Potential of Group Discussion as a means of Developing Students' Lifelong Learning Skills in Tanzanian Higher Education Institutions: Lecturers' Perspectives

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Abstract
Institutions and governments across the globe have been invariably striving to promote the vision of lifelong learning for years now. In some institutions, the discourse on the development of graduates' lifelong learning skills has been linked with debates about improving the quality of teaching and learning using collaborative and group learning approaches. However, despite the wide acceptance of the use of group discussion in higher learning institutions of teaching and learning to promote students' lifelong learning capacity, there have been mixed feelings on the potential of group discussion for developing this capacity, especially in the face of challenges such as a shift in student demographics and the changing pattern of university admissions. The conviction of the majority of higher education institutions which use group discussion in teaching and learning is its potential for promoting students' high quality learning. The purpose of this paper was to assess the function of group discussion in teaching and learning, and university lecturers' views on groups' potential for improving undergraduates' learning using a qualitative approach.

Key words: Lifelong learning, self-directed learning, Group discussion, teaching and learning

Introduction
The concept of lifelong learning has gained wide acceptance among educators, policy makers and scholars, as a key word embedded in the design and implementation of educational policies in recent years. Given its popularity, the concept has become a buzz word, and has been widely linked to discourses on effective educational systems such that it has started to emerge in quite a significant number of scholarly papers (Candy, Crebert & O'Leary, 1994; Chapman & Aspin, 1997; Knapper & Cropley, 2000; Osborne & Thomas, 2003). The main theme in most of these scholarly papers had been the emphasis on the need to accept the lifelong learning framework as a guiding principle in transforming education. Additionally, propositions in most of those studies have been on the necessity for higher learning institutions to reject and depart from traditional teaching and learning systems and ways of doing things and to integrate the framework of lifelong learning. Emphasising this further, Chapman & Aspin (1997) consider that the move to combine lifelong learning principles with traditional practices is the only critical issue that links universities or higher education institutions at large with their primary mission of schooling.

The successful integration of lifelong learning principles in higher education institutions' teaching and learning requires school systems not only to focus on the realisation of students' achievements, but more importantly to concentrate on helping students to acquire and use a range of learning strategies necessary for life beyond school. For the same reason, scholars (Duke, 2002; Husen, 2002; Longworth & Davies, 1996; Vermunt, 2003) have called for higher education institutions to be transformed into lifelong learning systems. As a concept, lifelong learning is typified by two major dimensions, namely, 'life-long' and 'life-wide', which implies

learning throughout one's life, and learning through all possible learning contexts, respectively (Clark, 2005). In an effort to achieve the life-wide and life-long goals of lifelong learning therefore, various teaching and learning approaches have emerged across institutions and countries, with the aim of optimising learning using different pathways. For the same reason, several models of lifelong learning have evolved over time to achieve the philosophy of lifelong learning (Aspin, Chapman, Hatton, &Sawano, 2001; Maclachlan & Osborne, 2009; Mwaikokesya, 2014). The enthusiasm to promote a culture of lifelong learning in recent years has also been necessitated by the global trends in internationalisation and individualisation processes accompanied by the revolution in information technology (Dehmel, 2005). In this regard, higher education institutions have particularly been identified as being crucial and significant agents for socialising graduates to develop a culture of lifelong learning so that they can live and compete in the modern and complex globalising world.

Understanding group functioning
Many scholars have attempted to understand the concept and use of groups in the teaching and learning process. Johnson and Johnson (1989) define group discussion or cooperative learning as a situation in which individuals work together to promote both their individual learning outcomes and the learning outcomes of their peers. There are mixed feelings in the literature on the centrality of using group discussions as a means of supporting learning. However, the importance of groups in supporting quality teaching and learning has been widely acknowledged (Springer, Stanne, & Donovan 1999; Hillyard, Gillespie, & Littig, 2010; Chiriac, 2011; Hillyard, Gillespie, & Littig, 2010; Springer, Stanne, & Donovan 1999). Those who see the potential of the group approach for boosting students' learning, such as Jaques, (1984), consider that learning in groups is crucial because, among other things, it enables students to negotiate meanings, express themselves in the language of the subject and encourages several other skills such as teamwork and presentation.

