
Evolving Learning Models and Emerging Role Conflicts in Higher Education

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Abstract

Higher education institutions are centers of learning which impart education primarily through teaching. Teaching could be conceived as knowledge delivery where the teacher and the taught engage in the mutually agreed transaction. The role relationship between the two decides the quality of the transaction – may it be patronage, benevolence, demand-driven interaction or joint exploration. These roles, either the presumed role of the students or assumed the role of the teacher, are characteristic of different models of learning with corresponding intended learning goals. There is a comparable relationship between these models and the system of learning that has been in existence over a period of time. Compatibility could be seen in relation to levels of learning as well. Hence learning models are to be seen as evolving. The present scenario of higher education envisages sharing common platform for teacher and student thereby teacher is confronted with role conflicts frequently. This paper aims to discuss some of the emerging role conflicts which are more relevant in a partnership based learning scenario. An attempt is also made to draw a framework for evolving learning models.

Keywords: Learning Models, Role Conflicts, Higher Education Institution

1.Introduction:

Historically speaking, the Indian context of the teaching profession presents a murky scenario. In the early days, teaching as a profession was less attractive and many joined teaching because no other job was available. It was a time of low profile teachers who were bare minimum Postgraduates. Then came a time when it was the only job that could be bought on a fair cash deal. As a result, such people had no dedication in the job, or to the institution or to the students. Further to it, academic jobs became lucrative vocations with UGC coming into picture implementing a huge compensation structure countrywide. Governments were slow in adopting this due to the heavy financial burden to the state exchequer. Slowly situation began to improve. Qualified aspirants were attracted to the teaching profession. Thus the economic considerations gained the upper hand. Even today there are many who think of joining teaching just because they have cleared a subject-based eligibility test (NET). Still,

most people undertake to do a Ph.D. ‘only’ with the intention of ‘getting’ a teaching job. The personal traits and personality requirements mandated for the teaching profession is often overlooked. The chance factor still prevails as a dominant reason in drawing a person into the teaching profession.

2. Various Models in Learning :

Teaching could be conceived as knowledge delivery where students are perceived as objects of learning, or subjects of learning, or recipients of learning or customers of learning. Considering students as ‘partners’ in learning is the beginning of a new approach which presupposes a joint realization by the teacher and the students that ‘what we know is little, what we don’t know is more, and what we ought to know is much more.’ This places the student and teacher on a common platform to start sharing and discovering knowledge. The teacher ought to prepare and develop a mindset that would help him/her adjust to a paradigm of partnership role. Those students are a reservoir of unlimited freedom by virtue of their adolescent age, early experiences, peer group influences, faulty socialization, etc. should be acknowledged and the teacher needs to ‘re-negotiate’ their behaviour so as to conform with forces of social control and expected behavioural and institutional norms. Although the context here is teaching, we are not focusing on the myriad of ways by which teaching could be made student-friendly, but pointing to the behavioural angle arising out of role relations that make conducive for partnership-based learning.

The tendency to view students as objects of learning, as in the olden times, is indicative of the task giver role of the teacher. This has reduced the goal of learning to shape perceptions of the learner and teaching-learning transaction was typically patronage type. Slowly evolved a task manager role where the students were elevated as subjects, a shift that marks learner involvement, at least to a limited extent. The change in the concept of considering learning as a ‘task’ to ‘gaining information’ brought about changes in the role of students as recipients, a much passive yet more participative, where actions were demand-driven for attaining the intended goal. In a market society, learners have become conscious of their rights. This has converted their mindset to that of the customers and teachers became service providers. Thus we see that there has been a paradigm shift in the role of the teacher consequent to certain assumptions of student role in each of the models of learning. The emerging learning model is presented in figure 1.

