HALE Comprehensive Exam: Part One Section A

(Assigned code)

Since the 1990s many leaders of higher education have embraced what is often called the "learning (or learner-centered) paradigm," the focus to be given to the experience, cognitive abilities, curricular interests, and instructional preferences of students rather than to the authority and favored teaching methods of the faculty. Write an essay exploring: a) The conditions of higher education that have made the "learning (or learner-centered) paradigm" an appealing reform idea; b) How the new “paradigm" has been implemented in traditional and virtual classrooms; c) The arguments for and against reform of this kind; and d) Your own position on the reform “paradigm” and why you hold it.

Introduction

During the Colonial period through the mid-1800s teaching and learning focused on rote memorization and the recitation of facts (Thelin, 2004). From the mid-1800s until the 1990s occasional adjustments were made to instructional processes, but few significant changes were made in terms of the overall teaching and learning philosophy of colleges and universities (Lattuca & Stark, 2009). Beginning in approximately the 1990s and continuing to the present day there has been an increasing emphasis on moving from a teaching-centered environment to a learning-centered environment within the higher education community (Lattuca & Stark, 2009). The learning paradigm maintains as its purpose “not to transfer knowledge but to create environments and experiences that bring students to discover and construct knowledge for themselves” (Barr & Tagg, 1995, p. 15). In this paper I will describe some of the conditions of higher education that have led to a shift toward the learning paradigm, indicate how the learning paradigm has been implemented in traditional and virtual classrooms, provide an overview of some of the arguments for and against the learning paradigm, and conclude with my personal opinion about the shift toward a learning paradigm at colleges and universities.

Conditions Leading to a Learning Paradigm

Although higher education is an industry steeped in history and tradition, some recently changing conditions have made it more appealing for colleges and universities to move toward a learning paradigm. Some of the conditions causing a shift toward the learning paradigm are: (a) a changing economic and global environment, (b) an increasing number of educational options and competition for students, and (c) a diversifying student population.

Changing Economic and Global Environment

"The traditional architecture of education was designed in an earlier time to meet the needs of an agrarian and an industrial economy; it was not designed to improve and expand student learning" (O'Banion, 2010, p. 167). Today, economic competitiveness in a globalized society, rapid technological changes, and a move toward a knowledge-based economy have resulted in the need to prepare a different type of student for the future workforce (Flynn & Vredevoogd, 2010; Lattuca & Stark, 2009). In the past, students could learn a specific set of skills in one field and make a career in that specific area. Today, employers seek students with greater critical thinking and problem-solving skills and the ability to integrate materials across disciplines (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2010). These societal changes have caused colleges and universities to rethink their traditional teaching methods. Bok (2006) argued that "instructors need to create a process of active learning by posing problems, challenging student answers, and encouraging members of the class to apply the information and concepts in assigned readings to a variety of new situations" (p. 117), all of which are consistent with the learning-centered paradigm. Given the role higher education institutions play in society in preparing future members of the workforce, changing economic conditions make implementing the learning paradigm an appealing reform for colleges and universities.

Increasing Educational Options and Competition for Students

Another factor that has contributed to a shift toward a learning paradigm is the increasing number of educational options available to students, which results in a competition for students. Lattuca and Stark (2009) argued that American higher education has "experienced a long-term trend toward diversification of institutions" (p. 23), most recently with the increasing number of for-profit institutions and online education providers. This has been particularly true in the last couple years with a rapidly increasing number of institutions offering massively online open courses (MOOCs). MOOCs are typically free courses offered by institutions that allow anyone to access traditional course content offered at those institutions (Pappano, 2012). As the number and types of educational institutions increases, the competition to attract students increases as well (Lattuca & Stark, 2009). Poindexter (2003) argued that increasing competition places more pressure on institutions to improve their teaching styles, which makes the learning paradigm an attractive reform option.

