Does Spoon-feeding Impede Independent Learning?

L'ALIMENTATION A LA CUILLERE, EST-ELLE UN OBSTACLE POUR L'APPRENTISSAGE INDÉPENDANT

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Abstract: Spoon-feeding is a common term which literally means feeding one with a spoon or metaphorically means giving no opportunity for one to think or act for himself. It can also refer to behavioural treatment given to someone that so pampers and compromises self–development. Pedagogically, this behavioural setback may impede independent learning and can deter creativity and innovativeness among the learners in general, and undergraduates in particular. On the other hand, with the advent of on-line learning materials taking centre stage in tertiary education, the ever ready materials at the click of the key serves like manna from heaven for many students at present. Providing learning materials on-line or in class may save time, cost and effort for both facilitators and learners. However, such provision may result in the inhibition of the development of independent thinking and learning. From several literature, educators have varying views about spoon-feeding and this is what the paper attempts to explore. Being educators for more than two decades, the authors believe that independent learning should be proposed via creative teaching and learning and this too will be explored in the paper through weekly teaching-learning activities conducted throughout the semester. Although this act of spoon-feeding in learning has been a choice in providing lecture notes and learning materials to the students, undergraduates can be trained to generate their own learning materials using technology and innovation through creative and committed teaching by the facilitators themselves.

Keywords: spoon-feed; independent learning; creative teaching; learning materials

Résumé: L'alimentation à la cuillère est un terme qui signifie littéralement une alimentation avec une cuillère ou d'une métaphore qui signifie donner aucune occasion à quelqu'un de penser ou d'agir par lui-même. Il peut également se référer à des traitements comportementaux donnés à quelqu'un qui pourraient compromettre le développement autonome de la personne. Pédagogiquement, ce comportement pouvait entraver l'apprentissage autonome et décourager l'innovation et la créativité chez les apprenants en général, et les étudiants en particulier. D'autre part, avec l'avènement des matériels de l'apprentissage en ligne dans l'enseignement supérieur, il suffit de cliquer sur le clavier pour que le matériel tout prêt apparaisse comme la manne tombée du ciel pour de nombreux élèves à l'heure actuelle. Fournir des matériels d'apprentissage en ligne ou en classe pouvait gagner du temps, réduire le coût et épargner les efforts à la fois pour les enseignants et les apprenants. Pourtant, une telle disposition pouvait conduire à l'inhibition du développement de la pensée et de l'apprentissage. Dans plusieurs ouvrages, les éducateurs ont déjà exprimé leurs vues diverses sur la l'alimentation à la cuillèr et c'est ce que le document vise à explorer. En tant qu'enseignants depuis plus de deux décennies, les auteurs sont convaincus que l'autonomie d'apprentissage devrait être proposée par l'enseignement créatif et l'apprentissage créatif et cela aussi sera étudié dans cet article en faisant des analyses sur les activités hebdomadaires de l'enseignement-apprentissage menées tout au long du semestre. Bien que cet acte de l'alimentation à la cuillère dans l'apprentissage a été un choix de fournir des notes de cours et de matériels d'apprentissage pour les élèves, les enseignants eux-mêmes pouvaient former les étudiants à créer leurs propres matériels d'apprentissage en utilisant la technologie et l'innovation à travers un enseignement créatif et engagé.
Mots-Clés: alimentation à la cuillère; apprentissage independant; enseignement créatif; materiels de l'apprentissage

1. INTRODUCTION

Of many objectives of the higher education, there is one goal that defines education itself. That goal, which is the most challenging one to attain, is, to build an intellectual development of the students as a result of mental challenges. One can simply obtain the highest mark in the examination. However, this does not necessarily mean that the person has improved his/her intellectual development. This is because the mark does not really represent the critical thinking a student should have possessed after the education process. On some occasion, the students might have been conditioned with such questions in the examination that they would not be able to devise another way to answer the same questions. Hence, critical thinking does not occur in the mental state of the student. In another case, the students experience a process of mental challenges only at the initial phase during lab experiment. However, the lecturer suddenly turns the activity into a routine activity by explaining all the details to their students. This tendency to spoon-feed the students may be a contributory hindrance for students to grow into an active and lifelong learner.

2.   DEFINITION OF SPOON-FEEDING

What is spoon-feeding actually? According to Mohanan (2000), in a literal sense spoon-feeding refers to performing a physical action for children that they can actually do on their own, or which they are actually ready to learn to do it with some effort. In pedagogy perspective, it has more or less the same meaning. Lecturer does everything for the students or tells everything to them and thus, preventing them from having to think or act for themselves (*Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary*, 1989). From these perspectives, Mohanan (2000) concludes that spoon-feeding in pedagogy would be the activity of preventing possible mental development by doing for the learner what the learner could have done for himself/herself.