Figure 1: Emerging Learning Models

Models in Learning	Presumed Role of Students	Assumed Role of Teacher	Transaction Type	Intended Learning Goal
Partnership Model	Partners	Facilitator	Joint Exploration	Experiencing Discovery
Customer Model	Customers	Service Provider	Choice-based Delivery	Experiencing Satisfaction
Recipient Model	Recipients	Information Giver	Demand-Driven	Absorbing and Assimilating

			Interaction	
Subjective Model	Subjects	Task Manager	Act of Benevolence	Accumulation of Knowledge
Objective Model	Objects	Task Giver	Extending Patronage	Sharpening Perceptions

Transactions tend to be choice-based, with greater attention to greater quality in the customer model. The attainment of goal was likened to experiencing satisfaction, more than learning per se. Ahead of all, this is the evolving partnership model where both teacher and student are partners in the learning process, with full and active involvement facilitated by the teacher through the joint exploration to the attainment of experiencing discovery.

Higher education is passing through challenging times now than ever before such that the teacher often finds himself in constant conflict with his roles. This has been compelled by factors such as changing profiles of students, changing the perception of self, changing demands from the institution, changes in the social environment, changing preferences of employers, changing values and goals, changing demands of the profession, etc.

3. Teacher-Student Divide :

The present-day students are qualitatively different from that of the past. They are tech-savvy so that information is at their fingertips. What they want is not a teacher who comes with his dry information to them, but make it live and convey it warmly. They want to be in an atmosphere where they are treated as individuals and their dignity respected. They no longer wish arbitrary rules set by the teacher, rather negotiated decisions in matters pertaining to them. The teachers as a community may have many similarities but by and large, differ in their personality and temperament. There is a tendency to look at strictness and discipline as an inevitable combination by many teachers. It depends on how discipline is defined. Eventually, if it is a matter of self-control, the control has to come from inside and strictness is working external through punishments and threats more often than through rewards. In a rapidly changing society where values are fast eroding educational institutions are the only hope of relief and the rescue has to come from the teacher. The purpose of education being character-building too he finds himself confused about how he would stand guard to the behaviour of the students outside the institution or classroom. In the particular context of higher education, young age and newfound freedom combine add to the vulnerability. The strong and irresistible impulses of teenage, away from the sight of the parents and unlimited freedom, together operate, catalyzed by an avalanche of predisposes in the form of ideas, information, products, housing or companions, work to endanger the character and morals of the students. This, in turn, will reflect in their behaviour in the form absence, late reporting, lethargy, indifference to instructions, defiance to rules, inability to meet academic obligations, indifference in the classroom, and ultimately loss of goal in life. Teacher perceives himself in various ways. Some

think of them as pure professionals. This renders them to retreat further into their shell. Given that the profession demands teachers to be multitaskers and firefighters too, the cloak of overestimated professional stature is reduced to rubble.

4. Ethical Concerns in Student Assessment :

Assessment is a very sensitive area to perform so much so that one is often left wondering teaching is easy but the evaluation is difficult. In the conservative approach of 'take it or go', the teacher does his job but not accountable for the result. Rather he acts as a dispassionate judge in the assessment, never swayed by what follows. In the changed scenario, the results are directly correlated with the effectiveness of teaching, such that a teacher has to create a result if he has to sustain while at the same time not diluting assessment. The challenge is to create interest in the subject - by using all possible ways as they would perceive it is meaningful to learn and motivate them to learn - often tailoring pedagogy and adopting innovation, involve them in learning - to ensure that the learning process is sustained, and in the end, create result in an 'objective 'assessment through properly conducted examinations may it be oral presentations, viva voce or written. The issue of subjectivity may be reduced in the valuation of written scripts than oral presentations, especially when valuation is based on answer keys. Nevertheless, answer keys are rigid enough and miss out to capture the flavour of the answers such as the style of presenting the answer, the language used, additional information enriched through advanced reading, etc. Oral presentations are much superior. But in both, the obscure elements of subjectivity such as the mood of the examiner, blocks created through weak introductory answers, the extent of time available for evaluators and the use of comparisons as a tool of justice prevail. Hand-picking the best answer scripts for beginning the valuations is a temptation to many, needless to say. The average time for evaluation of a written answer script is mostly less than four minutes of which more than two minutes are lost in the procedural form fillings each time, leaving almost less than two minutes to read and evaluate a script written in three hours by a student. This is compounded by the difficulties in reading different handwriting each time.

