

A Sociological Analysis of Student-Lecturer Interaction in the Wake of Contemporary University Dynamism

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Abstract The fact that effective student-lecturer interaction can impact positively on quality university education has encouraged many universities to embark upon rigorous programs geared towards enhancing such interaction. Many have done so with only the potential benefits in mind, without paying much attention to the contemporary snags surrounding the student-lecturer interaction. This situation is complicated by the recent revelations in the literature indicating a decrease in lecturers time to interact with students outside the classrooms.

This paper aimed to provide the foundation towards the institutionalization of systematic plan directed at enhancing the student-lecturer interaction. The qualitative research design was adopted for this study. Fifteen lecturers and twenty former students from government assisted universities in Ghana conveniently participated in the study. Both the former students and the lecturers did agree to the significance of student-lecturer interaction in university education. They however held differing stance when it came down to how such interaction should proceed. They both called for the institutionalization of professional counselling units to help students out with the academic matters outside the classroom teaching. The former students made it clear though that such a move should not be a replacement to student-lecturer interaction, but a supplement to it.

Keywords Student-Lecturer Interaction, Discourse Analysis, University Education, Teaching, Learning Experience

1. Introduction

The value of university education transcends the transmission of factual material in the classroom. Knowledge is not the exclusive end of education, but a part of the process in which students learn more about society and self. University education to be truly beneficial to students implies effective mentoring beyond what goes on in the classrooms. Lecturers not only pass onto their students the expertise they have acquired in their respective fields of learning, but also guide them directly and indirectly through the intricacies of the university system, lends moral support, and provide academic and career counselling. Formal student-lecturer interaction is therefore an important precursor for overall quality teaching and learning experience at the university.

Student-lecturer interaction occurs at various places including the classroom, the laboratory, and office. Irrespective of where it occurs, it is at the core of university experience associated with student overall academic and social development[1]. The literature underscores the

significance of such interaction between students and lecturers. Constructive and close interactions between students and their lecturers facilitate students' favourable educational experiences as well as their greater academic and personal development ([2],[3]). Also, such interaction impacts positively on students' self-concept, persistence, and satisfaction with non-academic life ([4],[5],[6]).

Giving the aforementioned benefits that effective student-lecturer interaction can have on quality university education, many universities have embarked upon rigorous programs, with mixed outcomes, geared towards enhancement of such interaction. Many have done so with only the potential benefits in mind, without paying much attention to the contemporary complexities surrounding the student-lecturer interaction in the wake of increasing students populations and the transition from physical to virtual interaction.

This situation is further complicated by the recent revelations in the literature indicating a decrease in lecturers time to interact with students outside the classrooms. References ([7],[8]) report that lecturers are now spending more of their non-teaching time in the pursuit of research and publication, rather on students' interaction. The saying at the universities that "you publish or perish" is now being adhered to by many lecturers at the expense of other conventional roles like interacting with students.

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This budge in faculty priorities indicates that contemporary students are losing a valuable source of influence that has the capacity to wield multiple, positive effects on their university experience and success. Unless universities engage in institutional practices that are intentionally or purposely designed to promote student-lecturer interaction outside the classroom, prevailing lecturers' interests and reward systems make it unlikely that such interaction can be enhanced.

One way of working towards enhanced student-lecturer interaction is to thoroughly understand scientifically how evolving changes at the universities affect the interaction. The fact that most empirical studies on student-lecturer interaction have failed in addressing this concern makes this study even more crucial. The aim of this study, therefore, is to provide the foundation towards the institutionalization of systematic plan directed at enhancing the student-lecturer interaction process.

2. Theoretical Background

Michel Foucault's discourse analysis will serve as the theoretical background for the study. Specifically, the relative and contextual application of power, which he believed can produce particular forms of behaviour will be adopted[9]. One of Michel Foucault's greatest contribution to post-structural thought is his rethinking of power[10]. Power, according to him, is related to knowledge. Thus making truth and facts contextual. This implies that truth and fact cannot simply be delinked from the relations of power within which they are produced[10].

