

## CHANGING PEDAGOGIES: VIETNAMESE CASE FROM INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

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### ABSTRACT

*From exploring learning theories, this article analyses and evaluates the orientation presented in Vietnamese MOET (Ministry of Education and Training) guideline documents for the nearest high school curricula and textbooks reforming. From that, the article presents some conclusions about the missing aspects which can affect the way teachers interpret and use the new approach in their teaching practice.*

**Keywords:** learning theories, education reform, teaching approach, changing pedagogies.

### TÓM TẮT

#### ***Giáo dục thay đổi: Trường hợp Việt Nam nhìn từ quan điểm quốc tế***

*Xuất phát từ việc khảo sát các lí thuyết học tập trên thế giới, bài viết phân tích và đánh giá định hướng đổi mới được trình bày trong các tài liệu hướng dẫn của Bộ Giáo dục Việt Nam cho đợt đổi mới chương trình và sách giáo khoa trung học phổ thông gần đây nhất. Từ đó, bài viết đi đến kết luận về những điểm bị bỏ qua mà chính những điểm này có thể ảnh hưởng đến cách các giáo viên hiểu và ứng dụng phương pháp dạy học mới trong khi giảng dạy.*

**Từ khóa:** lí thuyết học tập, đổi mới giáo dục, phương pháp giảng dạy, giáo dục thay đổi.

### 1. Introduction

One of the main objectives of the educational reform conducted at all levels of schooling in Vietnam, which started in primary school in 2002 is reforming teaching and learning approaches. However, it seems that this reform was not succeeded. To analyse and evaluate carefully the current curricula and textbooks, many research have been done. However, it also essential to analyse the MOET's orientation for reforming because if it is not clear, we cannot have good curricula and textbooks and it will be difficult for teachers to understand how to reform their teaching approach. This work would be more necessary in the case that Vietnamese MOET is now preparing for designing new curricula and textbooks, which will be started to use in some selected schools after 2016. In this paper, the writer focuses on analysing and evaluating the reforming orientation presented in Vietnamese MOET guideline documents for the

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nearest curricula and textbooks reforming. From international perspective, these analysing and evaluating will be put under the light of many learning theories that continue to be used through out the world.

## **2. Changing pedagogies: From international perspectives - some learning theories**

Most people would agree that learning is an essential part of life and numerous researchers and teachers have sought to understand how students learn and, from that understanding, develop teaching approaches that accommodate students' learning. However, it is not easy to understand how students learn and what kinds of teaching approaches can help them learn efficiently. Searching through the research literature, there were many research and people suggested many ideas related to this topic. It seems that there is a shift in the educational profession from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning. So, why and how pedagogies have changed?

In the first half of the twentieth century, behaviourism was the dominant learning theory. Although behavioural theorists agree that internal feelings, thoughts, and beliefs do exist, they consider these are unimportant because the causes of learning are observable environmental events. Behavioural theorists argue that teachers should pay attention to arranging environments which encourage students to respond properly to stimuli. The best known behavioural theory is Skinner's operant conditioning which is based on the fact that organisms respond to their environments in particular ways to obtain or avoid a particular consequence. Applying Skinner's theory to education, many educators argue that students will be motivated to learn if they are positively reinforced for doing something well and negatively reinforced if they do something badly [20].

The most popular approach to teaching based on the behaviourist theory of learning is direct teaching. This approach 'emphasises the efficient acquisition of basic skills and knowledge of specific learning areas through lectures and demonstrations, extensive worksheet-based practice and corrective feedback' [20, tr. 382]. Direct teaching focuses on learning basis skills and in class the teacher is always the person who makes decisions. Students are kept on-task and achievements are rewarded but off-task behaviour and/or under-achievements are punished. Therefore, it is obviously that direct teaching is a highly structured approach to learning and teaching. In fact, it is often called as 'teacher-directed or teacher-led classroom learning' [20, tr. 382].

However, in the second half of the twentieth century, cognitive theorists such as Piaget and Vygotsky developed different ideas about learning by focussing on the inner workings of the mind. While behavioral theories stress the observable environmental events, cognitive theories emphasise the mental processing of information. Cognitive theorists argue that learning is an internal mental phenomenon inferred from what people say and do. Therefore, learners' perceptions of themselves and their learning environments are very important and teachers should consider how instruction affects

their students' thinking during learning. Both Piaget and Vygotsky saw learning as an aspect of cognitive process. However, Piaget emphasises that children learn more from the interactions they have with their peers than with adults while Vygotsky stresses that they need social interaction with people of all ages who are more intellectually advanced.