5. Diminishing Margins in Student Relations:

An important aspect to be discussed in student relations. The higher age group of the students you are dealing with makes it the whole problem. They are not to be scared with the cane but required to be reached out through an attitude of friendliness. A Professor however knowledgeable and well accomplished is sitting in an ivory tower if he fails to notice the distance between himself and the students. It may be true that each student is different from others, their attitude, temperament, and outlook may vary, the impact of wrong schooling may have impaired their behaviour, but it is wise to see them as a class and build a bridge through which both can travel to each other. Often teachers escape being friendly with students for fear that reduced distance will bring reduced respect. It is not so. On the contrary, it will only give you a place in their heart, so that you can inspire them, give them the confidence that you are with them on board in the journey and you are there to rely in times of difficulty. I do not deny that it is challenging for many reasons. If the apprehension is that it will hamper your professional responsibility, I say it is vital to performing your professional

responsibility as well. It may indeed put you in an ethical dilemma from time to time raising questions to yourself ‘Am I subjective or objective?’

6. Maintaining Professionalism with Reduced Distance :

Commitment to the profession is largely reflected in one's own behaviour and attitude. In the first place, commitment could be seen as expressed through the interest the teacher takes in students, given the fact that students are his primary concern. Ironically this creates a dilemma for being ‘close’ or ‘distant’ both of which are equally repudiated. The degree of distance is abstract and more a subjective consideration of the third person who may perceive it from various angles. For instance, to some extent taking interest in the personal life of the student is appreciated but not to the extent that it may infringe the professional ‘stature’ of the teacher. Behaviour otherwise going unnoticed for others is under scanner for a teacher. He should be devoid of all vices, destined to be ‘puritan by birth’ and antecedence. Going by this, he should be like a ‘living saint’ who is detached from earthly weaknesses. His energy levels are as important as high thinking. Maintaining the fitness of a fighter pilot always is impossible too.

7. Responsibility and Accountability:

Accountability is a generic term which includes accountability to the institution, accountability to students, fellow teachers, and profession, each of which places huge demands on the teacher at the same time imposes a lot of restrictions. The demands of the institution are countless. For the institution, the teacher is pivotal to performing its fundamental objective. In the modern context of holistic development, the teacher has a much greater role such that he should present everywhere directly or indirectly. The all-round development of students resulting in equipping them to be intellectually robust, economically productive and employable, socially sensitive, spiritually inclined, and emotionally balanced all makes sense only if the teacher adds life and spirit in the everyday experience of the student in the campus. In a sense, he has to be omnipresent all the time and everywhere. Students look upon him as a person in multiple roles – as a treasure house of knowledge, a seat of wisdom, a patient listener, a playful friend, a kind-hearted companion, a facilitator in learning, an advisor in confusion, a helping hand in trouble, a means to trust, a counselor to open up, a role model to imitate and above all an inspiration throughout life through his overwhelming influence which they carry beyond the confines of the institution. The institution expects him to be diligent, students expect him to be elastic, colleagues expect him to be a buffer, and the profession expects him to be dispassionate. Caught in this intricate web of diverging interests he struggles to live to the expectations of others and not his own. This pops up ethical dilemmas adding one more straw on the camel's back.

8. Pragmatism and Troubleshooting :

Conflict management requires mature and balanced thinking, particularly if it pertains to students. Interpersonal and group differences in opinion and ideas surface as a conflict which only a skilled teacher can handle. Diverting differences in healthy competitions could build team spirit and unity. Cultural and linguistic divide among students may trigger discontent and if unresolved could lead to alienation of students.

The teacher may confront role conflict unless he refrains from identifying with the students as cliques and subgroups. This comes more often unconsciously and keeps shifting every now and then. To be pragmatic he should be looking at students individually or collectively as a wholesome group. At the same time ignoring subgroups may lead to marginalization. Hence effort is also required to engage them to integrate.

