International Approaches to Aligning Learning-centred Curricula and Staff Development: Developing Scholarly Approaches to Curriculum and Pedagogical Practice in Higher Education*

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Introduction
There is growing recognition of the complexity of academic work and the need for scholarly approaches to curricula and pedagogical practices in higher education (Hubball & Gold, 2007). This article and available PowerPoint slides provide guiding principles and comprehensive strategies from critical lessons learned in diverse undergraduate and graduate degree programme contexts.

Context
Global, national and regional factors are fuelling profound curricula and pedagogical change on university campuses (Hubball & Gold, 2007). In an attempt to address these critical challenges, research-intensive universities in North America, Australia, West Indies, Asia, UK and Europe are developing learning-centred curricula that focus on explicit student learning outcomes, integrated and strategically sequenced learning experiences throughout key programme phases (including educational technologies), effective teaching and learning methods, authentic assessment practices, and scholarly approaches to curriculum and pedagogy (Hubball & Burt, 2006).

However, research suggests that implementing learning-centred curricula is a complex, multifaceted and iterative process. It is shaped by many factors (social, political, economic, organisational, cultural and individual) and involves people at various institutional levels (administrators, curriculum development

* This article follows from a NUS seminar presentation at CDTL on 20 February 2009 about institutional and faculty-wide curricula change experiences and research collaborations at Universities in British Columbia, Ontario (Canada) and the West Indies.
committee personnel, instructors and learners) in complex settings (Hubball & Burt, 2007; Hubball & Gold, 2007). Not surprisingly, therefore, the localised development and implementation of learning-centred curricula poses significant pedagogical as well as administrative challenges for most institutions and academic units.

The following strategies are drawn from successful institutional and faculty-wide curricula development and implementation experiences at Universities in British Columbia, Ontario (Canada) and the West Indies.

**Transitioning toward learning-centred curricula: Developing curricula learning communities**

In many academic settings, undergraduate programme structures and innovative curriculum strategies are neither visible on faculty notice boards and busy departmental agendas; nor is it clear to many students or faculty members within these programmes how, if at all, individual courses and modules are integrated and progressively sequenced throughout multi-year programme learning experiences. Much less understood is how individual courses contribute to overall programme-level learning outcomes, if indeed this is explicitly stated (Hubball & Burt, 2004).

Research suggests that curriculum learning communities are at the heart of learning-centred educational practices in multidisciplinary settings. By engaging administrators, faculty members, colleagues in the field and students in opportunities for discourse around consensus building and curriculum visioning, a strong sense of ownership, shared responsibility and accountability for educational practices can be developed in undergraduate and graduate programmes. Curriculum learning communities, for example, are key for engaging academic units in scholarly approaches to curriculum and pedagogical practices in order to address critical issues such as:

- which literature sources and theoretical frameworks are appropriate to inform effective discipline-specific curriculum and pedagogical practices?
- what are the indicators of success for a responsive, cutting-edge, exciting and dynamic undergraduate programme?
- which research questions are important to enhance learning-centred curriculum change?

Curriculum learning communities are also key for developing programme-level learning outcomes which are a central component of learning-centred curricula. Learning outcomes can occur at many different levels (e.g., professional accreditation, quality assessment reviews, institutional planning, programme development, individual course design and integrated course alignments) in the form of ‘top-down’ and/or ‘bottom-up’ processing, each of which (and various combinations) can have significant implications for implementing learning-centred educational practices (Hubbball & Gold, 2007).

**Staff development implications and learning-centred curricula**

Clearly, it is unrealistic to expect systematic and scholarly approaches to curricula and pedagogical change in the absence of critical institutional and faculty-wide support and incentives that help to predispose, enable and reinforce the value of learning-centred educational practices on research-intensive university campuses. Research suggests that context-specific, integrated and stage-specific curriculum and pedagogical support frameworks enhance the development and implementation of learning-centred curricula in multidisciplinary settings (Hubball & Burt, 2007; Hubball, Mighty, Britnell & Gold, 2007). Effective institutional and faculty support strategies include:

- institutional staff development programmes for curriculum leaders that focus on the scholarship of curriculum and pedagogical practices in higher education;
• attention to curricula and pedagogical contributions through tenure and promotion processes;
• initiation of curriculum grants, curriculum leadership and innovative course design awards;
• providing on-site curricula and pedagogical expertise to support and assist units and faculty members with transitions toward learning-centred curricula; and,
• institutional conferences that celebrate research on, for and about academic programmes (Hubball & Burt, 2007; Hubball, Mighty, Britnell & Gold, 2007).

