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## Nicknaming Instructors: What is in it for Instructional Communication?

Alemayehu Debebe\*

**Abstract:** This study explored the bases of students' nicknaming of their instructors in relation to provisions of student-centered learning. The objective of the study is to identify sources of nicknaming and their implications to the teaching-learning scenario. Participants of the study were selected from among the second year pre-school teacher trainees of the Kotebe College of Teacher Education (extension program). Eight (5 female and 3 male) students within the age range of 18-25 years were included in the study on a voluntary basis. After identification of the participants was made, the students took part in a focus group discussion. Results obtained from the focus group discussion indicated that nicknaming instructors is mainly directed towards either how well or poorly an instructor handles his/her teaching responsibilities in general and encouraging participatory learning in particular.

### Introduction

Education is a process of acquiring knowledge, skills and attitude. Communication is a 'no substitute' tool of education through which meanings are shared. In fact, communication in educational environments is a complex process that requires not only knowledge of the subject matter but also the way how to present it to the students. The interactive nature of contemporary classrooms requires competency to communicate and facilitate planned learning. Interactive classroom is characterized by two way communication whereby instructors present their lessons and students contribute to their own learning. Students' feedback on how the instructional communication is a vital source of information for further improvement of effectiveness of the teaching-learning process.

"Creating interpersonal climate is one of the important processes in teaching," Jyce and Weil cited in Siddqui and Khan (1991, p. 1-2). Teachers are also responsible to design and maintain classroom interaction in the

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\* Lecturer, ECSC ; email: wogabeb@yahoo.com.

pursuit of student learning (McCaslin and Good, 1996). Cannon and Newble (2002) mention that provision of frequent, constructive and usable feedback are vital in order to achieve quality learning outcomes. Campbell and Kryszewska (1994) outline that student-centered learning maximizes potential of the learner and peer teaching and correction. The former benefit is concerned with ideas, opinions, experiences and areas of expertise that students can bring to the classroom instruction. The latter is about interdependence. In both cases, the teacher is not regarded as the only source of information. Students are also expected to contribute to their learning either in enriching the lesson being presented or in giving constructive feedback on how the teaching learning process is going on. The student centered approach to teaching, therefore, provides another opportunity to students to work in groups and learn from each other via guidance of their teacher. Thus, one can generalize that student-centered learning is a process whereby learners acquire the desired change in knowledge, skills, and attitude through active-interactive engagements.

In relation to the nature of student-centered learning, Cannon and Newble (2002, p.17-18) further discuss it in comparison with the conventional teaching in the following way:

<b>Conventional Teaching</b>	<b>Student-centered Learning</b>
Students are often passive (no role in planning, sitting in lectures)	Students have responsible and active role (in planning their learning, interacting with teachers and other students, researching, assessing)
Most decisions are made by the teacher	Students are required to make choices about what and how to learn
Emphasis on learning their subject only	Emphasis on integrating learning across the curriculum
Emphasis on receiving information	Emphasis on enquiry-type of activities
Teacher as expert dispenser of Knowledge and controller of activities	Teacher as guide, mentor and facilitator of learning
Extrinsic motivation (grades, teacher praise)	Intrinsic motivation (interest, curiosity, responsibility)
Individual learning and competition between students	Focus on cooperative learning
Learning is confined to fixed teaching venues (lecture rooms, libraries, laboratories)	Learning can occur anywhere
Relatively inflexible arrangements	Greater flexibility in learning and teaching
Assessment is seen as the responsibility of the teacher with examinations as an important focus	Greater flexibility in assessment: self and peer assessment become more common
Short-term perspective: emphasis on completing assigned work and learning for the examination	Long-term perspective: emphasis on lifelong learning

*Source: Cannon and Newble (2002, p. 17-18).*

In fact, it is not the question of preference to use or not to use the student-centered learning approach. If one recognizes that students have the stake in the teaching and learning process and that they are responsible for their learning, creation of conducive environment that responds to the needs of the learners is one of the essential conditions in provision of education.

Being responsive to the learning needs of students is an essential condition for the very existence of instructional communication.

