



## Research Article

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# Voices of Future Educators: Graduate Students' Conceptions about Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

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## Abstract

*Teaching and learning as a process and concept is often researched through the viewpoint of graduate students as future educators in their respective fields. The aim of this study was to explore graduate students' conceptions, experiences, and advice about teaching and learning as they embark on their journey as educators. Through purposive sampling, data were collected from students in the final year of their master's program in education at a large university in Saudi Arabia. A qualitative content analysis of students' written responses revealed three main themes: 1) definitions of teaching and learning were either teacher-led (predominant) or student-focused; 2) practical activities and assignments framed students' memorable experiences; and, 3) updated, diverse methodologies including practical applications formed the main advice for educators. Student conceptions of teaching and learning, while predominantly teacher-led, illustrated elements of student-centered learning. An underlying trend throughout the data was an awareness and description of the ongoing transition from teacher-centered/led to student-centered classrooms in their higher education experiences. Implications of this study include reflection on teaching and student-centered learning as a concept and process in graduate-level education programs and faculty academic development and reconsideration of the traditional faculty-student relationship to a more cooperative and involved one, particularly at the graduate level.*

**Keywords:** graduate students, Saudi Arabia, teacher education, teaching and learning conceptions

## 1. Introduction

The teaching and learning process is the essence of what educators and learners at all levels do—whether in lesson or course preparation, participating in a learner-centered classroom environment, co-creating faculty-student relationships, or constructing knowledge and competences through lifelong learning (Fuhrman, Fuhrman, & De Lay, 2010). According to the literature, there is no one universal, correct definition of teaching and learning. It is often discussed in terms of effective, quality teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2021; Fuhrman, Fuhrman, & De Lay, 2010; Hill, 2014; Olsen, 2021) or from a conceptual, more theoretical and historical approach (Bruce and Gerber, 1995; Bruner, 1985; Murphy, 2008; Saroyan, Dagenais, & Zhou, 2009). Either approach, whether effect, quality-focused or conceptual, is mutually inclusive with practical implications for the teaching and learning process (Zerihun, Beishuizen, & Van Os, 2011).

Saroyan, Dagenais, and Zhou (2009) and Bruce and Gerber (1995) reported that research on conceptualizing teaching and learning began more than 40 years ago in the late 1970's. Research initially focused on school students and teachers' conceptions of learning, gaining momentum in higher education later in the 1990s and 2000s with faculty members and students (Bruce & Gerber, 1995; Saroyan, Dagenais, & Zhou, 2009). Olsen (2021) further pinpoints the issue of effective teaching and learning as a "moving target" that "holds dozens of variables unique to the context and person yet also contains scores of universal truths about learning, teaching and educational reform" (p. 1).

In Saudi Arabia and the Gulf region, it is believed that effective, high quality teaching in higher education involves much more than excellent content or field-specific knowledge. Led by Saudi's national development plan, *Saudi Vision 2030*, high-quality education is considered at the forefront of economic and societal transformation. Thus, effective teaching and learning includes becoming professional educators, i.e. cognizant of teaching and learning foundations and best practices (Muammar & Deraney, 2019), quality and learning domain frameworks (Education and Training National Evaluation Commission, 2020) to ensure accountability, and supporting the learners within the specific field and culturally-relevant context (Darling-Hammond, 2021; Elmahdi, Muammar, & Al-Hattami, 2015). Suffice it to say that educators' perspectives on the teaching-learning process is "informed by their conceptions, beliefs and assumptions about how students learn and what meaningful learning is" (Saroyan, Dagenais, & Zhou, 2009, p. 582). Accordingly, these informed conceptions coupled with practice and experience are the foundation of informed teaching and learning in classrooms.

