

Teachers as Learners: Exploring the Role of Course Structure on Learners' Agency

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Abstract: Faculty members at higher education institutions are often recruited based on their subject-matter expertise, whereas less attention is paid to building other skills that are required to tackle teaching-learning challenges that arise as a part of the profession. In this paper, we draw insights from a student-led course at a technical institute in India aimed at enhancing teaching beliefs by prompting deep pedagogical thinking of future faculty members through 14 post-course surveys and four semi-structured interviews. The findings highlight specific course structures that enabled participants to exercise agency: deep pedagogically engaged course topics, autonomy in connecting personal experiences to course topics, informal peer discussions for co-constructing ideas, and post-class journaling for critical reflection.

Keywords: participatory design, learner-centred knowledge, teaching

1. Introduction

Instructors in higher-education institutions are often selected into the profession with strong research skills, but they often lack proper training to shape their attitude and address other challenges that occur in the classroom (Jain, 2007). As a result, most teachers struggle to understand and adapt to the role as a facilitator, and facilitate student-centred instructional design and student engagement strategies (O'Neill & McMahon, 2005). It affects motivation and the overall experience of students. Therefore, teacher training programs are needed to promote reflective teaching that is necessary to adapt to rapidly changing educational contexts. Teacher training programs are crucial not only for enhancing pedagogical competence but also for fostering the right professional attitudes that align with learner-centred, outcome-based education. Zeng (2020) highlights that when teachers engage in experience-based peer discussion, they gain insights into different pedagogical strategies and internalise their beliefs through comparing and reflecting on their own experiences. This dialogic process facilitates conceptual change and motivates teachers to refine teacher beliefs (Yang & Xiaochen, 2022). If the structure of a course is overly rigid, content-heavy, or teacher-directed, it limits opportunities for student-teachers to reflect, question, and contribute meaningfully, which are key dimensions of exercising agency (Priestley et al., 2015). In this paper, our research goal is to understand whether a student-centered course structure that was floated to build teaching skills in India helped learners to exercise their agency in learning and to refine their teaching beliefs.

2. Data and Methodology

The study is conducted at the Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay, a premier technical institute in India that caters to a wide range of students from various socio-economic backgrounds who are selected through strict selection criteria. The course was designed by the instructor together with the learners. Students proposed topics and reacted to peers' ideas, and the most-voted topic was selected prior to the class. The topics ranged from identifying teacher practices from case studies, mental health challenges, to the conceptualization of challenges and benefits of generative AI in teaching-learning practices.

The course was rolled out for 8 weeks between January to March 2025. Past and present PhD students and postdocs associated with the Centre for Educational Technology were invited to attend the pilot course voluntarily. The learners were also asked to fill in their post-class reflections in a web-based journal, select their peer groups and engage in discussions.

We use data from a post-course questionnaire and interviews for this paper. The learners reflected on their experience with the course. They expressed their experience by ranking their experience on a five-point Likert scale. Out of the enrolled 31, 14 filled out the questionnaire. We acknowledge the fact that more motivated learners are more likely to voluntarily fill out a questionnaire, creating possible bias.

Based on the responses, researcher 1 conducted a semi-structured interview with 4 learners. The data collected as part of the survey are represented in terms of reflecting the participants' profiles and experiences as learners in this course. Researcher 1 read and coded the responses according to their alignment with one of these four structural components following Braun and Clarke (2006). Following this, researcher 2 cross-verified the analysis. This study employed a qualitative multi-phase analysis, combining both content analysis and thematic analysis to explore how course structure enabled students to exercise agency in peer group discussions and refine their teaching beliefs.

3. Result

In this section, we combine the findings from the post-course survey and interviews. The topics covered in the course were defined by the learners together with the instructor. In the sample, 14% of the learners had no teaching experience, whereas the rest had different levels of experience, with a maximum of 10 years. The topics revolved around common challenges faced by higher-education instructors, or the topics presented the learners with scenarios that would help them reflect on their (teacher) beliefs.

The classes followed a structure that was based on discussion and exploration in peer groups. Almost 57% of the learners had never or rarely attended a student-led course before, making it a new experience for them. Interviews revealed that co-designing the course made the learners feel empowered. Although the learners had the choice to propose topics, this structure was not consistently observed across the course, which could have been the result of the student composition and their inexperience in attending student-led lectures. In the absence of learner-led topics, the instructor proposed a topic which were discussed in the class. The instructor gave agency to the learners to choose their peer groups for discussion, but only 43% of the sample reported that they chose their peer groups; yet, 93% reported being heard by their peers, and 57% reported that their experience was always or often similar to that of their peers.

When learners were not confined within the rigid interpretation of the topic, they connected the topic with their emotional and philosophical experiences, not just cognitively but personally. This autonomy created a space for reflective agency and identity expression, which were essential for meaningful belief development (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). Akkerman and Meijer (2011) emphasise that teacher identity is dynamic and dialogical, constructed through participation, negotiation, and reflection. The instructor did not engage in the peer discussions; rather, they allowed the learners to shape the discussion and reflect and strengthen their (teacher) beliefs, and find implementable contextual solutions to different challenges. Although class participation was voluntary, the learners participated owing to their prior familiarity with the teacher, peers, and their interest in the course structure. The familiarity with the peers' discussion could also be occurring from the nature of the questions discussed in the classes, like the role of teachers in classrooms, teacher's actions when faced with learners with learning differences and mental health challenges, and the use of (generative) AI and the role of teacher in the era of (generative) AI, which has spillovers to other professions. Mahmood et al. (2023) showed in an empirical study that peer comfort and psychological safety are essential for engaging in critical educational dialogue to promote relational agency. In a similar line, Zembylas & Schutz (2009) also discuss how

emotional safety and belonging are crucial for open discourse, especially in emotionally charged or critical topics. Our findings are in the same line that familiarity and safety enhanced discussions and helped learners exercise their agency.

Interviews also revealed that specific features of the course, such as the ability to propose topics, drive discussions, critically engage in topical issues that are not covered by disciplinary knowledge, provided a freedom where they could think critically, engage meaningfully with peers, redefine their beliefs and share their co-constructed beliefs among the other groups. When students are given freedom to select or interpret course topics with their personal experiences, it fosters a strong sense of ownership and authenticity in the topic's dimension selection. The learners also shared that reflecting and documenting their learning played a critical role in shaping their teacher beliefs. This is in line with the literature that this promotes deeper processing and facilitates belief refinement by giving students the time and freedom to revisit what resonated, what challenged them, and what they might carry into future practice, hence exercising their metacognitive agency (Farrell et al, 2013).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

We explore whether courses that are co-designed by instructors and learners are helpful in influencing learners to refine their teaching beliefs and exercise agency. We use a post-class reflective survey and data from interviews to address our questions. The findings of the study emphasise the importance of courses that build on teachers' real-life experiences, promote reflection and are embedded in the local contexts. While our results hold for this specific cohort of learners, we acknowledge the limitation that self-selection of learners into completing the reflective survey could have bias. Future research with a broader group of teachers would help us test the external validity of the results.

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