An eight-month faculty leadership programme, focused on the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), for example, was initiated in 1998 at the University of British Columbia, Canada to enhance learning-centred curricula in multidisciplinary settings (Hubball & Burt, 2006). Graduates of this SoTL leadership programme include over 200 faculty members from a wide range of institutions (Canadian and international universities), disciplines and academic ranks, including national and institutional teaching award winners, curriculum leaders, senior as well as new faculty members in various undergraduate programme settings. This programme has positively impacted curriculum and pedagogical leadership; assisted the implementation of learning-centred curricula; fostered institutional, national and international SoTL collaborations; enhanced teaching development and diverse student learning experiences; and, enhanced the dissemination of SoTL research at local, national and international academic conferences and peer-reviewed publications.

Applications for the next mixed-mode (distance) Faculty leadership programme are now being taken for the September 2009-April 2010 cohort (US$1500 for international faculty members). We welcome 1–2 faculty applications from NUS faculty members for the next SoTL Leadership Programme (http://www.tag.ubc.ca/programs/facultycertificate/admin.php).

Conclusion

Research suggests that there are no quick-fix solutions to successfully developing and implementing learning-centred curricula. It is a labour intensive, time consuming, community-driven and stage-specific process that requires adequate scholarly attention, leadership, expertise and institutional and Faculty-wide support. Linking learning-centred curricula with properly aligned teaching development plans within institutions is, therefore, critical for successful implementation (Hubball & Burt, 2006; Hubball & Gold, 2007). Valuable lessons can be learnt from research and best practices in order to prevent significant challenges and setbacks toward developing and implementing a learning-centred curriculum in undergraduate and graduate programs. The author intends to revisit NUS in February 2010 to engage faculty in a follow-up seminar in this dynamic field of research and practice.

References


Specifying Learning Outcomes in Graduate Business Education—Insights on Theory and Practice

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Introduction

In 2005, University College Dublin (UCD)1 redesigned its programme offerings and moved to a modular and semesterised (rather than year-long) system. The programme design changes and the process employed were demanding for all academic and non-academic staff, and were further complicated by the university's restructuring—we now have five Colleges and 35 Schools. As the lead person for teaching and learning (T&L) within the College of Business and Law, I was the conduit for the university in promoting the shift from a content-driven/teacher-led philosophy of teaching to one which is student-centred and outcomes-based. This article identifies and explains some of the intricacies associated with leading and informing faculty in specifying programme and/or module learning outcomes and using them to inform their teaching and assessment strategies. The barriers encountered (mainly knowledge- and information-based) are identified along with strategies used to circumvent them, to coax faculty to engage in programme/module redesign and convince them that teaching university students can be fun, especially at graduate level!

Learning outcomes—What are they?

Learning outcomes and their usefulness in higher education have been commented on in the literature (Moon, 2002; Biggs, 2004; Hussey and Smith, 2002) and are normally specified in generic terms (e.g. development of analytical skills/communication competencies). They have certain advantages in that they clarify for the learner what is expected in terms of learning, and provide indications of what will be assessed. The expectation that faculty (especially module coordinators) specify what a student is expected to know, understand or be able to do at the end of a module/programme and how that learning can be demonstrated was well-received by some colleagues, but not all. Formerly, UCD programme/course details were made available in a booklet. With the new system, these details are now available online. A new module descriptor tool was introduced and completing this form (detailing the module overview, learning outcomes, workload and assessment) was considered an inconvenience by some faculty, a major challenge by others and an exciting development by a small number.

