Variations in Decision-making Approach to Tertiary Teaching: A Case Study in Vietnam

Thanh Tien Nguyen
EdD. Haiphong Private University, Vietnam, *thanh.nt@hpu.edu.vn*

Although the question of what to teach and how to teach has received much attention from the literature, little was known about the way in which academics in teaching groups make decision on what and how to teach. This paper reports an analysis of variations in the decision-making approach to tertiary teaching through academics' practices of designing course syllabuses, teaching, and assessing student learning. The study was conducted in three Faculties of business administration of three Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Vietnam and three different patterns of decision-making approach to tertiary teaching, namely as (i) the Given Framework, (ii) the Closed Framework, and (iii) the Open Framework, were found.

INTRODUCTION

Research into academics' educational beliefs (Hativa & Goodyear, 2002; Williams & Burden, 1997) and conceptions (Bruce & Gerber, 1995; Kember, 1997; Prosser, Trigwell, & Taylor, 1994) has consistently indicated that what academics think and believe about teaching and student learning, more than anything else, determines their teaching practices. Examining 13 studies in the field, Kember (1997) categorized academics' conceptions of teaching onto a continuum from teacher-centred to student centred. Other researchers such as Nguyen and Tran (2009) or Jones (2014) argued that academics' conceptions of student learning play a vital role in their teaching practices. Nguyen and Tran (2009) and Tran, Nguyen and Nguyen (2011) further reconceptualised academics' conceptions of student learning into four categories ranging from teacher-centred to student-centred ones (see Table 1). These researchers called for an improvement in tertiary teaching quality by making a real change in academics' conceptions of teaching and student learning to more advanced ones, i.e. student-centred conceptions.

Table 1: Academics' conceptions of student learning in categories

Dimensions	Academics' conceptions of student learning in categories			
	Storing and recalling atomised information	*Reproducing understanding*	*Reorganising and modifying knowledge*	*Change-in-the-way-of-thinking*
Intended learning outcomes	To recall atomised information	To reproduce understandings of given knowledge	To reorganise and modify knowledge	To change the way of thinking to create new knowledge and appreciate different view points
Expected use of knowledge	To deal with tests mainly	To solve standard problems	To solve unforeseen problems	To value different beliefs and viewpoints in order to live together
Academic-student interaction	Presenter - Passive recipient	Presenter - Active recipient	Facilitator - Critical learner	Challenger - Lifelong learner

←————————————————————————————————————→
Teacher-centred   Student-centred

To improve the quality of teaching and learning in higher education, a number of institutional attempts have been made to change academics' conception of teaching and student learning through stand-alone professional development programmes (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Ho, Watkins, & Kelly, 2001; Knight & Trowler, 2000; Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne, & Nevgi, 2008; Tran, 2012). Although these empirical studies have provided somewhat promising evidence to support the use of professional programmes, many participants in these studies have not made any changes in their teaching practices. Any institutional attempts to change academics' conceptions of teaching and student learning, therefore, should not be in devoid of teaching contexts, in particular collegial relationships (Trowler & Bamber, 2005) because teaching context has an undeniable impact on academics' teaching approaches (Hockings, 2005; Lindblom-Ylanne, Trigwell, Nevgi, & Ashwin, 2006; Trowler & Knight, 2000).

Research in the field has indicated that how academics work together to make their decision on what and how to teach is best revealed through their daily activities in their teaching groups or departments. It is because academic teaching groups or departments are seen as the basic operating units in an organisation (Clark, 1987) as the homes where academics live and work (Harrington, 1977), or as a unit of change (Wieman, Perkins, & Gilbert, 2010). Thus, how academics work together to make the decision has been explored from disciplinary differences (Kekäle, 1999) or from team-teaching perspectives (Benjamin, 2000), and academics' perceptions of leadership (Martin, Trigwell, Prosser, & Ramsden, 2003).

