

ICED 2020 proceedings:

Investing in our future: Preparing incoming faculty for today and tomorrow using education developer / faculty mentoring teams

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Abstract

Enculturating incoming faculty members into the paradigm of student-centered education is of central importance in building a sustainable, robust base of excellent educators in higher education. Since university faculty typically begin teaching with little to no pedagogical background, and (in our system) there are no official requirements for them to acquire such skills during their tenure, we developed an evidence-based, personalized, comprehensive mentoring program that prepares junior faculty to use their strengths and to leverage the latest principles of good teaching. Here we introduce our program for incoming faculty, entitled Welcome Aboard, and highlight its cornerstones, such as pedagogical and disciplinary mentors, class observations, teaching consultations, the use of small-group instructional dialogue, and self-reflection.

Introduction

Even though most institutions pay careful attention to the step-by-step development of their students through first-year seminars, an advisory network and social engagements for freshmen, employing the same principles for incoming faculty can be considered rare. Here Hungary is no exception: historical reasons, the demanding requirements for top quality research for university faculty, and the lack of central legal and policy guidelines all contribute to the sporadic, uneven landscape of faculty development.

Investing in developing incoming faculty actively and early on provides a unique opportunity to transform teaching practices and improve the quality of the learning culture at universities. Incoming faculty typically have yet to develop a firm professional identity (Katz 1972, Kálmán 2019) and as such, education developers can help them adopt high-impact teaching practices, a student-centered attitude and a sense of belonging from the beginning. The benefit to the future of universities is clear: instructors inoculated with high-impact practices and a student-oriented mindset progress along the EPIC model (Aragón et al. 2017) much faster, committing to effective teaching practices more readily and sustainably. Early socialization into the teaching community also makes it likely that these instructors will continue to engage in professional development, strengthening the group of committed, excellent university instructors who can then serve as beacons of good practice for their colleagues as well.

In the following, we first describe key theoretical background, and then we introduce our program for incoming faculty, entitled Welcome Aboard. We follow this by offering a few evidence-based tools for readers to support faculty in their journey.

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Key models

We developed Welcome Aboard using three foundational theoretical models as our pillars.

1.1 The development model of faculty

Entering faculty are excellent in their fields – but they are hardly ever immediately excellent at *teaching* in their fields. Accordingly, the first few years of teaching typically pose considerable challenges to new faculty; they not only have to learn to navigate the educational system, deal with unfamiliar administrative and student issues, but must also learn the nuts and bolts of teaching as a craft. Most faculty stumble through this obstacle course experiencing doubt, anxiety, fear of failing to perform as expected, feeling pressed for time and not in control, and generally having a hard time. Katz (1972) aptly named this stage of faculty development *Survival*. This stage is a crucial target for education developers for two reasons: it is the period when faculty need the most support and thus are most likely to seek and accept help; and it is the stage when their professional identity is the most malleable, so they are likely to both listen to and internalize new ideas about teaching (Kálmán 2019). Partnering with them at the beginning can also ensure that they move on from *Survival* to the *Maturity* stage with positive experiences and solid teaching practices, thereby increasing the chances that they will stick with a teaching career and improve the quality of education at the institution in the long term.

1.2 The EPIC model

In addition to our faculty developing a solid, student-centered professional identity, it was also important to us that they adopt high-impact practices and routinely make them part of their course design. The EPIC model (Aragón et al. 2017) describes the adoption of a practice from *Exposure*, through *Persuasion* and *Integration*, to *Commitment*. All too often we see in our other programming how faculty get stuck at the first few stages, for they would need personal attention and feedback to fully integrate new pedagogical tools into their practice. In Welcome Aboard, we designed the program structure with this in mind.

