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Applied strategies for educational development as cultural work

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Abstract

This paper views cultural work as a threshold concept in educational development which helps to interpret institutional contexts and informs decisions on future practice. Three cases describe how the authors' educational development work is nurtured by a cultural perspective. Specifically, we address making teaching a "community property" (Shulman, 1993, p. 6) at ETH Zurich; the analysis of microcultures at the University of St. Gallen (HSG); and the cultural role of brown bag lunches at the University of Bern.

1   Introduction

For the ICED conference we had planned a workshop which elaborates cultural work approaches to teaching and learning for participants by sharing theoretical perspectives and application strategies for different institutional contexts. The following text seeks to mirror this approach. It introduces educational development as cultural work and provides practice examples from three institutions.

We follow Schein's definition of culture as the "pattern of basic assumptions, […] that [is] considered valid and […] is to be taught to new members as the […] correct way to perceive, think, and feel […]" (1990, p. 111). We share Stensaker's understanding of cultural work in educational development as "a deliberate attempt to develop and disrupt the organization on the basis of established and emerging practices and knowledge" (2017, p. 277) with the goal "to develop local practices which […] are crafted in ways that are quite unique to the individual organization" (2017, p. 281).

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2   ETH Zurich: Make teaching a community property

A core faculty development task is to offer courses for teaching staff. We build on Shulman, who advocates leaving "pedagogical solitude" to make teaching a "community property" (1993, p. 6). He suggests producing artifacts "that capture [the] richness and complexity" (Shulman, 1993, p. 7) of teaching and making these available for peer review. We embedded these two strategies in our course programmes: to complete a course, teachers prepare a written artifact which focuses on their teaching practice and share it with other teachers. For each faculty group, the requirements are adjusted along the two dimensions suggested by Kern et al (2015): (a) the range of people an artifact needs to be shared with, and (b) the level of systematicity ("[s]ystematic means […] a methodical, planned, and deliberate process to acquire knowledge" (Kern et al, 2015, p. 4)). The requirement is set by considering each group's teaching-related needs (e.g. teaching tasks, career relevance, etc.).

Programme target group	Needs	Written artifact required	Systematicity	Publicness
Professors	• Busy point in career • Practical course preparation	• Hands-on product (e.g. course syllabus) • Short course reflection	Apply basic analysis questions about teaching and learning in reflection	Within own class
Scientific staff	May require teaching certificate for career purposes	Teaching project	Short, fairly systematic report on teaching and corresponding student learning in one of their courses	Shared with programme alumni
Teaching assistants (TAs)	• Teach in application-focused formats • Appointments may happen at short notice	Teaching proposal	Application of a teaching technique and assessment of its effectiveness	Shared with programme alumni

Table 1: Course programmes offered at ETH viewed through a cultural work lens (selection)

In this approach, faculty themselves build a culture where teaching becomes community property. Educational developers support this in two ways: we invite teachers to build on their course products, e.g. by seeking more formal publication opportunities (e.g. in our institutional or a discipline journal), or more public opportunities, e.g. brown bag lunches on teaching (see Brown, Scherrer, Suter, 2018). Also, we select parts of artifacts as examples of teaching and learning aspects and reintroduce them as material in our courses (teacher's permissions provided) (see Brown & Scherrer, 2018).

3   University of St. Gallen (HSG): Microcultures at work

HSG follows a tradition of integrating business and economics programmes with the social sciences and humanities. Study programmes are headed by at least one academic director and one administrative manager who reports to the school. Working in the university's educational development unit, we have used the organisational culture model by Schein (1990) and founded our educational development activities on the analysed values and basic assumptions, as evidenced by visible artifacts. Work by Alvesson (2013; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2008) has also informed the approach by focusing our attention towards people's everyday behaviour and by stressing the importance of smaller communities within an organization and more local cultures.

An institution-wide analysis of the teaching and learning cultural aspects of our university yielded a largely hierarchic understanding of a business-like relationship between instructors and students, quite similar to the manager-worker relation, especially for the undergraduate

programmes. In this culture, students are kept rather distant from the instructors and usually need a lot of extrinsic motivation through written exams. Extrapolating these aspects to the relationship between programme managers and instructors implied a manager-worker relationship as well. Programme managers, in this view, could impose decisions in a top-down enactment of top management, hence yielding a hierarchical vertical model of programme management. Based on this idea, we have been working with the programme managers in several ways in order to develop their programmes, mainly by supporting them directly with their specific projects, such as programme reforms, which has worked well. In addition, we sought to install a university-wide event series for all programme managers. When asked, the majority of programme managers supported the latter idea. However, some colleagues explicitly voiced their concerns that the events would result in work overload; these concerns were in part fuelled by their fear of obligations imposed top-down.

Our cultural understanding was thus refined in this way: the hierarchical understanding of teaching and learning was confined to the areas where it was clearly visible. Apart from that, we now interpret the programme managers' position as well as ours as a laterally and horizontally leading role based less on top-down authority (e.g., Thomann & Zellweger, 2016). In addition, further progress in differentiating between micro-cultures at HSG led us to favour a local approach to educational development, in line with current thinking on the cultural approach in educational development (e.g., Stensaker, 2017).

4   *University of Bern: Just another Brown Bag Lunch?*

The University of Bern is a comprehensive university in the tradition of European universities, with eight faculties. The quality of teaching is anchored as one of four sub-strategies in the Strategy for 2021 (University of Bern, 2013).

In order to implement this sub-strategy, the Vice Rectorate Teaching and the Educational Development Unit launched a joint initiative called "FEDERALL" (Faculty and Educational Development Research Alliance) with the aim of encouraging lecturers to engage in a systematic discussion of their teaching activities; to promote interdisciplinary exchange on teaching among teaching staff; and to enable exchange among the very heterogeneous teaching and learning cultures at this university. In building this community, an attempt was made to create a micro-cultural environment which can be described as a Commons (Roxå & Martensson, 2015). Commons are characterized by an open discussion atmosphere, mutual trust and shared concerns and responsibilities.

As an instrument and forum for this community, Brown Bag Lunches take place once a semester. They are organized and moderated by members of the Educational Development Unit and attended by lecturers from different departments. During the Brown Bag Lunches, two lecturers give a short insight into their current Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) projects. They show their results, raise methodological questions and, above all, discuss implications for their own teaching. Thus the focus is not so much on whether results attain publication requirements in educational development journals, but rather on their applicability to the local conditions at the institute or department. Therefore, with FEDERALL we emphasize the importance of local knowledge about teaching and learning (Ashwin & Trigwell 2004; Martensson, Roxå & Olsson 2011). Shulman (1993) postulates artifacts as a means to make teaching more visible and accessible for a broader discourse. Therefore all presentations of the FEDERALL Brown Bag Lunches are freely accessible on the website of the Educational Development Unit (www.federall.unibe.ch).

FEDERALL is cultural work within educational development, because a discussion of artifacts, values and basic underlying assumptions (Schein, 1990, p. 111) takes place explicitly. What appears to be a very classical measure for the support of SoTL projects turns out to be an important moment for cultural work for the development of teaching and learning at the University of Bern.

5   Conclusion

Through our collaboration we have come to regard cultural work as a threshold concept in educational development (Meyer & Land, 2003). Once we started viewing our institutional environment through a cultural lens, it allowed us to articulate an overarching framework for our work which informs decisions on our practice. Although the phenomena observed and practice strategies adopted differ among our three institutions, we share the underlying cultural framework which helps us to interpret our environments and systematically foster contributions towards each institutional teaching and learning culture.

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