Kekäle's (1999) study, for example, was conducted in two Finnish universities to investigate how academics worked together in eight Faculties representing the

disciplines of sociology, history, biology and physics. Four patterns found in her study were: (i) important decisions were made collectively and democratically in open discussions among academics; (ii) every academic was assumed to be on their own, and so the decisions were left to individuals; (iii) important decisions were made on the basis of discussion, with much emphasis on the close interaction among academics; (iv) exact knowledge, management were appreciated, and an accurate, well-working, straight-forward leadership and management were expected by the academics. Four patterns identified in her study were assumed to be resulted from the disciplinary difference and the issue left unexamined was the difference in the ways academics perceive teaching and learning.

Based on academics' engagement with the literature of teaching and learning, their teaching reflection, collaboration, the scope of communication, and conceptions of teaching, Benjamin (2000) identified two rather distinctive styles of teamwork between five groups of university teachers working in teaching teams from different disciplines. The first one, which was more teacher-focused, that is, there was less communication and discussion about teaching, and the intention of teaching team was seen as an opportunity to share workload. The second was more student-focused and collaborative, that is, ideas about and practice of teaching were communicated and shared, and the intention of teaching team was to improve teaching and/or student learning. Similar to what has been found in Kekäle's study, the different styles of teamwork was explained as the disciplinary difference. What was not clear in Benjamin's study was the role of the Heads of teaching groups in making the decisions related to teaching.

Martin et al. (2003), on the other hand, investigated variations in academics' perceptions of leadership exercised by Heads of department and subject coordinators in their department. In their study, four types were identified based on the decisions on what and how to teach: (i) there was little experience of leadership and management by academics as there was little need for change in teaching; (ii) the decisions were imposed upon academics in a teaching team by authorised people; (iii) the decisions were made through negotiations between the authorised people and the academics in a teaching team; (iv) the decisions were made through internal collaboration between the academics in a teaching team. Martin et al. (2003) has indicated that there was a positive relationship between academics' perceptions of the subject coordinators' leadership as collaborative and these teachers' approaches to teaching as student-centred. However, in their study, two questions remained unanswered: (i) why did two academics perceive teaching as conceptual change but perceive leadership as non-collaborative; (ii) why did eight academics perceive teaching as information transmission but perceive leadership as collaborative. In addition, interaction among academics in each department appeared to be overlooked in Martin et al. (2003). In a recent study, Bryant, Niewolny, Clark, and Watson (2014) have emphasised that collaboration in teaching could be interpreted differently in different teaching contexts and called for further research into this issue.

It is clear that an academic's teaching practice depends on not only his/her thinking and belief about teaching and student learning but also his/her teaching context. However, how academics work together in a teaching context and with the Heads of their teaching

groups to make decisions on what and how to teach have not been well studied. The focus of the current study was to address this issue by investigating the interaction among these people to make their decisions.

METHOD

This case study was conducted in three Faculties of business in three HEIs in Vietnam, of which one was a non-public institution, the other was a public institution, and the remaining belonged to a national university. These HEIs hereafter were given pseudonyms as UniA, UniB, and UniC. Participants chosen for this study were the academics of these three Faculties because academics are the best people who can reveal collaborative approaches to their departments and university administration (Bryant et al., 2014). Their teaching practices may reflect the values and shared belief in the group which they are most closely aligned with (Viskovic, 2006).

The selection of participants for this study was carried out in two stages to maximise the variation of the participants in each Faculty. In the first stage, a questionnaire, asking academics to choose the situation/s when they felt most satisfied in teaching, was sent out to all full-time academics working in each Faculty of business. Thirty six academics responded (accounting to 49%): six from UniA, 23 from UniB and seven from UniC. After analysing respondent's replies, two broad categories were identified: (i) Group A: those who felt most satisfied when students had many different explanations to an issue; and/or, students sometimes disagreed with their explanations; (ii) The other ones belong to Group B, who felt most satisfied when students silently concentrated on their lectures and/or students accepted their answer to an issue as the final solution for their debates. In the second stage, two randomly chosen academics from each Faculty, each from either Group A or Group B, were further invited for an in-depth, face-to-face interview. In total, five academics from three Faculties took part in the interview; hereafter each of them was given pseudonyms named after their institutions as UniA1, UniA2, UniB1, UniB2, and UniC1. In case of UniC, only one academic was available for the interview.