Historically, the emphasis on the use of group learning in the classroom is based on humanistic learning principles associated with the ideas of philosophers, such as John Dewey and Jean Piaget, most of whose 20[th]century work explicitly proposed group learning in the classroom as one of the standard means of learning. The emphasis on the use of group learning is also based on the assumption that learning occurs through interacting with others (Hassanien, 2006). It is argued further that through group discussion students can easily get feedback on their learning. Not only that, but group discussions are also said to be crucial for the trajectories that emerge from them (Bennett & Dunne, 1990; Gillies & Ashman, 2003; Stymne, 1992; Wilson, Goodman, &Cronin 2007). The overall argument regarding the value of groups in most of the cited studies is the expectation that the students' learning behaviour tends to change when they are influenced by others, and the belief that groups are the means through which experiential learning can take place as students engage with the subject matter and learn vicariously. Bjerkaker and Summers (2006) consider that group processes are essential not only for learning, but are also key to the practice of recent social and liberation movements, including those involving women, black minorities and the disabled.

Following the trends discussed above, students' use of informal learning discussion groups has been one of the commonest strategies adopted in many universities as a means of realising high quality student learning. Other strategies included restructuring their course structures to allow them permit a maximum degree of flexibility using such techniques as the use of modularisation, block courses and blended learning (Orazbayeva, 2017). However, whereas there has been wide acceptance of the use of group discussion in teaching and learning, its use does not necessarily suggest that it has been an effective way of promoting lifelong learning

skills among students. Some criticisms of the use of groups in teaching and learning have been associated with the possibility of destroying self-directed learning and personal initiatives in learning. Critics also point out possible undesirable learning outcomes, such as the potential for producing uncritical learners (Galton & Williamson, 1992).

Does the presence or absence of others really matter in teaching and learning?

As stated above, despite the widespread acceptance of group learning styles in enhancing interaction, debates exist as to whether or not the use of groups really improves learning (Chriac, 2011; Cinnamon, Gillespie, & Littig, 2010). Although in the past few years the question of group productivity has been advocated and has sometimes been taken for granted that it will lead to productivity, critics such as Brown (2000) have questioned whether or not the presence of others can boost performance in learning. Conversely, one of the arguments among supporters of the adoption of group learning has been the claim that it can enhance learning because of the facilitation by group members. However, critics of this idea argue that one's performance of social tasks does not totally depend on social facilitation, but it can be determined by a combination of one's expectations and the potential for evaluation through social comparison implied by the presence of another person performing a similar task (p.172). Critics furthermore question the guarantee of group productivity due to the possibility of the dominance of the 'social loafing' phenomenon which is common in most group processes. Illustrating further group learning pathologies, critics have also indicated that nearly 80% of those who work collectively are likely to engage in incidences of social loafing, which significantly impairs their performances (Karau& Williams 1993). Scholars such as Bjerkaker and Summers (2006) argue that although learning is considered to be a sociable process, group processes alone cannot guarantee learning and sometimes can limit and actually impair learning. Some of the undesirable outcomes among group members for example can occur when a group is uncritical of certain behaviours, and when members do not accept the group's position or downgrade personal views (Ardichvili, 2001). The use of group learning processes is also criticised from the practical point of view, whereby it is argued that it poses difficulties in measuring individual input (Hassanien, 2006).

Critics furthermore indicate that the productivity of a group not only depends on the presence or absence of others but also on the idiosyncratic factors of the group, including whether or not a particular group is based on authoritarian, democratic or laissez-faire patterns of group behaviour (Cotton, 1995). According to Cotton, in authoritarian groups, one dominant person, a teacher or a leader, becomes firmly in charge, while others remain passive and do what they are told to do by the authority figure, thus curtailing learning. Conversely, in democratic groups, members use the learner-centred approach in which learning is shared and negotiated and is characterised by participants' active contribution and participation. In this sense learning is likely to occur. Finally, groups can also adopt laissez-faire behaviour patterns in which group members function and engage in group activities with little or no planning for what is to be learnt or procedures to be followed. In this regard learning is unlikely to occur in groups of this nature. Clearly, the three patterns of group discussions represented above are important predictors of the possible variations in groups' learning outcomes.

