



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF  
EDUCATION, PSYCHOLOGY  
AND COUNSELLING  
(IJEPC)

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## UNLOCKING MEANINGFUL HIGHER EDUCATION: A CONCEPTUAL EXPLORATION INTO THE TRIARCHIC CONNECTION OF KNOWLEDGE, TEACHING AND LEARNING

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### Article Info:

#### Article history:

Received date: 27.11.2023

Revised date: 10.12.2023

Accepted date: 09.01.2024

Published date: 01.03.2024

#### To cite this document:

Shaari, A., & Morat, B. N. (2024). Unlocking Meaningful Higher Education: A Conceptual Exploration Into The Triarchic Connection Of Knowledge, Teaching And Learning. *International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling*, 9 (53), 40-49.

DOI: 10.35631/IJEPC.953005

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### Abstract:

The term education generally constitutes knowledge delivery and attainment activities. Enabling an individual to both gain and exercise knowledge, the processes of teaching and learning have remained the backbone of the education milieu. A major challenge is how to translate the concepts of knowledge, teaching and learning into producing meaningful education. The effort requires a closer look into understanding the connection between such concepts in a constructive manner. Instead of viewing teaching and learning as merely a physical process of imparting, absorbing and regurgitating knowledge between educators and learners as what Paulo Freire terms as 'banking education', this paper aims at highlighting the three educational fundamentals and their connectedness to one another in the voice of emancipating education. It is anticipated to be significant to several educational stakeholders like educators, parents and learners, especially in recognising the real potential of an individual and education, when knowledge, teaching and learning should no longer be viewed as transmissionary in nature.

### Keywords:

Meaningful Education, Knowledge, Teaching, Learning, Higher Education

### Introduction

Higher education in Malaysia is generally expected to help individuals equip themselves with certain knowledge and skills, so as to prepare them as thinkers, scholars, experts, and both

skilled and semi-skilled professionals (Malaysia Ministry of Higher Education, 2023). In other words, the higher education ecosystem plays a significant role in equipping society for real-world survival. In a way, it serves as a stepping stone in preparing a quality workforce for the economic development of the country (Shukran Abdul Rahman, 2013). Nonetheless, it is not in a vacuum that education exists; instead, it is part of a wider social fabric of values and civic life, apart from employment preparation (Harkin, Turner & Dawn, 2001; Russo-Netzer, 2023). Not only higher learning institutions be viewed to prepare individuals for economic advancement, they, too, ought to function as a platform that helps mould individuals' thinking and behaviours, hence noble or first-class character.

These anticipations are in line with the principles of meaningful education as propagated by Parnell (1994): (1) learners acquire information and retain it sufficiently to apply it toward or associate it with some real-life circumstances; (2) learners actively participate in practising and processing what they learn within the context of varied genuine real-life situations; (3) learners demonstrate adequate comprehension of the content and context of what they are learning to apply knowledge and skills viably to new situations; and (4) learners organise the educational experience around problems and themes as opposed to subject-matter disciplines. In fact, when psychologists have begun to acknowledge the importance of meaning in life for individuals' positive development in the last two centuries (Russo-Netzer, 2023), education is deemed as the number one approach to attach meaning to its process and to educate people to have meanings in every endeavour.

Of producing such meaningful education, Anis and Hairul Nizam (2019), however, express their anxiety when the issue of higher education is discussed, for the perspective on higher learning as fostering economic development and economic life, as well as nurturing 'educated hope', ethical and critical citizens seem increasingly at risk. In the evolving landscape of education in the country and in the whole globe, certain big issues like the university rankings and the emergence of artificial intelligence have exerted a profound influence, reshaping perspectives on knowledge, teaching, and learning amongst educational stakeholders. Learners, largely, according to Harkin et al. (2001), fail to achieve their potential because they are mostly found unengaged with real-world learning. They further argue that "much education is an agony of irrelevance and boredom" (p.4). On the same note, Vargas-Hernández, Vargas-González, Castañeda-Burciaga and Kariyev (2023) believe that learners are expected to be interactively engaged with issues matter to them in order to ensure useful knowledge to be applied in the career and life periods. The 'banking education' as Freire (1970) terms as, too, is still a worrisome issue, especially when knowledge is regarded as a commodity that may simply be transacted in and out. It is crucial to ponder and act upon ways to take both education and practice forward in a progressive direction (Sharan, 2015; Vargas-Hernández et al., 2023; Walker, 2006).