Diversifying Student Population

Along with the increasing competition for students, the type of student that institutions are competing for is changing. "American colleges and universities today probably have a wider and more varied mix of students than any system of higher education in the world" (Tagg, 2003, p. 41). Today, students are older, attend school on a more part-time basis, and are more ethnically diverse than in the past (Zusman, 2005). As a result, higher education institutions need to develop programs and teaching methods that take into account the contemporary needs of students of all different ages, genders, and ethnicities (Flynn & Vredevoogd, 2010; Lattuca & Stark, 2009). For example, Kelly & Strawn (2011) argued that older students often must juggle

work, school, and family obligations, which impacts their learning experiences. Higher education institutions seeking to accommodate a diverse student body must be cognizant of who their students are and take students' unique needs and interests into account in developing a curriculum and teaching strategy (Lattuca & Stark, 2009). The learning paradigm emphasizes the needs and interests of students, which makes it an appealing option for institutions adjusting to a diversifying student body.

Implementation of the Learning Paradigm

The learning paradigm involves shifting the focus from the teacher to the student. This shift can be implemented in a variety of ways. In this section I highlight some of the ways the learning paradigm is being implemented within traditional and virtual classrooms.

Traditional Classrooms

One of the ways the learning paradigm is being implemented in the traditional classroom is by moving away from the traditional lecture format that has historically been the dominant instructional process utilized at colleges and universities. The learning paradigm places more emphasis on interactive learning environments where the student plays an important role in the classroom setting (Tagg, 2003). Although lectures are still common in many classroom settings, changes have been made to make lectures more interactive (Lattuca & Stark, 2009). For example, Fredrick argued (1986) lectures could be made livelier through the inclusion of demonstrations, alternating short lectures with discussion, or allowing questions and participation during lectures. Each of these methods engages the student directly in the learning process instead of the student sitting as a stale bystander.

Another variation on the traditional lecture format of teaching has been implemented through a phenomenon known as "flip-the-classroom." In a "flipped" classroom, the professor provides students with access to a recorded lecture prior to attending class and then utilizes the class period to engage in discussions or simulations related to the course content (Kolowich, 2011). Although the lecture still exists in some form, the time students spend in the classroom with their peers and the instructor becomes more interactive and is intended to encourage more active participation in the learning process. Engaging students more directly with the course material also encourages students to think more critically and deeply about the course content. Part of the learning paradigm involves students obtaining the ability to think more critically and take ownership for their learning (Tagg, 2003). By shifting the emphasis of instructional processes toward more active learning methods, students develop different cognitive skills and abilities than they would in the old teaching-centered paradigm.

It is also vital to recognize that the full implementation of a learning paradigm combines classroom experiences with considerations of the curricular interests and overall collegiate experience of students. There has been considerable "growth in the number and variety of programs, majors, and degrees over time" (Lattuca & Stark, 2009, p. 49). This growth in curricular options has resulted in students having more choices about what courses to take and how to structure their degrees to best fit what they want to get out of their educational experience. In a learning paradigm, students are also encouraged to become involved in co-curricular activities through student organizations, learning communities, and experiential learning opportunities (Tagg, 2003). The combination of greater curricular choice and co-

curricular opportunities provide students with more ownership of their educational experiences and aligns well with the goals of the learning paradigm.

Virtual Classrooms

Online course enrollments now account for 20% of all collegiate enrollments and an additional one-fourth of courses utilize some type of course management software system (Lattuca & Stark, 2009). Virtual classrooms are now an important aspect of how colleges and universities implement the learning paradigm. Instructional methods in virtual classrooms often place the student at the center of the educational experience. Instead of following the traditional lecture format of most face-to-face classroom experiences, online courses utilize a high degree of electronic discussions and questioning (Steinbronn & Merideth, 2008). This places the student in a position of responsibility for his or her own learning environment and shifts the focus from the teachers' preferences to the students' preferences for learning.

Another way the learning paradigm is implemented in virtual classrooms is through the amount of information made available to students. In virtual classrooms students are able to utilize online platforms to seek out their own knowledge at a rapidly increasing pace and that information is often endless (Brown, 2006). This allows students the opportunity to pick and choose what is most important for them to read and review. Instead of the instructor being the gatekeeper of all knowledge, students become equal partners in learning and discovering new information. The large amount of information available to students in virtual classrooms also helps students learn new cognitive skills in terms of being able to think critically about what is important to learn, self-regulate how much information they seek, and make sense of the material they discover (Herrington, Oliver, & Reeves, 2003).

