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Situated Learning Theory: The Key to Effective Classroom Teaching?

ABSTRACT: Situated learning theory holds that effective education requires learning that is embedded in authentic contexts of practice, wherein students engage in increasingly more complex tasks within social communities. Opponents of the theory point out its failure to account for individual differences among students and its insufficient emphasis on knowledge acquisition. In this essay, by using the qualitative methods, I describe situated learning and review the arguments for and against it, contrasting participatory and acquisitive learning models as they apply in classroom settings. The view that all learning should be situated if it is to be effective is too strong. Such a statement ignores the fact that learning is a matter of acquiring knowledge before one can participate effectively in the situation or real setting. The teacher acts as a provider, facilitator, and mediator of knowledge; students are able to learn from that knowledge and practice it in group activities. In turn, students arrive at a new level of knowledge and understanding based on their experience as a real practitioner in the group or community. The different norms and values attached to participation and acquisition complement one another, and either one alone would be insufficient. I then assess religious education in Brunei Darussalam, where education has traditionally focused on memorization and written exams. I suggest that a blend of participatory and acquisitive learning models may be the most effective approach to classroom instruction.

KEY WORDS: Situated Learning; Classroom Instruction; Brunei Darussalam; Cognition; Social Networking.

INTRODUCTION

Situated cognition or *situated learning* was first defined by J.S. Brown, A. Collins & P. Duguid (1989) and then expounded by J. Lave & E. Wenger (1991). Since then, it has had a significant effect on educational thinking. Situated learning theory has emerged as an alternative to dominant, cognitive perspectives on learning. Situated learning theory, or at least elements of it, is emerging as a possible vehicle for revitalizing

the understanding of, and prescriptions for, how knowledge is developed and organized within workplaces (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991; and Motteram ed., 2013).

Situated learning theory holds that knowledge should be delivered in an authentic context. Beginning learners should be involved in authentic settings of daily practice, applying knowledge, and making use of artefacts in productive but

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low-risk ways. This usually requires social interaction and collaboration within the “community of practice”. However, learners gradually move away from this community to become engaged in more dynamic and complex activities, and transition into the role of the expert. This process usually occurs unintentionally. J. Lave & E. Wenger (1991) call this process “legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Such was the influence of this theory that it led some researchers to argue that learning can only be meaningful if it is embedded in the social and physical context. Those who fall into this camp include J.S. Brown, A. Collins & P. Duguid (1989). They argued that formal learning is often quite distinct from authentic activity performed by practitioners in their everyday work. In other words, students’ activities, particularly in classroom settings, are usually isolated from “the ordinary practices of the culture” (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989:34).

Instead, J.S. Brown, A. Collins & P. Duguid (1989) proposed a method specifically designed to “enculturate students into authentic practices through activity and social interaction” (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989:37). In addition, S.D. Cook & D. Yanow (1993) described learning as the “acquiring, sustaining, and challenging, through collective actions of the meanings embedded in the organization’s cultural artefacts” (Cook & Yanow, 1993:384). A. Contu & H.C. Willmott (2003) found that learning that is embedded in the social and physical context is more effective than non-situated learning. Hence, learning through situational experience has emerged as a significant approach to classroom teaching (Contu & Willmott, 2003).

While prior research supports the advantages of situated learning, there remain many questions and issues regarding its nature and the best form of situated instruction. Accordingly, this paper will illustrate how J. Lave & E. Wenger (1991)’s ideas of situated learning have been corroborated by some theorists and criticized by others (Lave & Wenger, 1991; and Herrington & Oliver, 1995). The aims

of this paper are to highlight the effective aspects of situated learning and to draw attention to the possible drawbacks by providing critiques from other theories or perspectives.