Of particular importance of Foucault's work to this study is his analysis of discourse, discipline, surveillance, and normalization as critical in negotiating power in social relations and interactions. He defined discourse as a system of meaning that governs how people think, act, and speak about a particular thing or issue. Discourse thus influences one's action when interacting with others. People accept power of others based on discourse, thus disciplining them to abide by the tenets and the power negotiated through social relations. Discipline as a form of modern power works through surveillance, which Foucault referred to as the acts of observing the agreed-upon power sharing emanating from social relations. Such disciplinary power is exemplified by the normalizing judgment, which is internalized coercion that stratifies and regulates people's actions. Foucault referred to this as normalization, which is a social process of defining some practices and ways of living as "normal" and others marked as "abnormal".

The discourse surrounding the student-lecturer relationship will therefore be explored in this study. Such analysis will provide the system of meanings held by both students and lecturers when relating towards the other. How students become disciplined and place surveillance on their behaviour to conform with the status quo based on the normalization process is explored in the study. This will unearth the power relations developed in the student-lecturer

discourse. Understanding how power is brokered between this parties is an important step in ensuring that both parties work together to provide a more comprehensive university education.

3. Methods

The qualitative research design was adopted for this study to capture how both students and lecturers in government assisted universities in Ghana perceived their relationships. Fifteen lecturers and twenty former students conveniently participated in the study. Purposefully, former university students were selected for the study to take care of the envisioned reluctance on the part of ongoing students to appraise their relationships with their lecturers. These participants conveniently volunteered to participate in the study via the internet and were later interviewed on telephone. Both the students and the lecturers were thoroughly interviewed on how they saw the student-lecturer relationship on-campus. The discourse surrounding the relationship and how power was negotiated among them were central in the study. Both parties had the opportunity to voice out feasible ways of enhancing the student-lecturer interaction on campus.

For data analysis, the NVivo software was adopted in patterning the data elicited from the respondents. This made it feasible to capture both individual perspectives that respondents had on the issues posed to them. Further, convergences and divergences that emanated from the various perspectives were also established using the axial coding approach. The combined use of deductive and inductive reasoning was adopted to put together the responses.

4. Analysis and Discussion

Both the two groups of respondents unanimously testified to the significance of student-lecturer interaction as an important component of university education. Such relationship, the respondents believe, add positively to the overall mentoring of students as part of the big scheme of getting them ready for the "world". Structures in place to facilitate student-lecturer interaction outside the classrooms included the following - consultation times with students, individual and group counselling sessions, and lecturers' patronage in students' organizational activities.

With the points raised in the aforementioned paragraph, one would expect that both the students and the lecturers are impressed with the overall structures in place to facilitate the interaction. That, however, is not the case. Whereas the lecturers were overwhelmingly satisfied with the structural provisions to encourage their interactions with students, the students were unimpressed with the provisions in place to facilitate their interaction with lecturers, particularly outside formal classrooms interactions. Various reasons were assigned for these parallel stance.

To the lecturers the time already assigned for student consultation with them is enough and would not recommend that any changes be effected to it. Many of the lecturers believed that students consultation with them should centre mainly on academic matters, stressing the fact that issues pertaining to social and career counselling should be directed to the appropriate professionals on campus. The hesitancy to embrace this responsibility, it was learnt from the lecturers, emanates from the lack of time to consult with the ever increasing students population. According to the lecturers, the student population increase has not been matched with teaching and administrative supports, thus adversely impacting on their workloads, particularly marking and correcting examinations. Some specific comments made by the lectures are captured below.

"I have 4 classes of over 200 students per class. Marking alone takes all my time. I wish I can devote more time to my students after class, but that is simply unrealistic to say the least" (Lecturer).