In order to investigate how the academics worked together and with their Dean to make decisions on what and how to teach, the interview questions focused on the way in which teaching materials of their course were designed and approved; the way they addressed and solved their teaching issues. The interview with each academic was audio-taped, transcribed verbatim and then imported into Nvivo for analysis.

To examine academics' thinking about teaching and learning, it is necessary to explore the relationship between their professed views and their actual practice (Thompson, 1992). Thus, before conducting the interviews, each participant was asked to provide their teaching materials, samples of recently used assessment tasks. These sources provided corroborating evidence to triangulate the data.

As a case study conducted at one point in time, the current study was limited by several aspects, including the limited number of cases and the lack of prolonged engagement. The fact that thirty-six academics responded to the questionnaire and only five academics were selected for the interviews limited the generalisability of the current

study's findings. Another limitation was the lack of prolonged engagement (Lincoln & Guba, 1986) since the interviews were one-off and of between 45 and 60 minutes.

RESULTS

Three patterns of the decision-making approach to tertiary teaching have emerged from data analysis of the study: (i) the Given Framework, (ii) the Closed Framework, and (iii) the Open Framework (Table 2). Each framework was indicative of a foundation, in which a particular decision on what and how to teach was made in a particular teaching group.

Table 2: Three Patterns of the Decision-making Approach to Tertiary Teaching

	Decision-making approach to tertiary teaching		
	Given Framework	*Closed Framework*	*Open Framework*
	Imposed upon individual academic by people in authority	Internally agreed in teaching group	Externally and internally co-constructed and shared
Role of authorised people	To ensure what and how to teach and assess learning are unchanged	To model and advise what and how to teach and assess learning	To provide opportunities for discussions and debates about what and how to teach and assess learning
Collaboration	None	Consensus-based	Different-viewpoints-based
Shared conceptions of student learning	Storing and recalling atomised information/ Reproducing understanding	Reproducing understanding	Reorganising and modifying knowledge

Given Framework

In the Given Framework, it is believed that what and how to teach is unchanged over time and the authorised people are seen as the gatekeepers to preserve previous teaching models. What and how to teach and assess student learning are imposed on academics through the process of informing and approving course syllabuses and assessment tasks.

> In fact, these course objectives… [the basis] is given to me by the university. (UniA2)

> …he [the Dean] reminded me before designing the assessment tasks that I should design like that, should pay attention to this part…. Students who had learnt by heart should deserve five… who were better should have nine or ten… that I should design such assessment tasks according to these standards. And I tried to follow. (UniA2)

The need for collaboration in teaching among academics, even among academics in the same course division, is not evident in this teaching context. The purpose of having discussion with other academics is mainly about identifying the weight of topics, which have been presented and to ensure the inclusion of certain topics in the assessment tasks for the end-of-term tests. There could be hardly discussion about reviewing and revising the course syllabus in general, and course objectives in particular.

> An academic might have focused on this part; the other academic might have focused on a different part. But the most important element is that just before releasing examination papers these academics should talk to each other about which parts the test should be based on (UniA1).

Academics who share this Given Framework assume that "the Faculty's curriculum framework must be complied with" (UniA2) and that they should always strictly follow this common framework. Therefore, previous teaching materials and typical samples of teaching are used as the given frameworks, which academics are expected to follow unquestioningly.

> It [the course] has been still based on the basics given from the Faculty, the standards given from the Faculty, and I added on a few more things. (UniA1)

> In general, they [people in authority] have instructed me that I should teach similarly to what Mrs… had used. The framework, like the course syllabus, should also follow the previous academic's course syllabus; and I should only add something new to it when it is necessary. (UniA2)

As a result, university teachers working in this framework expect their students to remember and repeat what have given to them or to explain things in the given ways. Students' new ways of thinking or ideas to solve the problems are less likely to be welcomed by these academics.