Education, from the perspective of Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas (1999), is constituted by three fundamental elements: the process, the content, the recipient; and he believes that 'man' or the recipient is the most important element of all, followed by the content and the process. In this context of a discussion, the recipient is equated to the learners, the content reflects the knowledge within the teaching and learning activities, while the process refers to the methodologies, approaches or techniques in instilling the content into the recipient, which involves the educators role in such a formal learning context.

Hence, in the effort of producing such meaningful education, this paper attempts at highlighting the essences of teaching, learning and knowledge, thus exploring their connectedness to one another. The discussion provided in this paper is hoped to invite further dialogue among educational stakeholders on the qualitative relationship of such concepts in meeting the aim of making education meaningful.

### **Knowledge: Connecting Learning and Teaching**

In a formal classroom context, teaching and learning are two processes that fail to be separated. It has always been an expectation that learning occurs in line with the teaching. In reality, it has been a question of whether it is really so. Discussing the processes of teaching and learning, knowledge is another element that is attached to the processes. It is not a separate single entity, for learning and teaching value nothing without knowledge being regarded as ‘the ball of the game’. It is a matter of how to make the ‘ball’ become larger and useful in any circumstances in life.

The ‘ball’ metaphor actually characterises Ibrahim’s (1999) view towards knowledge, in which it is cumulative, for when one learns continuously throughout life, it keeps increasing instead of diminishing in time, like health and strength. Knowledge is never static unless it is left unused, which is almost impossible as knowledge is able to grow and reach people in many ways. This is parallel to Harkin et al. (2001) who believe that comprehending knowledge could be treated as “provisional and never final” (p. 36). They further explain that knowledge is concerned with the action of learning, in which people are always in search of what they know and how they construct what they know. In other words, knowledge exists in more than one layer. It allows people to explore its body one layer after another. It helps people to uncover new things about anything under the sun through a process called ‘learning’.

Playing an important role in human beings, knowledge is seen by Al-Ghazzali as the content implanted in the core of the soul, which is to be sought from and taught to others (Che Zarrina Sa’ari, 1999). Complementarily, Che Zarrina Sa’ari (1999) further states that Al-Ghazzali also mentions the four states that human beings occupy pertaining to knowledge:

1. Seeking knowledge (man is acquisitive)
2. Having knowledge (man would not need to inquire of others)
3. Reflection of the acquired knowledge (man would contemplate and enjoy his achievement)
4. Teaching knowledge (man imparts his knowledge to others)

These four states involve the process of learning and teaching of knowledge and this explains the fact that knowledge never stops moving. It is obtained and shared by people with other people. In short, it could be seen that knowledge, learning and teaching are the ‘three-in-one’ concept of education. They are in some ways related to one another as how Syed Naquib Al-Attas (1999) describes concerning the three elements of education (the content, process and recipient) in which the knowledge reflects the content, the teaching and learning refer to the process, while the learners represent the recipient.

### **Learning: Definitions, Conceptions and Dichotomies**

In search of knowledge, the process of learning is believed to start right after birth and ends in the encounter of death of an individual (Ibrahim, 1999). In other words, learning is viewed as

a life-long journey. Relating to that, with the mushrooming programmes designed and offered for adults to extend their education, learning as in the idea of a life-long journey is no more a rare conception in today's modern world (Atchoarena, 2021). It is indeed a need to ensure knowledgeable individuals regardless of age.

Albeit the popularity 'learning' earns among people all over the world, the term has been defined in multifaceted ways. Defining 'learning', numerous arguments emerge. To illustrate, Merriam and Kim (2008) discuss three themes pertaining to learning: learning is communal, learning is lifelong and informal, and learning is holistic. From a communal perspective, all members of the community are made responsible for the learning because it is believed that the community can best develop itself through the interaction that occurs between its members. Learning is also viewed as lifelong and takes place not only in a formal context. Learning happens at any time and anywhere from birth to death and everybody is expected to undergo life as a learning process. In addition, the perspective of wholeness in learning is also highlighted, for learning itself is in the service of developing more than just the mind. Instead, learning is crucial in developing a moral person, a good person, and a spiritual person, who by being part of the community strengthens the whole.

