

# *Experiencing an Active Learning Approach: From PhD Students and Their Professor's Perspective*

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**Abstract** - The main purpose of this study was to assess the reflection of PhD students on an active learning approach used by their professor who taught them the course qualitative research methods in education. Thirteen PhD students were participated in taking the course. Informal observations were made on the roles and activities of each student and the role played by the professor. Interviews (with general interview guide approach) were also conducted with five students. Furthermore, focus group discussion was made with five of the participants in order to triangulate the data. Finally, a very short interview was also conducted with the professor who handled the course. The findings of the study revealed that both the students and the professor did enjoy the approach used through out the course. Students enjoyed their participation, interaction, exchange of views and active involvements in holding responsibilities to learn from their own experience and the experience of others. They believe that they did get sufficient dosage of intellectual knowledge and experience from their professor to start critical thinking in constructing knowledge. The instructor also enjoyed the participation, interaction, maturity level of his students. He found his inputs directing the students towards the start of critical thinking.

**Keywords** - Active Learning Approach, PhD Students, Professor's Perspective.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The traditional lecture methods, in which professors /instructors/ talk and students listen, dominate the teaching approach of colleges and universities. The resistance to interactive instructional techniques among faculty has been high. As opposed to this however, research literature depicts that students must do more than just listening (read, write, discuss or be engaged in solving problems). In view of this, involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing plus engaging them in higher order thinking tasks such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation has become an attractive and convincing approach to a number of university professors (Chickering and Gamson, 1987).

Studies revealed that strategies which promote active learning are comparable to lecture in promoting the mastery of content but superior to lecture methods in promoting the development of students' skills in thinking and writing.<sup>1</sup>

Basically, active learning happens when students are given the opportunity to take a more interactive relationship with the subject matter of a course and encouraged to generate ideas, issues rather than simply to receive knowledge. In such an environment, professors are expected to play facilitating role rather than dictating the students learning.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ntlf.com/html/lib/bib/91-9dig.htm>

In practice, however, faculty members' resistance to use the active learning approach has been high and as a result the traditional approaches such as lecture method become dominating tradition of higher institutions in general and Addis Ababa University in particular. It is with this observation that I became fascinated to conduct a qualitative research on how PhD students reflect on the active learning approach that was used by the professor who taught them the course qualitative research methods in education. The course was conducted by a university professor who has affluent experience in teaching and research deeds both

within and out side Ethiopia. The students were recruited from higher education institutions of the country (lecturers in universities) except the one who was recruited from the MoND. Their diverse experience and profile in teaching and consultancy services did conceivably established promising impression to both the students and the professor.

## II. CONTEXT

We begin the course in a small room with bright light and well arranged sets. The wall of the room could indeed attract the eyes of everybody as photos of the earlier Deans of the Faculty of Education were posted on it. It was inspiring to gaze at them because of the individual's academic profile and its historical nature. The professor and some of the students who discern those individuals tried to describe them and how they came to such a position. Their photos were placed in chronological order. Some of the people who were Dean of the Faculty are not included in the order as commented by professor. It is a room serving as conference space for Academic Commission of the College now.

We did start the class after our instructor introduced his incredible personal experience which then followed by the introduction of each participant to the group. We agreed on the time schedule, expectations and the approach to be used. The next day we (the students) changed the arrangement of the sets into 'U' shape to have a face to face arrangement. This was welcomed by the professor. Presentations were supported by power point and the usual attempts to fix the computer were among the situations that charms the start of each session. Such a nice setting occasionally changed as we move to TDP room which was jam-packed by pieces of papers on the walls of the room. Under both settings the uses of power point presentation were common. We realized that some of the students were active enough in fixing and helping others in using technology.

## III. METHOD

The methods used to collect qualitative data in this study include: informal observation, interview (with general interview guide approach) and focus group discussion.

### *Participants*

Thirteen (twelve Educational Policy and Leadership and one Applied Developmental Psychology) PhD students were participated in taking the course qualitative research methods in education. Informal observations were made on the roles and activities of each student and the role played by the professor. Moreover, interviews (with general interview guide approach) were conducted with five

students. On top of this, focus group discussion was made with five PhD students in order to triangulate the data. Finally, a very short interview was also conducted with the professor who handled the course. All the participants involved in the program, the informal observation, interviews and group discussion were male, adults, full-fledged and highly experienced.

