

# HOW LECTURERS' BELIEFS SHAPE THEIR WORLD OF TEACHING

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## ABSTRACT

Until we utilize our ability to choose our worldview, to choose our beliefs, to choose the reality in which we wish to live, behavior remains habitual and unexamined" (Yero 2002:234). This article explains and discusses the influence of lecturers' beliefs on teaching. It is important for lecturers to engage in mindful teaching by becoming aware of their momentary doings. If lecturers could discover how their own mental models of reality (i.e. beliefs) shape the world within the classroom, they have the opportunity to make mindful decisions. It is recommended that lecturers do a self-inventory to help identify their patterns of thought and bring into consciousness the beliefs and values that underlies their teaching. Because each lecturer's thinking processes and interpretations are unique, only they can determine what changes need to be made in the classroom environment.

**Keywords:** mindful teaching, mindless teaching, beliefs about teaching

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A wealth of research exists on answers to questions lecturers have asked since the beginning years of higher education. What should we teach? How do students learn? How should we facilitate learning? What and how should we assess learning? How should knowledge be organised? How should we approach diverse learners? According to Malcolm and Zukas (2001:37) many research studies reduce the higher education lecturer to the image of a technician equipped with a portable toolkit of scientific theories which can be selected and applied as required. Students are often presented as "... anonymous, decontextualised ... beings" who is mainly pigeonised according to learning styles, intelligence, personality or approach to learning (Brown in Malcolm and Zukas 2007:21). This leaves the boggling question of why higher education, despite the availability of a wealth of researched answers, is still saddled with learning facilitation and assessment problems. If the so-called "right answers" are out there why are students in one class allowed to speak his/her mind and in another class not dare to do so? Why do some lecturers' classrooms look and sound like a zoo and another's appear like a church sermon? Why do students despite exposure to a variety of learning strategies still resort to memorisation of learning material? Could it be that lecturers understand and implement the "right answers" differently? The time has come to shift the focus from what and how one *should* facilitate and assess to examining the reasons (the why) behind lecturer's choices.

Researchers should come to the realization that lecturers are not constants like a chair or data projector, in the classroom environment but are the change agents that determine the tone and direction of classroom learning (Yero 2002: ix-xi). If lecturers could discover how their own mental models of reality (i.e. beliefs) shape the world within the classroom, they have the opportunity to make *mindful* decisions.

## 2. MINDFULNESS DEFINED

According to Bishop (2008:9-13 of 32) mindfulness (refer table 1) consists of two components:

- Self-regulating what one is paying attention to in the present moment by becoming aware of one's thoughts, feelings and sensations as they arise. Mindfulness does not mean that one's thoughts should be suppressed, but rather redirected to the present moment. Mindfulness requires switching attention from one object to another and then sustaining it long enough to react appropriately.
- The second component entails developing a curious, open and accepting orientation towards one's experiences. An attitude of openness and receptivity needs to be developed to whatever happens requiring abandonment of one's agenda

According to Bishop (2008: 8-9 of 32) mindfulness enable a person to respond to situations more reflectively as opposed to reflexively.

## 3. MINDFUL VS. MINDLESS TEACHING

Mention the topic of teaching and learning to a group of lecturers and almost everyone will attach a different definition to it. On the question why lecturers have different views of teaching and learning Yero (2002:1) takes it back to the innate beliefs and values of each individual. According to Yero (2002:1-2) a lecturer's beliefs and values influence the subject matter to be covered, the learning outcomes formulated, learning facilitation and assessment methods used, and the atmosphere of the classroom (refer table 1) where the most important life lessons on respect, values, self-worth, expectations, and thought processes are formed. Lecturers do not realise the power they have over their learners, namely that they, consciously or unconsciously, can have a positive or negative influence on them. To bring over the importance of being in touch with one's beliefs and values it is important to distinguish between mindful teachings versus mindless teaching.

A mindless lecturer is not someone that has *lost* his/her mind but rather a person not *using* his/her mind to think by paying attention in the classroom.

Mindless teaching is when lecturers are unaware of what they are doing, why they are doing it and the assumptions underlying their behaviour (Yero 2002:12) (refer table 1). Mindless lecturers often view themselves as the gatekeepers of knowledge and often have a negative attitude towards the students with whom they work. A mindless lecturer often accuses students of being lazy, unmotivated, unwilling or unable to respond (refer table 1).