3.   ADVANTAGE AND LIMITATION OF SPOON-FEEDING

Spoon-feeding is quite popular among the lecturers. Boyer (1987) states that the majority of college teachers use the lecture format in their classroom. This pedagogical strategy creates a teacher-centred class with students playing a passive role (Whitman & Fife, 1988). However, it is somewhat preferred by the students. Chhem (2000) argues that such common situation occurs because the lecturer perceives spoon-feeding as one of the teaching methods due to these advantages:

1st. A lecture is short and needs little preparation, as the lecturer is the expert in the field in which he teaches. A 'good' lecture that has been prepared according to the traditional rules and delivered by a 'good' lecturer is still considered one of the best teaching methods.

2nd. Once a lecture is delivered, there is no need for lengthy preparation for the following academic year, except the need for some updates.

3rd. Lectures are economical and cost effective because one lecturer can deliver the course content to a large class, up to several hundreds of students.

4th. Students like the traditional lecture because there is no need for active effort. The only skills required are to be able to take notes, memorise the information to be regurgitated at the examination, and hopefully get the expected marks. Therefore, this process is also economic and cost effective for the students in terms of effort for information treatment.

5th. In most teaching situations, including lectures and other spoon-feeding conditions, giving the answer to students' questions is good for the teacher's ego, as he is perceived as the one who knows. In addition, the process is quick and costs the teacher very little in terms of time and commitment**.**

Nevertheless, Chhem (2000) stresses the disadvantages of spoon-feeding that can do harm to the students. First, spoon-feeding does not stimulate active participation from the students and only fosters rote learning. Second, spoon-feeding does not promote independent learning and creativity. Finally, students lack initiative and problem-solving skills because they have not been trained to search for data by themselves. Etchison (1988) describes this mental state as the condition where the passive students will view themselves as empty bowls to be filled up, after which they would pour their learning back on an examination.

Furthermore, Alwis (2000) believes that spoon-feeding is a very destructive method towards intellectual development especially in "Do" disciplines (engineering, medical and pharmacy). These are the disciplines where students are expected to possess the characteristics below:

1st. Being able to do (e.g. Ali is able to do the heart surgery)

2nd. Having the experience of doing (e.g. Ali has performed a heart surgery)

3rd. Knowing why it is done the way it is (e.g. Ali understands why the heart surgery should

performed with a precise movement for its every step)

4th. Understanding the underlying principles (e.g. Ali understands the principles of heart mechanism, its structure, its physiology, and many more)

Therefore, in "Do" disciplines the ability to do one task cannot be taught only by spoon-feeding method. In fact, it should be managed to occur as little as possible. Spoon-feeding would diminish one's experience on doing certain crucial tasks.

4. COLLABORATIVE APPROACH AS A MEAN TO OVERCOME SPOON-FEEDING

This method is actually developed in the 1950s for the first time in the UK for secondary and medical educators. Drew (1990) describes the importance of collaborative learning to overcome spoon-feeding problem. She compares between the characteristics of collaborative format and lecture format, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. The differences between collaborative format and lecture format in teaching process
(Drew, 1990)

No.	Collaborative format	Lecture format
1	Student centered	Teacher centered
2	Active learning	Passive learning
3	Collaborative to independent learning style	Dependent learning style
4	Open, decentralised classroom	Structured, centered classroom
5	Teacher responsibility- student accountability	Teacher responsibility
6	Cooperative learning with a positive interdependence among group members	Individual competitive setting
7	Teacher acts as facilitator, environment setter	Teacher acts as expert, authority figure
8	Expanded	Traditional

According to Drew (1990), collaborative approaches such as group inquiry and peer learning-teaching tend to downplay competitiveness, foster professional partnership, reduce anxiety and facilitate active involvement in the learning process. In this collaborative initiative, teamwork is enhanced and some management concepts of leadership could be applied in this higher education teaching-learning process. Lecturer may want to learn and adjust the concept according to his or her needs in the teaching process. In this concept, lecturer acts as a leader who has the obligation to manage the students and perhaps students too are exposed to leadership elements required in their learning process. Blanchard and Miller (2001) suggest five important values to develop a good managerial character in a leader, embedded in "SERVE" word:

1st. See the future

A lecturer should be able to see the future of the teaching process. In other words, the objective of teaching should be devised in the first place before he/she engages with the students. What does the lecturer expect as the outcome of the teaching process?

2nd. Engage and develop others

What kind of environment that the lecturer should provide to motivate the students so that they

engage in the process actively? Lecturer should not see students as mere objects of teaching. Instead, a lecturer should see them as partners with the lecturer acts as facilitator rather than an authoritative figure.