### *Design*

At least one group was responsible to present the summary and discussion points of a chapter. Hence, when a group of two members (some times only one person) presents the other participants raise questions, issues for further discussions and clarification. Hence, the informal observations were made on both categories plus the role played by the professor during each presentation. The interview was designed by using a general interview guide approach. Finally, focus group discussion was conducted on overall issues that are related to the approach used in handling the course.

### *Assessment*

Assessment was made through continuous observation and critical analysis of the reflection of participants by looking at their own roles, the roles played by the other participants and the instructor during each section and by gathering their reflection on the approach used. The validity and credibility of the research was checked by using triangulation of the three methods (informal observation, interview - with general interview guide approach - and the focus group discussion).

### *Procedures*

Issues that were informally observed in each and every session were recorded on daily basis. Activities and the role played by the students (presenters and audience of the day) and the role played by the professor were part of the daily record all the way through the course (with the exception of the presentation on chapter one). In fact, more and more details were taken from the final week interactions as I realized the need for an in-depth observation. The method employed was participant observation. After completing the informal observations, interviews (with general interview guide approach) were conducted with five students.

In conducting the interviews, first I did try to approach five participants who were to be interviewed. I explained the purpose of my study and the importance of their reflection to the study. We agreed on the schedule /appointments/ which was suitable to them. As a result, they gave me their reflection on how they looked at the approach

used in teaching the course, the role played by them and the role played by the other participants as well as the role played by the instructor. The selection of the five participants were purposive that was targeted to address participants who came from different higher education institutions as well as different departments.

Ideas and reflections of each interviewee were taken and jotted down systematically. Next to this, I did conduct group discussion to crosscheck the data gathered through informal observation and interviews. I also approached the professor in order to get his expectations and reflections on the approach used as well as on the role played by the students. Finally, ideas from the informal observation note and guided interviews were systematically organized and categorized into similar classifications by using cross case analysis which is then followed by case analysis. Cross cases analysis enabled me to categorize similar ideas that were gathered from various participants on the same issue (Patton, 1990).

#### **IV. RESULTS**

The primary sources of data in this study include: informal observation, interview (with general interview guide approach) and focus group discussion. The informal observation conducted throughout out the course (for about 15 days except one) clearly shows that the students were actively involved in presenting the task given to them (presenting the summary and discussion points from a chapter given to them), asking questions, responding to questions, generating ideas for further discussions, expressing their views and sharing their experiences. They were so curious. They do not scare to ask questions, express their views, oppose and support ideas; generate points for discussions and further explanations by exploring the experience of others. For instance, one of the participants did ask the instructor to enlighten us his experiences and exposure with regard to the major and practical problems that are related to data collection in our institutions by referring to the country and the specific university he works. That was an attempt to look at his professor's experience progressively and thereby to learn out of it. Some of them say this is what I raised for more discussion and reflection, my experience is this and that how about your experience? In general, from the informal observations made, it is possible to classify the major issues into three themes: the level of participation and interaction (between the students and the instructor, among the students), the role played by the instructor and the importance of experience and maturity level of the students for active learning.

In view of this, interviews were also made with five participants. The participant's response to the interviews conducted by using the general interview guide approach reflects the existence of high level of participation during the actual sessions. It also magnifies the extent to which constructive interaction (between the students and the instructor, among the students) did serve as a source of knowledge and the starting point of critical thinking by the students. Their reflection also focuses on the role played by the instructor. They witnessed that, the instructor did play marvelous role in facilitating the stage for more participation, interaction, free discussions, exchange of views and ideas in a very constructive way. Here again, I looked at the depiction of the interviewed participants' responses in describing the approach used in handling the course. The theme of their response can be safely categorized into the level of participation and interaction, the role of the professor and the experience of students. I also further structured the level of participation and interaction of the participants into the role of an individual participant (self evaluation) and the role played by the other participants. In supporting this, literature depict that active learning is multi- directional experience in which learning occurs teacher – to – student, student – to – teacher, and student – to- student.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.auc.edu/cte/activelearning/>

In one way or the other way, the participants tend to reflect their views in terms of their own role; the role played by the others (participants and instructor) as well as the experience of the instructor and the group as a whole.

