

Deconstructing Pedagogy: Balancing Between Teacher's Authority and Students' Autonomy

Samira Tasnim

Students, Department of English, Jahangirnagar University

Sourav Jahirul

Students, Department of English, Jahangirnagar University

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ABSTRACT

In the modern era, education aims to improve society by bringing about change and preserving, transmitting, and advancing knowledge. Paulo Freire once argued that "All the institutions that could make social change are dead, except the classroom." Yet, education systems today often prioritize test scores and standardization over critical inquiry, creativity, and independent learning. This paper examines the tension between teacher authority and student autonomy in pedagogical practices, using a mixed-methods survey of 63 students from both national and international universities. The results show significant dissatisfaction with teacher-centered instruction, rigid assessment methods, and hierarchical student-teacher dynamics. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of learner autonomy and student-centered education, this paper analyzes pedagogical challenges and proposes practical strategies for creating balanced, empowering, and transformative classrooms. It advocates for teachers to shift from being gatekeepers of knowledge to facilitators of student growth, and for learning environments that encourage autonomy, critical thinking, and lifelong learning.

Introduction

Education has long been regarded as a cornerstone of societal progress, with the classroom serving as a vital space for fostering critical thinking, innovation, and personal growth. However, traditional pedagogical practices often prioritize teacher authority over student autonomy, creating a disconnect that limits the potential for transformative learning. Paulo Freire, in his seminal work *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), argued that the classroom remains one of the few institutions capable of driving societal change, yet its potential is often undermined by rigid, teacher-centric approaches. These methods emphasize measurable outcomes, such as test scores, over fostering a deep understanding of concepts, leaving students disengaged and ill-equipped for lifelong learning. In recent years, scholars like Sultana (2024) have highlighted the detrimental effects of this overemphasis on quantifiable achievements, noting that it restricts students' potential and perpetuates an outdated, logo-centric view of knowledge. Similarly, Dreyfus (2009) emphasizes the importance of a collaborative teacher-student relationship in creating an effective learning environment. By incorporating student autonomy into the classroom, educators can empower learners to take charge of their education, fostering self-reliance and the development of lifelong learning skills. This paper seeks to explore the gaps between teachers and students in contemporary pedagogical systems and propose strategies to bridge these divides. Through a survey of 62 students from diverse national and international universities, this study examines the teacher-student dynamic and suggests actionable reforms to create a more balanced and student-centered educational environment.

Objectives

The primary objectives of this study are:

To investigate the current state of pedagogical practices in higher education, focusing on the balance between teacher authority and student autonomy.

- To identify key barriers that prevent students from exercising autonomy in the classroom.

- To explore the impact of teacher-centric methods on student engagement and learning outcomes.
- To propose instructional strategies that promote a collaborative relationship between teachers and students, fostering an environment conducive to self-directed learning.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

How do current pedagogical practices in higher education reinforce teacher authority at the expense of student autonomy?

What are the primary barriers to fostering student autonomy in the classroom?

How do teacher-student hierarchies impact the learning experience, particularly in terms of engagement and self-reliance?

What instructional strategies can effectively bridge the gap between teachers and students, enabling a more balanced and collaborative learning environment?

Hypothesis

Based on the literature and preliminary observations, this study hypothesizes that teacher-centric pedagogical practices in higher education significantly limit student autonomy, leading to reduced engagement and hindering the development of lifelong learning skills. By adopting instructional strategies that prioritize collaboration and student agency, it is possible to create a more effective and equitable learning environment.

Literature Review

The discourse on pedagogy has evolved significantly over the past century, with scholars increasingly advocating for a shift away from traditional, teacher-centric models. Paulo Freire's *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) remains a foundational text in this field, arguing that education should be a liberatory process that empowers students to challenge oppressive structures. Freire critiques the "banking model" of education, where teachers deposit knowledge into passive students, and instead advocates for a dialogic approach that positions students as co-creators of knowledge. This perspective aligns with the goals of fostering student autonomy, as it encourages learners to take an active role in their education.

