Classroom Distraction as a Pedagogical Barrier and its Remedies

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the causes of classroom distraction and the ways to reduce them and promote students' active participation . The main purpose of the study was to pursuit the ways to encourage learners' self-efficacy and capability . In this hermeneutic phenomenological study, data were collected through in-depth interview, focus group discussion and classroom observation . The sources of the information were grade eight students and their teachers teaching English and social studies from five community schools of suburban area of Kathmandu . The schools and participants were selected using convenient and quota sampling respectively . The study found out that teacher centered activities are the main cause of distraction; furthermore, classroom environment, the students' own and their peers' behavior and attitude, teacher's teaching strategies and their inept behavior, learning content and assessment have influenced the distraction . Until and unless, the concern authority disheartens pedagogical barriers and makes teachers accountable, the change seems impossible . Selection of learning content from students' interest, use of assessment as a process of learning, gradual shift of pedagogy into heutagogy and teachers' strategical classroom mobilization promote students' engagement . It concludes that student friendly action-packed classroom activities which are enriched with learning content are the keys for the promotion of student participation.

KEY WORDS: Classroom distraction, hermeneutics, heutagogy, action-packed activities

Introduction

Students learn any knowledge and skills meaningfully when they work on them . For this, school or classroom environment, content for learning, and assessment have great role to influence students' participation and learning . They work enthusiastically in the fearless environment; even more enthusiastically when they have harmonious relations with the teachers and friends . Due to the use of teacher-centered teaching and theory-based knowledge, students have difficulty in concentrating on a monotonous activity continuously . We usually experience distraction when our busy mind being engaged in a particular area suddenly moves away from its immersed involvement . Soyemi and Soyemi (2020) state, "Distraction is a process of diverting the attention of a person or group from the desired focus which results in blocking the reception of desired information"(p . 37) . When attention on something breaks, distraction occurs . Students also face the problem of distraction in the classroom . Their memory of any incident that comes in their mind and swipes their engaged mind away from the earlier engaged area . During distraction, we cannot concentrate on what we were keeping our mind engaged .

Theoretical Perspective

In the study, critical theory and constructivist theory are used as a lens to see classroom distraction as a barrier to interfere students' pedagogical efficiency and related studies to find out the gap to be fulfilled . As critical theory develops critical consciousness in students and enables them to criticize the taken-for-granted messages, the messages they learn in in the society and accept it without any question, I have tried to explore what the students assume and experience classroom distraction and find out viable options for making their learning more engaged and goal-oriented . According to Freire, critical theory is necessary to discourage any sort of dominance or hegemony and restore humanity . The theory was originated in Germany at Frankfurt school of social research in the 1920s . In the words of Garlitz and Kögler (2015) "Frankfurt School is an interdisciplinary research center associated with the University of Frankfurt in Germany and responsible for the founding and various trajectories of critical theory in the contemporary humanities and social sciences" (p . 380) . Through the lens of critical theory, I have examined classroom practices and attempted to highlight the hidden structures that has dominated and hegemonized students.

Methodology

I have used hermeneutic phenomenology as the roadmap of the study . As each person has their own perceptions and worldviews, I have given due respect to multiple realities, the reality of each participant . Information in the study was collected from ten grade-eight-students from five community schools using three methods: in-depth interview, focus group discussion, and online communication . The schools were selected conveniently from suburban area of Kathmandu and the participants were selected purposively . Quality standard was maintained following credibility, transferability, and conformability . Ethical considerations were maintained with voluntary participation, confidentiality, and informed consent . In order to create friendly and comfortable environment, I stayed in the field for a long time, taught them, passed time with them involving in different activities run in the schools.

Result and Discussion

Distraction in the study was found to have occured due toclassroom environment, students' personal and familial situation, learning content and teacher's role in the classroom . First of all, students become better stimulated in learning when classroom environment assures them that they are physically, mentally and socially free from any sort of descrimination and domination . For this, they require neat and clean classroom with sufficient lights and spacious places for sitting, friendly behavior, and harmonious relationship to one another . As Pratikshya says, "Due to friends' noise, congested sitting, conflict amont them, some students' naughty behavior, we cannot concentrate on study" . As such situation break students' concentration in the study, the teachers require strategies to diminish such prpblems of classroom environment .