Even though there are some differences, both Piaget and Vygotsky agree that meaningful learning happens in each student's cognitive process and through social interactions. Therefore, applying Piaget's and Vygotsky's theories of cognitive development, teachers are advised to create many learning activities and challenging tasks to promote cognitive development because learning through activities and direct experience is essential. Since Piaget and Vygotsky, yet based on their work, educators have suggested that teachers should provide plenty of materials and opportunities for children to learn on their own and memorisation of information for its own sake should be avoided. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development has also led to the development of a technique called scaffolding to support students' learning. Consciously, when the students become more capable of learning independently, this support can be withdrawn.

In the 1960s Maslow and Rogers were among those who developed humanist theories that recognised learning was also influenced by student needs, values, motives and self-perceptions. Maslow argues that by satisfying their needs, teachers can help to develop students' potential. Rogers contributes to this and claims teachers need to provide a classroom atmosphere in which students are 'free to learn' [19, tr.104]. In his view 'the only man who is educated is the man who has learned how to learn' [19, tr. 104]. In a similar vein, Holt, in his book 'How children fail', argues that 'school should be a place where children learn what they most want to know, instead of what we think they ought to know' [12, tr. 175]. He suggests that the child just remembers and uses effectively what he really wants to know and will forget quickly what he had learned to please or appease someone else (for example teachers or parents). Forty years later Neville agrees with Holt when he writes: 'We learn very little by being told the answers to questions we have not asked' [18, tr. 24]. Neville believes that learners learn through their own experiences, not their teachers' experiences, and the natural way of learning means we pick the knowledge up as we go along without the need for teaching.

Rogers [19] stresses that the role of the teacher is to facilitate learning rather than being a transmitter of information. Holt [13] also suggests that what we need to do is create as natural a learning environment as we can, listen respectfully to children and give them our help and guidance whenever they need it. When this is done he believes we can trust our students and let them undertake the rest of their learning. Combs [9] also points out that 'the task of the teacher is not one of prescribing, making, molding, forcing, coercing, coaxing, or cajoling; it is one of ministering to a process already in being. The role required of the teacher is that of facilitator, encourager, helper, assister,

colleague, and friend of his students' [9, tr.16].

Taken together, Maslow, Rogers, Holt, Neville and Combs all agree that meaningful learning will occur if teachers understand the importance of trust and democracy in education. They emphasise that teachers should allow their students to make decisions about their own learning. Teachers also need to be sensitive to the social and emotional needs of their students by empathising and responding positively with them.

These above ideas from the seventies have had a powerful effect on education, and are now being further developed by post-modern theorists who recognise that there is not one kind of learner, nor is there only one goal for learning and that the places where learning takes place can be varied. These ideas are evident in many theories such as Gardner's idea of 'multiple intelligences', Kieran Egan's notion of 'imaginative learning', John Miller's support for holistic education, Parker Palmer's advocacy for learning communities and Hart's six interrelated layers of the depths of knowing and learning. These theorists suggest ideas that bring far more complexity to the teaching-learning process than was evident when the behaviourist view of learning was the most prominent influence. The roles of both teachers and students have been profoundly challenged by these ideas and it is now recognised how critical it is to include collaborative learning activities for students and for the teacher to become the one who creates meaningful learning activities rather than the one who has all the knowledge.

Other researchers contribute more evidence and ideas to an ongoing discussion of meaningful learning. Amongst them, constructivist learning seems to be a focus for many researchers in recent years. Based on the principle that knowledge is created from experience, this philosophy is distinguished from other learning theories such as behaviourism and cognitivism by its ideas about the nature of reality which it sees as socially constructed and created by the learners rather than waiting out there to be discovered. A constructivist education seeks to have the students themselves construct their own knowledge during their learning process instead of receiving 'inert' knowledge from their teachers. The most important relationship between this theory and education is the belief that students are in control of their own learning. Rather than seeking one answer, solution or idea, constructivists revel in complexity and multiple viewpoints. Paying attention to the learners' cognitive development, Bruner proposed that preselecting and prearranging materials may lead to students becoming too dependent on other people. He argues that teachers should put their students in front of a problem and help them seek solutions, either independently or by engaging in collaborative group discussion. Therefore, we can say his theory - discovery learning - is a teaching strategy that encourages children to seek solutions to problems either on their own or in group discussion.