More recent scholarship has built on Freire's ideas, exploring the practical implications of student-centered pedagogy. Sultana (2024) argues that the overemphasis on measurable outcomes, such as standardized test scores, restricts students' potential by prioritizing rote memorization over critical thinking. This logo-centric view of knowledge, which equates learning with the accumulation of facts, fails to account for the diverse ways in which students engage with and process information. Sultana's work highlights the need for pedagogical reform that values student agency and fosters a deeper understanding of concepts.

Dreyfus (2009) complements this perspective by emphasizing the role of the teacher-student relationship in effective learning. According to Dreyfus, a desirable learning process occurs when teachers and students form a proper and friendly relationship, characterized by mutual respect and collaboration. This relationship enables students to feel supported in taking risks and exploring new ideas, which is essential for developing autonomy and self-reliance. Dreyfus's findings underscore the importance of rethinking traditional teacher-student hierarchies, which often position the teacher as the sole authority in the classroom.

The concept of student autonomy has also been explored in the context of lifelong learning. Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (1985) provides a useful framework for understanding the psychological factors that drive autonomous learning. According to SDT, individuals are more likely to engage in self-directed learning when their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met. In the classroom, this means creating an environment where students feel empowered to make choices, confident in their abilities, and connected to their teachers and peers. By aligning pedagogical practices with these principles, educators can foster the development of lifelong learning skills, preparing students for success in an ever-changing world.

Despite these insights, many educational institutions continue to rely on teacher-centric methods that limit student autonomy. This is particularly evident in higher education, where rigid curricula, high-stakes assessments, and hierarchical classroom dynamics often dominate. The literature suggests that addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach, one that reimagines the role of the teacher as a facilitator rather than a dictator of knowledge. This study builds on this foundation by examining the experiences of students in higher education and identifying practical strategies for reform.

Methodology

To better understand these dynamics, I conducted a survey involving 62 students from diverse national and international universities. Participants came from various cultural and educational backgrounds, providing rich insights into the challenges and opportunities of different pedagogical systems. The survey consisted of both closed- and open-ended questions, designed to gather quantitative and qualitative data on the following topics:

- The extent to which current pedagogical practices prioritize teacher authority over student autonomy.
- The impact of teaching methods, assessment systems, and teacher-student hierarchies on the learning experience.
- Students' perceptions of their ability to exercise autonomy in the classroom.
- Suggestions for improving the teacher-student relationship and fostering a more collaborative learning environment.

The survey was distributed online, and participants were given two weeks to respond. The data were analyzed using a combination of descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to quantify the prevalence of teacher-centric practices and their impact on student engagement, while thematic analysis was applied to the open-ended responses to identify recurring themes and patterns. This mixed-methods approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand, providing both numerical insights and nuanced perspectives from the participants.

Results and Findings

The survey results revealed several key findings regarding the state of pedagogical practices in higher education. First, a significant majority of participants (78%) reported that their educational experiences were predominantly teacher-centric, with limited opportunities for student input or autonomy. This was particularly evident in the design of curricula and assessments, which were often dictated by the instructor with little regard for student preferences or needs.

Second, the participants identified several barriers to exercising autonomy in the classroom. The most commonly cited issues were rigid teaching methods (65%), high-stakes assessment systems (58%), and hierarchical teacher-student dynamics (52%). Many students felt that these factors created an environment where they were expected to passively receive knowledge rather than actively engage with it. For example, one participant noted, "Our professors decide everything—what we learn, how we learn it, and how we're assessed. There's no room for us to explore our own interests or take ownership of our education."

Third, the survey highlighted the negative impact of teacher-centric practices on student engagement and self-reliance. A staggering 72% of participants reported feeling disengaged in classes where teacher authority dominated, and 68% felt that their ability to develop lifelong learning skills was hindered by the lack of autonomy. These findings align with the literature, particularly Sultana's (2024) critique of logo-centric pedagogy, which prioritizes measurable outcomes over meaningful learning.

Finally, the participants offered several suggestions for improving the teacher-student relationship and fostering a more collaborative learning environment. These included adopting more interactive teaching methods, such as group discussions and project-based learning; redesigning assessment systems to focus on process rather than product; and creating opportunities for students to co-

design curricula with their instructors. These suggestions provide a roadmap for pedagogical reform, emphasizing the importance of student agency and collaboration.