Some others view learning as experiential in nature. As stated by Jarvis and Hirji (2006), for instance, people give meaning to their experiences as they engage in developing the whole business of learning. Life experiences are made remarkable by giving meaning to them, for they are able to become such great lessons in guiding one's life path. It could be seen that the concept of experiential learning values life context so much as media for knowledge enhancement. In guiding future action, Mezirow (1996, cited in Taylor, 2008) states that using a prior interpretation of an experience helps to construe a new life experience. This is how experiences work in the process of learning, as all humans are believed to have an instinctive drive to make meaning of their livings (Taylor, 2008).

It is crystal clear that learning deals with meaning construction in naming the experiences undergone in one's life. Having discussed one's experiences and their meanings, it is arguable that learning has to be made contextualized (Muijs & Reynolds, 2005). Effective learning, according to Harkin et al. (2001), involves "a process where learners can 'come to know' through engaging with and investigating the world, creating and developing their own sense of meaning, assimilating how understandings with what is already known and experienced" (p. 37). Relating one's learning to the real world context is important in making one's learning meaningful. There is no use for knowledge to be made greater in mind should the learners are unable to apply them in the real world situations and circumstances. It is hence essential for learners to keep their minds open and active to receive as many kinds of life experiences as possible (Ibrahim, 1999).

Rooted from experiential learning, some extends the term learning to being transformative in one's life. For example, Taylor (2008) terms the concept of transformative learning as a paradigm shift which the process is circumscribed and formed by a frame of reference, that the frame of reference are structures of both assumptions and expectations. Prior experiences are vital in expecting the upcoming life events, which somehow make individuals become more aware of actions to be taken in dealing with the events. Learning is said to occur when one changes or transforms one's perspective of looking at something following certain life encounters.

Besides being perceived as communal, life-long, holistic, experiential and transformative, learning is also scrutinized in several other ways. It could also be viewed from the dimension of two folds: passive learning and active learning. Passive learning refers to learners receiving everything imparted by the teacher, while active learning requires an active role played by learners. In passive learning, learners normally sit quietly and listen to the teacher and are expected to recall the teaching in order to answer any tests or examinations. In other words, passive learning is very much synonymous with rote memorization. Active learning, on the other hand, enables learners to participate in the knowledge construction processes. Example of activities in an active learning process includes questioning and problem-solving. Consequently, active learning allows learners to be critical in catering to their inquisitive minds.

Having discussed passive and active learning, Asian learners, which include the Malaysian counterparts, have long been equated to rote learning (Hong, 2011; Jeyaraj & Harland, 2019). The critical inquiry here is “How might one reconcile the phenomenon of learning by induction from rote memorization – the paradox of Asian learners – with Western ideals of learning and of the growth of knowledge by critical questioning?” (Mason, 2008, p.1). It does not mean that passive learning provides absolutely zero benefit to individual learners, but it is a matter of how active learning has been seen as effective in promoting critical thinking in expanding one’s knowledge.

Other scholars might attribute the terms active and passive to deep and surface learning. According to Jordan, Carlile and Stack (2008), the idea of both deep and surface learning stem from the ‘deep and surface processing model’ in information processing and memory, which postulates that incoming information is processed at various levels. Surface processing simply involves the recall of information while deep processing involves forming associations between material already held and what is incoming (Jordan et al., 2008). In deep learning, learners engage themselves vigorously in the learning process. In other words, they often critically reflect the aims of their learning and make attempts to relate the learning to real-life circumstances. Deep learners always view learning as part of their internal needs, while surface learners are keen to look at learning as an external process, in which they are not as intrinsically motivated as the deep learners. In surface learning, learners mostly see learning as recalling what have been taught and completing the tasks given. Being a task-based learner or a ‘recaller’, an individual would not be able to construct knowledge independently and dynamically. Besides, learning is external and is done upon undergoing certain standardised assessments. Harkin et al. (2001) explain that there are two reasons why most learners prefer surface learning:

1. Unable to make distinction between the meaning underlying deep and surfaces and consequently fail to comprehend the breadth of the concept of learning.
2. Characteristics of the course (heavy workload, excessive amounts of course material, a lack of opportunity to explore in-depth, threatening, etc) (p.48)