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1 UCD - University College Dublin
To support the shift to the outcomes-based approach, I facilitated several workshops for staff from the Business School during which the essence and features of clearly articulated learning outcomes were considered, and their usefulness in guiding teaching and learning strategies explained. Specific activities/tasks were completed by participants during each workshop and the usefulness of the Dublin Descriptors highlighted, as explained below.

**Dublin Descriptors and learning outcomes**

The Bologna Framework (Dublin Descriptors) informs the levels of learning within the Irish higher education system. They are specified for the three cycles: (i) Undergraduate (levels 7 and 8), (ii) Masters (level 9) and (iii) Doctoral (level 10). For Cycle 2 (Masters—see Table 1), the descriptors emphasise the extent to which students must be able to demonstrate, apply and integrate their knowledge and understanding along with the communication and learning skills acquired by completing the programme. Using this generic framework, it is possible to write/formulate programme outcomes and then identify the module offerings that will facilitate the attainment of these outcomes, taking into account the subject knowledge and personal skills/competencies required.

Asking workshop participants to suggest how the attainment of the learning outcomes reproduced in Table 2 might be assessed is always an interesting exercise and brings varied responses. With the assessment strategies identified, other issues emerged such as grading, compiling grade descriptors and so on, which have been the subject of more recent Business School T&L workshops.

Overall, feedback from the workshops was positive but the question of how to communicate the message to the non-attendees/disengaged had to be addressed. The assistance of Subject Area Heads, who are responsible for module quality, was sought to outline and explain the changes in teaching and learning philosophy to subject area members. This helped to bridge the communication gap and was supported by the development and circulation of ‘how to’ guides. Over the course of the initial school workshops and based on conversations with faculty, it emerged that many individuals did not understand the connection between formulating module learning outcomes, module design and delivery (including learning tasks), and how the attainment of the learning outcomes was measured (using assessment tools). There is evidence to suggest that this misunderstanding has been reduced, based on data from the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Headings</th>
<th>Detailed Specifications</th>
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<tr>
<td>Have demonstrated knowledge and understanding</td>
<td>That is founded upon and extends and/or enhances that typically associated with Bachelor’s level and provides a basis or opportunity for originality in developing or applying ideas, often within the research context.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Can apply their knowledge and understanding</td>
<td>And problem solving abilities in new or unfamiliar environments within broader (or multidisciplinary) contexts related to the field of study.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Have the ability to integrate knowledge</td>
<td>And handle complexity and formulate judgements with incomplete or limited information, but that include reflection on social and ethical responsibilities linked to the application of their knowledge and judgements.</td>
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<td>Can communicate their conclusions</td>
<td>And the knowledge and rationale underpinning these to specialist and non-specialist audiences clearly and unambiguously.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have the learning skills</td>
<td>To allow them to continue to study in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous.</td>
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Source: http://www.nqai.ie
recent module descriptor form and discussions at the Programme Board meetings and School Executive. Another manifestation of the change is the shift away from formal examinations as the sole assessment tool and the employment of other tools such as projects, essays, presentations, case study analysis and so on.

**Information gaps—Module quality**

As Vice Principal for T&L, I am responsible for overseeing module quality at the school level and identifying inconsistencies or information gaps. During our first three years of modularisation, many blank descriptor forms (mainly for graduate taught modules) existed. Some possible explanations for the gaps include:

i) timing—the undergraduate programmes were modularised first (in 2004), followed by the graduate programmes (in 2006);

ii) the large number of graduate programme offerings (compared with undergraduate) and consequently a larger number of module details to be revised;

iii) the variety of levels of learning within the graduate programme portfolio—specialist pre-

experience masters, post-experience masters and executive education programmes; and

iv) the university’s poorly developed technological infrastructure (this was since upgraded).

The number of blank descriptor forms has been reduced (as at December 2008). Two factors contributed to this: (a) better familiarity with the system and (b) programme marketing requirements.

