MODERN TRENDS IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION LANDSCAPE: WORTHWHILE AMERICAN PRACTICES

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Abstract: The higher education landscape is constantly evolving. Undeniably, different countries practice different approaches, methods and techniques. The USA has got a lot of useful lessons to share in this respect. Being the third biggest country in the world, which is welcoming professionals, researchers, students, immigrants from all over the world, it can show a good example as to how to prepare well-qualified specialists in various fields. American universities constitute the majority of the highest-ranking institutions in the worlds. That is why American higher-education practices and realities are worth considering and following through. It is no wonder the US remains the most popular destination by far for international students, who are drawn to this country because it is home to some of the best universities in the world, which offer great educational diversity for students. It is not possible to encompass the whole range of teaching/learning/researching aspects and experiences that are used in American universities in one article. For this reason, the present study focuses just on some of them, including syllabus development, problem-based learning (PBL), universal design for learning (UDL), cooperative learning, course delivery formats, flipped classroom, educational technology, and experiential learning. To a great extent, the presented issues are based on the authors' personal academic experience of both studying and working in the USA.

Key words: higher education, knowledge and skills, teaching, learning, methods, approaches

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Introduction

The higher education landscape is constantly evolving. Universities have to adapt to new approaches and tendencies that constantly appear in the world of modern education, which is always subject to a number of changes. Some of them happen as a result of society evolution, new teaching/learning methods and practices replace older ones step-by-step. Whereas others happen unexpectedly under the influence of certain circumstances which happen without our knowledge or consent, e.g., the necessity to go online because of the COVID 19 pandemic. Higher education in the 21st century is a multifaceted phenomenon, which incorporates a great variety of institutions and systems, an increasing diversity of students, and a range of purposes and functions.

Undeniably, different countries practice different approaches, methods and techniques to provide high-quality higher education. The USA has got a lot of useful lessons to share in this respect as American universities are internationally competitive. Being the third biggest country in the world, which is welcoming professionals, researchers, students, immigrants from all over the world, it can show a good example as to how to prepare well-qualified specialists in various fields. American universities constitute the majority of the highest-ranking institutions in the world. That is why American higher-education practices and realities are worth considering and following through. It is no wonder the US remains the most popular destination by far for international students, who are drawn to this country because it is home to some of the best universities in the world, which offer great educational diversity for students.

Global University Rankings

Although rankings are often criticized in terms of the validity of the data offered by them, much attention is paid to global rankings. Some countries use university rankings as part of points-based immigration programs, while others automatically recognize degrees from higher-ranked universities. The three longest established and most influential global rankings related to higher education are those produced by Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), Times Higher Education (THE), and Shanghai Ranking Consultancy (the Academic Ranking of World Universities – ARWU). Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) is a British company specializing in the analysis of higher education institutions around the world. Times Higher Education (THE) is a British magazine reporting specifically on news and issues related to higher education. And the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), also known as the Shanghai Ranking, is one of the annual publications of world university rankings. Table 1 clearly demonstrates that American universities occupy leading positions and do constitute the majority of the highest-ranking institutions in the world. It means that their approaches, strategies, methods, techniques, etc. are worth following.

Table 1 Global university rankings (2023)

Rank	Quacquarelli Symonds (QS)	Times Higher Education (THE)	Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU)
1	Massachusetts Institute of Technology (USA)	University of Oxford (UK)	Harvard University (USA)
2	University of Cambridge (UK)	Harvard University (USA)	Stanford University (USA)
3	Stanford University (USA)	University of Cambridge (UK)	Massachusetts Institute of Technology (USA)
4	University of Oxford (UK)	Stanford University (USA)	University of Cambridge (UK)
5	Harvard University (USA)	Massachusetts Institute of Technology (USA)	University of California, Berkeley (USA)

Source: own work based on the data on the company websites.

Worthwhile American Practices

It is not possible to encompass the whole range of teaching/learning/researching aspects and experiences that are used in American universities in one article. For this reason, the present study focuses just on some of them, including syllabus development, problem/project-based learning

(PBL), universal design for learning (UDL), cooperative learning, course delivery formats, flipped classroom, educational technology, and experiential learning. To a great extent, the presented issues are based on the authors' personal academic experience of both studying and working in the USA. So, taking into account some of American aspects, approaches, experiences and practices related to preparing specialists at universities, faced and experienced by the authors personally, the following ones are worth mentioning:

Syllabus Development

An American syllabus is not just a formality. It may be students' first exposure to a course, and its contents may determine whether or not they take the course. A syllabus lets students know the content of the course, the reasons it is taught, and what will be required for them to be successful in it. It represents kind of a contract between the professor and students, as well as a learning tool, providing both parties with a common reference point that sets the stage for teaching/learning throughout the course. The form and content of a syllabus vary depending on the university, department, course and instructor. Universities have some institution-wide policies and guidelines which are taken into account by instructors as they build their syllabuses. As a rule, this information can be found on the university website.