"If we can exclusively teach and have others assigned for marking and correcting papers, I believe that will free some of us to help out our students more outside of the classroom. But till that is done, I am afraid I cannot see how the student-lecturer interaction outside of the classroom can be enhanced" (Lecturer).

In addition to the problem posed by the upsurge of student numbers on the campuses, the lecturers were disgruntled about the recognition awarded to teaching and student consultations in their promotions and professional evaluations. Many therefore felt they rather devote their times outside the classroom to their research work as the surest route to their promotions and success in academia. Research and publication, they said, were the prime considerations for promotions. This confirms the works of ([7],[8]) that lecturers are now spending more of their time outside the classroom on their research to the neglect of student-lecturer interaction. A newly appointed lecturer has this to say:

"You publish or you perish is all I am being told over and over again by my senior colleagues. I think they have my interest at heart because during my school days, the best professors with regards to teaching and student consultations were not the seniors. Rather the poor ones who came to class not remembering how the previous class ended were the seniors because they were always on the road doing research. They always had their office doors shut even when they were in to push away students. I now see why they were doing that. We need to find a fine balance between teaching and research" (Newly Appointed Lecturer).

Clearly, the face of contemporary university teaching has changed with lecturers preferring less student-lecturer interaction outside the classroom. Upsurge in students numbers, time, and criteria for promotion seem to have dictated the pace of the present shift in university teaching. This situation, no doubt, can impact adversely on quality university education because university education conventionally thrives on the two way stream of feedback

sharing between students and lecturers. The lecturers, however, did not wholly accede with the aforementioned observation by rejecting any significant dunk in the quality of university educational delivery. They believed though that the present changes at the universities with regards to ever increasing students numbers poses tremendous challenge for effective teaching and learning.

Regarding how to deal with the challenges pose by the present changes at the universities on student-lecturer interaction and for that matter quality university educational delivery, the lecturers made various suggestions. Many felt there should be more resources placed at their disposal to match the additional current work load as a result of the recent upsurge in students numbers. One of the comments made in this regard is captured below.

"Students number are up, but what we work with has pretty much remained unchanged. Clearly, this is a problem affecting effective interaction with students. Under the present circumstances, something has to give and students interaction seems to have had a hit unfortunately" (Lecturer).

Others recommended that professional counselling units be established to render students with the support hitherto offered by lecturers outside the classroom. This suggestion, though might be worth considering, lecturers are the only people who can directly counsel students more effectively when it comes to academics. The proposed counselling units can, at best, serve as a supplement and not replacement for student-lecturer interaction.

The other set of respondents, who are former university students in Ghana, had the rare opportunity, as was claimed by most of the respondents, to evaluate student-lecturer interaction as they saw it while pursuing their university courses. All the respondents deemed student-lecturer interaction as an important component of a fulfilling university education. Reasons assigned for this stance include the following - opportunity to discuss issues in more personal terms, opportunity to follow up on some critical class discussions, opportunity to get to know their mentors better, and seeking feedbacks and directives on assignments.

The majority of the respondents were not at all impressed with the sort of interactions they had with their lecturers. They described the lecturers as "evasive" and did not care about their interactions with students outside the classroom. Some of the respondents saw this behaviour as unprofessional and called that its reversed for a more quality delivery of university education. Asked whether they saw the upsurge of students population as an impediment to effective student-lecturer interaction, many did not see it like that. Overwhelming majority of the respondents saw that as an excuse to cover up their unprofessional attitudes and behaviours. Some comments expressed are hereby disclosed.

"We all know students numbers have increased in recent times, but that should not undermine student-lecturer interaction outside the classroom. It is simply a cover up. Most of the lecturers have their own agenda, businesses to attend to and for that matter see their interactions with students as a waste of their time. This is unfortunate because

it takes something away from ensuring quality university education" (Former Male Student).