Harkin et al. (2001) further explain that “some learners are able to use both approaches in their learning - varying them according to their intentions and the nature as well as the demands of the task in hand” (p.48). It is agreed that learners might take different subjects differently, for the aims and objectives of each subject might differ from one another. Nevertheless, Biggs

(1989, as cited in Harkin et al., 2001) suggests some elements in promoting a deep approach to learning:

1. Motivational context (intrinsic motivation is crucial)
2. Learners' activities (engaging learners in knowledge construction)
3. Interaction with others
4. A well-structured knowledge base (coherent and cohesive)

It is essential to make learners become aware of the benefits of deep learning. It enables learners to have a purpose in learning. This is no other than to ensure meaningful learning among the learners. It is not enough to only acquire knowledge without knowing why it is acquired. Similar to al-Ghazzali (in Che Zarrina, 1999), human learning is best achieved when they achieve both conditions- learning from the outside (*ta'allum* - acquisition by learning) and from the inside (*tafakkur* - busying oneself with meditation and reflection).

Different from the previously discussed learning dichotomies, Luntley (2008) proposes two ideas of learning – by training and by reasoning. Learning by training describes the process of acquiring habits of mind and behavior that have been shaped by others, while learning by reasoning reflects learning in which learners think of what to do and to work out for themselves. It is a form of mental activity that entails learners not to just mimic patterns of thought and action proffered by others. Instead, learners are expected to think a lot. Encouraging learners to be critical thinkers permits them to exhibit judgment and take responsibility for their learning. Luntley (2008) does mention the need of both training and reasoning in which the former is supposed to occur at early stages of learning, while the latter is anticipated to be held at later stages of learning development.

Apparently, the term learning has been defined and conceived in various ways. Nevertheless, in this context of discussion, the priority is how to make the learning meaningful, in line with the aims and philosophy of national education as well as the country's economic needs. Learning is hoped to be a medium not only for individual growth, yet for the development of a bigger circle that surrounds an individual (i.e. the family, the community, and the nation). Relating learning to the formal context that the government of Malaysia provides, especially in higher learning institutions, it is not an easy task to ensure effective and meaningful learning. Harkin et al. (2001) summarise that a successful learning context must actively engage the learners and is facilitated by social interaction. Now, the question is how teaching or any pedagogical practices are able to provide such contexts with such ambiance for meaningful learning to take place.

### **Teaching: Complementing Learning in Knowledge Seeking**

As discussed earlier, with regard to individuals' knowledge enhancement, teaching and learning are two sides of the same coin. Traditionally, teaching has been regarded as the passing of knowledge, thus promoting educators to conduct teaching strategies that merely involve the transmission of knowledge. To illustrate, McCain (2005) states that postsecondary educators have the tendency to reinforce school skills more than real-world skills, in which they focus more on training the learners to do well in written assessments to score good grades. In this form of teaching, memorisation of content is highly emphasised. Harkin et al. (2001) have projected their concern in this issue:

In much education, there is a tendency for learning to be treated simply as the delivery of knowledge and values by those who know more (teachers) to those who know less and know it less expertly (learners). In other words, teachers transmit and learners ingest a commodity called knowledge. Consequently, learners are frequently attributed with passivity; are deemed to have little experience and understanding that is relevant to the situation and are seen to have a capability to learn that is likely to respond only to incentives and deterrents (p. 36).

In Malaysian higher education, certain teaching practices remain questionable. The one-way lecture and the quiet classrooms are illustrations of those teachings characterised by McCain (2005) and Harkin et al. (2001). The mere passing of knowledge would only produce such passive and surface learners. This may contribute to the reasons justifying the unemployment among a number of higher-learning graduates all over the country.

Within the education development, teaching is expected to produce active rather than passive learners, given the demands of the global economy, which apparently needs active, creative and critical workers who are 'life-long' and 'life-wide' learners (Abdul Shakour Preece & Adila Juperi, 2014; Mason, 2008). Educators play important roles in employing classroom strategies that conform to the needs of the country, for the learners are vital assets to be raised and polished. To do this is not by allowing learners to only sit, absorb and memorise, yet by giving them autonomy in learning. Autonomy in this context resembles the empowerment of learners which sources from the teaching that acknowledges them as active reasoners and judges, instead of mimics (McCain, 2005). It is seen here that rethinking the teaching in today's education is crucial, especially in preparing learners to face real-world challenges.