This paper, by using the qualitative methods (Dede *et al.*, 2005; and Creswell, 2007), focuses on the analysis of situated learning in relation to classroom teaching. My experience in religious schools in Brunei Darussalam is also discussed in the article. I conclude that situated learning, by itself, is not sufficient, but would be more effective if it were united with learning through knowledge acquisition.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

An Outline of Situated Learning

Theory. A. Contu & H.C. Willmott (2003) questioned the adequacy and relevance of learning as a cognitive process that involves a selective transmission of comparatively abstract, codified bodies of knowledge from one context, e.g. a classroom, to sites of application, e.g. specific work practices (Contu & Willmott, 2003). To address the shortcomings of cognitive learning theory, J. Lave & E. Wenger (1991)’s situated learning theory draws together threads of earlier ideas from J.J. Gibson (1977) on the theory of affordances; L.S. Vygotsky (1978) on the theory of social learning; and Alan H. Schoenfeld (1985 and 2013) on the theory of mathematical problem solving, into a sustained conceptualization of situated learning within communities of practice (*cf* Gibson, 1977; Vygotsky, 1978; Schoenfeld, 1985 and 2013; and Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Again, J. Lave & E. Wenger (1991) argued that learning occurs when individuals are members of the communities, in which they are acculturated and at the same time participate actively in the diffusion, reproduction, and transformation of in-practice knowledge about agents, activities, and artefacts. They also argued that to know is to be capable of participating with the requisite competence in the complex web of relationships among people and activities (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

In this context, J. Lave & E. Wenger

(1991) viewed situated learning as participatory in nature and as a process of social participation, a process of growth through which learners dialectically construct their identities. They saw learning as a socio-cultural phenomenon rather than the action of the individual acquiring general information from a decontextualized body of knowledge (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In other words, it is a process of social participation in everyday situations rather than the acquisition of knowledge by individuals. J. Lave & E. Wenger (1991) states as following here:

A person's intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a social-cultural practice. This social process, includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills (Lave & Wenger, 1991:29).

For J. Lave & E. Wenger (1991), understanding learning in practice necessitates situating the "person-in-the-world" and making sense of how people become members of what they call "socio-cultural communities" (Lave & Wenger, 1991:52).

A. Contu & H.C. Willmott (2003) are among those sharing the view that learning should be located or situated within everyday, i.e. work, practices. As they put it, situated learning focuses less on cognition, which takes place in the individual's mind, and more on the practices of groups (Contu & Willmott, 2003). Similarly, T.J. Fenwick (2001) held the view that people should be embedded in situations, where they can participate (Fenwick, 2001).

As T.J. Fenwick (2001) put it, learning is "not in the head of that person as intellectual concepts produced by reflection, nor as inner energies produced by psychic conflicts"; rather, it is how people know and learn by engaging in ever-changing individual processes within a particular community. In other words, "knowledge is not a substance to be ingested and then transferred to a new situation, but part of the very process of participation in the immediate situation" (Fenwick, 2001:34).

Situated learning theory suggests that learning is experienced and mediated through relationships with community members or within a "community of practice". Within a community of practice, group members jointly share and develop practices, learn from their interactions with group members, and gain opportunities to develop personally, professionally, or intellectually (Lave & Wenger, 1991; and Mills, 2013).

The notion of "community" and the relationships among individual members within a community also play an essential role in social networking dynamics. In their identification of theoretical frameworks that inform our understanding of e-learning, T. Mayes & S. de Freitas (2007) presented situated learning theory as a fundamental perspective to further discipline our understanding of learning in Web 2.0 environments (*cf* Mayes & de Freitas, 2007; and Mills, 2013:348).

As we see from the above, many scholars share the view that the understandings that emerge and help a person to participate in a situation are intimately entwined with the particular community, tools, and activity of that situation. In other words, individuals learn as they participate by interacting with the community, i.e. with its history, assumptions and cultural values, rules, and patterns of relationship; the tools at hand, including objects, technology, languages, and images; and the moment's activity, its purposes, norms, and practical challenges (Haferkamp & Smelser eds., 1992; and Kozulin *et al.* eds., 2003).

Knowledge emerges as a result of these elements interacting simultaneously. Thus, knowing is interminably inventive and entwined with doing. As S.A. Barab *et al.* (1999) stated, situated learning is a theory that allows for the "unification of the world, the individual, and the relations among these reciprocal components" (Barab *et al.*, 1999:360).