3rd. Reinvent continuously

Teaching sometimes can be a routine activity and might trap the lecturer in the danger of mediocrity. Lecturer would become less excited because the person is bored with the same activity over time. As a result, the lecture might opt for passive style learning and creates a spoon-feeding phenomenon. Thus, lecturer is encouraged to create different environment and interactive learning style for the students.

4th. Value result and relationship

Many students become reluctant to be part of the teaching-learning process actively because they are afraid. They perceive the lecturer as an authoritative figure that might not accept for being interrupted or questioned in their teaching style. Hence, lecturer should build a cooperative approach towards the students.

5th. Embody the values

This aspect is very important in order to create a life-long learner. The lecturer must be able to inspire the joy and excitement of learning. Life-long learning is a crucial part of creating core competence in the workplace. Without that, a person cannot develop itself in the organisation and grow professionally. He or she will always be a mediocre in the workplace because the lack of the ability to invent himself/herself. It is important to bear in mind that the "SERVE" concept discussed above derived from the management perspective. Nevertheless, its relationship between education and work is still valid.

The use of SERVE as an acronym is not just for the sake of simplicity, the word *serve* itself has an important meaning. If a lecturer as a leader leads with the intention to serve the people and organisation (the higher education institution), he or she will behave in a fundamentally different way than if the motivation is self-serving. Blanchard and Miller (2001) clearly share the same vision with Drucker (2008). Since leader always deals with people, they should serve the people well in order to develop them. The concept above describes the importance of lecturer cooperative action towards the students. Furthermore, it is important to perceive students as partners in studying. This approach would lessen student's hesitation towards active learning.

Moreover, it is important to bear in mind that the fundamental concept to overcome spoon-feeding and passive learning is to give control and power of the learning process itself partially to the students. It is important to empower the students partially, for lecturer still holds some of the responsibilities in the learning process. In addition, partial empowerment could place the lecturer as a facilitator rather than authoritative figure. Another issue that should be considered is the fact that lecturer has to challenge the students to overcome their own hesitation to be actively involved in the learning process. Lecturer cannot just ask with formal and standardised question such as "Do any of you have any questions so far?" or "What is your opinion about the topic we've just discussed?" It needs more than that to inspire them.

5. SAMPLE LESSON: TEACHING IN THE REPORT WRITING COURSE

In his discussion on the analysis of learner's needs, Little (2000) states that student-centred learning that encourages learner autonomy fulfils the requirement which arises from the use of language form in a multitude of situations that may occur in the social context of the individuals and groups. In the Report Writing course, there are nine areas of contents in the scheme of work that have to be disseminated to the students from the very beginning of the course and throughout the fourteen weeks of each semester. This is supplemented by the evaluation requirements of the course that include producing a report of 1500-2000 words, oral presentation of the report written, a class test and the portfolio. In the process of

dissemination of the contents, one approach that can be conducted is instructing the students to take charge of their own learning.

There are several workable techniques that have provided self-learning opportunities for undergraduates, in particular case, at the Faculty of Business Management. To cover all chapters in Report Writing would be a mammoth task for a busy lecturer or instructor. Coupled with having to give the lecture from 4.00 to 6.00 p.m. after the students have attended and listened to content subject lectures, the English lecturer might have to end up with having students nodding off, not in agreement with him or her, but in fatigue and sleepiness. Therefore, the job (of understanding the contents and practice of report writing) is delegated to the students in an attempt to encourage self-learning and active learner participation. Through the following activity, it allows them to take charge of their learning by presenting the selected contents, students prepare themselves for the oral presentation aspect in the Report Writing course.

5.1 Lesson outline

Step 1: In a class of 30 students, the lecturer/instructor divides the students into several groups of 3 or 4, depending on how much content is expected to cover.

Step 2: Each group is then assigned one topic area that the course needs to cover.

Step 3: The topic areas to be covered for Report Writing course are displayed in Table 2 below.

Step 4: Based on these areas as stipulated in the syllabus, the groups are instructed to prepare power point slides, handouts of mind-mapping presentation and other relevant materials for the presentation in class. These materials are to be dispensed to every other group during the presentation class. For power point slides, the learner will utilise them on the LCD. The group has to make and distribute copies of their presentation to the entire class. Relevant materials are to be vetted by the language lecturer before being used.

Step 5: For 8 weeks, each group takes turn to present the chapters that they have been assigned to. In sharing with other students what they have read, each student is given the opportunity to practise public speaking/effective presentation strategies before he or she is assessed by the lecturer in the second half of the semester.

Table 2 below indicates the complete lesson areas that need to be covered in the first half of the semester. For this course, there are seven areas to cover in order to write a proper report according to the syllabus. Every group has to present one area each. The themes are sufficient to accommodate the number of the small groups formed in a big class of 30-40 students.