Hypothesis Testing

To test the hypothesis that teacher-centric pedagogical practices in higher education significantly limit student autonomy, leading to reduced engagement and hindering the development of lifelong learning skills, the survey data were analyzed in relation to the key variables of autonomy, engagement, and lifelong learning skills. The hypothesis also posits that adopting instructional strategies prioritizing collaboration and student agency can create a more effective and equitable learning environment.

The survey results strongly support the first part of the hypothesis. The finding that 78% of participants experienced predominantly teacher-centric practices indicates a pervasive limitation on student autonomy. This is further corroborated by the identification of rigid teaching methods (65%), high-stakes assessments (58%), and hierarchical teacher-student dynamics (52%) as primary barriers to autonomy. These factors align with Freire's (1970) critique of the banking model, where students are passive recipients of knowledge, and Sultana's (2024) observations about the restrictive nature of logo-centric pedagogy.

The impact on engagement and lifelong learning skills is equally evident. The 72% of participants reporting disengagement in teacher-centric classes directly supports the hypothesis that reduced autonomy leads to lower engagement. Similarly, 68% of participants noted that the lack of autonomy hindered their development of lifelong learning skills, such as self-reliance and critical thinking. These findings are consistent with Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (1985), which links autonomy to intrinsic motivation and sustained learning.

The second part of the hypothesis, regarding the potential of collaborative and student-centered strategies, is supported by the participants' suggestions for reform. The emphasis on interactive teaching methods (e.g., group discussions, project-based learning), process-focused assessments, and student involvement in curriculum design aligns with Dreyfus's (2009) advocacy for collaborative teacher-student relationships. While the survey did not directly test the implementation of these strategies, the qualitative data suggest that students perceive them as viable solutions for enhancing autonomy and engagement, providing a foundation for future experimental studies.

In conclusion, the hypothesis is supported by the survey data, confirming that teacher-centric practices limit student autonomy, reduce engagement, and hinder lifelong learning skills. The proposed instructional strategies offer a promising approach to addressing these issues, warranting further investigation and implementation.

Discussion

The findings of this study, including the hypothesis testing, confirm that teacher-centric pedagogical practices in higher education limit student autonomy, leading to reduced engagement and hindering the development of lifelong learning skills. The survey results align with the literature, particularly Freire's (1970) critique of the banking model of education and Sultana's (2024) observations about the overemphasis on measurable outcomes. By prioritizing teacher authority over student agency, many educational institutions are failing to create an environment where students can thrive as self-directed learners.

One of the most striking findings is the extent to which rigid teaching methods and high-stakes assessments contribute to the problem. These practices not only limit students' ability to take charge of their education but also reinforce a hierarchical dynamic that positions the teacher as the sole authority in the classroom. This dynamic undermines the collaborative relationship that Dreyfus (2009) identifies as essential for effective learning, leaving students feeling disempowered and disconnected.

However, the participants' suggestions for reform offer a promising path forward. By adopting more interactive teaching methods, such as group discussions and project-based learning, educators can create opportunities for students to engage actively with the material and with each other. Similarly, redesigning assessment systems to focus on the learning process rather than the

final product can encourage students to take risks and explore new ideas without the fear of failure. Finally, involving students in the design of curricula can foster a sense of ownership and agency, aligning with the principles of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

These strategies require a fundamental shift in the role of the teacher, from an authoritative figure to a facilitator and guide. This shift is not without its challenges, as it demands that educators relinquish some control and embrace a more collaborative approach to teaching. However, the potential benefits—improved student engagement, greater self-reliance, and the development of lifelong learning skills—make this a worthwhile endeavor. By bridging the gap between teacher authority and student autonomy, educators can create a more equitable and effective learning environment that prepares students for success in the modern world.

Conclusion

This study highlights the imbalance between teacher authority and student autonomy in higher education, revealing that teacher-centered methods often hinder student engagement and self-directed learning. Key barriers include rigid pedagogy, high-stakes assessments, and hierarchical dynamics. However, reforms such as interactive teaching, revised assessments, and student involvement in curriculum design can create a more collaborative environment. These strategies reflect Freire's and Dreyfus's educational philosophies. Shifting the teacher's role to that of a facilitator can enhance student agency and promote lifelong learning. Educational institutions must prioritize reform to transform classrooms into spaces that empower students and foster meaningful societal change. transformation.

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