Some researchers such as Driscoll [11] points out that in a constructivist learning environment, students seek meaning based on their experiences, thus, their existing

beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge will impact their learning. Huang [14] argues that constructivist learning focuses on how people learn rather than what is learned. Marlowe and Page [16] identify four main ideas to distinguish between constructivist learning with traditional learning and claim that constructivist learning is about:

- constructing knowledge, not receiving it;
- understanding and applying, not recalling;
- thinking and analysing, not accumulating and memorising;
- being active, not passive.

In addition, Milbrandt, Felts, Richards, and Abghari [17] argue that the students being actively involving in learning activities is not sufficient and they should be engaged in decision-making about their learning as well as critical and creative thinking opportunities. Because students are allowed to take on more responsibility, the role of teachers as facilitators is critical to student success. Even though one of the major criticisms of constructivist theory is that when students are allowed to control their own learning, their results can be trivial rather than rigorous, many researchers believe that this learning still needs to be supported because it helps the students become autonomous learners who will develop the capacity for rigorous thought [17].

Drawing on the notion of creating meaningful learning arising from such teaching philosophies and theories, many researchers construct and build teaching and learning approaches to help teachers engage with students more effectively. Student-centred approaches are the focus of much research and the term ‘active learning’ commonly appears in the literature. It is understood as ‘an approach for in-depth learning that draws on, creatively synthesizes and integrates numerous learning methods’ [10, tr. 22]. According to researchers such as Lantis, Kille, and Krain, active learning simply happens when ‘students are working together, and with the instructor, to achieve educational objectives’ [15, tr. 1] and active teaching ‘involves the use of instructional techniques designed for meaningful student engagement in the discovery of knowledge’ [15, tr. 1]. Together with introducing new educational terms, many suggested teaching methods and strategies are also documented in the international literature. Among them are some common methods and strategies such as problem-based learning, collaborative learning, inquiry-based learning, project-based learning, case-based learning, task-based learning, and discovery learning.

### **3. Vietnamese education: How to go with the changes?**

As discussed above, many researchers and educators have been seeking ways to help students to learn actively, positively and meaningfully. They have built some useful theories which help teachers to meet their goals of enabling students to learn. Even though their arguments may be different, they all pay attention to the student’s learning. In other words, effective teaching means teachers know how to help their students to learn through enjoyment, eagerness, and knowing how to learn. Learning is

not only an individual cognitive process but also socially constructed. Cooperative and collaborative learning are encouraged. It is evident that there is a gradual shift in teaching from focusing on teachers' teaching to focusing on students' learning, especially when cognitive and constructivist understandings are taken into account. This raises the question of whether such a shift is evident in the present educational innovation aimed at transformation of Vietnamese education.

### **3.1. *The centrepiece of the move***

For a long time, teaching in Vietnam still reflects a teacher-centred pedagogy and is based on Confucianism which can be seen to be consistent with a behaviourist approach. Students are required to memorise and repeat the information presented by the teacher and the teacher is often the person who makes decisions in class. However, as in many Asian countries, this traditional approach is being challenged as many Vietnamese teachers and students have recognised its shortcomings, and ideas from other nations begin to affect the way learning is considered. To shift teachers' practice, the Vietnam MOET (Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training) conducted a national educational innovation at all levels of schooling, which started in primary school in 2002 and in senior high school from 2006. One of the main objectives of this educational innovation, presented in the Vietnamese Government documents such as '*The Resolution of Vietnamese Parliament about reforming school curricula*' [7] and '*Instructions for reforming school curricula to carry out Resolution number 40/2000/QH10*' [5], is reforming teaching and learning approaches. These new teaching and learning approaches imply a required shift in teaching from a focus on teachers' teaching to a focus on students' learning. This is clearly stated in the '*Education Law*':

*Teaching and learning in school must: raise the sense of initiative, voluntariness, positivity and creativity; practice autonomous learning skills; build group work skills and skills of applying knowledge to practical situations; ...[to] lead the students to happy learning and eager learning'. [8, tr. 8]*

It is evident from this quotation and various policy documents that the introduction of the new curricula together with the new teaching and learning approach form the centrepiece of the move towards qualitative improvement of education in Vietnam. In '*Strategies for educational development in the period 2001- 2010*' [6], Vietnamese policy makers explain in detail that to reform teaching and learning approaches means to shift from the traditional approach of passive transmission and reading-taking notes to one of active learning to promote students' development, their autonomy and their capacity for creative thinking. This orientation can be seen as the umbrella educational ideology required for all levels of education. Improving teaching and learning approaches is identified as one of the fundamental elements of innovating the curriculum and textbooks at this time.