**Individual role:** Each and every participant who was interviewed did start by evaluating their own role during the entire course. Everybody described his role as an active participant who involved in: asking questions, responding to questions, raising issues for further discussions and clarifications, expressing their views and taking responsibilities given to them. For instance, one of the interviewed participants described that: as a student I did attend, ask, and react to questions that were raised during the entire course. I feel that I had some limited inputs to the discussion. Similarly, the other interviewed participant described that my role as student was to be in class on time, involving in group work regularly, asking questions, expressing my views, commenting on, responding to questions and the discussion points raised.

**The role of the group:** they all agree that they did learn from the group immensely. Everybody has expressed the role played by the participants of the course as entirely

different and new experience. This was evidenced by the informal observation and the group discussion conducted. For some, it was very amazing that a number of participants were extremely active than their expectations. For instance, a participant who was highly interested by the nature and the role played by the group profoundly expressed his reflection as follows. It was very strange for me as I joined a group who were together for long. I really felt as an outsider. However, I found that, missing the other group and joining such a group was *a blessing in disguise* for me. I really felt home, very free to speak out and express my views. I developed very nice feeling toward the group, the instructor and the whole process. The group was very genuine, never undermine others, have respect to each other, no one was defensive, fault finder and pretended to seek recognition. Really, we were grown up adult and became accountable for our own learning. I believe that, the method used by the instructor was very innovative and appropriate to the group.

Similarly, the other interviewed participant described the role played by the group in the following way. I found my classmates highly interactive, well organized and above all ready to share their views and experience. That was what made my days bright on top of the teaching approach followed by the professor. I really enjoyed the diversity, experience, openness and confidence of the group.

**The role played by the professor:** Research suggested that the success of active learning requires knowledgeable faculty who can use alternative techniques and strategies for questioning and discussion (Hyman, 1980). In line with this, every interviewed participant agreed that the caliber, experience and practical exposure of the professor enabled the group to act with motivation, commitment and responsibility for their own learning. For instance, one of the interviewed participants described the role played by the professor in the following way. The instructor did manage to create an interactive stage. I found him as an excellent facilitator. He really had a clear understanding of what an adult learner means. He is very democrat. To be frank, we were the one who rather tend to behave as student. Of all, I never forget the extension of our discussions even when we had tea and coffee sharing the same table with our instructor. On the whole, I personal feel that we know the theory, we do teach but what I learned from this course is how to make it practical. It is really what I expect from a PhD level program and such a matured professor.

Similarly, the other interviewed participant portrayed the role played by the professor in the following way. The role

played by our instructor is indeed emanated from his own experience and exposure. He played the game by facilitating the stage. He gave life to the discussion by instigating new ideas, points of focus and special areas of attention. This enabled me to start rethinking and be conscious of views and ideas. At times I get confused as beginner researcher and fall back to my background. His words (ይህን ነገር በደምብ አይታችኋል?) remain with me. He was so democrat even in setting tasks to the group. I realized that doing even old things in a new way may not be inferior to innovation. The results of this study support the notion that faculty should create a supportive and emotional environment that encourage students to take risks in creating their own learning (Lowman, 1984).

**Reflection on the approach:** All of the interviewed participants confirmed that the approach used by the professor did enable them to take responsibilities for their own learning. They also believed that, the approach used by the instructor allow them to look at the various approaches critically. The reflections of all the interviewed participants were similar. However, some of them give due attention to the role played by the professor, others try to compare this approach with their experience while others became emotional in describing their feelings. For instance, one of the interviewed participants described his reflection to the approach used in the following way. The role of the professor was facilitating except for the first two days in which he presented some conceptual and theoretical foundations of research. The interaction between the students and the professor was so democratic that the students could express their feeling, interest and views without restraint. I found the professor as the one who is extremely friendly to all the students. I believe that this approach helped us to manage our time, understand the subject matter, conceptualize and evaluate our previous experiences.

A participant who tends to compare the other approaches with an active learning approach also reflected on the issues in the following way. I was among the students who actively involved in the discussions, learning from others, challenging views, sharing views, asking and answering questions. The participation of my classmate was very active and they were free to reflect their views. I feel that, the role of the professor was more of facilitating besides his contribution and reflections to the students' view. His approach was not the usual traditional approach. I sense that his approach may perhaps be used as a model to evaluate our conventional way of doing things including myself. The interaction among the group was exciting, constructive and

more academic. It was really educative that new ideas, experiences and views were expressed and even open the ways for more creative thinking and further discussions.