The responsiveness of a given instructional practice to its target beneficiaries can be assessed through two ways. The first approach is by conducting evaluation. This is a commonly utilized formal method. The second one is unceremonious by nature and depends on informal description and explanations of events as data sources. Nicknaming instructors, therefore, is an informal practice that gives feedback on how soundly or poorly an instructor presents his/her lessons. The purpose of this study, thus, is to shed light on how students express their views and comment on the performances of their instructors through the use of nicknames.

### **Method**

In consultation with the education department head and one of the instructors teaching the pre-school teacher trainees, I was given 20 minutes to stay with the students to communicate my intention and select participants of the study. Thus, I had to deal with the issues of my concern step by step. First, I introduced myself with some more details than my host did. Secondly, I disclosed that I am looking for informants for my intended study without telling them the specific topic of the research. I also specified the number of participants in the focus group discussion which is 6 to 8 students preferably with equal representation of both sexes. Thirdly, I called upon those students who like to take part in the study on their own free will.

I counted thirteen hands raised in response to my request. Three of the volunteers were male and the remaining 10 were females. Initially the intention was to have 4 male and 4 female students to form a team of 8 participants for the focused-group discussion. However, it became impossible to maintain the gender balance for only 3 of the 16 male students willingly decided to participate in the study. Yet, the number of female volunteers was greater than the required one.

Therefore, we had to draw lottery to bring the number of female participants down to the desired size. Finally, the selection was completed with identification of a sample size of 8 (3 male and 5 female) students. After selection of participants has been settled, we had to fix the date, place and time of the focus group discussion in collaboration with the participants. Accordingly, we agreed to meet for the interview the next day, at the same place (Atse Naod Primary School, room number 403); at 5:00 o'clock in the afternoon that is an hour earlier than the class time.

Data were collected through the focused-group discussion. The discussion schedule had four open-ended guide questions set out in a way that enables to raise multiple questions springing from responses made by the participants. Triangulation of responses was made at the spot through asking the other participants of the interview whether they agree with the idea or they saw it differently.

## Results

During the focused-group discussion, the first question was about 'why do people nickname others instead of using their given names?' This is one of the general questions that helped to obtain background information about the issue under discussion. According to the participants, people nickname others for one or the other reasons that are specified as:

- 1) to express intimacy of relationship (love and appreciation);
- 2) to express hatred or disapproval; and
- 3) to be critical on one's personality (behaviors and way of doing things).

The participants have also pointed out that nicknaming is commonly used primarily among students across different levels of education, co-workers in different organizations, and more popular among taxi drivers, their assistants and associates. Secondly, subordinates use nicknames to address their bosses, people designate nicknames to political leaders; and students assign nicknames to their teachers. In the case of nicknaming bosses, political leaders, and teachers, nicknames kept as secretly as possible in

fear of probable (direct or indirect) discomfoting reactions from the side of the nicknamed.

According to the focused-group discussion session, considerations to assign a nickname to a given person can broadly be classified in to two. The first type of classification is made on the basis of personal attributes or traits such as decency, impatience, determination, discipline, values, virtues, styles (the way one talks, walks, dresses, greets, and others). The second classification is solely based on performance of an individual. As far as the topic of performance-based nicknaming is concerned, however, the one who is going to be nicknamed should be either a high or low achiever (a hare or a tortoise – to borrow one of the respondents' various expressions about the two extremes). According to the respondents, average performance is out of the scope to be considered by the nicknaming entities. The participants noted that there is no wonder to nickname the one who does his/ her job in a way most people do.

Since the issue of performance is one of the two basic considerations for nicknaming, this point of time was the critical phase of the study whereby the participants expected to discuss about their currently teaching instructors. I just forwarded my first question.

The initial reaction to my first question by the respondents was gazing at each other with a kind of surprise. The question was about whether they had instructors with nicknames. All of the participants were smiling in silence. Nearly a minute later, my question was responded by another question from one of the students.

**Student 1:** Are you sure that the information that we are going to give you would be kept confidential as you told us earlier?

**Me:** Absolutely, yes.

**Student 1:** If that is the case, we all call one of the four currently teaching instructors using one popular nickname. (The one who was speaking checked his left and right for approval from his friends. The remaining seven participants nodded in agreement.)