### 1.1 Rationale and Research Questions

This study explores teaching and learning from the perspective of current Saudi graduate students majoring in education. Graduate students in education are in a unique position as both teacher and student to offer knowledgeable perspectives on what defines and improves teaching while still being a critical if not experiential learners within the process (Ramsden, 1992; Saroyan, Dagenais, & Zhou, 2009). Adding to the study's rationale, there is limited literature regarding Saudi students' perspectives on teaching and learning as a concept and experience, which is the foundation of their future practice. There is also a frequent gap between what is believed to be 'good' teaching and what is actually practiced in the Saudi higher education context due to quick-changing policies, shifting pedagogic paradigms, or lack of practical, timely professional development (Hamdan, 2015). Without reflection, these new educators could "uncritically reproduce the teaching models they have experienced" (Hill, 2014, p. 57), as has often occurred in this context (Al-Ghamdi & Tight, 2013). Rather than explicitly discussing what constitutes quality teaching, this study aims to inductively investigate graduate educators' conceptions of and experiences with teaching and learning within the Saudi higher educational system. Thus, through a content analysis of written responses from master's degree students in various fields of education, this research posed three questions:

1. How do graduate students in education, as future educators, conceptualize teaching and learning?
2. Based on past experiences in higher education, what are participants' most significant or memorable examples of teaching and learning?
3. What advice would the participant graduate students offer to current educators to improve teaching and learning in higher education?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Conceptualizing Teaching and Learning

Current conceptions and academic discussions of teaching and learning lie within the constructivist (Vygotsky, 1978) and cognitive-constructivist paradigms (Bruner, 1985), emphasizing students are at

the heart of learning as “agent, the active constructor of meaning and knowledge” (Murphy, 2008, p. 30). Murphy (2008) succinctly outlines the importance of scaffolding through peers, instructors, and the learning environment—what can be done or learned with support until the learner can value, know, use the knowledge independently. Murphy further emphasizes two points as paramount to learning: 1) the context in which learning takes place and 2) critical discussion of knowledge.

Related to context, as suggested by Murphy and posited by several educational researchers, culturally-relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2013) clearly supports the idea that culturally-aligned and inclusive content, resources, applications, and practice are valuable for more effective learning (Bassey, 2016; Gay, 2010). In addition, negotiation or critical discussion of learning within that cultural content cannot be separated from knowledge or practice: “The social construction of knowledge is a product of negotiation. In order to understand key ideas in subjects, students need to understand, and have access to, this process of negotiation” (Murphy, 2008, pp. 32-33).

Bruce and Gerber (1995) studied university lecturers’ conceptions of teaching and learning. The authors found six categories of conceptions ranging from foundational gaining and understanding knowledge and its application, to developing professional skills and competencies, and viewing learning as participatory experience, in which “the focus is on exploring how students participate in the learning experience” (Bruce & Gerber, 1995, p. 454). The authors suggest that professional development for faculty members should focus on and compare how students and faculty members understand the concept of teaching and learning.

Åkerlind (2004) also studied faculty members’ conceptions of being a university instructor in Australian higher education. In concurrence with Bruce and Gerber (1995), four clear patterns emerged in the teachers’ descriptions from student as “passive recipients” to “active creators” (p. 372), specifically teaching as knowledge transfer, building student-teacher relationships, student-centered interaction, and finally student-centered learning. Unlike most current faculty development programs in Saudi higher education, which focuses on practical strategies and activities (Deraney & Khanfar, 2020; Elmahdi, Muammar, & Al-Hattami, 2015), Åkerlind (2004) suggests that faculty academic development should emphasize the “conceptual understanding of the nature of teaching and learning, in contrast to the traditional approach of focusing on teaching methods and techniques” (pp. 373-374).

Building on the work of Åkerlind (2004), in their study and in-depth overview of conceptualizing teaching and learning, Saroyan, Dagenais, and Zhou (2009) researched doctoral students’ views on teacher and student roles and what constitutes effective teaching and learning after taking a teaching and learning course. The authors concluded that the graduate students also held four different conceptions of teaching and learning that were on a continuum between teacher and learner-centered: 1) knowledge transfer, 2) organized course preparation and management, 3) course outcomes/results emphasis with instructor more as facilitator, and 4) finally a more constructivist view of autonomous and lifelong learning (Saroyan, Dagenais, & Zhou, 2009, pp. 590-591). The researchers found that the students’ ideas became more student-centered after completion of the course on teaching and learning.