Situated Learning and Classroom Teaching. Situated learning stresses the opportunities for students to reveal their abilities and talents. It can provide students

with a learning environment that mirrors the culture and tools that are cast in the same mold as those used in real life situations (Kozulin *et al.* eds., 2003; Cleveland, 2011; and Schoenfeld, 2013).

Next, we need to look at how students' participation in classrooms can demonstrate their potential and the abilities gained through their learning experience aided by social resources. Teachers often employ activities and tools to artificially simulate authentic social contexts in the classroom. For example, C. Shaltry *et al.* (2013) used Facebook as an online space in which to situate collaborative activities for pre-service teachers. They were given an opportunity to try a wide variety of innovative technologies through explorations of their own choosing, such as designing a classroom website in Weebly, allowing them to adopt their own classroom and teaching identities to create detailed websites with blogs, videos, images, and imagined showcases of their future students' work (Shaltry *et al.*, 2013:22).

Several other researchers have implemented new technology in the classroom to involve students in meaningful communicative practice, content exchange, and collaboration (Ziegler, 2007; Greenhow, Robelia & Hughes, 2009; Junco, Heiberger & Loken, 2011; and Nosko & Wood, 2011). These researchers view social networking tools such as Facebook and Twitter as online classrooms; the tools support social interactions and allow users to build communities and form relations inside and outside the classroom by enabling people to join discussion or interest groups and share information, ideas, and opinions among themselves (*cf* Ziegler, 2007; Greenhow, Robelia & Hughes, 2009; Junco, Heiberger & Loken, 2011; and Nosko & Wood, 2011).

N. Mills (2013) analyzed the joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and shared repertoire experienced within the Facebook community of her students in an intermediate French course. She concluded that students' participation could make connections to course content, and that students could develop identities via the enhancement of interpersonal, presentational, and interpretive

modes of communication, in addition to developing relationships through their involvement in the online francophone community (Mills, 2013).

In addition, A. Sfard (1998), another supporter of situated learning theory, stated that the participation metaphor could give rise to togetherness, solidarity, and collaboration, which promote positive risk taking and inquiry in learning environments (Sfard, 1998).

This illustration reinforces the theory that learning through participation as "apprenticeship" might further encourage the student's collaboration in the classroom. *Inter alia*, the situative perspective emphasizes that, being in constant flux, the situation precludes any permanent labelling of people; for students, all options are always open, even if they have histories of failure (Sfard, 1998:8; and Lier, 2004).

Thus, unlike the acquisition of knowledge metaphor popular in cognitive learning models, the participation metaphor accommodates student progress and growth: today, you act one way; tomorrow, you may act differently. Students' teamwork, whereby they help one another with tasks given by teachers, benefits weak students, enabling them to contribute more, develop new understandings, and acquire knowledge by experiencing and participating in real situations (Lier, 2004; and Gablinske, 2014).

Limitations of Situated Learning.

Against situated learning theory, T.J. Fenwick (2001) argued that situative theorists ignore issues of race, class, gender, and other cultural and personal complexities. Students with different abilities may not be able to participate meaningfully in particular systems of practice. T.J. Fenwick also argued that the situative perspective is silent on the issue of resistance in communities, in which tools and activities may be unfair or dysfunctional (Fenwick, 2001).

Further problems could arise if students' differences subconsciously preclude total participation. As B. Hooks (2003) pointed out in her book, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, students in her classroom often repudiated the notion that their lives

continued to be shaped by racial differences (Hooks, 2003). Yet, under analysis, this proved not to be the case. She, then, stated as following here:

In classroom settings, I have often listened to groups of students tell me that racism really no longer shapes the contours of our lives, that there is just no such thing as racial difference, that “we are all just people”. Then, a few minutes later I give them an exercise. I ask if they were about to die, and could choose to come back as a white male, a white female, a black female, or black male, which identity would they choose.

Each time I do this exercise, most individuals, irrespective of gender or races invariably choose whiteness, and most often white maleness. Black females are the least chosen. When I asked students to explain their choice, they proceed to do a sophisticated analysis of privileged based on race, with perspectives that take gender and class into consideration (Hooks, 2003:26).