**Table 1: Mindless vs. Mindful teaching – a comparison**

| Mindless teaching  | Mindful teaching   |
|--|--|
| <b>Characteristics</b>   |  |
| Unaware of doings.<br>Inattentive.<br>Unaware of reasons behind actions.<br>Poor self-knowledge of beliefs and values.<br>Unaware of what and why things are done.<br>Gatekeepers of knowledge.<br>Negative attitude towards students.<br>Does not like change – closed attitude, habitual way of doing things.  | Cognisant of momentary doings.<br>Self-regulator of thoughts, feelings and emotions.<br>Cognisant of beliefs and values.<br>Cognisant of what and why things are done.<br>Cognisant of reasons behind actions.<br>Non-judgmental.<br>Positive attitude towards students.<br>Embraces change – open and receptive attitude.<br>Divergent thinker.   |
| <b>Beliefs are shaped by personal life experiences, enculturation, education and schooling.</b>  |  |
| View students as lazy, unmotivated, unwilling, and unable to respond.<br>All individuals learn the same way.<br>Students should be treated as resisters, receptacles and raw material.<br>Learning is a serious and an organised endeavour.<br>Diversity in the classroom is a problem.<br>The teacher is accountable is students do not learn.<br>Learners should be punished.<br>Knowledge is transmitted.<br>Students must memorise text.<br>Learning is a static process.<br>See mistakes as unacceptable. | View students as energetic, motivated, willing and able to respond.<br>Students have unique learning styles.<br>Students should be treated as clients, partners, individual explorers and democratic explorers.<br>Learning should be fun.<br>Diversity in the classroom is a strength.<br>The learner is accountable for what is learned and not learned in the classroom.<br>Learners should be rewarded.<br>Knowledge is constructed.<br>Students must search for meaning in the text.<br>Learning is a continuous process.<br>Learning requires taking risks and making mistakes |
| <b>Beliefs influences/affects the following:</b>   |  |
| Subject matter covered.<br>Formulation of learning outcomes.<br>Learning facilitation methods.<br>Assessment methods.<br>Social climate or classroom atmosphere.<br>Perceptions<br>Judgments<br>Students attitude towards learning, achievement scores and self-esteem.<br>Lecturer's self-efficacy.<br>Critical reflection of teaching practices  |  |
| <b>Solution?</b>   |  |
| Self-inventorying<br>Cognitive dissonance  |  |

The mindless lecturer likes to use the same learning guide over and over each year by just changing the cover page, uses the same power point slides year after year, criticizes students for not taking responsibility for their own learning, are not aware of his/her own learning styles and different intelligences and have poor self-knowledge on own beliefs, values and meanings attached to teaching and learning. What the mindless lecturer does not realise is that students only mirror back what he/she models to them.

A mindful lecturer is attuned to himself/herself (Siegel 2007:4); someone that pulls himself/herself from the habitual way of doing things. A mindful lecturer is aware of what he/she is doing and why it is done (Yero 2002:13). Mindfulness is paying attention to what is happening at the present moment in a non-judgmental way (Siegel 2007:10). In studying Siegel's (2007:6) edition of mindfulness students can only benefit from a mindful lecturer in that mindful awareness "... improve the capacity to regulate emotion ... improve patterns of thinking ... reduce negative mindsets ... improve relationships with others ... because the ability to perceive the nonverbal emotional signals from others may be enhanced." A mindful lecturer that practices mindful teaching – a term coined by Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer (2002:11) – is open to novelty, aware of different perspectives, and sensitive to presenting material in different contexts (Siegel 2007:7).

The difference between teaching "mindlessly" versus teaching "mindfully" is that in the latter we are aware of our momentary doings. If we teach while thinking about for example the argument we had with the programme manager just before the class, we are engaged in mindless teaching. Then teaching becomes an automatic routine job and the classroom surroundings become a dull space. Should a student ask to re-explain the topic our inside feelings of irritation will surface in the form of a negative reaction such as e.g. snapping at the student. If we then continue our teaching from there without reflecting on what just happened we just continue engaging in mindless teaching.

#### **4. BELIEFS AND PERCEPTIONS**

Before one can delve into the beliefs that exist around teaching and learning articulation of a clear description of what a belief is, is required. In an insightful study by Pajares (1992:314-316) he cited numerous researchers' descriptions of teacher beliefs:

- "Clark (1988) called teachers' beliefs preconceptions and implicit theories"
- Porter and Freeman (1986) called teacher beliefs orientations to teaching
- Tabachnik and Zeichner (1984) chose the term teacher perspectives.
- Pajares (1992:316) himself associates teacher beliefs with teacher attitudes about education – i.e. students, learning, teaching, and schooling.

Yero (2002:21) define beliefs as “judgments and evaluations that we make about ourselves, about others, and about the world around us.”

On the question of where beliefs come from Yero (2002:22) is of the opinion that personal life experiences since childhood shapes one's beliefs. On the nature of beliefs Van Fleet as cited by Pajares (1992:316) states that beliefs are created through a process of enculturation, education and schooling. Enculturation is the incidental learning process where an individual observes, participates in and imitates the culture in their personal world. Education is the directed and purposeful learning process where it aims to bring the individual's behaviour in line with cultural requirements. “Schooling is the specific process of teaching and learning that takes place outside the home” (Pajares 1992:316).