Zerihun, Beishuizen, and Van Os (2011) studied the conceptualization of teaching and learning and its implications in two universities in Ethiopia. The authors concluded that “the experiences and conceptions of both teachers and students reflect a teacher-focused approach to teaching and learning” (p. 151). A more student-centered approach or perspective, as mentioned in previous studies, was not a finding in this study. The undergraduate students overwhelmingly felt that they should be “passive listeners” (p. 158). Thus, the authors posited that participants may not appreciate or value more learner-centered approaches, which are not common in their teaching and learning environment.

## 2.2 *Effective Teaching and Learning*

Darling-Hammond (2021) studied what defines quality teaching in five countries around the world,

namely Canada, Finland, Singapore, Australia, and China, guided by teaching standards and quality frameworks. The author emphasized that quality teaching is “rooted in a wide-ranging knowledge base that combines an understanding of content, pedagogy, and learners which is focused on meeting students’ diverse social, emotional, and academic needs – rather than just covering the curriculum” (p. 13). Related to students’ social and emotional needs, Fuhrman, Fuhrman, and De Lay (2010) found that doctoral students reported ‘good’ teaching as related to “teacher practice and teacher personality” (p. 19). The participants noted interested, motivational and empathetic teachers who used varied strategies in their teaching.

Hill (2014) studied graduate students’ views of effective teaching in the southern US. Similar to Fuhrman, Fuhrman, and De Lay (2010), the researcher found that while students in the study valued teaching skills and knowledgeable instructors, the author noted the significance of “the affective or emotional processes involved in learning, forming a relationship with students, and caring about students’ learning and ability to integrate and apply new information” (Hill, 2014, p. 57). The focus on varied, applicable teaching strategies is also found in studies involving pre-service educators’ conceptions of teaching and learning. In agreement, Edwards-Groves and Hoare (2012) found that if future educators encounter and engage in explicit interactive activities such as dialoguing from the beginning of their undergraduate careers, these activities can inform and develop the future teacher’s pedagogic views.

In the Saudi higher education context, the conceptualization and study of teaching and learning is relatively new to multi-disciplinary faculty members. The concept is often reflected in what would be considered ‘traditional’ practice with “outdated teaching methods that do not enhance students’ skills and abilities” (Al-Ghamdi & Tight, 2013, p. 86). Adding to Al-Amri’s (2011) earlier view on the perception of teaching and learning in Saudi as teacher-centered, Alghamdi Hamdan and Aldossari (2021), in their research on graduate students’ experiences with the debate learning strategy, also noted that it is still “the reality that Saudi higher education tends to be teacher-centred, not learner-centred” (p. 340), and active teaching strategies are not yet the norm in Saudi higher education as a whole.

On the positive side, with the quick growth of faculty development centers and programs in Saudi universities and quality standards focused specifically on teaching and learning development and accountability (within the last 10-12 years), research within the Saudi higher education context is showing awareness and indications that faculty members are on the cusp of more effective and rigorous teaching and learning practice (Alghamdi, 2018; Elmahdi, Muammar, & Al-Hattami, 2015; Hamdan and Aldossari, 2021; Muammar & Deraney, 2019). What is not clear from the growing body of research is the meaning and conceptualization faculty members and future educators attach to teaching and learning, which implicitly and explicitly underlies their practice. This point emphasizes the importance and timeliness of the current research in this context.

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1 Research Design*

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically a content analysis of written responses to three prompts focused on graduate students’ definition, experiences, and advice about teaching and learning. This approach was chosen to explore “participants’ unique viewpoints that can only be fully understood within the context of their experience and worldview” (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018, p. 808). Written responses were used to implicitly investigate the students’ perspectives without intervention—in other words, students’ responses were sought without further discussion or prompting, which could potentially guide their responses. The data represented the participants’ perspectives in the final year of a master’s program in education.