Such problems must be taken into account, when discussing the effectiveness of situated learning; student differences are bound to have an effect on the way a working group bonds (Herrington & Oliver, 1995; Anderson, Reder & Simon, 1996; Wolfson & Willinsky, 1998; and Dunne *et al.*, 2007).

The artificial activities and tools that teachers employ to create realistic situations are also worth noting. Classroom activities can only ever simulate reality. For instance, if students are asked to create a scenario in which one acts as a teacher and the others as pupils, the principal criticism might be that this situation only reinforces teaching methodology and the means of handling a group of students in a controlled situation. It would not convey the real life situation, where a teacher might deploy a range of tactics to engage pupils in the real classroom environment (Chilcott, 1996; and Kreitmayer, 2014).

J.S. Brown, A. Collins & P. Duguid (1989) claimed that many of the activities students undertake in classrooms are simply not the activities of practitioners. They argued that “hybrid activity” limits students in their attempts to access important structuring and supporting cues that arise from authentic contexts. As a result, students are likely to

misconceive entirely what practitioners actually do (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989). This deficiency of situated learning was also emphasized by A. Contu & H.C. Willmott (2003), who noted that the view of learning as situated created problems by promoting the idea of “naturalness” (Contu & Willmott, 2003).

Other critics have pointed out that learning in communities is not always recommended, especially for unsupervised students learning in authentic environments, where such participation could reinforce negative practices that a community is trying to eliminate (Fenwick, 2001; and Murray *et al.*, 2014). G. Salomon & D.N. Perkins (1998) argued that people who are apprenticed in particular ways may pick up undesirable forms of practice, wrong values, or strategies that subvert or profoundly limit the collective and its participating individuals (Salomon & Perkins, 1998).

In a recent study of situated learning via social networking, N. Mills (2013) indicated that despite the various benefits afforded by the interactive online environment, Facebook-based learning projects possess limitations. For instance, error correction, outside of clarification, and negotiation of meaning did not occur in the Facebook context, although particular classroom activities, compositions, and homework assignments focused on the promotion of grammatical accuracy (Mills, 2013:364). Further, C.M. Wang (2012) found that students using Facebook were more easily distracted owing to the social and entertainment applications provided within Facebook (Wang, 2012:71).

The Role of the Teacher. These limitations highlight the importance of the teacher’s role. When considering using social networking sites as “online classrooms”, the educator should ensure that students receive adequate training in this emerging technology. Teachers should brief students on mobile safety and guidelines for social networking sites, as well as etiquette and expectations for classroom use (Blannin, 2015; and Alsolamy, 2017).

In authentic activities, especially in

classrooms, the teacher plays a significant role in coaching and observing students, as well as offering hints and reminders, providing feedback, and modelling, all of which are integral to the learning situation. Teachers should be able to provide coaching at critical times and furnish a high level of support to students who are unable to complete the tasks (Herrington & Oliver, 1995; Gablinske, 2014; and Alsolamy, 2017).

As students gain proficiency, the support can be gradually withdrawn, and the teacher's role shifts to move the learner into self-directed learning and finally generalizing or transferring the skills. The educator will thereby help learners to have a fuller understanding of the activity in question and attain more positive outcomes. As students gain more self-confidence and control, they move into a more autonomous phase of collaborative learning, where they begin to participate consciously in the culture (Fenwick, 2001; and Sansome, 2016).

T.J. Fenwick (2001) interpreted S. Billett (1998)'s description of indirect guidance as opportunities to observe and practice participation in a community, as assignment to various tasks and increasing scope of responsibility, and as time for reflection and dialogue (Billett, 1998; and Fenwick, 2001). S. Billett (1998) noted that such conditions do not arise naturally or on an equal footing in real-life environments, but, in educational settings, the educators can ensure equitable learning opportunities and enhance learning potential by ensuring adequate support, resources, guidance, and reasonable learning time (Billett, 1998).

Situated Participation versus Acquisition in Religious Education.

Students in traditional, religious education may believe that the best way to learn is by memorizing every bit of information in each subject. This manner of learning does not end in secondary school, but continued as students' philosophy of learning in higher education (Fry, Ketteridge & Marshall eds., 2009; and Sansome, 2016). Succinctly, B. Hooks (1994) characterized her graduate education as akin to a banking system; memorizing and regurgitating information

represented gaining knowledge that could be deposited, stored, and used at a later date (Hooks, 1994).