Table 2.   The areas to be taught for Report Writing distributed to each group in a class of 30-40 students

No.	Lesson Theme	Group Leader
1	Qualities of a Good Report & Types of Report	A
2	Parts of a Report	B
3	Data Collection and Researching for Materials	C
4	How to Write: Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations	D
5	Determining and Designing Visuals	E
6	Reported Speech and Passive Voice	F
7	Elements of an effective Oral Presentation	G

On presentation day a group is called to the front to share on the area that they have been asked to prepare. The learning experience includes teamwork begins early in the course, the preparation gives them the opportunity to explore the lesson theme extensively as each person is required to refer to at least three references, the students are exposed to the presentation practice using their class lesson to share what they have understood with all their classmates, and the students gain the opportunity to explore hands-on practice in preparing the PowerPoint slides which are used to complement their presentation. Each group is given about 10-15 minutes to present the topic area to the audience who are their peers. From this practical aspect, the language learners acquire the experience of presenting a complete work using thematic topics of the lessons. After each presentation, the learners are given debriefing on each of their presentation in terms of their strengths and weakness in relation to their power point slides, grammar, presentation styles and skills.

Such exercise does not mean the lecturer/instructor leaves the classroom without teaching or doing anything. The lecturer in fact, takes on where the group has left off or out. The lecturer indeed adds on to what the group has presented. This approach in increasing learner autonomy can help reduce the burden faced by the English lecturer, who might have to face a classroom full of wandering or sleepy minds at 5 pm, particularly on a hot or rainy afternoon.

5.2 Learners' feedback

An evaluation form to find out the effect of increasing learner autonomy in the Report Writing Skills course class was distributed to the learners. The results are shown in Table 3. The findings from the simple evaluation form indicate learners' opinion on the lesson technique.

Table 3. The feedback from students on the teaching-learning approach

Question	Students' opinion on the lesson technique	YES %	NO %
1	I work with my team well.	98	2
2	I like the lesson theme given to my team.	98	2
3	The preparation of this exercise teaches me a lot about the lesson theme.	100	0
4	My lecturer has been helpful in guiding my team member prepare the presentation.	100	0
5	I am able to present the lesson theme using the power point slides, handouts and related materials effectively.	96	4
6	I am able to catch the attention of my audience.	78	22
7	My audience finds my presentation interesting.	82	18
8	I am confident with my presentation.	63	37
9	I am nervous during the presentation.	98	2
10	I am able to share useful information in the handouts with my audience.	100	0
11	I am able to compile all related materials and handouts in my course portfolio.	88	12
12	I found this approach in learning how to present a speech effective.	100	0

The above evaluation was conducted on the seventh of the fourteen weeks of July-November 2008 semester to discover the students' opinion of the learner-centred approach that was used during the second until the fifth week of class. A total of 51 students took part in this evaluation exercise. The feedback provided above can be indicative that almost all students favour this student-centred approach.

Hence, learner autonomy should be encouraged in a language course, as 100% of the students agreed that they found this approach in learning how to present very effective (Siti Akmar & Siti Mariam, 2008).

Another outcome that results from this activity is the production of Student-Generated Learning Materials (SGLM). The contribution made by the students in each group is the creation of learning materials in the form of power point slides and a handout of mind-map on the selected topic selected by each group of students to present. When these materials are printed in hardcopy, the class further collate them in sequence and the outcome for each class is the SGLM that can be the reference materials and guide for the Report Writing assignment that is conducted on-going throughout the semester.

6.   CONCLUSION

Presentation exercise must be skilfully guided by the language lecturer, not only to minimise the lecturer's workload, but also to encourage students' participation that helps to enhance the teaching-learning process. The language learners undergo hands-on training in presentation skills; they get to learn how to present effectively before they finally present their chosen topics as part of their assessments. Immediate and continuous feedback from the language lecturer helps them not only to improve their presentation skills, but also their research work and data finding in preparing the report and learning materials.

From the preparation stage until the presentation exercise of the lesson, in which students have to conduct a search of materials, data and information, and extract pertinent elements to be collated in their power point slides, the exercise has successfully trained the students to expect what they need to do in preparing for their own presentations. Indeed, such autonomous learning process has given the students a rich learning experience and discovery. They have a directed purpose in reading not only the prescribed textbook, but also other materials that are relevant and interesting. For each lesson taught in the Report Writing course, the students have to read beforehand and conduct research with their group members, creating opportunity for them to work in a team and providing them a positive learning experience that gives them a sense of accomplishment. By doing so, the students are taking charge of their learning as they learn not only individually, but also in a team.

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