On the consequences of beliefs Yero (2002:103) and Pajares (1992:326) agrees that beliefs influence one's perceptions and judgments which in turn affect behaviour. For example, if a lecturer takes on the belief that students are lazy when coming to studying will focus the perception (i.e. attention) to the students' body language. This belief will influence the way the lecturer interprets the body language, namely that boring facial expressions and slumped posture displays laziness. This change in perception influences the lecturer's behaviour e.g. frowning, becoming irritated, sharp voice tone and chucking the students. A derivation therefore is that one's beliefs determine the feedback one gets.

Before proceeding to the beliefs that exist about learning and teaching it is important to emphasise that mindfulness does not imply changing students' beliefs about learning. Pajares (1992:325) cites from many theorists that the earlier a belief is incorporated into one's belief structure the more difficult it is to change it. He further cites that adults rarely change their beliefs despite scientifically correct explanations and that a change can only be brought about by a gestalt shift (i.e. perceptual structure). Yero (2002:103) strongly accentuates that it is not the students' beliefs that should be changed, but rather the lecturer's own beliefs. One cannot “unteach” the learning experiences a grade one teacher “implanted” into a learner but an attempt can be made to influence the learner's beliefs about learning by “playing” around with other beliefs in one's mental mind map. The minute positive feedback is received from playing around with another belief some gestalt shift can take place in one's inner landscape. It is important to realise that people perceive what they expect to perceive and if you do not know who you are you cannot understand who your students are.

## **5. BELIEFS ABOUT TEACHING**

If lecturers could come to the realisation that students need more than just subject matter they can shape learners into individuals who like themselves thereby enjoying learning so much better. The beliefs of lecturers are only now becoming a strong focus in educational research.

Much of what lecturers believe about higher education comes from their own experience as students. Through their own “varsity” experience lecturers have formed unconscious beliefs about themselves, their abilities, how to learn and the nature, transmission and reproduction of knowledge. Typical beliefs about teaching (refer table 1) as listed by Raths (2001:5 of 10) are as follow:

- All individuals can learn.
- Learners should be treated as clients.
- Learners should be treated equally, as a matter of justice.
- Learners should be treated differently according to their own needs and interests.
- Learning should be fun.
- Diversity in a lecture hall is a strength and not a problem.
- The learner is accountable for what is learned and not learned in the classroom.
- Learners should be rewarded.

In a study of exemplary teachers cited by Yero (2002:204) the following beliefs about teaching (refer table 1) were identified:

- All individuals can learn and therefore the teacher must test which technique and approach will work for a specific learner.
- Learners learn in their own unique ways.
- A holistic approach to teaching will improve learning.
- Knowledge is constructed.
- Since learners are teachers, teachers must also be willing to be learners.
- Teachers need to assist each learner regarding intellectual, social and emotional development.
- Connections in learning are crucial since understanding is a high priority.
- Teaching should be guided by learners' strengths and interests.
- Learning is a continuous process.
- Learners metacognitive skill must be developed (learning about learning).
- Learning requires taking risks and making mistakes.

Thanasoulas (2002:4 of 6) states that lecturers view students as resisters who do not wish to learn, receptacles which can be filled with knowledge, as well as “raw material, clients, partners, individual explorers and democratic explorers” (refer table 1).

According to Raths (2001:6 of 10) attempting to compile a list of beliefs that all lecturers will share seem to be an impossible task. From the above list a personal conviction for example is that both learner and lecturer are accountable for what is learned and not learned during the learning process.

Regardless what beliefs other educators hold about learning and teaching one must remember that your own beliefs are the most important. Try to recall your favourite teachers and think what qualities made them to stand out from the rest. There are no simple rules about how to be an excellent lecturer and what excellent lecturing entails. If we as lecturers can make our students feel good about themselves we can get them closer to the idea that learning is joyful. On the question why lecturers need to discover their personal belief and value system potential reasons are (refer table 1):

- that according to Proctor's school based model for teacher expectations, it will set the social climate in the class; will influence the students' behaviour and attitude towards learning, and will affect students' achievement scores and self-esteem (McIlrath & Huitt, W 1995:2-3 of 9).
- that it influence the lecturer's sense of self-efficacy which in turn is a predictor of student success ((McIlrath & Huitt, W 1995:7 of 9).
- to narrow the gap between what lecturers say they believe (i.e. espoused theories) and how they act (i.e. theories in action) (Thanasoulas 2002:3 of 6). Lecturers should become reflective practitioners "... thereby subjecting their professional practice to ongoing critical reflection ..."by asking questions on what one's teaching practices say about one beliefs and values about teaching and whose interests are served (Thanasoulas 2002:3 of 6).
- to realise that beliefs and values underly the personal expression of the self. If e.g. a lecturer has a poor self-esteem, maybe because he thinks nothing of himself/herself, he/she will battle build the self-esteem of the students (Thanasoulas 2002:5 of 6).