### 3.2 Participants

Study participants were sought via purposive sampling “for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest” (Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 533), which, in this study, is future educators’ perceptions of teaching and learning. The participants were contacted through a trusted gatekeeper (Andoh-Arthur, 2019), a Professor of Education, who helped recruit interested master’s level graduate students at the College of Education in a large university in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. There were two main criteria for participation: 1) graduate students in education; and 2) final year of the program so participants had a clear foundation of teaching and learning as future educators.

The program has on average about 150 active graduate students within five different graduate programs, with an annual intake of about 30 students each year. The program is course-based and culminates in a thesis project. The vast majority of students are women. The final 12 participants for this study, Saudi women aged 25-40, represented four different programs (as shown in Table 1). All participants were in their final year of their Master’s program and employed in educational institutions within the Eastern Province. As participation was entirely voluntary and the researcher/questions were known to potential participants in advance, students’ written responses confirmed their informed consent. Additionally, participation was not related to any course, funding, or external reward.

**Table 1:** Participant Program and Specializations

Program/Specializations	Percentage (Number in Program)
Curriculum and Instruction (Science, Math, and Humanities Specializations)	50.00 (6)
Educational Administration	33.33 (4)
Educational Foundations	8.33 (1)
Special Education	8.33 (1)

### 3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data in the form of responses to three question prompts were requested and collected between December 2020 and April 2021. The questions, written in the students’ native language of Arabic, were validated for content (Creswell, 2014) and language accuracy by a bilingual expert (native Arabic speaker) in education:

1. As a future teacher, define (conceptualize) the meaning of teaching and learning from your point of view.
2. Through your past experiences in higher education, what examples of teaching and learning were the most significant/positive?
3. For the benefit of future educators such as yourselves, what advice would you give to other educators to improve teaching and learning in higher education?

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and university closures, participants were encouraged to respond in the most convenient way for their circumstance as working, graduate students. Thus, participants responded via e-mail, social media, and voice notes. The responses were written or voiced in the graduate students’ native language of Arabic, transcribed as needed, and then translated into English by a bilingual (English native) research assistant and rechecked and verified for meaning by the researcher.

After an initial data review to make notes of overall findings by question, each written response was then uploaded into the MAXQDA (2021) software program and analyzed in two ways to reveal repeated patterns and emerging themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). First, in the program, the data of all participants were uploaded, analyzed by open coding each question, and then collated into one project (148 total codes) revealing 16 overarching categories of repeated/similar codes. The written

responses were coded at three different times and color coded by question to improve reliability, increase accuracy, and reduce coder fatigue (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Second, the coded segments and categories were reviewed semantically for more rigorous interpretation of patterns and themes that emerged across questions and within each question (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Table 2 shows the number of codes and categories for each research question. For confidentiality, the participants are referred to by their program only, and, for transparency, their responses are quoted verbatim in the findings.

**Table 2:** Frequency of Codes

No.	Question	Codes	No. of Categories
1	Teaching and Learning Concept	52	4
2	Teaching and Learning Experiences	60	6
3	Advice for Future Educators	36	6
Total		148	16

#### 4. Findings

Three prominent themes emerged from graduate students' responses about their definitions, experiences, and advice regarding teaching and learning in higher education: 1) definitions of teaching and learning were either teacher-led (predominant) or student-focused; 2) practical activities and assignments framed students' memorable learning experiences; and, 3) updated, diverse methodologies including practical applications formed the main advice for educators. An underlying trend throughout the data, as shown in the students' verbatim responses, was an awareness and description of the ongoing transition from teacher-centered/led to student-centered classrooms in their higher education experiences.