9. Oversimplified Assumptions:

Assumptions on student behaviour is often a cause of worry, for most teachers are divided into these lines. Chiefly two sharp divergences could be predicted. One set of assumption picturize students as inherently lazy, try to avoid studies and should be forced. The other set of assumptions is diametrically opposite and depicts students as liking studies and could be motivated. Such assumptions result in conflicting notions about student behaviour and create predispositions across students which could lead to conflicting thinking. Sometimes such deep-seated feelings may create personality types among teachers in the worst case some become uncompromisingly arrogant. This would turn out to be counter-productive failing to distinguish each student as individuals, and hostile feelings that may come across are the product of environment or upbringing. The leadership style of the teacher based on his perceived role as in the learning models mentioned before may convert into role conflict.

10. Impropriety and Appropriateness:

Just as the distinction between normal and abnormal is relative, determined by time, place and person, the boundary between appropriateness and inappropriateness is often vague especially when a teacher is confronted with situations of inconsistency in student interaction. Usually, the teacher absorbs role appropriateness in the early stages of a career. It continues to mature over the years. This despite, ambiguities of appropriateness arises out of inconsistent student behaviour. For instance, students express mixed feelings, not always of respect, but sometimes arrogance, defiance, and indifference. Such situations of impropriety arouse the dilemma of appropriate behaviour. Wrong judgments may give way to wrong reactions. The challenge is to accommodate individual differences with prudence. The teacher ought to get rid of his cast as a 'limited company' for a 'few obedient shareholders' to bank on, but as a resource of unlimited access. The concern is that if a teacher cannot forgive the mistakes of his students who else, for he is the one who is there to correct their mistakes.

11. Issues of Holistic Development :

Education to serve its purpose ought to be a vehicle of human values such as truth, kindness, empathy, selflessness, devotion, etc. Looking at this way the purpose of education is the development of the mind, not mere intellect. It is not just about knowledge but also about how you put that knowledge into action. It is about creating the desired mindset of looking at oneself and surroundings. Even the tiny bit of the vast expanse of knowledge, may it be science, arts, management, technology, etc should be able to carry along with it human qualities which creates social sensitivity. Social sensitivity is to mean concern for others – both persons and groups – to feel with them and display responsibility in ameliorating it. Teaching is not just about

speaking facts and figures. It is dependent on the teacher during the course of the transaction to convey such values to the students to enable them 'read between the lines'. The aim is the total or holistic development of the student. Exposure to the entire range of activities – extra-curricular and co-curricular – contribute in a big way to holistic development. Qualities such as co-operation, collaboration, leadership, initiative, ability to accept mistakes, attitude to enjoy the success of others are all part of the innumerable facets of holistic development. Beyond both these, the campus atmosphere acts as an agent of change. Such for instance ability to accommodate differences in culture and opinion, unity in diversity, identifying and utilizing growth opportunities, responding to realities, etc are the influence of the overall campus exposure. The teacher can provide quality experiences to unfold this. The teacher holds the key to these experiences through guided interaction.

12. Conclusion :

Higher education is passing through challenging times now than ever before. Over the years the teacher-student role relationship has been evolving such that the presumed role of the students and assumed the role of the teachers have given way to different models of learning resulting in a corresponding shift in intended learning goals. The shift in role relationship is accompanied by a typology of transactions connected with the learning goal. In the present day context of higher education, the teacher is confronted with role ambiguity characterized by multiple roles he has to perform, vague assumptions, hypothetical situations, limited demarcations between roles, the radical shift in student expectations, performance demands, etc. resulting in role overlappings, sometimes conflicting and sometimes challenging. This often leads to confusing situations where the margin between one's own judgement of right and wrong is thin. This renders him to either settle down on a stereotype or struggle to be an innovator. Each day throws before him an experience unique from the other day to which he should act and react. The tendency is to follow the road opened by others, but the challenge is to open your own door.

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