**Concluding comments—Any lessons for educators?**

In writing this article, I reflected on the progress made with respect to adopting an outcomes-based philosophy and how this can influence the reshaping of UCD Business School’s programme offerings. A key lesson emerging from this exercise is the need to plan activities and communication strategies to bring all faculty members (and administrators) along. Since 2005, heads of T&L have been appointed in each school, along with a T&L committee. The latter provides a forum for initiatives such as the School Teaching Awards, module quality reviews

<table>
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<tr>
<th>On completing this module, students will be expected to be able to:</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Critically assess the theoretical underpinnings of international business management;</td>
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<td>• Account for the variety of variables which influence the international firm’s success;</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Explain the strategic options available to firms that ‘go international’ and analyse the internal/external forces effecting this decision; and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Organise, manage, evaluate and report on a business seminar.</td>
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*Table 2: Learning outcomes—International Business Module (7.5 ECTS, Level 9)*
and development of policies specific to the Business School’s needs. Another noteworthy development is that two Business School programme reviews have now been completed, resulting in improved programme design and delivery. Given the university’s ‘big bang’ approach to modularisation, there was resistance and disinterest by certain individuals and nothing would make them interested! The insights I have gained on faculty learning (or non-learning) are particularly valuable and cancel out the stressful moments during workshops, seminars and school meetings. This article focuses mainly on the practice (rather than theory) of specifying learning outcomes and I trust that the reader is convinced that while worthwhile, there are many intricacies involved in the process!

Endnotes
1. There are seven universities in Ireland and UCD is the largest with a student population of 22,000.

References

Traversing Borders, Integrating Knowledge(s)

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Introduction
As university teachers, we know that knowledge is not a bounded entity, but a borderless journey. It is a journey that can be challenging and frustrating for the absence of clear-cut parameters and the ongoing, ‘unfinished’ nature of knowledge formation. Yet, at the same time, it is an illuminating and exhilarating adventure because the pursuit of ‘knowledge without borders’ is filled with possibilities, unexpected turns and discoveries. It is the stuff of which passion is made!

The journey is ultimately one that each student must be willing to undertake on his or her own, for it requires the individual to adopt an attitude of active learning. As active learners, students must take responsibility for their learning, be prepared to make ongoing connections between knowledge domains and eventually make what they know their own. As teachers, our role is to prepare the groundwork, start them off the journey and help them navigate their own path. Over the years of teaching at NUS, I have worked towards an ‘open-borders’ approach to teaching
and learning, which seeks to push beyond, and bridge, knowledge boundaries. The pedagogic objective and motivation for me have been the hope that the attitude towards embarking on a borderless journey, which they encounter while in the classroom, is one that they will carry with them long after they have left university.

In this paper, I elaborate on how I have developed an ‘open-borders’ approach to knowledge in the classes I teach. I have grouped into four sections for discussion some of the strategies I have used to facilitate border traversals and knowledge integration. Before I discuss each in turn below, I should mention that it is important to explain to students the ‘open-borders’ approach that underlies the design of the modules, so as to mentally prepare them for what is expected of them in the journey ahead. I do this at the start of every module I teach, and provide more specific signposts on how particular knowledge domains may be usefully related throughout the course of the module.

Some strategies to facilitate border traversals and knowledge integration

1. Transdisciplinarity and permeability of knowledge

In designing my module syllabi, I keep border crossings in mind. One form of crossing involves transdisciplinarity of knowledge. Writing about research, Fairclough (2007) describes a ‘transdisciplinary’ approach as one view of interdisciplinarity, which sees research as a process of bringing different disciplines and theories to bear together on a research topic, and setting up a dialogue between them. EL3254 “Media, Discourse and Society”, which I introduced as a third year English Language elective, was designed to be transdisciplinary, combining discourse analysis (within the field of linguistics) with media and cultural studies. For each session, students are assigned two class readings, one of which is from discourse analysis—a field with which most English Language majors have some familiarity—and another reading from either media or cultural studies. The two readings bear upon one topic, say ‘media representations of gender’, each of which presents a different conceptual framework for analysis. At the end of the session, students examine strengths and shortcomings of each, as well as explore possibilities for combining aspects of the frameworks to analyse actual media texts.