This situation still exists in classrooms and the learning environment at large. School learning, as J.P. Gee (2004) stated, is often about disembodied minds learning outside any context of decision and actions. J.P. Gee argued that when people learn something as a cultural process, their bodies are involved, because cultural learning always involves having specific experiences that facilitate learning beyond just memorizing words (Gee, 2004).

Students who are constrained by a system that requires them to reproduce on demand, in written or oral form, the contents of a syllabus, who are taught by a process of acquisition rather than participation, will not be able to access a body of knowledge that would otherwise be available to them through a learning experience enriched by real-world social and material interactions. The situated learning theorist would claim that learning can only happen through the intervention of activities, context, and culture (Fry, Ketteridge & Marshall eds., 2009; Motteram ed., 2013; and Sansome, 2016).

For J. Lave & E. Wenger (1991), the essence of learning involves participation in a community engaged in a common set of tasks, with associated stories, traditions, and ways of working (Lave & Wenger, 1991). At first, this participation is peripheral, but it increases gradually in engagement and complexity, until the learner becomes a full participant in the sociocultural practices of the community. They argued that knowledge should not be decontextualized, or discussed in abstract or general terms; instead, new knowledge and learning should properly be conceived as being located in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; and Jarvis & Parker, 2005).

They also argued that the learner should be involved in a community of practice that embodies the tenets and behaviors to be acquired. They eschewed the idea of traditional cognitive learning, which they saw simply as a process of acquisition (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Jarvis & Parker, 2005; and Jing, 2017).

According to P. Hodkinson *et al.* (2007), the problem with the acquisition view of learning is that it separates the learner, the process of learning, and the product that is learned. They argued that many writers still subscribed to the acquisition model. P. Hodkinson *et al.* highlighted three weaknesses in the acquisition model: first, it is concerned with the mind and with propositional knowledge, that is merely based on mental process; second, it is primarily concerned with formal learning; and third, learning and context are seen as separate (Hodkinson *et al.*, 2007).

The basis of the argument is that learning should be seen as participatory, because it is not entirely concerned with formality, i.e. schools; knowledge can be acquired in almost entirely informal situations. In addition, in the situated learning paradigm, learning and situation are inseparable (Tomadaki & Scott eds., 2006; and Jing, 2017).

We find an example of this paradigm in religious education, where, according to L. Broadbent (2002), experiential learning strategies to teach ritual practices are fairly widespread (Broadbent, 2002). Additionally, in the context of religious education, classroom learning may not involve learning knowledge about a subject, but may rather emphasize reflections on experience (Grimmit, 2000; Broadbent, 2002; and Whitworth, 2017).

Despite the integration of some experiential learning, much religious education still involves memorizing texts and facts, which are then tested in examination. This style limits group collaboration to times, when teachers allow group discussions. Thus, as J.S. Brown, A. Collins & P. Duguid (1989) pointed out, students may pass exams, which are a distinctive part of school culture, but at the same time be unable to use the domain's conceptual tools in authentic practice (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989).

Therefore, there is a degree of truth in the view that religious education, where the syllabus is related to faith, belief, values, truth, justice, duty, and obligation, is different in its curriculum when compared with other areas of education. Nevertheless,

more situated learning could enable students to make progress in the religious classroom by using different methodologies, skills, and suitable resources. As P. Gateshill & J. Thompson (1992) stated as following here:

Religious artefacts bring pupils into touch with the real thing; the actual objects used by people today in the course of practicing their religions. This opportunity gives pupils some firsthand experience of religions and is particularly important for the many children in our classes who have direct personal contact with religions (Gateshill & Thompson, 1992:5).

Participation or Acquisition? Situated learning is a theory in which learning is based on relationships between people, in which educators endeavor for students' participation in the communities of practice, and in which there is an intimate connection between knowledge and activities (Wolfson & Willinsky, 1998; Mills, 2013; and O'Kelly, 2016).