A model for understanding group function in teaching and learning

In literature, various models have been proposed to explain the usefulness of groups in teaching and learning. Understanding some of those models seems to be important since it can help to figure out and judge whether or not the groups being deployed in the teaching and learning are in the right direction. Figure 1 depicts one of the models which indicate some of the key components that are necessary for predicting the effectiveness of group functioning. The

assumption in this model is that 'a group's output can only be as good as its input' (Glanes, Adams, & Brilhart, 2004, p. 7). Clarifying further about the possible outcomes of group processes, Glanes, Adams and Brilhart argued that even if the group members are committed or have skills for conducting a discussion; high quality learning and critical thinking are unlikely to occur, especially if the group members are not furnished with adequate information which is relevant, accurate, valid and complete to work on.
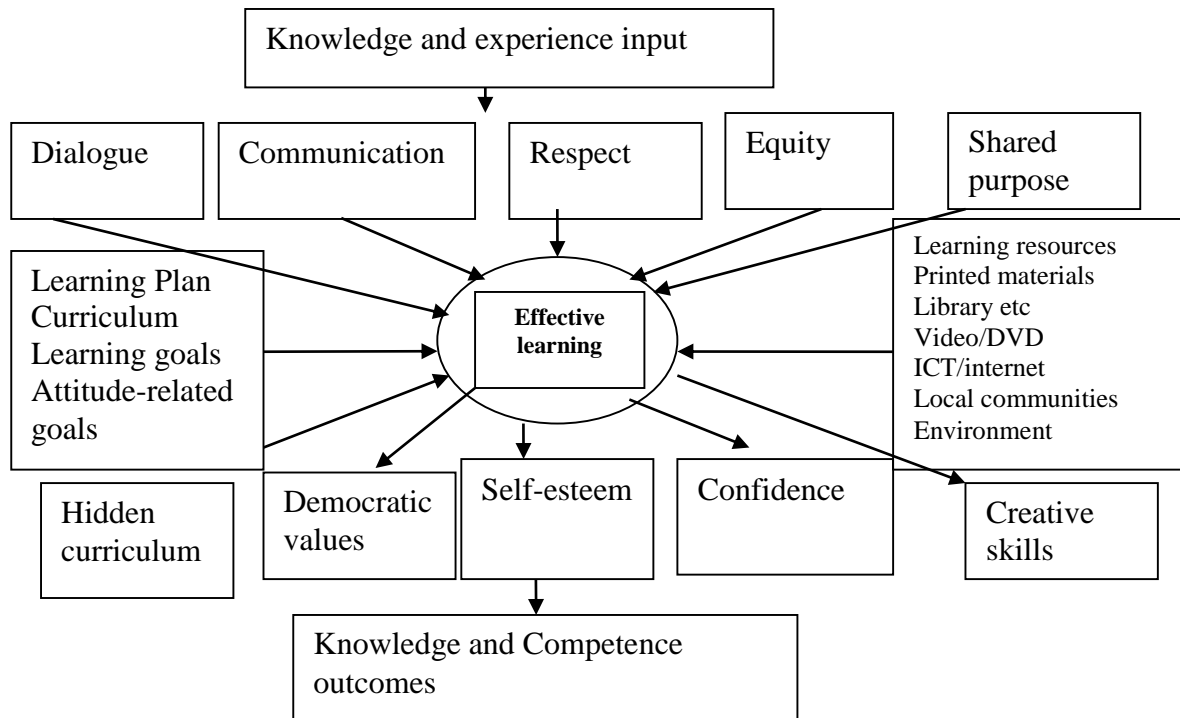

Figure 4: Factors influencing the effectiveness of learning in groups (Adapted from Bjerkaker and Summers, 2006: 102).