Lecturers need to realise that teaching is the expression of one beliefs and values. What a lecturer gets back from the students is a reflection of what he/she has brought to the classroom.

## **6. VISION FOR TOMORROW**

The time for a mind "makeover" has arrived and no-one can do this for someone but the person himself/herself. To ensure that mindfulness and the exploration of our beliefs take root in our lives as lecturers Yero (235-244) offers the following suggestions:

- Make a difference by challenging conventional wisdom. Challenge the belief that a quiet classroom is conducive to learning. Challenge beliefs at your institution such as that you must keep students busy the whole lecturing period; that marks encourage students to work harder; that giving a student additional accounting exercises will improve his/her academic performance and that the work first needs to be explained by the lecturer before the students can be assessed.

- Re-humanise the educational process by being less concerned about marks and more concerned about what a student learns and what sort of person he/she is becoming. Start inventorying the skills students at your institution have mastered during a course of study. Start having fun in class! Create moments of ecstasy.
- Start to already at first-year level influence the students' worldviews and beliefs about learning. Break free of the old way of thinking. According to Yero (2002:245) the old way is based on beliefs and metaphors which are contradicted by current knowledge and experiences.
- Identify the metaphors that you use when thinking about teaching and learning and try to figure out what beliefs support it. A metaphor "... is understanding and experiencing one thing in terms of another" (Yero 2002:40). Metaphors reflect a person's beliefs. A lecturer who believes in the transmission of knowledge probably has a mechanistic view of learning where just like oil into a machine knowledge can be poured into a student's head.
- Accentuate the positive. Lecturers should start focusing on catching students doing the right things. For example say to your students that you highly appreciate the effort they put into their oral presentations instead of focusing on the negative such as that students speak too softly and display low self-esteem.

According to Ritchhart (1999:1 of 3) "our emotions have projective power over our thoughts". Emotions shape our thinking and lay the foundation for the next level of thinking. To help promote productive patterns of thinking Ritchhart (1999:2 of 3) proposes the following steps:

- Recognise one's immediate emotional response in a situation and then source the origin of those reactions. Try to figure out how one's reactions are linked to one's beliefs and perspective of the world.
- Act on automatic emotional reactions by applying emotional management. Try to bring a halt to one's immediate emotional reaction by considering alternatives. E.g. asking questions such as how might another person respond differently, what are alternative perspectives on this situation and what will the consequences be should I follow through on my initial reaction?
- Develop emotional sensitivity to engage in effective thinking. Ritchhart (1999:2 of 3) states that sensitive thinking is made up of two components, namely identifying what type of thinking might be most appropriate in a situation and creating an awareness of when and where one's thinking becomes sloppy or narrow.



- “Act your way into a new way of believing”. According to Burns as stipulated by Ritchhart (1999:2 of 3) it is “... easier to act one's way into a new way of believing than to believe one's way into a new way of acting”.

Lastly, it is important for lecturers not to go on a rampage in search of the so-called correct and incorrect beliefs about teaching. The message here is to explore the personal mental landscape. Although a list of possible existing beliefs were provided it was mentioned earlier that it will be an impossible task to provide an exhaustive list of all lecturers' beliefs and values. The belief and value structure of one higher education system will differ from another and beliefs are culturally bound. So the best a lecturer can do is to get hold of the belief and value structure of their particular institution and then to challenge the conventional wisdom tied up therein, but also determine whether it is compatible with the latest conceptions of teaching.

## 7. CONCLUSION

“Our life is what our thoughts make it.” Marcus Aurelius

Lecturers will have to practice mindfulness since mindfulness is a metacognitive skill (i.e. thinking about one's thinking). Mindfulness is a metacognitive process since lecturers need to learn to control their cognitive thinking processes and monitor their level of conscious thinking (Bishop *et al.* 2008:11 of 32).

Lecturers must do a self-inventory on themselves in other words literally take stock of the reasons they had for becoming a lecturer. An inventory can help lecturers determine what they are good at, what they are not good at, why they behave the way they do and help determine what needs to be done to accomplish personal goals they have set for themselves. An inventory requires self-reflection and helps the lecturer to focus on what he/she is *really* thinking and not what he/she hears all the time. Listing personal beliefs, beliefs about teaching and learning and values which are reflected by beliefs, will enable lecturers to become cognisant of their perceptions, judgments and behaviour in a particular situation which can encourage them to try to reshape their belief structure. The success of the latter happening will happen when the lecturer experiences cognitive dissonance i.e. a condition of conflict or anxiety resulting from inconsistency between one's beliefs and one's actions (Answers.com:2008 1 of 1).

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