Finally, the implementation of the learning paradigm in the virtual classroom involves changes in curricular choice and the overall experience for students. MOOCs specifically provide students with an opportunity to explore more subject matters in a different setting than has typically been available to them (Pappano, 2012). Students can enroll in courses free of charge and learn about new topics and gain new skills; the ultimate iteration of curricular interests being crafted by students themselves. Online learning environments also lend themselves to greater interaction between faculty and students outside of the classroom. Instead of students only interacting with professors during physical class periods, students in online courses typically interact with professors on a more regular basis through email communication and course management systems (Lattuca & Stark, 2009). This encourages students to take a more active role in their overall educational experience and interact with professors in a different context than they would in a traditional classroom setting.

Arguments For and Against the Learning Paradigm

Although the learning paradigm is gaining traction within higher education institutions, it is not universally accepted. This section explores some of the arguments for and against the learning paradigm.

Arguments for the Learning Paradigm

One of the rationales for the implementation of a learning paradigm is that it can often increase students' motivation when their needs and interests are considered. Lattuca and Stark (2009) argued that "few instructors systematically consider learner's needs, abilities, and goals as they develop courses. Yet research on learning suggests this is a critical dimension of effective curriculum design" (p. 145). In the learning paradigm, instructors are encouraged to consider the

unique needs of their students and consider how instructional processes and assignments align with students' backgrounds, experiences, and future goals (Tagg, 2003). By taking students' interests into account and potentially increasing students' motivation levels, the learning paradigm may improve learning outcomes among students. In an era of increasing calls for assessing and improving student learning (Ewell, 2006; Shulman, 2007), increasing students' motivation to learn is a good first step to enhancing learning outcomes.

Another argument in favor of the learning paradigm is that it increases focus on critical thinking and application instead of the memorization of facts. Bok (2006) argued that "faculty members agree almost unanimously that teaching students to think critically is the principal aim of undergraduate education" (p. 109). Yet in teaching-centered paradigms, lectures and memorization replace deep thinking. In the learning paradigm, students take part in problem-based learning, simulations and performances, and receive continual feedback to help them improve through the "ongoing, mindful conversation with the materials of problematic situations" (Tagg, 2003, p. 163). By providing more engaging and complex learning opportunities for students, the learning paradigm better prepares students for the workforce of the future by focusing on developing their critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

Finally, the learning paradigm not only helps improve student-learning outcomes, it can also positively contribute to students' retention. Tinto (1993) argued it is important for students to feel integrated academically and socially while attending college. In the learning paradigm, an increased focus on students' interests and creating a more engaging learning environment contribute to students' academic integration. Additionally, a true learning paradigm includes learning beyond the classroom setting through co-curricular activities (Tagg, 2003).

Participation in co-curricular activities can help students socially integrate with their peers and positively contribute to persistence in college (Tinto, 1993). Although the learning paradigm is primarily viewed as a strategy to improve student learning, it may also help institutions' overall retention efforts.

Arguments Against the Learning Paradigm

Although there are many arguments in favor of the learning paradigm, there are also arguments against the learning paradigm. First, not every student may be comfortable in a learning paradigm environment. For example, some students may be uncomfortable taking a more active role in their learning experience. Dirkx and Smith (2004) argued that some students are uncomfortable with the power shift from the professor to the student in collaborative online learning environments. Similarly, students may feel uncomfortable in traditional classroom settings when called upon to be more actively engaged. Lattuca and Stark (2009) argued that discussions might be intimidating to some students. The learning paradigm may be beneficial for some students, but other students may feel uncomfortable in such an environment.

A second criticism of the learning paradigm is that it may diminish the importance of content mastery. Pratt and Collins (2012) identified five teaching perspectives. One of those perspectives, the transmission perspective, emphasizes mastery of specific course content distributed from the instructor. Individuals subscribing to the transmission perspective of teaching might be less likely to accept the learning paradigm's student-centered focus. Furthermore, the learning paradigm's shift from lecture-based teaching to more discussion-based teaching may result in less content being covered. Lattuca and Stark (2009) argued that discussions "are typically less efficient than lectures in presenting large bodies of

information" (p. 200). Students in introductory courses may not receive enough content as a base of information for subsequent courses if less information is covered in a more interactive, but also less efficient learning paradigm environment.