Another form of border crossing involves permeability of topics on the module. Students are encouraged to approach topics covered on the modules as interrelated, rather than as isolated, self-contained units. In an Honours module (EL4254 “Language, Ideology and Power”) that I teach, the topics and readings for each week are selected such that they relate to the issues and perspectives raised in other weeks. For example, the class reading for one of the weeks raises the issue of the political neutrality of language, which relates to a reading on ideology in the following week, although the authors of the two readings are writing in different periods, addressing different specific concerns and using different terminology. The issues raised in these two weeks, in turn, are revisited from quite a different angle later in the module, when the bases for the claims of linguistic non-neutrality and ideology are critically scrutinised. Because of the inter-penetrability of the topics, students are required to stay abreast of the weekly readings and discussions, make ongoing connections, revisit ideas and hone their arguments on issues over the course of the module.

2. Bridging different kinds of knowledge

Frequently, knowledge (with a capital K) is associated only with expert academic scholarship. In my classes, however, I encourage students to think more broadly
about different kinds of knowledge (or ‘knowledges’ in the plural), and to learn to integrate them into their own practice of ‘knowing’. One kind of knowledge that is often devalued and sidelined in most institutional settings, including the academia, is one’s personal experiences, which are worth reclaiming in the classroom. I consider it instructional for students to appreciate the usefulness of academic theories in helping them understand and articulate their own rich experiences (‘tacit knowledge’) as users of language and discourse. At the same time, the bringing together of expert and experiential ‘knowledges’ presents a valuable opportunity for interrogating the limits of a particular theory in the light of students’ own situated practices. In teaching about the media, for example, students are asked to record in a journal their own news viewing practices, which we later examine in class in relation to theories of media consumption.

Although EL3254 “Media, Discourse and Society” is not a practice module, knowing how media discourses are constructed from the perspective of media practitioners is no doubt enriching, as indicated in student feedback. In order for students to relate what they have learnt about techniques of media analysis in the classroom to what goes on in practice, I have invited media professionals (copywriters and journalists) to speak in my classes. This has been not only informative for students, but also an opportunity for students to pose questions to the professionals, and decide for themselves how what they have learnt on the module fits (or not) with professional practice.

3. Learning beyond the classroom

In today’s technologically enabled educational environment, the virtual world presents an excellent platform for borderless learning. The IVLE discussion forum, for instance, has become an important component in the design of all my modules, in order to facilitate continuing exchanges beyond the physical classroom. Sometimes, I pose a question at the end of a lesson for continued discussion on the forum. Mostly, however, the forum is an informal open space for students to initiate topics of their own, share resources and learn from one’s peers. Just as students may pose questions and comments arising from the week’s lesson, so too I bring what is raised on the forum into the classroom for further discussion. The point is to encourage free flow of dialogue and collective ongoing formation of knowledge, regardless of space and time.

Another dimension of learning beyond the classroom is to bring ‘the world’ into our classrooms. Through a variety of avenues such as student journals, the IVLE forum or class presentations, students are asked to bring for reflection and discussion issues and texts that surround and occupy them, which they consider as germane to the module. This way, students can test the applicability of theories and consider the relevance of what they learn to the ‘real’ world in which they live. Because the students source for their own materials, they seem to have a greater stake in the knowledge that is produced as a result.

4. Pushing conceptual boundaries

In the study of media discourses, analytical concepts introduced in readings are usually developed in the context of particular media genres. While class exercises may be geared towards consolidating students’ understanding of particular concepts and their applicability to actual media texts, term projects—owing to longer duration of time—are better suited in allowing students to push the boundaries of tried and tested...
Background

The objective of this short communication is to highlight some key processes that should be considered in module planning. These include clarification and specification of pedagogical goals in designing students’ learning experience. Assessment and feedback on learning are other important processes that will not be addressed in this article.

Clarifying pedagogical goals

Curriculum goals are derived from pedagogical outcomes, namely basic and discipline-specific competencies, which all students should attain by graduation. For example, if public speaking is identified as a basic competency that every student must have by graduation, then public speaking skills must be intentionally taught and reinforced, and no student should graduate without receiving appropriate training and practice in public speaking.