Figure 1, illustrates different factors that can influence a group's collaborative learning efforts. These include participants' experience and ability to dialogue and communicate, group members' potential for having a shared purpose, and the ability to establish respect and equity. The Bjerkaker and Summers (2006)framework for understanding group functioning is essential because it lays down some of the key conditions for successful group learning, and indicates some of the key predictors in determining whether or not group activities will eventually productively contribute to learning. As suggested in this model, factors such as the group members' previous educational and professional strengths are essential for group functioning because they can promote other competences such as self-management, active listening skills, and empathy that can maximize learning (Bjerkaker & Summers, 2006, p.32). It is further argued that groups can function better if the members are in one accord to plan, to set objectives and work within the context of optimum resources. Another factor influencing group functioning, as suggested in the literature, is the teacher's ability to use participatory methods such as role-play and debates that allow both reflection and application (Cotton, 1995).

The Study

In attempt to develop a clear understanding of issues connected to the use of group discussion method in teaching and learning, the study adopted a qualitative research approach as the methodology because of its potential to allow understanding and interpretation of meaning as well as intentions underlying human interaction (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Data for this study ware collected using semi-structured interviews, and were based on the data collected at the University of Dar-es-Salaam (UDSM) in Tanzania with lecturers (n=26), who were drawn from four academic disciplines, namely, sociology, accounting, science and engineering. The focus on lecturers was important because of the role they play as mediators of teaching and learning, which could aid students' understanding of the contextual and pedagogical factors influencing lifelong learning processes. As suggested in the literature, teachers play a key role in creating the learning environment in which students might develop lifelong learning skills (Henkin & Persson, 1993; Kane, Sandretto, & Heath, 2002; Trigwell, 2003). Their inclusion in the study might therefore help provide an understanding of the role of contextual and pedagogical factors in the development of lifelong learning attributes in students.

The UDSM is the oldest public university in Tanzania, established in 1970. Recent statistics suggest that between 2011/12 (20,329 students) and 2016/17 (29,125 students), the total enrolment increased by 43.3% (UDSM, 2017, p.12). The university was selected as a case study because of the unique features it possesses, including being the oldest university in the country, which made it stand out as a well-established place in terms of traditions, infrastructure and structures. This meant that it could provide more reliable data than other institutions in the country.

Data for this study were collected and analysed qualitatively using interpretative philosophy by applying general principles suggested in the literature by scholars such as Bogdan and Biklen (1998), in which one examines the meaningful and symbolic content. All interviews were recorded verbatim using a digital voice recorder and transcribed with the help of NVIVO data analysis software. Data analysis involved organising, categorising, synthesizing, interpreting and writing about the data. It further comprised of going through sub-processes, such as writing field notes and memos, reading through the transcripts to gain overall views and impressions, and applying the insights gained from the field to make sense of the participants' descriptions. The analysis furthermore involved using all reflective ideas and insights emerging during data collection, comparing the data, and supporting the analysis with the use of memos as an additional source.

Findings

From the findings it was discovered that at least two modes of learning groups existed at the UDSM, namely, formal and informal. On the one hand, the formal groups are usually determined and moderated by the course lecturers, most of whose procedures are formally monitored. Formal procedures, for example, included attending the lecture and choosing the questions to be discussed and presented. Additionally, presentations of formal groups usually take the form of seminars or tutorials. On the contrary, the majority of informal learning groups are organised by the students themselves with no predetermined guidance or requirements. Regarding the nature of these groups, the findings of this study indicated that, in most cases, informal learning groups were formed on an ad-hoc basis, were unregulated, and in most cases were ineffective, as suggested in the interview comments below: -

> I think most students are self-selected and decide on their own to form the groups, constituting friends who can help one another by sharing notes and exchanging copies of materials. I am not in favour of these groups and the way they tackle questions collectively. For me the ideal way would be for them to study individually, and then tackle questions

individually. They should seek assistance from instructors when they face difficulties and spend just a small amount of time sharing with friends in groups. Sadly, at the moment group discussion has been one of the commonest methods of studying at this university. Students are mainly using this approach, spending a lot of time, even overnight. (Lecturer 11, Sociology).