1.3 The role of reflection

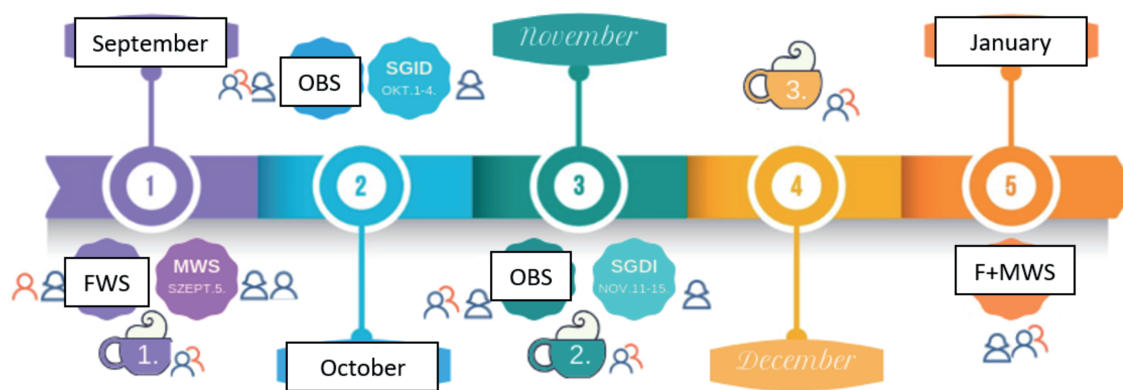
Clayton and Ash (2005) see the role of reflection in faculty development as crucial on two fronts: to strengthen the metacognition of faculty regarding their own roles as teachers, and to further their ability to later help their students develop metacognitive skills themselves. During the development process, reflection is appropriate and necessary at several stages, forms and constellations. We engage our faculty in self-reflection at the onset, during and at the conclusion of the program; they have opportunities to reflect both verbally and in writing; and there are built-in exercises with their peers, with their mentors, with students and by themselves.

Welcome Aboard

We created our comprehensive program for incoming faculty drawing on the scholarly literature outlined above, and the practice of other higher education institutions across the world (Georgia Institute of Technology, Copenhagen Business School). Welcome Aboard is an elective, semester-long engagement which is designed to support incoming faculty members as they are learning

- to navigate the university system;
- to develop a professional identity and philosophy;
- to build an inclusive, student-centered pedagogical toolkit;
- and ultimately to integrate into the community of the institution.

We present an overview of the program structure in Figure 1.



Legend:

FWS: New faculty workshop

MWS: Workshop for disciplinary mentors

F+MWS: Joint workshop for faculty and mentors lead by CTL

OBS: Class observation and follow-up consultation with mentor and CTL

SGID: CTL leads a small group instructional dialogue with the students (20-30 min)

Coffee: Informal meeting between mentor and mentee, touching on topics like teaching practice, evaluation and progress in general

CTL (pedagogical mentor):

Disciplinary mentor:

Mentee:

Figure 1: Overview of the Welcome Aboard program for incoming faculty

We invite all incoming faculty members (regardless of their academic track or appointment type) to a New Faculty Orientation before the semester starts. This is a full-day workshop that we use to welcome new faculty and to immediately create a sense of belonging, both to the institution, to other faculty, and to the Centre for Teaching and Learning. Since our institution does not have an organized new employee orientation program we devote some time to general information, from navigating the premises through university policies to the structure and units of the institution. In addition, each participant receives our booklet, entitled Campus Compass, which is a collection of useful resources, maps, contacts, a page with institute-specific jargon, in addition to tools and tips for a successful start in teaching. In the workshop we introduce faculty to course design principles, the complexities of their role as teachers, the elements of backward design (Wiggins and McTighe 1998) and alignment, the mechanics and levels of learning (Marzano and Kendall 2006, Bransford et al. 2000), and we begin to practice certain crucial competencies with them, such as empathetic listening and assertive communication with students. We designed the workshop such that we keep on using one active learning technique after the other with them, stopping and reflecting on what it was like for them as learners, and whether they could incorporate such methods into their own classrooms. We consider these workshops a success when we receive feedback from faculty that suggests that the confusion and anxiety associated with their *Survival* stage (Katz 1972) has been softened if not alleviated.

At the end of the workshop we invite all participants to sign up for the full program. Those who do are matched with a pedagogical mentor (a member of CTL) and a disciplinary mentor (an experienced colleague from the mentee's own department).

We identify suitable mentors via their department heads or deans, and based on our own experience. Potential mentors typically have at least 5 years of experience teaching at BBS, and an excellent track record in teaching, including student evaluations and curriculum development. Mentors are paid a nominal fee per mentee and are required to participate in the full program.