The main aim of this paper has been to consider how some theorists regard effective learning as a solitary and individual pursuit, whereas others observe it as something that can only occur in social situations. I have illustrated that some theorists see learning as the passive acquisition of facts and knowledge and others see it as situated participation. Because "learning is often conflated with formal education" (Adair & Goodson, 2006:3-4), which frequently refers to the structured educational system that leads to formal certification, learning effectively may involve both participation and acquisition.

Because learning in Brunei Darussalam has tended to focus on assessment of acquisition of facts by written examination, there is a need to emphasize the importance of a balance between passive memorizing and active participation (*cf* Mussawy, 2009; Tarasat, 2011; and Noor, 2016). For example, teachers need to provide notes and explanations, while students revise from the notes and understand the knowledge given.

As A. Sfard (1998 and 2001) argued, choosing either acquisition or participation is an unnecessary and counterproductive constraint (Sfard, 1998 and 2001). S. Keiny

(1998) also argued that the *complementarity* of the two metaphors, viewed as two sides of the coin, emphasizes the coexistence of learning as matter or acquisition metaphor; and learning as process or participation metaphor (Keiny, 1998:2).

Moreover, the relative advantages of each of participation and acquisition make it difficult to give up either, because each has something to offer that the other cannot provide. The combination of the acquisition and participation metaphors would bring to the fore the advantages of each of them, while keeping their respective drawbacks at bay (Keiny, 1998; and Sfard, 1998 and 2001).

Taking all the arguments from different standpoints into consideration, learning would seem to be most effective when based on what A. Sfard (1998) termed as two metaphors of learning: the acquisition metaphor and the participation metaphor (Sfard, 1998). It is also essential to emphasize that the teacher's role in classroom learning is of vital importance.

Teachers should be aware of their roles in transmitting and activating knowledge. For example, teachers should not merely offer information for the students to assimilate and then reproduce in an assessment process. Rather, they should stimulate students to generate ideas, to evaluate, and to work hard to use new ideas in practice (Palos & Maricutoiu, 2006:3). Such a multifaceted strategy will enable teachers to deliver knowledge effectively.

In addition, T.J. Fenwick (2001) summarized that the task of teachers in a situative orientation is to assist students in becoming fuller participants in a particular community by creating authentic conditions for students to experience and practice (Fenwick, 2001). Thus, the teacher's role is to organize direct and indirect guidance for students in a community of practice and provide assistance, such as offering support in activities known as cognitive apprenticeship.

Teachers are also encouraged to recognize how particular networks of action affect learning and how spatial and temporal geographies of a situation influence the

networks of action. Given that changes to the environment, tools, and opportunities for interaction in a community profoundly affect learning, teachers should find pedagogical entry points in a community through recognizing possibilities for and animating action toward change (McGregor, 2004; Felder & Brent, 2005; and Sansome, 2016).

Teachers should take into consideration, in their lesson planning and style of teaching, students' differences in the classroom. If there is a high level of compatibility between teachers' thinking and teaching styles and their pupils' learning styles, then better academic performances should ensue.

CONCLUSION

The view that all learning should be situated if it is to be effective is too strong. Such a statement ignores the fact that learning is a matter of acquiring knowledge before one can participate effectively in the situation or real setting. The teacher acts as a provider, facilitator, and mediator of knowledge; students are able to learn from that knowledge and practice it in group activities.

In turn, students arrive at a new level of knowledge and understanding based on their experience as a real practitioner in the group or community. The different norms and values attached to participation and acquisition complement one another, and either one alone would be insufficient. Thus, applying both acquisition and participation in classroom teaching is the best method for effective learning.¹

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¹**Statement:** I, hereby, declare that this paper is my original work and not a product of plagiarism from any books or journals that have been published. The citation is stated and shown in the References. I confirm that this manuscript has not been published elsewhere and is not under consideration in whole or in part by another journal.

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(Source: <https://borneobulletin.com.bn/page/2520>, 24/3/2018)

Because learning in Brunei Darussalam has tended to focus on assessment of acquisition of facts by written examination, there is a need to emphasize the importance of a balance between passive memorizing and active participation. For example, teachers need to provide notes and explanations, while students revise from the notes and understand the knowledge given.