

A Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Initiative in Universiti Utara Malaysia: The Role of In-class Teaching Consultant

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Abstract— The aim of this paper is to show some findings on the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL) initiative in Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), a specialized management public university in northern Peninsular Malaysia. UUM is regarded by some scholars as an example of a learning organization. Funds are made available by UUM for lecturers to create projects to improve classroom teaching and learning. This paper is earmarked to improve the teaching competency of international lecturers who joined UUM for the first time. The project was on “in-class teaching consultant” for a course labeled as “Performance Management”. Focus group interviews were conducted on 36 postgraduate students who took the course. Ninety (90) percent of the interviewees agreed that the course instructor became effective in his teaching with the presence of the “in-class teaching consultant” (ITC).

Keywords— *in-class teaching consultant, international lecturer, learning organization, SOTL*

I. INTRODUCTION

The scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL) programs are slowly catching on in public universities in Malaysia. Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), one of the public universities in Malaysia, is busy initiating projects for improving teaching and learning efforts among its lecturers since 2013. One of the SOTL projects which was funded by the SOTL grant was called “The Role of In-class Teaching Consultant”. The aim of this paper is to report part of the findings of the project.

II. BACKGROUND OF UNIVERSITI UTARA MALAYSIA

The Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) was established on 16 February 1984 under the Universiti Utara Malaysia 1984 Order (Statutory). The university was incorporated on 23 April 1998 [1]. The university is located in Sintok, Kedah. The university was established with specific mission of providing a leadership role for management education in the country. Thus, the university is also known as management university. UUM is ranked top 701 in the recent QS World University Rankings® 2015/16 [2]

Initially, in terms of academic system, UUM practiced the school system. Then in 2003, UUM changed its academic entity to faculty system. In January 2008, another restructuring of the university academic system was undertaken. In this restructuring exercise, 13 faculties were merged and streamed into 3 main Academic Colleges, namely UUM College of Business (UUM COB), UUM College of Arts and Sciences (UUM CAS), and UUM College of Law, Government and International Studies (UUM COLGIS). To some scholars, the ability to change its academic system over time reflects UUM’s quest as a learning organization [1, 2, 11, 12].

In addition, UUM set up its University Teaching and Learning Center (UTLC) in 1990, a department which is dedicated to assist the improvement of the quality of teaching among its lecturers. In 2013, UTLC started to offer funding called the SOTL grants to lecturers who wanted to conduct research to improve their teachings in UUM [1].

III. THE FOCUS OF THE SOTL PROJECT

A. *The Identified Course*

The course which was identified was BSMH5043 Performance Management, a postgraduate course in the program called “Masters of Human Resource Management” (MHRM) offered by the School of Business Management (SBM) under UUM College of Business. The course is a core course and it is taken by both local and international students. The concern was that over time there were international visiting lecturers who were recruited to teach courses (such as Performance Management) and some were teaching the courses in UUM for the first. Their qualities of teaching were suspected. SBM wanted to assist new international lecturers [3].

B. *The Time*

The time chosen to undertake this project was the September semester 2013/2014 session [3].

C. The Course Instructor

The instructor concerned was Dr Mohd Hasanur Raihan Joader, a visiting scholar from Bangladesh, who was going to teach the course for the first time in UUM in the said semester. Dr Joader was formerly an academic from the School of Business and Economics, United International University, Dhaka. He had his first degree in English literature from Delhi University, two master degrees from University of Wollongong, Australia, and a PhD from UUM. In addition, he had more than six years teaching experience in Bangladesh [3].

D. The In-Class Teaching Consultant (ITC)

The ITC for the course was Dr Mohamad Yazam Sharif, the project researcher. He would attend the class for 42 weeks as a participant observer and also as the advisor to the course instructor and the students in the class [4].

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL)

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL) is a growing movement in post-secondary education. SOTL is scholarly inquiry into student learning which advances the practice of teaching by making inquiry finding public [5, 10].

SOTL necessarily builds on many past traditions in higher education, including classroom and program assessment, the reflective practice movement, peer review of teaching, traditional educational research, and faculty development efforts to enhance teaching and learning. Terms closely related to the scholarship of teaching and learning are good teaching (that which promotes student learning and desired outcomes and is recognized by student satisfaction, peer review, etc.) and scholarly teaching (in which teaching is regarded as an area of study and the teaching and learning knowledge base is regarded as an additional discipline in which expertise may develop) [5, 6].

As such, SOTL encompasses aspects of professional development or faculty development, such as how teachers can not only improve their expertise in their fields, but also develop their pedagogical expertise, i.e., how to better teach novice students in the field or enable their learning. It also encompasses the study and implementation of more modern teaching methods, such as active learning, cooperative learning, problem-based learning (PBL) and others. SOTL scholars come from various backgrounds, such as those in educational psychology and other related fields of education, as well as specialists in various disciplines who are interested in improving teaching and learning in their respective fields. Some scholars are educational researchers or consultants affiliated with teaching and learning centers at universities [5, 6, 7].