**Table 3:** Themes of Participants' Responses about Teaching and Learning Definitions, Experiences, and Advice

No.	Theme	Research Question (Secondary)*	Frequency	Prevalence Rank
1	Teacher-Led or Student-Focused Definitions	Definition	35	2
2	Practical Activities and Assessments	Experience (Advice)	35	1
3	Updated, Diverse Teaching Methods	Advice (Definition)	23	3

\*Primary question (secondary question)

As shown in Table 3, the single most prevalent theme was practical activities and assignments as participants' most significant teaching and learning experiences and advice to educators to improve teaching and learning. The combined categories of teacher-led and student-focused definitions created the second theme, and the third most prominent theme, updated and diverse teaching methods, was repeated by participants across two research questions, primarily as advice and secondarily as defining teaching and learning through "modern" methods. The three themes are further explained in detail herein with excerpts from participants' responses.

##### 4.1 Theme 1: Teaching and Learning Defined as Teacher or Student-Focused

To answer the first question, two-thirds of responses, 67% as shown in Table 4, defined teaching and learning either as a teacher-led or student-focused concept. Only one student noted that teaching and learning were interrelated processes and another mentioned the concept of lifelong learning.

**Table 4:** Categories and Codes of Teaching and Learning Definitions

No.	Category	Number of Codes	Percentage
1	Teacher -focused or led	20	38.46
2	Student-centered or focused	15	28.85
3	Modern teaching and learning methods	9	17.31
4	Passion for education and knowledge	7	13.46
	No category (individual response)	1	1.92
	TOTAL	52	100.00

Overall, participants communicated separate definitions for teaching and learning where teaching was an ‘information transfer’, either previously or currently, with the teacher “passing” or “explaining” information. Some also noted the ongoing transition from teacher-centered to student-centered learning, but still with a teacher-led focus:

*Teaching is, in my opinion, indoctrination of information or the way information is passed from the teacher or teacher to the learner.--Education Administration*

*Teaching/planned process based on theories, governed by the objectives of the teacher to communicate information, skills and experiences to the student.—Curriculum and Instruction*

*Teaching is a process that requires a teacher who explains skills and information with educational methods, strategies and methods.--Special Education*

*Teaching: The actions performed by the teacher inside the classroom to achieve the desired goals.—Curriculum and Instruction*

*The idea of teaching in the past depended on the teacher to transfer information to a student, and over the years the concept of teaching changed where the task of teaching became closer to supervision. The teacher provides students with information, and the task of the student is to research and self-learning. In addition, the teacher is considered the mastermind of this process who develops plans aimed at achieving the highest possible benefit of learning.-- Educational Administration*

Learning was defined within the ideas of self-learning, self- reliance or experience, with instructors in a supervisory role, often with a mention of the learning environment, as illustrated by excerpts from the students’ responses:

*Learning is a process of self-learning by the student for what is happening around him or her in the environment.—Special Education*

*Learning/relatively constant behavior change inferred from the learner's performance as a result of training or self-experience.—Curriculum and Instruction*

*The student or learner is searching for his or her own knowledge, whether in the classroom or outside the classroom...and the teacher may direct the student to learn and then acquire the principle of lifelong learning.—Curriculum and Instruction*

Two sub-themes found in students’ definitions, representing 31% of responses, focused on modern teaching and learning methods, also mentioned explicitly as advice to educators (Theme 3), and a passion for education and development, which was highlighted by several students. The following excerpt from a Curriculum and Instruction (science specialization) student exemplifies this idea:

*As a future teacher, in my opinion, it's about teaching faculty, the love for education and knowledge, discovery research, experimentation, and how they continually educate themselves. Also, how to learn and help other. It's not only about defining knowledge and information and testing it. It is something more and bigger than this.*

#### 4.2 Theme 2: Practical Activities and Assignments as Memorable Learning Experiences

The majority of participant responses about significant teaching and learning experiences (58.34% as shown in Table 5) involved detailed, practical activities and assignments that were memorable.