> Oh, students were not allowed to use any of the learning materials while taking the exam…. It was because the answers were in the books and in the lectures also. If they had been allowed to use these materials, they would have copied and copied all. (UniA1)

> In fact, that guy [her student] was excellent…. I had to give him half of the mark because I could not crack his argument; I did not have enough knowledge to crack. (UniA2)

Confined in the Given Framework, it appears that the way academics approach to teaching and learning is towards teacher-centred.

Closed Framework

In the Closed Framework, it is believed that what and how to teach and assess student learning needs to be discussed and decided by consensus among academics, who are seen as experts of the field. In this framework, authorised people such as the Head of a course division, the Head of a teaching group, and the Dean of a Faculty, are expected

to set the foundation for the consensus as these people are considered more senior than others:

> Our Dean is an open and updated person. He was well trained overseas. …so he was the first person who has applied modern methods and technologies in teaching, in encouraging discussion in the class. It was not like us in the past when we only preached and lectured. Now our Dean was the first one, and then we as the young teachers just followed his modelling. (UniB1)

> The Head of the teaching group produces some drafts of a course syllabus. Academics in the teaching group discuss these drafts and come to an agreement to choose one syllabus to be used officially in the teaching. (UniB2)

Teaching and assessing student learning are likely to be straightforward processes because academics in this framework can easily come to an agreement. Consensus in a teaching group is often emphasised and considered as the best way to deal with any issue during teaching and assessing student learning. Debates among members of a teaching group as well as with members from other groups are not a common practice.

> For example, the Head of the teaching group assigned two academics to mark the exams of this class; I marked them and handed to the second academic.… Almost all of us are rather harmonious in thinking, so the disagreement in marking has never happened. (UniB1)

> Academics in the teaching group have many viewpoints but they are complementary to each other or rather similar in essence, and only a small number of us have slightly different viewpoints. Nevertheless, in general we did agree with each other when it came to these course objectives and syllabus. (UniB2)

As a result, working in this teaching context, academics tend to be conservative in thinking about teaching and assessment of student learning. They emphasise their teaching group's consensus and do not look for opportunities to debate with outsiders or even insiders in their groups about new ideas and different viewpoints, especially when they believe that only someone who is professionally working in the discipline could contribute to the content taught in the course. Comments on their teaching and assessing materials from academics in other Faculties are regarded as "little and not worth mentioning" (UniB2).

Academics in this framework see themselves superior than their students and they "must be the person to give out the right answer, like a judge" (UniB2). Students, in turn, were expected to explain, apply, and analyse in certain ways given by the academics.

> These things students had learnt in the class. They had learnt in the class and had studied some related practical problems; for instance, this matrix, we had instructed students how to apply it. If students had learnt by heart, they could do these things easily. (Uni B1)

It is unlikely for these academics to hold the student-centred conceptions of teaching and learning, characterised by valuing differences in viewpoints and encouraging discussion and debate.

Open Framework

In the Open Framework, it is believed that knowledge is co-constructed by different people and people in authority are seen as agents responsible for creating and providing opportunities for academics to have their viewpoints about teaching and learning expressed in discussions and debates. A group of reviewers often established in order to provide such opportunities where they can discus, argue, and debate on a teaching or assessing material.

> In short, after the process of such reviews… the Chairman of the Committee concluded what needed to be changed and what was OK; and concluded about the possible course syllabus, which could be sent to the students later. And you had to comply with what had been reviewed by these people. (UniC1)

In this context, decisions are not imposed by people in authority. These are the results of a process of meaningful and rational arguments and debates.

> …I felt that they based their views on their teaching practices, possibly in other courses but related to my course. Their arguments were based on their own viewpoints about teaching methods, the ways of teaching, and this led to some conflicts or debates. (UniC1)

> The main point was that it [the decision] entirely depended on your arguments… in that review meeting. (UniC1)

Being in this framework, academics highly appreciate collaboration in teaching and assessing student learning. Therefore, teaching materials, such as a course syllabus, are products of collaboratively designing process not only among academics in a course division, but also with people from different course divisions, different Faculties, even from managers inside and possibly outside an institution.

