fine-tuning' of their responses were done to summarize the lessons.

3.0   CONCLUSION

One of SACE Board five years strategic mission and vision for student success, outlined in the SACE Board Strategic Plan 2016-2020, is to communicate to stakeholders and community on the SACE as a world-class qualification. In line with the changes in the 21st century, electronic exams and online submission of students' work for marking and moderation, a key element of SACE Board strategy, is being implemented stages by stages (SACE Board of South Australia, n.d.).

 The changes brought about by globalization in the 21st century has heightened my awareness and the urgent need to transform my pedagogical approaches in the classroom. With an unprecedented amount of information available at our fingertips today, students can easily obtain any information that they desire with a quick search on the internet. In view of this, the traditional mode of education which emphasized on compliance and rote-learning is no longer relevant today. As an educator in the 21st century, the question that we should be asking is "How can we equip students with the necessary skills to help them to survive and succeed?"

It is my hope that the pedagogical approaches that I have shared above will benefit all educators as more student engagement is observed in the classroom. The need for educators to change their pedagogical approach is not restricted to the SACE programme but it also applies to all other programmes as well as every level of education. This is because the students' profile has changed and there is a new demand in the workforce in this globalized era.

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