Generally, there are common components that successful syllabuses contain. These components communicate to students the following:

- course description (the content, learning objectives, characteristics of class meetings, logistics),
- course topics and assignments (schedule of topics and readings, assignments, projects),
- assessments (grading policy, requirements, rubrics, information about tests, exams),
- course policies and values (inclusiveness, integrity, responsibility, expectations for success).

Students get acquainted with all the syllabuses for the coming term during the first academic week, so called 'syllabus week'. It is a common practice to assign syllabus quizzes to students, to see how well they have understood what is expected from them during the term, to avoid future misunderstandings, and to collect and answer any questions later on.

Problem/Project-Based Learning (PBL)

Problem/project-based learning is a widely used term in education in general, and in higher education in the USA (and not only) in particular. It involves students designing, developing, and constructing hands-on solutions to a problem. Its educational value is that it aims at developing students' creativity and their ability to work through difficult or badly-structures problems, which is often done in teams, something which is likely to happen in a real-life work setting. As a rule, PBL includes the following steps or stages: defining the problem, generating ideas, prototyping solutions, testing. Students work extensively on projects in and out of the classroom, both on campus and in local communities. Along the way they build an understanding of other people and their own potential to impact the world for the better. In doing so, they develop key skills and abilities that will serve them in the future: collaboration, communication, socializing, problem-solving, delegating, critical thinking, etc. This type of learning results in greater student learning gains than traditional instruction, it challenges them to be adaptable, flexible thinkers.

A good example of PBL can be an integrated marketing plan for a real or imaginary company, which is created by students doing Marketing Communications course at Minnesota State University, Mankato. It includes the following steps: students choose a company, make its overview and define the purpose of their marketing plan, conduct a thorough analysis of the target audience, define the unique selling propositions, evaluate key competitors, establish clear, measurable marketing objectives, formulate marketing strategies, describe how they will be executed, explain the methodology for measuring the effectiveness of the marketing plan, create mock advertisements (for imaginary products), and, finally, present their plan. Presentations can take place in a purely academic setting, or, sometimes, specialists from the related companies/industries are invited to listen to them and share their expert opinion.

Thus, students are actively engaged in the process of experiential learning, i.e. learning by doing. These hands-on experience enables them to connect theories and knowledge learned in the classroom to real-world situations.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

UDL is aimed at meeting the needs of diverse learners in a common setting. "It is designed to promote physical, social, and academic spaces that support meaningful access and function to a range of learners." (Katz and Sokal, 2016). UDL allows students to access, process and represent their learning in multiple ways. Thus, while some students prefer to deal with the new content through a group discussion, others prefer teacher-led lessons, and another group of students are more likely to conduct research on their own using various media. In terms of presenting some information, some students prefer writing reports, others would better create a multimedia presentation. As a result, the learning endpoint goals are the same, but the ways students get there are different. UDL thus is an effective alternative for the "one-size-fits-all". Its two important tenets are accessibility and engagement.

Course Delivery Formats and Modalities

Besides traditional face-to-face instruction, when professors and students meet in person, there are other options, new educational solutions, which make learning more accessible and satisfy better clients', i.e. students', educational needs. These more modern options include the following:

- hybrid (class meets in person and has online asynchronous components as well);
- hybrid flexible or hyflex (class meets in person and virtual students can join via Zoom);
- online synchronous (class meets via Zoom at the same time every week with online asynchronous components);
- online asynchronous (class is fully online with weekly deadlines but does not have a required meeting time).

Educational technology

Higher education has been profoundly impacted by the technological innovation over the past few decades, which has been considerably intensified since the COVID-19 pandemic started. Technology has evolved to include Internet delivered content, and much wider usage of laptops, iPads, tablets, smartphones both by students and instructors. As a rule, all students present at the lesson in a typical American classroom have got gadgets and actively use them during classes to participate in learning experiences in the most efficient way. Actually, there is nothing to do during classes without them. It goes without saying that the students who attend classes online have to use them too. If students cannot have/bring their own gadgets for some reasons, they can borrow them from the university library.

University courses employ technology in the classroom to enrich interactive face-to-face and online learning experiences in a number of ways:

- hyflex (hybrid flexible) course delivery format, when class meets in person and virtual students can join via Zoom (it should be noted here that there are plenty of suitable classrooms with all the necessary technology, including a computer for the instructor with the installed Zoom app, two screens – for the students present in the classroom and those online, microphones);
- incorporating all courses into the university learning management system (LMS), e.g. Canvas or D2L (Desire2Learn), where students can find all the necessary materials and download the majority of them, systematically submit homework assignments and get the professor's feedback, see their grades and total progress;
- homework or projects where students use reading material, video, audio, pre-recorded mini-lectures, etc.;
- self-guided computer-assisted learning (on Canvas or D2L);
- video recordings of actual lessons.