> If it [the course] had been yours, just your viewpoint… when it had not been developed by many people's heads… may be it could not have been better. (UniC1)

In this teaching context, teachers' conceptions of student learning are likely to be challenged and changed towards the directions of the ones, which underpin student-centred approaches to teaching. The change in teacher's thinking about teaching and learning is his/her thinking about learning opportunities for students, their ability to apply knowledge and solve different problems in the practice.

> Previously, I thought that I should assign students to solve practical tasks embedded with theories. But now, I realised that theoretical and inference question is also rather necessary, not just only situation-based task. (UniC1)

> …applying this [theoretical and inference question] could help you to have different solutions to many situations… (UniC1)

As a result, working in this teaching context, teachers tend to be more open-minded in thinking about teaching and assessment of student learning. They expect students to have different solutions to a problem.

> Their solutions must be most appropriate in the given situation. Of course, their solutions can differ from what I have thought, but they are OK when I feel that the arguments are convincing. (UniC1)

Academics in the Open Framework live with the assumption that what and how to teach in a course should be co-constructed by different people across the borders of a teaching group. This co-construction is typically exercised through discussions, debates, and the critiques of ideas about teaching and student learning. The final decision about what and how to teach in a course does not depend on any individual, but on how different people are persuaded by the arguments. The data suggests that, in the Open Framework, academics are active in the change process, where their knowledge and viewpoints are acknowledged by others. They are responsible for not only implementing but also recommending changes to an approved course syllabus. Living in this Open Framework, academics' conceptions of student learning tend to be in line with the ones that set a foundation for student-centred approaches to teaching.

DISCUSSIONS

Exploring the ways in which academics and academic leaders interact with each others, the current study has identified three patterns of decision-making approach to tertiary teaching in the context of higher education in Vietnam, i.e. (i) Given Framework, (ii) Closed Framework, and (iii) Open Framework. Each framework is based on the dominant conception of student learning, academics' collaboration, and the role of academic leaders.

In the Given Framework, both academics and people in authority tend to believe that knowledge is "out there", proven by lengthy time of use, and seen as an instrument to help people to manipulate the external environment. Researchers, such as Habermas (1971) and Cranton (2006) have used the term "instrumental knowledge" to describe this assumption. As a result, people in authority impose previous model of teaching and assessing students on his/her teaching staff. Besides, teacher-centred conceptions of student learning appear to be dominant, and collaboration as well as change in teaching are unlikely to be welcomed and exercised.

In the Closed Framework, the validity of "out there" knowledge is shown by a common understandings in terms of a "common language" that Cranton (2006) and Mezirow (1997) have addressed it as a communicative instrument to help people to understand each other. Therefore, each academic in a teaching group is assumed to be one of the top experts due to their expertise about a "common language" related to the course and the discipline. In addition, comments from outsiders are unlikely to be taken up because of the belief that these people do not understand "our language". Responsibility in teaching

turns into delivering common understandings to students to make them members of the discipline.

Unlike the two patterns above, in the Open Framework both academics and people in authority tend to believe that what and how to teach should be co-constructed by different people with different viewpoints through discussions, debates, and arguments, regardless of the managerial boundaries. It is the role of the authorised people to create opportunities for academics to discuss and debate about teaching and student learning.

The current study challenged the assumption in Benjamin (2000) and Kekäle (1999) that the difference in the patterns of decision-making approach in teaching groups was due to the disciplinary difference. It argued that the variations in patterns of decision-making approach can be apparent in the teaching groups of the same discipline as a result of the differences in their shared conceptions of teaching and learning.

Although collaboration in teaching is necessary (Knight & Trowler, 2000; Martin et al., 2003; Merton, Froyd, Clark, & Richardson, 2009), the current study argued that the existence of collaborations in teaching is not always associated with a student-centred approach. Collaborations exercised through arguments and debates in an Open Framework are more likely to facilitate a change to student-centred approach to teaching than the collaborations based on consensus exercised in a Closed Framework. The style of collaboration and the kinds of actions it involves for the participants are then crucial.

