Should Faculty Focus More on 'Learning Verification' than 'Teaching'?

One of the expected outcomes from the institutions of higher learning is to develop learners who exercise their higher order cognitive (thinking) abilities, such as analytical thinking, hypothesizing skills and creative thinking. This leads to an interesting question: 'Where should then faculty focus more-delivering the content (generally referred to as teaching) or learning verification (assessment)?

Research in educational fields indicates that the ability of learners to transfer their skills from lower order to higher order thinking does not happen in a linear fashion. In other words, if a student gets skill in understanding the subject, that skill does not linearly get transferred to his/her ability to apply the subject or analyze the subject. However, most of the times, teachers focus on making the learners understand the subject, hoping that the 'understanding skill' will get transferred to 'applying skill', 'analyzing skill' or 'creative skills', when situation (exams/career) demands! Here, we forget a very simple fact that any skill is a result of practice!! If the entire semester for a course is focused on understanding the subject, this will result in increased understanding skill of learners in the subject and at the same time, learners may fail to develop higher order cognitive skills such as analytical thinking, hypothesizing and creating thinking.

Well, if they (learners) understand the topic, why can't they (learners) practice by themselves to develop higher order cognitive skills? Please remember that developing higher order thinking skills in any topic is a more challenging brain activity than understanding the topic in a given context, and hence learners requires expert guidance from a teacher (practice sessions) in order to achieve higher order thinking skills. Unfortunately, many teachers in higher learning institutes **focus more** on delivering the content, rather than developing methods to check whether the intended learning occurs or not, <u>before conducting exams or quizzes</u>. In this context, tutorials do a wonderful job in our course curriculum and all of us may want to increase the number of tutorials in the course structure.

If we are clear about the thinking skills expected from learners in a course/topic/module, it is always better to verify whether learners make progress towards the expected thinking skills as the course proceeds. **Learning verification should NOT be confined ONLY during the examination.** In other words, formative assessment techniques are becoming very important in teaching learning process to ensure that better learning results. Research indicates that formative assessment techniques (verifying the intended learning happened or not) not only improves learning, but motivates students to perform better in the course.

Useful Links for learning verification:

http://www.polyu.edu.hk/assessment/arc/action/feedback.htm - offers some guidelines for giving constructive feedback to students.

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/resources/resourcedatabase/id432_using_feedback.pdf- article form Phil Race looking at many aspects of giving feedback to students

http://www.iml.uts.edu.au/assessment/feedback/index.html - a brief discussion of how students regard the level of feedback they receive as evidence of good teaching.

http://itdl.org/Journal/Jun_04/article06.htm - a journal article by Jason Huett, University of North Texas, which discusses the use of email as a tool for giving feedback to students.

http://www.tedi.uq.edu.au/teaching/assessment/grades.html - a substantial (23 pages) discussion of awarding grades and giving feedback, from the University of Queensland.

http://tlu.ecom.unimelb.edu.au/tutortraining/pdf/feedback/Characteristics_of_Good_Feedback_to_students.pdf - the characteristics of good feedback, from the University of Melbourne.

http://www.unisa.edu.au/ltu/staff/practice/assessment/feedback/default.asp - David Jacques offers some advice on different types of feedback and giving feedback.

Wishing you all an effective teaching-learning semester ahead!

Edamana Prasad