Flipped Classroom

Flipped learning innovators are Jonathan Bergmann and Aaron Sams, American science teachers. They consider that the flipped classroom can address the learning needs of students by allowing their teachers to personalize the students' education. Basically, the concept of a flipped classroom is the following: "that which is traditionally done in class is now done at home, and that which is traditionally done as homework is now completed in class" (Bergman and Sams, 2012, p.13). The common stages are as follows:

1) Students deal with the content of the coming class individually.
2) They are encouraged to take notes, record any questions they have, and summarize their learning.
3) They have some assignments to do, theoretical or/and practical ones.
4) Students come to class with appropriate questions that help the instructors address their misconceptions.
5) After the initial questions have been answered (often in the form of micro-lectures), students are given some assignments; it might be an enquiry-based activity, a directed problem-solving activity, task-based learning, etc.
6) Finally, students get quite deep understanding of the topic both in theoretical and practical terms.

In a flipped classroom, the role of the teacher dramatically changes. They are no longer the presenters of information. Teachers spend their working time in the classroom interacting with and helping their students. They answer students' questions, organize and monitor their activity, they do lecture sometimes, but it does not last for a long time. The majority of class time is used for more extensive hands-on activities and problem-solving. The role of the teacher in the classroom is to help students deal with the information, but not to deliver it.

Typical homework assignments and activities, which students are involved in after having studied the content individually, might include the following:

- *The reading/audio/video presents many ideas related to … . Create a 'top ten' list of ideas based on the content and ideas mentioned in the reading/audio/video.*
- *In the reading/audio/video, the author gives some recommendations. Which two of them do you like the best? Explain why for each one.*
- *The author presents at least 6 different ideas for … . List the ideas below in the table and provide a description and/or example for each one (the first one has been done for you).*
- *Choose one passage from the reading that was particularly insightful and/or interesting to you. Write the passage below and then explain your choice.*
- *The authors provide several justifications for the importance of … in this reading/video/lecture. List these justifications.*
- *Outline the most important features of … .*

As we can see, such assignments contribute to the development of students' analytical and critical thinking skills. They do not just read/listen to the new material, they actively use it (make an analysis, compare, classify, make conclusions, justify their choices, etc.).

Typically, students submit their homework on the university LMS before the class. However, after having worked with the content at home, students continue working with their answers/notes when they come to the classroom. They usually work in groups/pairs, share ideas, compare and complete their answers, select the most important points. Besides, some classroom activities might be organized to work more with the content. As a result, students leave the classroom having acquired lots of useful knowledge and skills related to the topic.

To sum up, flipping the classroom establishes a framework that ensures students receive a personalized education tailored to their individual needs.

Cooperative learning

As it has been mentioned above, it is a common thing to organize work in groups/pairs both during classes and beyond them, which has its roots in the necessity of developing students' collaborative and communication skills and ideas behind the cooperative learning approach. Students often have to discuss some ideas, approaches, activities, which were designed by them while doing their homework. It is not just discussing; they often have to choose the best one(s) and report to the class. Various roles might be assigned when students work in groups, such as the note-taker, presenter, time keeper, team leader. It must be noted that this work is skillfully organized by professors for both categories of students: physically present in the classroom and online. It hardly ever happens when students do not work in groups/pairs and Zoom break-out rooms are not used. Online students participate in

cooperative activities as efficiently as in-class students do. The distance is not a problem. Thus, all the four essential elements of cooperative learning are effectively implemented, both face-to-face and online: positive interdependence, individual accountability, equal participation and simultaneous interaction. This approach prepares students for working in real-life conditions, when they will have to cooperate with their colleagues, supervisors, administration, customers, etc.

Experiential learning

Experiential learning is the process of learning by doing. Students master an educational program in order to develop their practical skills through the implementation of real practical tasks. The basis of this type of learning is the optimal combination of education with applied training. Thus, much emphasis is placed on practical tasks and assignments, without neglecting theory at the same time. When students do their homework, after having studied some theoretical basis, they, as a rule, are assigned to post their comments/ideas on the discussion board created by the teacher, elicit the most important issues they've read about, choose a number of those they like most of all, agree/disagree with and justify their choice, or they have to design a product, taking into account the theoretical content they have studied. It can be an action plan, a guide, a presentation, a project, etc., depending on the course. When working in the classroom, the professor usually organizes group or pair work, so that students discuss their lists, compare their choices, identify similarities and/or differences, and choose the best one(s) as a group. This kind of work promotes students' multilateral development, contributing to the improvement of their analytical, critical-thinking, communication and collaboration skills, thus preparing them for real-life work reality.

Conclusions

In general lines, the approaches to preparing specialists in the USA can be characterized as inclusive, enthusiastic, dynamic and engaging. Students feel their importance in the classroom as the instruction is student-centered. Universities cater to student diversity, whose needs are carefully taken into account, both current learning needs and prospective professional ones. As a result, American universities attract significant numbers of international students. Definitely, they can show a good example as to how to prepare well-qualified specialists, they have got a lot of useful lessons to share and worthwhile practices and experiences to follow.

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