With regard to that, McCain (2005) therefore suggests 6 ways to teach for independent and higher learning:

1. Educators must resist the temptation to tell (stand and deliver approach)
2. Educators must stop teaching decontextualised content
3. Educators must stop giving students the final product of the teacher's thinking
4. Educators must make a fundamental shift from 'teaching' to 'problem solving'
5. Educators must progressively withdraw from helping students
6. Educators must reevaluate evaluation

McCain's perspective of teaching is seen as learner-centred. Even though the term 'teaching' originates from the word 'teach' and is closer to the word 'teacher', yet the focus is rather prioritised on the learners. As a more powerful being in the classroom, it is the educators' responsibility to ensure that learners, too, have and utilise their power optimally.

According to Green (1991), teaching, from the arts and humanists perspectives, ought to involve "enabling students to make meaning, to use what they come to know in making sense of the lived world, the world they can see and hear and read" (p.65-66). Similar to the one recommended by McCain (2005), providing context to the teaching of content is necessary. Another attractive point here is the phrase 'enabling students', which indicates the 'educators' action to allow learners to relate and reason well in their learning.

Instead of letting the learners merely regurgitate what the educators say in the classroom, learners have to be empowered so that they have ideas of how to use the presented materials (Harkin et al., 2001). Constructivists have long proposed the idea of abolishing the mode of transmission when it comes to teaching knowledge, yet the practice of encouraging learners to construct knowledge is still found to be a dearth. Consequently, learners would remain seated and consume knowledge as desired by the educators. At the end of the day, who is going to live the life of the learners? Henceforth,

it is time to build a high-trust, democratic education system that respects learners and their experiences, listen closely to their expression of interest and need, builds a partnership between teachers, learners, parents, the community and employers so that young adults learn what they wish to learn, when they wish to learn and how they wish to learn (Harkin et al., 2001, p.146).

In other words, it is not only about empowering the learner and allowing them to discover and reflect on realistic experiences, yet about deepening the chance to articulate ideas, thoughts, and solutions (Muijs & Reynolds, 2005). The constructed knowledge means nothing if it remains in one's mind. It is supposed to be further constructed through communicating it with others, so that it would create such a huge knowledge network. This thought is in some way interconnected with Vella's (2002) twelve principles for effective adult learning:

1. Needs assessment (participation of the learners in naming what is to be learnt)
2. Safety (in the environment and the process, the context for learning is created and it ought to be made safe)
3. Sound relationship (between teacher and learner, learner and learner)
4. Sequence of context and reinforcement
5. Praxis (action with reflection or learning by doing)
6. Respect for learners as decision makers
7. Ideas, feelings and actions (cognitive, affective and psychomotor aspects of learning)
8. The immediacy of learning
9. Clear roles and clear development
10. Teamwork and use of small groups
11. Engagement of learners in what they are learning
12. Accountability (how do they know they know?) (p.4)

Considering that learners of higher education are of young adult counterparts, Vella's (2002) principles are probably appropriate to be considered in enhancing them holistically, especially towards achieving the vision and mission of the Ministry of Higher Education.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In a nutshell, this paper discusses the concepts of teaching, learning, and knowledge with the aim of producing meaningful education. Such concepts are to be viewed as one interconnected trio, and not as separate entities. The three concepts require deep understanding among its stakeholders. Comprehending the roles of each concept is indeed necessary as it may affect each and every party, comprising those who are at the micro (individual learner) and macro (instructors and policymakers) levels. Building a reciprocal understanding of these concepts among the stakeholders is a challenge to address, especially in making education a meaningful endeavour. To conclude,



The world has changed and continues to change rapidly and dramatically, yet humans' inherent needs and essence haven't changed. The question of meaning is a crucial one not only in the short term, in the sense of educational-pedagogical practice, but also in the long term, with the goal of preparing students for the uncertain and volatile life of the 21st century. (Russo-Netzer, 2023, p. 178)

### Acknowledgements

The authors extend their sincere gratitude to the Research and Publication Management Unit (RMU) of UiTM Kedah for their encouragement to write and submit papers through the initiative.

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