**Table 5:** Categories and Codes of Teaching and Learning Experiences

No.	Category	Number of Codes	Percentage
1	Practical in-class activities and assignments	35	58.34
2	Increased higher order thinking skills	6	10.00
3	Knowledge building/self-knowledge/knowledge-seeker	6	10.00
4	Differentiation strategies	5	8.33
5	Learning environment (Confidence)	5	8.33
6	External resources needed	2	3.33
	No category (individual response)	1	1.67
	TOTAL	60	100.00

In their descriptions, students often discussed the teaching methods and strategies within their specialization gained from these experiences:

*A course teaching learning difficulties was taught in practical ways and methods such as interviewing, flipped classroom, [and] multiple strategies. –Special Education*

*Unusual tasks such as creating a concept map on curriculum development, or explaining the experience of a country in developing mathematics curricula while writing an opinion about it as a math teacher and [explaining] what we need in the Saudi curriculum.— Curriculum and Instruction*

*A teaching method that makes the learner in a state of continuous learning as well as the work of projects and research, practical applications of courses and lecture presentation, and knowledge of the level of the student currently to provide advanced teaching.-- Educational Administration*

Several comments also focused on the memorable examples as enhancing their pedagogic knowledge and increasing higher order, critical thinking skills within their program:

*Another example, we had a general English course; the doctor was thinking outside the box. We looked for terms related to our field, namely curriculum and teaching methods... then after a while we wrote summaries in English. This method has [had] an effect to date, which is to learn and look for any knowledge by myself and not rely on anyone to provide me with information.—Curriculum and Instruction*

*Examples include teaching based on discussion, dialogue, criticism and critique; some faculty members are assigning us one of the topics from many sources to discuss every piece of information during our presentations; in a constructive, critical way that expands students' perceptions and earns them the skill of learning, cognitive depth and self-confidence. – Educational Foundations*

#### 4.3 Theme 3: Advice for Updated, Diverse Teaching Methods and Practical Applications

In response to the third question, the participants' advice for future educators in higher education



primarily focused on updated, diverse teaching methods (38.89%) with a distinct mention of less reliance on lecturing. Some participants likened updated teaching methods to “keeping pace with changes in society, both technological and social.” The findings (illustrated in Table 6) also revealed that students highly advise and value the use of practical activities and applications for improvement in teaching and learning (25%). This finding seemingly mirrored the participants’ memorable teaching and learning experiences (Question 2) noting practical activities and assignments.

**Table 6:** Categories and Codes of Advice for Future Educators in Higher Education

No.	Category	Number of Codes	Percentage
1	Updated, diverse teaching methods (less reliance on traditional methods and assessment)	14 (7)	38.89 (19.44)
2	Practical applications	9	25.00
3	More direct faculty involvement	6	16.66
4	More educational technology	3	8.33
5	Use more external and real-world sources	2	5.56
6	Increase critical thinking	2	5.56
	TOTAL	36	100.00

The following student responses describe their call for updated, diverse teaching methods and practical applications:

*Use several recent references relating to the content and not only a single reference; assign students meaningful tasks in each lecture; focusing on the applied rather than theoretical aspect of the course, for example in educational statistics...apply the SPSS program; use electronic applications in certain situations (when the teacher is absent or to enrich the course).—Curriculum and Instruction*

*Students urgently need to practice and apply the subjects they study, such as taking the problem-based learning strategy and then applying it to a specific lesson in front of her colleagues and being evaluated to identify gaps and develop their teaching.—Curriculum and Instruction*

*As well as the lack of practical applications for courses needed to understand more, instead relying on traditional [methods] and indoctrination only and lack of diversity in teaching.—Educational Administration*

As a sub-theme to advice for faculty members, several participants also recommended increased faculty involvement and participation in the teaching and learning process:

*There must also be cooperation and understanding from faculty members so that there is no pressure and psychological fatigue for students to be truly educated and not just to complete required tasks.—Curriculum and Instruction*

*Female students, in their discussions and experiences with each other, would benefit from more guidance from a faculty member... a faculty member has an effective role to play in the refinement of different skills, which can result from more constructive discussion between students and faculty.—Educational Foundation*

*As obstacles, the most important of which is the doctor's lack of knowledge of the course at times and dealing with the course's challenges with his [her] students.—Educational Administration*