Another student retorted as follows:

"Increase in students numbers is not an issue at all. After all, most of the lecturers have time to interact extensively with female students outside the classroom and we see it always. So how come they can't do same to the male students? Something for sure is missing somewhere in the puzzle, I think" (Former Male Student).

All the female respondents of the study, however, did not share the opinion expressed above. They said such unsubstantiated comments and views about female students even deter some of them in having a professional interaction with their male lecturers when there is the need to do so. They found such comment as unfortunate and premised upon sexism since majority of the lecturers are males. This confirms the fact that gender plays a key role in student-lecturer interaction process[11].

Some of the former students also felt that their interactions with their lecturers were premised on an uneven discourse, where they had no opportunity to engage in a free dialogue, but more or less indirectly coerced to accept whatever lecturers say as the only "truth". Such a one-sided discourse or rationalization, though can impact negatively on effective student-lecturer interaction, it emanated mainly from the Ghanaian culture, which abhors active engagement with authorities, but rather applaud passive engagements with them. This falls in line with a popular adage in the country that says that "a child must be seen, but must not be heard". This practice is internalized in the socialization process and live with people even when they are old. Thus creating timidity, passiveness, and takes away from the creation of the critical minds expected of a well functional university.

A number of suggestions were made by the former students to ensure quality interaction between students and lecturers. They deemed such interactions as vital in the training of students at the universities. They believed that since teaching does not end in the classrooms, lecturers should be mandated to set a specific time to interact with students. Such times, they insisted, should be made explicit on course outlines to be given to students at the onset of a course. Setting a time aside for students interaction is one thing, and ensuring that lecturers indeed keep to it is another. The former students, therefore, called on university authorities to ensure that student-lecturer interactions are supported and students well motivated to avail themselves for such an opportunity to engage in academic discourse with their lecturers after the classroom engagement.

Further, all the former students did not see the upsurge of students numbers as a logical reason to undermine student-lecturer interaction. They, however, admitted that such upsurge in numbers may impact adversely on student-lecturer interaction if the numbers are not matched with appropriate resources to aid teaching and learning. Like the lecturers, the former students recommended that universities institutionalize professional counselling centres to supplement student-lecturer interaction at the universities.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Even though both the students and lecturers did agree to the significance of student-lecturer interaction in university education, they held differing stance when it came down to how such interaction should proceed at the universities. On one hand, the lecturers saw the ever increasing number of students as an impediment to effective interaction between themselves and their students. They therefore called for the institutionalization of professional counselling units to help students out with the academic matters outside the classroom teaching. Put differently, the lecturers expected the universities authorities to commensurate the increasing students numbers with appropriate teaching and learning resources to ensure quality university teaching and learning experience for students.

The former students, on the other hand, though saw the increasing students numbers as a potential dim on effective student-lecturer interaction, they did not see any effective replacement for such interaction. They, thus, supported the idea of the setting up of professional counselling units at the universities not as a replacement of student-lecturer interaction, but as a supplement.

Further, a formal structure needs to be institutionalized at the universities to ensure effective student-lecturer interaction. Such structures should facilitate not only male interactions with lectures, but that of female students as well. An ethically sound and proven structure is what is needed in ensuring effective student-lecturer for all students irrespective of one's gender. Lecturers also need to be resourced more and motivated to interact more with their students outside the classroom to provide a complete university education and a more fulfilling experience for students.

It must also be stressed that lecturers can potentially learn a lot from their students if they interact with them with an open mind premised on a two way discourse free of any form of coercion. Students also need to be motivated to patronize the opportunity to interact with their lecturers as part of the university learning experience. A non-coerced discourse between students and lecturers, undoubtedly, can motivate students to interact more meaningfully with their lecturers.

Online student-lecturer interaction needs to be promoted. Student and lecturers can interact meaningfully via virtual space through official university's website. Such websites can easily be monitored to ensure that the interaction between the two groups proceed on sound ethical terms.

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