The above interview comment provides a lecturer's view on the effectiveness and learning outcomes resulting from the use of informal learning groups. It appears from the above findings therefore that the use of groups does not necessarily promote teaching and learning, and it is not always the case that the use of groups can contribute to the enhancement of student learning. The above findings on groups' functioning are also in line with those of Bjerkaker& Summers (2006), which indicate that although learning is considered to be a sociable process, group processes alone cannot guarantee learning. Subsequent analysis of the findings of this study also suggested that several other factors can undermine or promote groups' learning outcomes as discussed below.

Large classes as a challenge
The other theme, which emerged from the analysis, was the effects of class sizes on the ideal use of the group learning approach and its quality. During the interview with participants, it was reported that large classes greatly hindered students' learning. Because of the recent escalation in the number of students enrolled, it was almost impossible to maintain high-quality learning. Most lecturers (*almost 61%)* reported that larger classes hindered them from engaging students in learning and they could not effectively use participatory approaches. Reporting on how large classes could negatively affect their teaching efforts for example, some of the participants commented as follows: -

> A large class is a real challenge. When you teach, it is like most of the students are unaware of what is going on. With more than 800 students, I normally restrict my teaching to using the lecture method (Lecturer 16, Accounting).

> 'We have very large classes. I can't effectively monitor students' individual learning activities'. (Lecturer 03, Accounting).

> 'I have more than 700 students, but the lecture theatre capacity is only 500 students. We have to split the class into two groups'. (Lecturer 18, Science).

The excerpts above suggest that class size could negatively affect the monitoring of teaching and learning. The findings further suggest that some classes had as many as 1000students, with inadequate physical and instructional resources, such as tables, stools and lab utensils. For example, Lecturer 16 (Accounting) above candidly confessed that it was completely impossible for him to use participatory teaching approaches in his class because of the unmanageable large class he had. The above findings demonstrate some of the complications and challenges experienced by academics that could inhibit their use of learner-centred approaches that would have promoted students' lifelong learning skills. The findings with regard to the effect of large classes also raise the broad question about the challenges experienced by academics because of the unsatisfactory physical teaching and learning environment. The centrality of class size as a factor that can constrain effective facilitation of learning is also reported in previous studies by Gellman-Danley and Fetzner (1998).

Congregation of students in groups even without reading

The analysis of the findings suggested further that most lecturers had a negative impression of the expediency of informal learning groups organized by students in developing their critical mind that would promote a culture of lifelong learning. The interviewed lecturers reported that although many students participated in informal learning groups as one of the commonest ways of learning, several weaknesses inherent in the group learning approach could limit their effectiveness and could compromise the quality of teaching and learning, as one of the participants revealed:-

> Because our students don't read, they congregate in what they call informal groups, which constitute friends who exchange notes. Most of the group members do not attend lectures and they come to these groups without any preparation. So, in groups, they spend a lot of time repeating lectures. We have repeatedly advised them to change this, without any successes. (Head of Department A)

The above interview comment suggests some of the threats to quality emerging from the use of informal learning groups. The risks may arise due to the nature of the groups formed and their composition. From the comments above, it seems that not all types of informal learning groups can promote effective learning.

'Students come in groups just to enjoy'
The findings of this study suggested that some lecturers felt that quite a good number of students in groups were not prepared to make an effort and could not constructively contribute to group efforts. These findings are also supported by evidence from previous studies, indicating that group learning could promote social loafing behaviour. Evidence from a study byLiden, Wayne, Jaworski and Bennett (2004), for example, reveals that an individual's anonymity tends to increase as the group's size increases, so that it becomes increasingly difficult to assess each individual's contributions, and at times, the presence of others can cause that person to feel he or she is unaccountable. One of the participants for instance had the impression that in most cases group discussion are mainly characterised by social loafing, as illustrated in the interview quote below: -

> Some students just come to the groups to enjoy themselves and just take notes but they don't do anything, it is important we monitor their functioning; otherwise the groups will be very poisonous. When marking papers of students from these groups, you find that the answers are exactly the same. So although I don't discourage the use of groups, I encourage the groups formed to be guided by strict rules that guide group members. (Lecturer 2, Sociology).