Now let us look at the percipient who did give due attention the beginning sessions. I am silent by nature. I do not usually speak out, ask and react to questions on the spot. I feel that this behavior was with me all the way through the course. However, occasionally I found my self deep involved. That was really happened due to the professor's approach which demands interaction of students by raising imperative questions. Ironically, he said I was not passive and I was in it. I was very active in listing, in thinking, in giving attention to the others view and interfere on ideas that I differ. I really get moving experience. Whether I speak or not I was deep inside it. It was new experience for me, considerably moving from the traditional lecture approach to a new experience.

The professor started by posing questions such as what is knowledge? What are the sources of knowledge? And how the individuals believe about the nature of knowledge may influence the way in which they try to acquire knowledge? For me these questions were through out the entire course. That was really a unique approach of starting a course. We did not have any readymade answers to reply, but to start thinking!

Here, the professor used one of the strategies to incorporate active learning into a classroom that is *think-pair-share* – give students time to think about a topic, issue or idea, turn to their neighbor for a short discussion, and then share the results with the rest of the group (Eggen and Kauchak, 2001). In doing so, an expert teachers go beyond threshold to construct lessons that help students learn content in a meaningful way. It is a matter of shaping a person's ability to make and defend conclusions based on evidence including an attitude of open-mindedness, tolerance for ambiguity, respect for others' opinions, the ability to separate relevant irrelevant information, and other attitude and disposition (Eggen and Kauchak, 2001). To this end, the method used by the professor in starting and winding up sessions with concluding remarks were memorial to every participant as I realized all the way through my informal observation. The notion is supported by the research reviews that the 1<sup>st</sup> step in an active learning is to select strategies that enhance student's participation and interaction in comfortable way (Lowman, 1984).

Finally, it is important to look at some emotional expressions directly taken from the words of the interviewed participant. He said, the role played by the

instructor was facilitating, encouraging interactions, briefings and showing the right directions (yet he was not in a position to impose his views). I found his activities well organized, timely, attractive and planned. He had very friendly interaction with his students. The students were at ease to express their views, to reflect their beliefs and to comment on the views of others without negative connotation. Who believes that we always had tea encircling a table with our instructor? That was a wonderful time we had, really a lesson for instructors who believe in far-off from their students! Of course I found the students highly matured, experienced, and friendly as well as open to each other. I believe that the approach used in handling this course could create commitment, hard work, interaction, and feeling of happiness on top of opening the doors for critical thinking.

A very short interview was also conducted with the professor who taught the course. The professor believed that he is also the product of the traditional system of our institutions. However, he said, through further training and exposures I started to believe in an active learning approach. He supposed that particularly in PhD level training it is important to focus on creating critical thinkers, thinkers who think about themselves, about issues and knowledge construction by enriching their lived experiences. He also said that students of such level should focus on critics of ideas, thinking model and values. His reflection on the participants of the course was amazing. He said the students were willing to participate, have rich experiences, well impressed, encouraged and fulfilled. He keeps on and said, I feel that the group was an elite group who had experience in teaching in higher education institutions and by working at the various levels of administrative positions. He also believed that he did create a good environment for more interaction and participation. In deed, his intention is to create critical thinkers and to look at how the businesses of education persuade in educational institutions for transition.

## **V. DISCUSSION**

No significant differences have been observed among the participants in explaining the nature of the group, their level of participation and interaction as well as the role of the instructor and on what they did learn from such an approach. In fact the degree of participation did differ from one participant to the other participant. This may be attributed to their previous experience and exposure to such an approach or it could due to their personal differences. What is common to all is however, everybody was active enough within the group. Perhaps this was the outcome of

the professor's approach or the nature of the group otherwise attributed to both factors. Amusingly, the findings of the study revealed that both the professor and the participants were extremely satisfied by the high level of participation and interaction as well as the role played by the professor as facilitator and resource person to the group in terms of experience and intellectual knowledge. Attractively, they also managed to cover the content of the course on time. This finding is in supporting of the existing literature that describes students learn more material, retain the information longer and enjoy the class more in an active learning approach. Such an approach helps the student to learn in the classroom with the help of the professor and other students than in his own (Eggen and Kauchak, 2001).