Secondly, students' personal and familial situation distracts their concentration . Some students experience distraction due to the influence of a tragic event in the family or in the society they live while others distract conecntration due to their health problem and or personal problem with the friends in the class . Prerana says, "While studying or listening to the teacher, the scene of mother's death and step-mother's ill-behavior haunts my mind" . She further says, "during menstruation period, when I was hungry, when I was sick, and when I did not do homework or could not do homework, I have tension".Parents' educational status and home environment influences children's chances of positive

congnitive outcomes as Biedinger (2011) states, "The cultural capital of parents influences the home environment and activities between parents and their children" (p . 1) . Although parents are illiterate or less educated, their supportive behavior and encouragement motivates children to be a better learner as Bipana says, "My father supports us very much as he was unable to study because of poverty" . As most of the students in community schools are from working class, the students from such socio-economic background have experienced that they have no one in the school to understart their pain and agony . On the other hand, some students go to school to scape the work at home as their parents ask them to do one thing: either study or work . As Prajwal (pseudo name) says, "I come to school in order to scape the work at farm" . The students, being free of punishment and due to liberal promotion policy, are taking school as a comfort zone . Moreover, they feel happy when they have no class . They pass the leisure period by playing and talking with their friends.

Thirdly, Flaws in content, classroom management, teaching learning activities, and content delivery are another causes of classroom distraction . Some lessons are beyond the students' interest: some are difficult to learn; some are boring and monotonous; while others are are neither important for the examination nor useful for life . The students enjoy working on the contents that are as per their need and interest and goal-oriented . Distraction takes place mainly due to the flaws in content, environment, teachers and students . Frisby et al . (2018) define classroom distraction as "those behaviors that challenge the attention, focus, and information processing of students" (p . 1) . Scholars have discussed different distracting behaviors . Scholars like Boice (1996) and Fried (2008) talk about side conversations, confrontational behaviors, compulsively communicating, cheating, allowing cell phones to ring, student challenge behaviors, student misbehaviors, and off task behaviors as distracting . Such distracting behaviors emerge due to problems in content, classroom management, classroom activities and content delivery . Myers et al . (2015) talks about anti-citizenship behaviors as sources of distraction . Teachers' misbehavior to the students, incompetence in content and its delivery, laziness, and offensiveness also divert students' attention .

Soyemi and Soyemi (2020) mention that family's poor economic situation, use of mobile phones, hunger, love and emotional issues, away from parents, lack of interest in the course, sitting position in the classroom, drinking and eating in the classroom, power outage, unfinished assignment, poor ventilation, chatting in the class, personal hygiene and lateness in the class cause distraction . Nonetheless, distraction takes place mainly due to the flaws in content, pedagogical activities, and assessment . Frisby et al . (2018) assert that classroom distraction occurs mainly due to cognitive load . They talk about three types of cognitive load: intrinsic cognitive load, extraneous cognitive load and germane cognitive load . The intrinsic cognitive load represents the level of difficulty of content and students' previous knowledge or experience . Extraneous cognitive load refers to the teacher's presentation and learning distraction . Due to teacher's poor teaching strategies, students' learning distraction increases . Finally, germane cognitive load talks about how deeply students process and store information . In other words, it is the ability of students to process and store information in depth . When the content is beyond students' ability to store in their mind, distraction takes place .

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Assessment in Students' Learning

Assessment in education is the evaluation of students' performance . "It is a tool designed to observe students' behavior and produce data that can be used to draw reasonable inferences about what students know" (Pellegrino, 2014, p . 68) . It is used to discover what students have learned and what they still have to learn . Teaching learning activities are highly affected by what and how they are assessed . As mark-sheets are recorded evidence of students' performance and a part of their status, students including teachers always try their best to make it better . For this, ill-practices to be better grader have grown . Such traditional assessment system on teaching and learning has influenced students' study . If properly conceived, designed and implemented, it can have positive influence both on teaching and learning . I strongly insist on the statement of Pellegrino (2014), "We need less dependence on rote learning, repetitive tests and a 'one size fits all' type of instruction, and more on engaged learning, discovery through experiences, differentiated teaching, the learning of life-long skills, and the building of character…"(p . 66) . The ongoing assessment system should be replaced with those that Pellegrino (2014) focuses . Educational process should equip students with the competencies that they require to cope up with the increasingly complex and changing world . The assessment should evaluate these competencies . The ongoing assessment system represents academic competencies, particularly textbook related and paper-pencil-test orientated capabilities only . Although schools run curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, only curricular competencies are assessed . As a result of it, schools are not promoting activities for the students' holistic development.