Several participants also advised about less reliance on lecturing as a main method of instruction:

*Stay away from lecture style/ and diversify using modern teaching methods.-- Special Education*

*Do not rely on PowerPoint presentations regularly in lectures because routine leads to boredom.—  
Curriculum and Instruction*

## 5. Discussion

In agreement with previous research, graduate students' definitions of teaching and learning in this study were conceptualized as teacher-led (predominant) or student-focused, and practical, up-to-date methodologies were revealed as important and memorable in the students' lived experiences (Åkerlind, 2004; Saroyan, Dagenais, & Zhou, 2009). Like Zerihun, Beishuizen, and Van Os' (2011) findings, the majority of responses defined teaching and learning as a "knowledge/information transfer" from the teacher or a "behavior change" after engaging in activities depending "on the motivation, readiness, and other factors" of the learner. While there were elements of student-centeredness and comments of "lifelong" and "continuous learning," expressions referring to teachers as "supervisor" and "mastermind" of the process emphasized the teacher-led focus of the students' definitions of teaching and learning.

The response data showed minimal articulation of teaching and learning defined through student-faculty relationships, constructive and social-constructive aspects (Vygotsky, 1978; Murphy, 2008) of active learning (Silberman, 1996) or peer engagement (Åkerlind, 2004). At the same time, graduate students in this study described their most memorable experiences through student-centered, practical activities and assignments involving discussion, research, projects, and self-directed learning. Further, the advice they offered was also highly practical, including comments on the need for "meaningful tasks," "urgent" practical applications, and more faculty involvement, i.e., faculty-student relationships. Unlike Zerihun, Beishuizen, and Van Os' (2011) study, students in this context appeared to aim for and appreciate learner-centered approaches and faculty-student relationships.

The teacher-led conceptions and student-centered experiences and advice may seem like a paradox at least on the surface. However, with the advent of teaching and learning centers across the Kingdom within the last decade (AlRweithy & Alsaleem 2014; Muammar & Deraney, 2019), increased focus on quality teaching and learning (Al-Ghamdi & Tight, 2013; Alnassar & Dow, 2013), and after teaching and working in faculty development in Saudi higher education for more than 13 years (researcher's perspective), there are clear indications that teaching and learning in Saudi higher education is in the midst of a paradigm shift from teacher to student-centered. Alghamdi (2018), building on Al-Amri's (2011) call for a transition, remarked about the change: "this paradigm shift in Saudi Arabia's higher education system requires a fundamental change in terms of how faculty members perceive teaching and learning...Yet, in order for the new generation of teachers to achieve this transformation, they must overcome many years of experience – both as a student and as a teacher – that were premised on the traditional paradigm" (Alghamdi, 2018, p. 80). Indeed, the students' responses reflect tradition and transition, an acknowledgement of what has happened in the classrooms of the past, still happens in too-often traditional classrooms ("indoctrination" and "lack of diversity"), and contemplation of future possibilities, what should happen in their view, using terms such as "up-to-date," "modern" and calls for more faculty involvement. These students hold a unique position as Saudi graduate students in education who have experienced the past and current system but are also knowledgeable about pedagogy and the practicality of their own educational experiences and seemingly aware of the possibilities of more learner-centered education.

The typical classroom and faculty member in Saudi higher education is transitioning from a didactic, teach 'as they have been taught' content expert (Hill, 2014; Smith & Abouammoh, 2013) who strongly 'manages' the classroom to a lifelong-learning, content and pedagogically-aware educator who increasingly co-constructs the learning environment. While still not the norm in Saudi higher education (Alghamdi Hamdan & Aldossari, 2021), the students' responses also indicated an implied awareness and articulated description of student-centered, participatory experiences and advice, a 'wish list,' for constructivist educators. This emphasizes Bruce and Gerber's (1995) discussion on the

importance of participation and engagement in students' conceptions, even implicit, of teaching and learning: "Through their active participation in teaching and learning activities at university, students learn by doing and experiencing. What has been learned is determined through some form of monitoring of their pedagogic experience" (Bruce & Gerber, 1995, p. 455). While student-centered principles were not highly evident in their teaching and learning definitions, as Edwards-Groves and Hoare (2012) found, participants' descriptions of their experiences and advice evidenced and informed their pedagogic opinions.