Faculty’s responses are remarkably consistent when they are asked, “What basic competencies or skills should every university student have upon graduation?” These typically include communication skills (e.g. writing, speaking, reading and listening), mathematics (e.g. basic statistics), problem solving, critical thinking, interpersonal skills (e.g. working in and leading groups), computer literacy and interviewing skills. More recently the list has expanded to include understanding and various kinds and levels: pushing the parameters of concepts, navigating between different topics and disciplines, acknowledging and bridging different kinds of knowledge, as well as crossing physical/virtual spaces in the ongoing formation of knowledge. Refusing to be satisfied with the finite and the familiar, an ‘open-borders’ approach keeps the mind nimble, on the one hand, by honing one’s knowledge of particular issues and concepts, and on the other hand, extending beyond what is taught in the classroom, for a for a fuller, ongoing engagement of ideas.

Conclusion

The ‘open-borders’ approach that I have outlined requires traversing knowledge boundaries of

Processes in Module Planning

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Reference

respecting diverse cultures, resource utilisation, self-understanding, time management, conflict resolution, willingness to take risks and the ability to adapt to change and innovation. In addition, discipline-specific skills that students learn from core and elective modules form a complete set of learning outcomes for each graduate.

**Specifying pedagogical goals**

The importance of specifying pedagogical goals and the advantages of clearly-defined course objectives are summarised below:

1. Facilitates consistency in assessments and grading
2. Helps faculty plan consistent learning goals as well as interrelated contents and assessments
3. Determines effective practices and course materials
4. Shifts the emphasis from what to cover to what competencies should students have
5. Leads to a logical pedagogical structure
6. Improves communication among faculty
7. Encourages students to do self-evaluation
8. Facilitates efficient learning
9. Helps students understand how each course is related to the other

It is equally important to break down broad course objective statements to more specific ones in order to see the above-mentioned advantages. Furthermore, it is crucial to recognise and classify the objectives appropriately (e.g. cognitive versus affective) to meet the specific needs of the programme.

**Designing the learning experience**

Once the goals of the course are determined and defined, we begin to select and design pedagogical formats to optimise students’ learning experience. In many instances, the design of our courses is determined more by tradition, ease of implementation or our own comfort level rather than the alignment of pedagogical goals with classroom activities. As we design the learning experience for our students, we must not let our personal preferences eliminate effective pedagogical options. We may have to try new techniques or get help from external resources.

As Barr and Tagg (1995) aptly put it: we should move from the “instructional delivery system”, where “faculty are conceived primarily as disciplinary experts who impart knowledge by lecturing” to the “learning paradigm” which “conceives of faculty as primarily the designers of learning environments” where they “study and apply best methods for producing learning and student success.”

Three interrelated factors must be taken into consideration when selecting the most appropriate pedagogical approach for a given course:

1. The specific learning goals we want to attain.
2. The research on learning.
3. The pedagogical options available to us. These could include both structural options (e.g. lecture, small-group activities, out-of-class experiences) and technology options (e.g. media, computers).

This paper highlights the importance of setting specific pedagogical goals. Research on learning is an independent but pertinent topic that is beyond the scope of the current paper. However, it is important to read and learn the findings on pedagogical methods based on research so that we can design better learning experiences for our students (Gardiner, 1994). For example, teaching methods that take into account students’ diverse learning styles have
been found to be more effective. It was also determined that students’ motivation to learn is alterable; it can be affected by the task, the learning environment, the teacher and the learner himself. Furthermore, new information, when presented in meaningful and relevant ways is likely to be retained, learnt and used. Finally, many pedagogical options are available to faculty these days. The Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning facilitates the acquisition of such knowledge by organising regular courses and workshops.

Conclusion

In this short communication, we are reminded of the importance of planning and setting pedagogical goals in designing and enhancing students’ learning experience. While it is important to plan our module based on these concepts, it is also crucial to constantly align our pedagogical goals with classroom activities so as to enhance our students’ learning experience.

References