In certain government documents [2, 3, 4], the policy makers state that the core of the innovation is to re-orient focus on students' positive, active learning and away from

the passive learning habit; that is, to shift from one-way conveying of information to an active teaching and learning approach that reflects the understanding of discovery learning - a teaching strategy that encourages children to seek solutions to problems either on their own or in group discussion. The term 'active teaching and learning approach' is understood as including both teaching and learning and is prescribed in many government documents and several relevant articles written by educators and administrators who were involved in developing the curriculum and textbooks [1, 2, 3, 4].

### 3.2. *Some missing aspects*

However, it seems that even the key educators who are responsible for the ideology of teaching and learning and the innovation in education are still perplexed in their understanding and explanation of the new approach. For instance, there is little unity among MOET documents. There are three features prescribed in MOET documents which remain consistent:

- Enhancing student initiative, positivity and creativity through organising learning activities
- Building self-learning methods and developing the students' capacity for autonomous learning
- Focusing on both individual learning and collaborative learning

However, later MOET added some other features to their documents such as combining teacher and student peer evaluation [1] and student self-evaluation as another process [2]. Increasing the ability to apply students' knowledge into their lives is also another feature added to some documents [2, 3].

Compared to international conceptions of active learning and teaching, it appears that the Vietnamese conception draws on many aspects of teaching philosophies which focus on students' learning. However, there are also some missing aspects which make this approach different in the case of Vietnam.

As presented above, the first feature of the active teaching and learning approach defined in MOET documents emphasises that the students need to be involved in the learning activities, which are organised by the teacher, and then they explore the knowledge by themselves. In this sense, the new approach implies the adoption of discovery learning.

In relation to the second feature, Vietnamese educators argue that our society is changing very quickly with more and more information being available. Therefore, teaching students how to learn (learning strategies) is more important than teaching them what to learn (content). They emphasise that autonomous learning methods are very important because if students know how to learn by themselves, the learning outcome will improve dramatically. This idea seems to align with constructivist theorists' and Rogers' idea of the act of seeking knowledge and learn how to learn.

However, while there is similarity, Vietnamese bureaucrats seem to have neglected the students' freedom to learn. Rogers and other humanist and holistic theorists emphasise the effect that students' needs, values, motives and self-perceptions have on their own learning [9, 12, 13, 18, 19]. In the theory of discovery learning, theorists also emphasise the need for intrinsic motivation and self-sponsored curiosity of the learner which will help them to take responsibility for their own learning and become immersed in deep learning with self-regulation. In contrast, in Vietnam, students' needs and interests are ignored and students are still being asked to find the answers to their teachers' questions without having much chance to pose their own questions or seek information to answer them.

The third feature of active teaching and learning presented in most MOET documents shows that Vietnamese educators emphasise the focus on both individual and collaborative learning. It draws on the notion of Piaget's and Vygotsky's theories of cognitive development which point out that students develop their own ideas through making connections with others and with their own experience. However, the suggestion of introducing scaffolding techniques to help students to move through their Zone of Proximal Development is not mentioned in Vietnamese documents. Moreover, while emphasizing social interaction in learning, Vietnamese bureaucrats seem to ignore the idea that knowledge is socially constructed and is created by the learners and that students need to be in control of their own learning.

#### **4. Conclusions**

As discussed above, it can be seen that by shifting the focus to promoting students' active learning and setting it up as one of the most important aspects of the curriculum and textbook innovation, MOET has followed the international educational trend. This has included moving the teachers' focus from themselves as instructor to a focus that includes paying attention to the students as learners. The new teaching and learning approach introduced in the newly-designed curriculum and text books set for high school level uses many aspects of active learning philosophies documented in the international literature. However, there are also some aspects which have not been included in the Vietnamese curriculum designers' interpretation, therefore, it may affect how teachers interpret and use the new approach in their teaching practice. For example, acknowledgement of students' needs is one of them. Ignoring students' needs is likely to decrease students' motivation in learning and make the teaching hard in terms of developing attitudes that promote life-long learning. Moreover, even though MOET encourages teachers to become the creators of meaningful learning activities rather than being the one who has all the knowledge, the idea that knowledge is socially constructed and is created by the learners seems to be missing in the documentation. This omission may cause problems in the context of Vietnam where, for many years, Vietnamese teachers are used to coming to class with all the knowledge their students need and Vietnamese students are familiar with having to explore



knowledge that their teachers set and answer their teachers' questions rather than posing their own.

Now MOET is preparing for a new educational reform. There will be a lot of change in curricula and textbooks. However, innovating teaching approach to help students to learn meaningfully will still be one of the main purposes of this new reform and the above lesson from the previous reform will be useful for MOET and Vietnamese educators.

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