**Me:** What is that popular nickname?

**Student 1:** We call her “teacher radio”. (All at once blast in laughter).

**Me:** Are there any other instructors with nicknames? (This question was thrown onto all the participants).

**Student 2:** There is no any other popular nickname like ‘teacher radio’ or sometimes we call her ‘BBC’. (The remark has followed by another round of laughter).

**Me:** Is “teacher radio” the nickname that all of you are familiar with?

The team affirmed me with smile and nodding.

After obtaining confirmation, I decided to further examine into the rationale behind the nickname “teacher radio”.

Tremendous points have been forwarded by the team to justify why the nickname “teacher radio” was given to one of the four instructors that have been teaching the group since their admission into the program (at present the group is in its third semester). The responses are summarized as follows.

- She does not care about our feelings while presenting any of the lessons;
- She does not give us chance to ask questions whenever we are in doubt;
- She does not listen to us rather than simply speaking like a radio does;
- She usually digresses into matters that have no relationship with her topics;
- She does not ask us for feedback about what is going on in the class;
- She considers us as if we knew nothing; and
- She gets nervous at us when we ask questions.

Points presented above were checked one by one whether all of the respondents had similar impression against each of the remarks and uniformity of responses across the board was confirmed by all of the participants.

'If this is the situation, how do you feel about that particular class?' This was my next question to the group. Responses to the question are summarized as follows:

**Student 3:** We feel tired of her class even from its very beginning. In fear of being black-listed, however, I pretend as if I were attending it very well.

**Student 5:** To me, her classes become dull and almost all ways the same irrespective of the nature of the topic to be presented.

**Student 4:** I have one more point to add. She is serious in taking attendance. She is also strict in respecting her schedule. But her class looks like a ritual that one smart person keeps on speaking all over the sessions and others do nothing other than listening to the one who speaks.

**Student 7:** You see, she is not the only instructor who is giving us courses. Even now, we are taking three different courses with three different instructors including the one that we are talking about. We see no variety in her class. It seems to be business as usual. Remember! My remarks are not about her knowledge of the subject matter. I understand that she knows it very well. Our comments are on the methods of presenting her lessons.

My last question to the group was about their participation in evaluation of their instructors' performance. The question reads as 'Have you ever been given chances to evaluate your instructors or comment on their performance?' Participants have responded to the question in the following way.

**Student 7:** Never, not at all.

**Student 8:** We heard that students in the regular program do evaluate their instructors. But we do not have the chance to do so simply because we are the extension students.

As the final analysis of the focused-group interview, I asked the group whether all of them share the remarks that were made by students 7 and 8. They expressed their total agreement by articulating "yes".



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## Conclusion

The finding of this research indicates that nicknaming instructors could have strong implications for improvement of classroom instruction. The name 'teacher radio' and its corresponding explanations were pedagogically sound judgments. Practices such as indifference to the feelings of the learners, discouraging questions, considering oneself as all knowing person, and not entertaining feedback from the students are serious problems that prohibit two-way communication in instructional settings. Where there is no two way communication, there will no cooperative learning that opens opportunity to learn from one another. The classroom environment also gets monotonous and boring. Everything turns to be teacher driven where students are domesticated only to obey what a teacher instructs them to do or not to do. This kind of teaching tradition may lead to the situation that a teacher produces his/her replica.

The study did not take the teachers' perspective in to account. All the discussions were from the learners' view point. This is its possible limitation. Even then, the findings showed us that messages conveyed through nicknaming have considerable elements which reflect on how students perceive their learning in terms of methodological application. In some instances, like what has happened with this study, nicknaming can serve as a feedback on how well teachers discharge their teaching responsibilities especially in a way it responds to the needs and expectations of the learners.

Furthermore, this study perhaps shed light on another important dimension of research endeavor that seeks inputs for instructional improvement from the informal domain like nicknaming of teachers. Nicknaming instructors, if carefully studied, can contribute a lot in reflecting on the insider's view of the classroom instruction as graffiti mirrors out the real life situation from the informal perspective.

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