Out of two types of assessment: formative and summative, formative assessment also known as formative evaluation is a formal and informal assessment procedure that teachers conduct in order to monitor students' learning, provide feedback and improve their achievement . It is ongoing evaluation during educational process . It is diagnostic as it provides extended feedback . Babincakova et al . (2020) states Scriven's (1967) claim as, "The role of formative evaluation is to discover deficiencies and successes in the intermediate versions of a new curriculum" (p . 37) . It informs both the teacher and students about their achievement and feedback for further improvement . Its main purpose is to identify real situation and promote teacher's teaching and students' learning . Babincakova et al . (2020) describes formative assessment as, "an interactive process that should serve as a tool for improving the teaching and learning for all who are involved – the teachers, to know how to adapt next lessons, and the students, to know the areas of improvement" (p.88) . The schools were found to embrace different types of formative assessment . They are classwork, homework/home assignment, unit test, first and second term examination, weekly text, monthly test and so on .

Summative assessment, on the other hand, is applied at the end of a certain part of teaching learning process in order to make decision . The teachers and students usually focus their teaching and learning on summative tests and ignore the part of the textbook that are unlikely to be involved in summative tests and examination . As its emphasis is on standardizing test, it is popular . Students' academic competencies are evaluated through summative assessment and transversal competencies are ignored . This trend has established the fact that what grade students achieve is more important than what they actually learn . 21st century assessment system must reverse this trend.

The main focus of both the students and teachers is on summative assessment; and they emphasize less on formative assessment . "Any assessment activity which results in a mark or grade which is subsequently used as a judgment on student performance is summative assessment" (Baartman, 2008, p . 7) . He further states defining formative assessment as, "Any task or activity which creates feedback (or feed-forward) for students about their learning . Formative assessment does not carry a grade which is subsequently used in a summative judgment" (Baartman, 2008, p . 7) . It is any of the tasks that are used to provide feedback to their students about their learning . Feedback becomes worthwhile when it is as per the demand of the learner .

As we have subject wise prescribed textbooks and paper-pencil test as the sole tool of assessment, both the teachers and students focus on preparing their students for the paper-pencil test from the textbooks . The classroom activities of such exam-oriented teaching learning are confined within the course and mainly within the areas likely to be asked in the examination . Accordingly, teachers usually explain the content clearly and provide readymade capsules for learning and ask students to prepare for the examination from the notes given . How well the students write during two or three hours of examination is more important than how well they can perform a task in the real field . This repetitious teaching makes students mechanical and promotes distraction . This banking model of education should be replaced with dialogical education in emancipatory and justifiable environment that promotes social skills and intellectual growth in students . Such type of assessment discourages distraction and encourages engaged learning . Serrano et al . (2018) talk about the alternative forms of assessment (self-assessment, peer assessment, consultative-assessment and participative-assessment) . Such forms of assessment raises self-awareness, consciousness and reflexivity . When made evidence based, they become more authentic and student friendly . "Used with skill, assessment can motivate the reluctant, revive the discouraged and thereby increase, not simply measure, achievement" (Chappius, 2014, p . 1) .

Conclusion

The students experience distraction when classroom activities are less engaged, less action-oriented, and monotonous than the influence of the incidents they experienced in their life . Teachers role, classroom management, learning, and assessment have a great influence on students' distraction or concentration on learning . For discouraging distraction in the class, non-discriminatory and domination free environment, students-friendly-content, participatory and performance-based activities, and assessment that reflect the take away message are a must . The assessment activates students to concentrate on learning activities when it reflects students' experience of classroom activities, when it assesses students' both competencies: academic and transversal, and when it motivates them to self-evaluate.

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