The notable exception would be that students did not frequently mention interaction with peers or affective factors such as faculty personality or inclusive learning environments. These interactive, affective elements are explicitly noted in several studies of teaching and learning conceptions (Åkerlind, 2004; Murphy, 2008) and effective teaching (Darling & Hammond, 2021; Fuhrman, Fuhrman, & De Lay, 2010) as imperative to student-centered learning. In this study, the participants' call for more faculty involvement, interaction, and cooperation indicated that the faculty-student relationship is not yet developed in this context. Faculty involvement would then be the initial step before students' further consideration of faculty attributes. As also emphasized in students' definitions, the focus for teaching and learning is still faculty-led in this context meaning interaction with and learning from peers in a more traditional context (Al-Ghamdi & Tight, 2013) may not be seen as immediate to effective learning. Thus, learning is individualistic and still reliant on the 'expert' instructor to a considerable degree. However, as Darling-Hammond (2021), Hill (2014), Murphy (2008), and others mention, the importance of peer learning, through scaffolding, critical discussion, and socialization, is paramount to moving beyond just academic content to meaningful teaching and learning (Darling-Hammond, 2021).

As with all research, there are limitations to this study. These limitations primarily concern the sample size and demographics. A larger sample frame, both men and women (genders are segregated in the field of education in most Saudi universities), and inclusion of participants from other universities could offer more accurate, generalizable representation of graduate students as future educators. Further research on how faculty members conceptualize and define effective teaching would also add another dimension to teaching and learning research in Saudi Arabia and provide the groundwork for a possible comparative study.

## 6. Conclusions and Implications

This study explored masters-level education students' conceptions, experiences, and advice about teaching and learning in Saudi higher education. Three prominent themes were revealed: 1) definitions of teaching and learning were either teacher-led (predominant) or student-focused; 2) memorable practical activities and assignments framed students' teaching and learning experiences; and, 3) updated, diverse methodologies including practical applications formed the main advice for educators. The single, most prevalent theme was practical activities and assignments as participants' most significant experiences and advice to educators to improve teaching and learning. An underlying trend throughout the data, as articulated in students' responses, was an awareness and description of the ongoing transition from teacher-centered/led to student-centered classrooms in their higher education experiences.

A key implication and research pathway of this study focus on the development of teaching and learning conceptualization in Saudi higher education. Clear reflection on teaching and learning as a concept with emphasized elements of co-construction between teachers, students, and peers is recommended for consideration in graduate-level education programs and faculty academic development. Students, as the ultimate stakeholder, should remain at the center of these conceptions and process. Further to this point, the students' responses reflect a hopeful paradigm shift that could be facilitated with not only more learner-centered coursework/curricula, but a negotiated understanding of the reasons behind this needed and timely shift in the Saudi context. In this study, students could describe their memorable 'moments' of student-centered learning but could not

articulate student-centered conceptions in their definitions; they fell back on a more traditional perspective. Finally, the apparent lack of faculty-student relationships and focus on or mention of peer interactions implies that there is a gap in the areas of social-constructivist principles of scaffolded, peer learning and cooperative faculty involvement. Research reviewed in this study and several others posit that participatory, supportive learning involving both faculty-student and peer-peer engagement is a necessary step toward student-centered learning. This implication suggests the reconsideration of the traditional, hierarchical faculty-student relationship found in this context to a more cooperative and supportive one. While this study provides a limited indication of conceptions of teaching and learning among Saudi graduate students, it offers a needed regional perspective to the growing international research on the topic. Future research could further explore faculty members' and multidisciplinary students' conceptions of teaching and learning in the Saudi higher education context.

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