We next organize a preparatory workshop for the disciplinary mentors. In this paper we must omit the details of this workshop, but we are happy to share the content if contacted. “Mentoring the mentors” is crucial: most of them do not have experience mentoring a colleague (which differs markedly from mentoring a student) and they hardly ever have experience of being properly mentored themselves.

As the semester begins, incoming faculty are periodically engaged in two types of interaction: class observations sandwiched between by a preparatory and a follow-up meeting, and an informal coffee hour. We meet twice for the former and three times for the latter.

Both mentors participate in the class observations. In advance, the pedagogical mentor conducts the preparatory meeting with the mentee, gauging their questions, areas of interest and preparing them for what to expect. During the observation both mentors use a feedback form (**Appendix 1**) and during the last 20 minutes of the class the pedagogical mentor conducts a small group instructional dialogue (Black 1998) with the students (see **Appendix 2** for the worksheet). Within a week, both mentors prepare written feedback for the mentee that highlights both areas of strengths and specific suggestions for improvement, using both our observations and those of the students (for a sample see **Appendix 3**). These feedback sheets are emailed to the mentee and then we all meet to discuss the experience and avenues for further development.

Class observations are placed strategically: the first one is scheduled around the third week of the semester, while the second one is during the last two weeks. This arrangement allows two things: first, the tracking of improvement for all parties involved: CTL, the mentee and the students in the mentee’s class. We found it to be greatly motivating for faculty when they realize that students detected positive changes after the first round, and this supports our efforts to instil a growth mindset in them. Second, this is the element of the program that best supports the progress of the mentee along the EPIC stages (Aragón et al. 2017), for any teaching innovations they may have tried are refined during the semester and affirmed by both their mentors and the students.

The informal coffee hours serve more as an opportunity to connect, vent and trade ideas. We want the mentees to feel that someone is always there for them, that they have a safe place to go to with their concerns, and that they are welcome members of the community. We chose to leave these encounters to the disciplinary mentors entirely, with CTL staff absent, because in our experience, a more familial, more confidential atmosphere exists between disciplinary mentors and their mentees, for they work in the same department and often meet every day. Therefore, mentees feel more open to sharing uncomfortable experiences and asking questions that they might feel too ashamed to ask an education developer.

The program ends with a joint mentor-mentee workshop where we reflect on the achievements and learning outcomes of the semester. The inclusion of disciplinary mentors here is not merely for support: even though Welcome Aboard is officially designed and marketed as a developmental program for incoming faculty, we intentionally develop the disciplinary mentors along the way as well, both as mentors and educators.

Conclusions

Having identified a significant need and opportunity to sustainably improve the quality of higher education at our institution, we created an evidence-based, comprehensive mentoring program for incoming faculty. The introduction of Welcome Aboard has been met with overwhelming enthusiasm and gratitude by all parties involved – mentees, mentors and students. In future iterations we plan to strengthen the assessment component of the program, both to quantify improvements for developmental purposes (such as introducing a classroom observation tool like COPUS (Smith et al. 2013) to the protocol), and to demonstrate value added for management. The latter is warranted because currently the number of participants is limited by CTL staff availability, which we anticipate becoming a barrier as the program gains popularity. We look forward to sharing our materials with you – please contact us for details.

Acknowledgements

We thank all our mentors, mentees and students for their contribution to Welcome Aboard, and the leadership of Budapest Business School for generously providing funding for the program.

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Appendix 1: Classroom observation form

Name of instructor observed:

Name of observer:

Course characteristics (course name, type, year, class size)

Date:

Observing effective teaching: you may or may not observe something relating to all the questions. Read the list in advance and reflect on the items that are relevant to the context and that you were able to observe.