The study also suggested that a professional development programme for academics, regardless of how extensive it is, should be accompanied by a systematic change to an Open Framework where people are encouraged to discuss and debate how to implement the contemporary theories into their own practices of teaching and other related issues. The participation of people from different contexts such as academics of other teaching groups or institutions, employers, students, alumni etc... may bring about opportunities for academics to challenge and develop their conceptions of teaching and learning. In addition, more autonomy and support from the Head of a teaching group could play a decisive role in the academics' transition towards student-centered practices of teaching.

Academics make their judgments not by simply reading policy manuals, but by observing the practices of recruitment, recognition, rewards, promotion, and so forth (Cox, McIntosh, Reason, & Terenzini, 2011). Therefore, the policies in use that support for each of the above patterns of the decision-making approach to tertiary teaching could be subjects for further research in order to provide broader and more insightful understandings of stabilisation or transition of the three frameworks.

Acknowledgement

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Turkish Abstract

Üçüncü Derece Öğretime Karar Verme Yaklaşımında Farklılıklar: Vietnam'da Bir Vaka İncelemesi

Literatürde ne öğretileceği ve nasıl öğretileceği sorusu oldukça ilgi çekmesine ragmen, akademisyenlerin bu konudaki karar verme yolları konusunda çok az şey bilinmektedir. Bu çalışma üçüncü derece öğretimde karar verme yaklaşımındaki farklılıkların analizini akademisyenlerin müfredat tasarımı, öğretim ve öğrenci öğrenmesi değerlendirmesi uygulaması aracılığıyla yapmıştır. Bu çalışma Vietnam'da üç yükseköğretim kurumu işletme yönetimi fakültesinde yürütülmüştür ve (i) Verilen Çerçeve, (ii) Kapalı Çerçeve ve (iii) Açık çerçeve olarak üç farklı karar verme yaklaşımı bulunmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: akademik liderlik, Vietnam yükseköğretimi, öğretim yaklaşımı, öğretim çerçevesi, öğretimde işbirliği

French Abstract

Variations dans Approche de Prise de décisions à Enseignement Tertiaire: Une Étude de cas au Viêt-Nam

Bien que la question de ce qu'enseigner et comment enseigner ait reçu beaucoup d'attention de la littérature, ait peu connu de la façon dont les universitaires dans des groupes enseignants prennent la décision sur qu'et comment enseigner. Ce papier rapporte une analyse de variations dans l'approche de prise de décisions à l'enseignement tertiaire par les pratiques des universitaires de concevoir des programmes de cours, l'enseignement et l'apprentissage d'étudiant d'évaluation. L'étude a été conduite dans trois Facultés d'administration d'entreprises de trois Institutions d'Enseignement supérieur (HEIs) au Viêt-Nam et trois modèles différents d'approche de prise de décisions à l'enseignement tertiaire, à savoir comme (i) l'Étant donné le Cadre, (ii) le Cadre Fermé et (iii) le Cadre Ouvert, ont été trouvé.

Mots Clés: leadership universitaire, enseignement supérieur au Viêt-Nam, enseignant approche,enseignant cadre, collaboration à enseignement

Arabic Abstract

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الاختلافات في نهج صنع القرار لتعليم العالي: دراسة حالة في فيتنام

على الرغم من أن مسألة ما يجب تعليمه وكيفية تدريس تلقى اهتماما كبيرا من الأدب، والقليل كان معروفا عن الطريقة التي الأكاديميون في مجموعات التدريس جعل قرار بشأن ما وكيفية تدريس. تقدم هذه الورقة تحليلا من الاختلافات في نهج صنع القرار في التدريس الجامعي من خلال الممارسات الأكاديميين تصميم المناهج بطبيعة الحال، وتعليم، وتقييم تعلم الطلبة. وقد أجريت الدراسة في ثلاث كليات إدارة الأعمال من ثلاث مؤسسات التعليم العالي (HEIs) في فيتنام وثلاثة أنماط مختلفة من نهج للتعليم العالي، وهي على النحو (ا) the Given Framework ، (ب) the Closed Framework ، و (ج) the Open Framework، تم العثور عليها.

كلمات البحث: القيادة الأكاديمية، التعليم العالي في فيتنام، نهج التدريس، إطار التدريس ،التعاون في مجال التدريس.

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