A third criticism of the learning paradigm focuses on practicality. Although the learning paradigm may espouse an ideal set of standards for how to make learning more student-centered and engaging, it is often difficult to implement effectively. Many faculty members are not specifically trained in how to teach during graduate school and end up following the teaching methods of their former professors (Lattuca & Stark, 2009). This results in professors in a learning paradigm environment being asked to teach in a manner that is unfamiliar to them (Hartman, Dzibuan, & Brophy-Ellison, 2007). Although some might argue that it does not hurt to attempt to try new teaching methods, the opposite may be true. Christensen (1991) argued that discussion-based teaching can be difficult to manage and if not done effectively can end up doing more harm than good. In order for students to receive the full benefits of the learning paradigm, professors need more training and development in new teaching pedagogies (Steinbronn & Merideth, 2008). Although some may argue vehemently for the benefits of a learning paradigm, an argument against the learning paradigm is that there are not enough professors trained to teach effectively in this manner.

Personal Position

I believe the learning paradigm is a positive development within the higher education community. The national and global economies are changing, requiring students to develop new skills (Flynn & Vredevoogd, 2010). In light of these changes, higher education institutions must take proactive steps to prepare students for the workforce of the future. I believe the learning

paradigm is better suited to prepare students than the teaching-centered paradigm, but appropriate steps must be taken to ensure the learning paradigm is implemented effectively. This section describes my reasons for supporting the learning paradigm and issues that should be considered in implementing this paradigm.

Tagg (2003) argued that "to whatever extent students see learning tasks as chosen and as relevant to their personal goals, they are more likely to embrace those tasks and learn to enjoy them" (p. 132). The positive aspects of the learning paradigm begin with the fact that the learning paradigm, due to its focus on student interests, helps improve the motivation of students. Once students are motivated to learn, it is often easier to engage them with course material. Subsequently, professors can challenge students to think more critically and contemplate complex problems and scenarios (Tagg, 2003). Students will no longer be able to learn one set of specific skills and make an entire career based upon those skills. The learning paradigm helps arm students with the necessary skills and abilities to be successful in a changing global and economic environment.

Although I support the learning paradigm, there are certain considerations that I believe must be made before universally accepting this paradigm. First, it is important to recognize that different students have different capabilities and expectations for what they want to receive from their educational experiences (Tagg, 2003). It is important to recognize that some students may prefer to learn in a more traditional setting with the professor lecturing as an authority figure. If implemented, I believe the learning paradigm needs to appropriately consider how to balance teaching methods to accommodate all students' interests. Second, there is a certain amount of content that must be mastered for students to develop a base of knowledge for subsequent

courses, particularly in fields such as medicine and engineering. The learning paradigm may be beneficial to help students think through complex problems and develop critical thinking skills, but traditional teaching mechanisms may still be necessary to cover large amounts of basic content in introductory courses. Finally, many professors are not trained in innovative teaching pedagogies (Lattuca & Stark, 2009). It may be difficult for some professors to effectively implement a learning paradigm if they are not provided appropriate training in how to utilize engaging teaching methods. Overall, I believe the learning paradigm holds great promise for improving the quality of learning within higher education, but one must also account for the paradigm's shortcomings in order to effectively implement it within colleges and universities.

Conclusion

Since the 1990s the learning paradigm has begun to replace the teaching-centered paradigm within the higher education community. The rise of the learning paradigm can be partly attributed to a changing national and global economic environment, increasing educational options and competition for students, a diversifying student population, and increasing calls for accountability at college and universities. As a reaction to these factors, the learning paradigm has been implemented in a variety of ways in both traditional and virtual classrooms. Specifically, the learning paradigm has shifted the focus from lectures to more engaging teaching pedagogies, emphasized critical thinking skills over rote memorization, and focused on students' entire collegiate experience inside and outside the classroom. Although there are many benefits to the learning paradigm such as improved motivation within students and greater academic and social integration, there are also some arguments against the learning paradigm being implemented. Arguments against the learning paradigm include its potentially intimidating

nature to students not prepared to be as actively engaged in their learning experience and the lack of preparation for faculty to effectively teach in new and innovative ways. Overall, the learning paradigm holds great promise for the future of higher education as long as its shortcomings are considered and accounted for while being implemented.

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