Inquiry methods in SOTL include reflection and analysis, interviews and focus groups, questionnaires and surveys, content analysis of text, secondary analysis of existing data, quasi-experiments (comparison of two sections of the same course), observational research, and case studies, among others. As with all scholarly study, evidence depends not only upon the methods chosen but also on the relevant disciplinary standards. Dissemination for impact among scholarly teachers may be local within the academic department, college or university, or may be in published, peer-reviewed form. A few journals exclusively publish SOTL outputs, and numerous disciplinary publications disseminate such inquiry outputs (e.g., *J. Chem. Educ.*, *J. Natural Resour. Life Sci. Educ.*, *Research in the Teaching of English*, *College English*, *J. Economic Education*), as well as a number of core SoTL journals and newsletters [7, 8, 9].

The International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning (ISSOTL) was founded in 2004 by a committee of 67 scholars from several countries. It serves faculty members, staff, and students who care about teaching and learning as serious intellectual work. ISSOTL has held annual conferences since 2004, attended by scholars from approximately twelve nations. The conferences sites include Bloomington, Indiana USA (2004); Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada (2005); Washington, DC, USA (2006); Sydney, Australia (2007); Edmonton, Alberta, Canada (2008); Bloomington, Indiana, USA (2009); Liverpool, UK (2010); Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA (2011); Hamilton, Ontario, Canada (2012); Raleigh, North Carolina, USA (2013); Quebec City, Quebec, Canada (2014)[8, 9].

B. Improvement Programs in University Teaching

Improvements in teaching are generally about innovations in teaching practices [7]. Nowadays, the improvements and initiatives to escalate university teaching performance around the globe are somehow related to the SOTL programs [7, 8, 9, 10]. Conferences on SOTL are organized annually to discuss issues related to university teaching improvements and SOTL.

In public universities in Malaysia (including in Universiti Utara Malaysia), the emphases on university teaching improvement (prior to the emergence of SOTL) have always been there through the programs pioneered by their respective university teaching and learning centers (UTLCs) since the early 1990s. However, with the emerging globalized efforts lately on SOTL, university teaching improvement efforts in Malaysia are becoming more systematic especially with the participation of their researchers in international conferences discussing issues on SOTL [3].

V. METHODOLOGY

A. The Research Approach

The study used the qualitative approach as the objective of the study. It is intended to explore the teaching process in the postgraduate course called "Performance Management" as well as to determine the role of "in-class teaching consultant"

(ITC) from the students' perspectives. Qualitative approaches are deemed as suitable for exploring the processes [13, 14, 15].

B. The Research Method

The researcher (Dr Yazam) acted as the participant observer as well as the advisor to the course instructor (Dr Joader) and the course students. The researcher's aim was to discover the significance of his role as the "in-class teaching consultant" (ITC). The premise was the ITC would interfere with the instructor's teaching. Both the instructor and the students in the "Performance Management: class would be observed for 14 weeks in the semester concerned (one semester only). The researcher (and also the ITC) would be in the class, should the instructor and the students require his assistance.

C. Data Collection Method

Two data collection methods are implemented: 1) the researcher as the participant observer and the class advisor; and 2) focus group interviews on the students.

VI. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In terms of the student numbers in the said semester, it was revealed that there were 36 postgraduate students comprising 16 internationals and 20 Malaysians (refer Table 1).

TABLE I. STUDENT PROFILES

No.	Gender	Malaysian	International	Total
1	Male	10	10	20
2	Female	10	6	16
	Total	20	16	36

For this paper, two questions were addressed to the students at the end the said semester through focus group interviews (Table 2). Question 1 focused on whether the course instructor was effective in his teaching. Ninety (90) percent of the students viewed that the course instructor was effective and achieved what he had set out to do.

Question 2 focused on whether the "in-class teaching consultant" (ITC) had played useful roles to the course instructor and the students. A hundred (100) percent of the interviewees believed that the consultant presence in class had increased the performance of both the course instructor and the students.

TABLE II. THE TWO QUESTIONS POSED TO STUDENTS

No.	Questions	% Response
1	What do you think of the course instructor's teaching?	90 % effective
2	Did the existence of the "in-class teaching consultant" useful to the course instructors and the students?	100 % support

The qualitative answers from the interviews were converted to cumulative percentages for this paper as seen in Table 2.

VII. CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

From the in-class observation, the researcher discovered that the course instructor had used a combination of teaching methods of mini lectures and case analyses throughout the said semester.

From the focus group interviews of the students who had attended the course, 90 percent of them viewed that the course instructor was effective in his teaching even though it was his first experience teaching in an international cohort of students in Universiti Utara Malaysia.

With regard to the existence of the "in-class teaching consultant" (ITC), at first they were a bit confused as they thought the class had two instructors. But after three weeks, they adjusted themselves and discovered that the ITC was of his service to the course instructor as well as the students. The ITC had played two important roles; firstly he acted as a mentor to the new course instructor and secondly, he acted as an advisor and problem solver to students who sought for his help. The limitation of the study was that it was conducted only in one semester. In the future, it would be better if the study of this nature is performed in two semesters so that the process and findings can be verified.

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