<p>Learning outcomes and assessment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the instructor tell the students the learning outcomes for the class? • Does the instructor make explicit connections to material covered in the past, future lessons, homework, or assessment? • Does the instructor use any forms of formative feedback to track student understanding either before, during or after class? • Do students have any structured opportunity to reflect on their understanding (metacognition)? 	<p>Notes:</p>
<p>Instructional strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What instructional strategies does the instructor use? Do these strategies adequately support the learning outcomes of the class and prepare students for the assessment? • Does the instructor utilize course materials and instructional technology with confidence and skill? • Does the instructor provide definitions for new terminology, explanations for difficult concepts, and appropriate examples when necessary? • Does the instructor make use of collaborative and active learning techniques? • Does the instructor ask questions of students in order to involve them and have them think for themselves? 	<p>Notes:</p>
<p>Class atmosphere</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do students participate in actively in their own learning? • Do students interact and/or collaborate with each other and/or with the instructor? • Does the class atmosphere feel inviting to and inclusive for all students? • What tools does the instructor use to motivate students to ask questions? Do students ask questions? • Does the instructor demonstrate respect, curiosity and enthusiasm when interacting with students? 	<p>Notes:</p>
<p>Presentation skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is the learning affected by the pace and structure of the class? • What tools does the instructor use for demonstrations? How? • What is the instructor's verbal and nonverbal communication like? 	<p>Notes:</p>

Instructions for giving feedback: effective teaching involves some combination of the elements in the table above. When you summarize your feedback, collect your observations and think about how they connect to each other. Instead of a laundry list, prioritize the most important things.

1. What were the most effective elements of the instructor's teaching?
2. List some specific suggestions for improvement grounded in your observations.

Appendix 2: SGID student group worksheet

Course name:

Course instructor:

Date:

Number of students in group:

Please discuss what you think the instructor's strengths are in connection with this course, and what would help improve your learning. Write specific, detailed examples and suggestions in the appropriate boxes. If members within the group disagree about an item, please mark it with a *.

Strengths

(What is helping you learn in this course?)

Explanation/Example

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Suggestions

(What would help you learn in this course better?)

Explanation/Example

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

We think the pace of the class is:

 Too slow Just right Too fast

Please return this sheet to the education developer or to email@email.com.

Appendix 3: Sample feedback

Observer: Kata Dosa, Centre for Teaching and Learning**Course title:** **Date, time:** 2019.10.11.**Instructor:** Sally Sample**Mentor** (optional): Mark Mentor

Dear Sally,

thank you for allowing me to observe your class. I will summarize my observations below and we can discuss them along with your experience at our follow-up meeting. I highlighted the **most effective elements of your teaching in bold** and underlined any suggestions I may have.

You started your class with a brief review where you **collected the most important points from the last class together with the students**. You **tyed the material of the day to students' prior knowledge**, which clearly helped them understand the material and organize it in their heads. It was somewhat awkward that the correct answers were already present on the slide when you asked the questions of the students, so I suggest that you animate the slides such that the answers only appear once a student has given the correct answer. You may even throw in a cha-ching sound effect just for fun 😊.

The class continued with short **group presentations** on the progress of student projects. Having students listen to each other can be very beneficial, for they are all working on the same project and thus can learn from the other groups. After a while, however, some of the non-presenting groups got distracted and tuned out – it is worth giving a task to the non-presenting groups to keep them focused. You may want to consider giving them a scoring card, or asking them to pose a question to the presenting group at the end of their presentation. It is also worth structuring the group presentation such that all members of the group get to contribute, not just one spokesperson. If a student is dominating the presentation, you can always chime in saying: "Thank you, can I ask someone else to pick up where Chatty Cathy left off?"

It was visibly motivating for students when you **praised them for their effort** on the project and when you **referred back to examples they previously contributed** in their presentations. It took a while for the students to shift their full attention back to you from the exercise, though. If you would like to speed this up, you might want to use a small bell to signal to students that you now need them to quiet down.

You **chunked your class** into smaller units, with theoretical bits spaced apart by active exercises. This clearly helped students to maintain focus and remain engaged almost the entire time. You **handled transitions very well**, for example when moving from one task or topic to the next, you always foreshadowed it: Next we will do this and that... This enables students to follow along well.

The class atmosphere was friendly and cooperative. You used **open body language and kept eye contact** with students. You may not be aware that you have a habit of touching your left ear when students don't immediately answer your question – if this is something that bothers you, you may want to purposefully fold your hands before a questioning session.

Thank you again for the opportunity to observe your class. Please feel free to ask for clarification on any observation or suggestion of mine, I am more than happy to elaborate.

Best,
Kata