As revealed by the interview made with the professor who handled the course, the participation and involvement of the students was above his expectations. Essentially, in planning and interacting with students, professors are guided by their beliefs about what students need and their expectations about how students will respond if treated in particular ways. This situation supports previous research findings which describe that, the professor's beliefs about the academic ability, experience and the maturity of the students could influence the teaching method used (Brophy and Good, 2003). This is a scheme which supports the approach used by the professor in handling the course.

The general, the reflection of the participants and the professor were enthusiastic. However, it is very important to look at why the demise of the lecture method has long been predicted, and yet still remains the most widely used teaching method in higher education institutions. Some scholars endeavor to justify the lecture method in terms of its cost- effectiveness while others cite its compelling pedagogical reasons. They believe that the lecture method is absolutely an essential component of any course for providing background information, ideas, basic concepts, and methods required before the students become active participants in the discussion (Fry, Ketteridge and Marshall, 2004). This implies that, the various approaches of teaching could not be absolutely exclusive. The question of balancing this approach may depend upon the level of the program, the experience and background of the students and the experience of professors.

## **VI. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

In sum, the approach used by the professor in handling the course was an active learning approach. It was a deliberate act to address students of PhD level with rich experience and academic background. The focus was to

move forward the participants to the level of creative thinkers. This demands high level of participation and interaction between and among the students as well between the instructor and the students. In this regard, the success of an active learning approach desires creative ability and experience of the instructor. As witnessed by the students themselves, such an approach is a new experience for them. For instance, one of the participants in an interview described that this is entirely new experience to me and I guess for the others too. However, surprisingly we all became active and responsible for our learning under the guidance of our instructor. This implies that the art and science used by the instructor in handling a course is vital in addition to the level of the program and the maturity level of the students. Research findings also described that active learning requires careful and thoughtful planning to overcome the potential risks people tend to attach with active learning (limited class time, a possible increase in performance time and large class size and etc. (Hyman, 1980; Lowman, 1984).

To sum up, both the students and the professor did take pleasure in the approach used through out the course. The students enjoyed their participation, interaction, exchange of views and active involvement in shouldering responsibilities to learn from their own experience and the experience of others. They believe that they did get sufficient dosage of intellectual knowledge and experience from their professor to start critical thinking for constructing meaningful knowledge. The instructor also enjoyed from the high level of participation, interaction, maturity and their move towards critical thinking.

## **VII. LIMITATIONS**

The intent of this study was to get the reflection of PhD students on an active learning approach from their own experience. In view this, addressing each and every participant by using different methods in qualitative research is very vital. However, due to the time constraint it was not possible to interview all participants. Evidently, the interview results may not reflect the idea of those participants who were not included in the interview and the focus group discussion. Hence, there could be some particular cases that should be addressed in order to generalize the reflection of all the students. Moreover, such studies do require time and serious follow up and review of significant literature.

## VIII. IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

This study suggests that the realization of active learning depends on both the maturity and experience of students as well as the experience and capacity of the instructor. Involving students in doing things and critical thinking about what they are doing, require experience (Chickering and Gamson, 1987). The kind and level of the program also matters. Creating pragmatic mix of an active learning approach with some traditional methods of teaching such as lecture method requires further investigation. The reality is however, students of higher level such as PhD could get more scholastic knowledge through critical thinking, participation, high level of interaction and independent work guided by experienced and knowledgeable professors. Hence, self search is very vital for institutions like Addis Ababa University to fit with the dynamic academic environment. Hence, it is important to identify the common barriers of institutional change (influence of educational tradition, faculty self-perceptions and self- definition of roles) to respond to the current call for reform. Above, all this study implies that faculty member should engage in self-reflection, exploring his or her personal readiness to experiment with alternative approaches to interaction.

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## Appendix 1

### Guideline for Interview Questions Conducted With 5 PhD Students

1. How do you define your participation and the participation of others during the entire course? **(the level of participation)**
2. How did you get the role played by the instructor (professor) in handling the course? **(the role of the instructor or professor)**
3. How do you evaluate the interaction between the professor and students as well as among students during the entire course? **(Interaction)**
4. What new things did you learn from the method/s or approach/s used by the professor in handling the course? (What differences were there from the usual approach? **(experience gained and lessons learnt)**