The interview quote above suggests some of the pathologies which can hinder participation and active learning through group discussions. It appears from these findings that only when there are strict rules to regulate and guide the conduct and operation of groups, the informal groups can produce the expected results or enhance quality learning. These findings agree with propositions in the theoretical framework by Bjerkaker and Summers (2006), which suggests that effective learning through groups can be influenced by several factors, including learning 'students' plan' and a 'sense of shared purpose'. It seems from these findings that ifthe groups are to function effectively; it requires proper coordination and organization to allow effective collaborative learning to take place. Students learning in groups, for example, can be enhanced when the participants are able to identify their learning styles, and when they are organised on the basis of these learning styles to make sure they support each other.

Discussion

This article was aimed at examining the university lecturers' perception of the effectiveness of group discussion in teaching and learning in the context of lifelong learning. The study adopted the theoretical model proposed by Bjerkaker and Summers (2006), which suggests the presence of several pre-conditions for the effective functioning of learning groups. The analysis of empirical findings in this article supports the assumptions in the theoretical model. Further, the findings are consistent with previous studies, such as those of Cinnamon *et. al.* (2010) and Gunn (2007), which consider the structural and interpersonal problems or issues to be among the main predictors of successful group learning. According to Cinnamon *et. al* (2010), some of the structural issues to be considered include inter-departmental coordination and the design of tasks. Similarly, some of the 'interpersonal factors' include personal characteristics such as self-regulation and self-reflection. A similar study conducted by Topping (2005) also concluded that group discussion can only be effective if it is followed by post-group discussion activities and self-reflection. Topping (2005) for example recommends post-group discussion activities such as the development of generalisations and self-regulation. As observed by Topping, in a real sense and in most cases, learning groups are not followed by post-group discussion procedures.

Other scholars who are sceptical of the use of learning groups, argue that, although there is a consensus in the literature that learning can and should be achieved through interactive practices among students (Galton & Williamson, 1992),serious learning ultimately involves the inescapable solitary process of reading (Barnett, 1992). As suggested in this paper, the proposed learning strategies that could promote lifelong learning would be those in which students move from self-directed simple thinking to higher order and more abstract thinking, moving from the surface level of learning to the strategic and deep level, and from declarative knowledge to the procedural and conditional.

However, given the fact that the use of these groups is still a dominant mode of teaching and learning in most of the institutions of higher learning in Tanzania, it would seem sensible to propose that universities should foster both students' learning skills in groups and individual learning skills. Similarly, universities should find ways to boost the productivity of group learning as suggested in the Bjerkaker and Summers (2006)model. Whereas the promotion of students' personal agency skills and learning-to-learn skills are likely to enhance the effective use of self-directed learning, the facilitation of students' learning skills in groups could equally be important for enhancing collaborative learning skills.

Conclusion and Policy Implications
This article has discussed issues, debates and findings on the use of groups in learning and teaching. The article examined the implications of using formal and informal learning groups as suppressors or promoters of lifelong learning at university level. From the analysis, it seems that academics in Tanzanian universities have mixed feelings about the effectiveness ofusing formal and informal learning groups for quality teaching and learning, with the majority of them feeling that informal learning groups cannot contribute productively to teaching and learning. Participants with a negative attitude towards the use of groups felt that informal groups are just created as a way of students helping one another by sharing notes and copying materials from each other, and as a way of exchanging strategies for tackling questions by reviewing past papers, which did not seem to be the best way for university students to learn. The participants also felt that such approaches could promote reproductive, surface learning as opposed to deep learning, because they tend to discourage independent learning and encourage studying for examinations rather than gaining an understanding or solving problems. Some of the interviewed academics also seemed to prefer the use of formal seminars and group discussion

to informal group discussions, implying that the former groups are more likely to promote self-directed learning and impart lifelong learning attributes to students. It is important therefore for higher education institutions in Tanzania to reconsider the existence and functioning of group discussion and to find possible ways for improving the quality of learning in groups.

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