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The transformative role of teachers in modern higher education

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1. Introduction

In this article I will discuss the challenges for transformative teaching in higher education. The context for this reflective article is Laurea University of Applied Sciences with 8000 students and 500 of staff located in seven campuses around the larger Helsinki metropolitan area. At Laurea the focus has been shifted from teaching to working-life related learning during the past few years and the learning process has become student-centric. According to Laurea's values the students have genuinely been placed in the core of activities.

The pedagogical framework for learning in all degree programmes is called Learning by Developing (LbD) which is based on authenticity, partnership, experiential nature, research-orientation and creativity. Students' learning is linked to development projects that are rooted in the working life and the students are involved in these projects from the beginning of their studies. Learning by Developing –operational model is a process innovation developed by Laurea staff (see more in Kallioinen 2007; Pirinen&Fränti 2007; Raji 2007; Pedagogical strategy 2007). The main goal in LbD is to produce new knowledge for all partners of the collaborative learning process i.e. students, teachers and working life partners – in some cases also the customers are involved in the process. Collaborative learning in working life environments is a challenging task because it brings a true change in the traditional teaching culture and in the roles of teachers and students. The LbD-model is being constantly developed and it has also been evaluated by an international evaluation team (see more in Vyakarnam et al 2008). The follow-up evaluation is taking place at the end of 2009.

The *Learning by Developing* operational model (Fig.1), i.e. development-based learning challenges traditional teaching and learning activities. However, the competence-based curriculum reform in 2004-2006 has better enabled the establishment of the LbD operational model in all curricula of our university. The process of change with the new competence-based curriculum and the LbD-model has been particularly hectic for the teachers at Laurea – a fact that the external evaluation group of the curriculum process also points out in their report (Auvinen, Peisa & Mäkelä 2007).

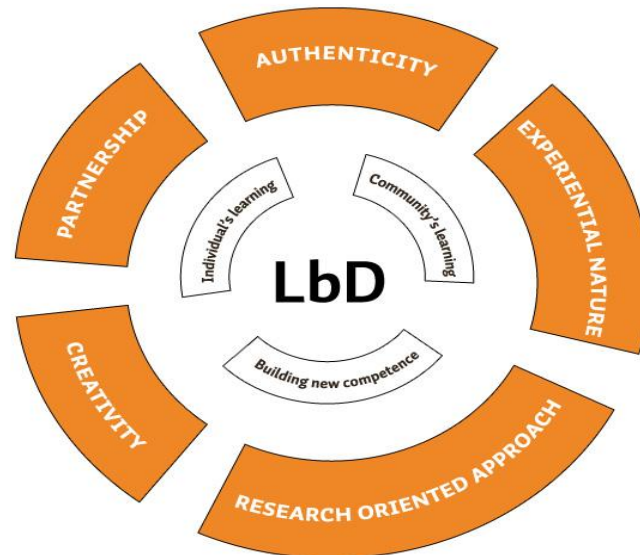


Figure 1. Learning by Developing (Pedagogical strategy 2007).

In these changes at Laurea the last decade for the scholarship of teaching has been marked by change and development. In delivering the competence-based curriculum and implementing the LbD-model the teachers continuously face new, unexpected and specific challenges, which are solved according to each situation. From a research-oriented, developmental approach to work, teachers are constantly developing themselves and the teaching community in their own unique ways. Thus, challenges are both individual and shared.

As universities of applied sciences are closely tied with working life, the current operating culture of each field must be integrated as a crucial element in the students' professional growth. This will enable professional knowledge to be constructed in accordance with the requirements of expert roles. The future remains open, but systematic preparation allows at least some of the challenges to be met when planning new curricula, defining the contents of different fields, and training experts and supporting their professional growth.

Teaching and its challenges can vary a great deal according to the operating environment. But regardless of the context, the basic function of teaching is facing individuals in the learning environment, communicating with them and creating an atmosphere that promotes learning. Above all, teaching is an interpersonal profession characterised by networking. It is also marked by a research-oriented and developmental approach, high-level professional knowledge and pedagogical expertise. Self-awareness lies at the heart of teaching, enabling constructive tutoring and an active role in the teaching community and in the networks.

The objective of this article is to discuss aspects of transformative teaching that are related to the Learning by Developing (LbD) model, and, in a larger context, to reflect the role of leadership in modern higher education teaching. At the end of this article I'll also briefly discuss factors enhancing learning in competence development. These factors are rooted in deep leadership (see Nissinen 2006).

2. Transformative teaching in working-life related learning

At the Finnish universities of applied sciences with three statutory tasks (pedagogy, r&d and regional development) the focus is shifting more and more towards working-life related learning and pedagogy in the region. Relation to working life in this article means learning processes of students and student

groups, that are tightly linked to genuine working-life organizations and situations and in which the students are in natural contact with working-life partners in development projects. In these projects the teacher's role is especially to ensure the networked activities and guide the students in their professional growth together with working-life partners. Active partnership with working-life enhances students' knowledge of organizations already from the beginning of their studies. In these challenges transformative teaching is at the core. The teacher's position and role is changing towards the role of a transformative leader in an expert organization and its multidimensional networked activities – a long way from traditional lecturing and course delivery.

This chapter includes a reflection between transformative teaching and the key elements from Laurea's Pedagogical Strategy concerning teaching in the LbD-model. The Learning by Developing (LbD) -model is based on authenticity, partnership, experiential nature, research-orientation and creativity. Development projects for renewing workplace practices form the starting point for LbD. Advancement of the project requires collaboration among teachers, students and workplace experts. In addition to producing new knowledge and understanding, it is essential that a university of applied sciences also creates genuinely new competence and knowledge, new models, new products, new processes and innovations. (Pedagogical Strategy 2007.)

Learning has a clear, authentic objective when working life is being developed. In addition, the process of producing new competence creates possibilities for learning. On the other hand, the R&D project in which teaching is integrated, provides an opportunity for developing the workplace and managing the learning process. Learning by Developing means close collaboration with the workplace where problems are being solved and authentic situations dealt with. The Learning by Developing -operating model seeks to systematically solve problems in a way that requires the creation of new knowledge. The development project serves as a learning environment where learning takes place individually and in groups, and where new competence and knowledge are generated by all parties. (Raij 2007.)

In the text below there are the key elements of working-life related scholarship of teaching (Pedagogical strategy 2007):

Laurea's teachers are researchers and developers, regional developers and pedagogues.

Completing a development project in this operating environment requires special expertise, sharing and refining competence, and diverse roles and responsibilities. Participants in the development project work, act and learn together. In these operations, the teacher's inspiring, encouraging and stimulating attitude is particularly important.

- *Some teachers conduct research leading to reports which prove the impact of the development projects as renewers and developers of workplace competence.*
- *Some teachers are developers in charge of identifying and pushing forward the development project's processes.*
- *The third role is found in workshops, where culture-based knowledge is transferred and shared, and where students learn the use of professional tools.*

Teaching also involves partnerships with working life. Working life experts participating in the development projects contribute their professional competence, while teachers ensure that the evidence-based data to support this competence is in place. Together the participants produce new knowledge to develop and renew working life.

The teacher's role in the development project can also be described as that of a professional expert, a participant and a pedagogical tutor, who facilitates the students' growth and development into professional experts. (Pedagogical Strategy 2007.)

Teacher transformation is based on strategies and values and at Laurea we have come a long way from learning in projects to development-based learning, where competence development happens in authentic, networked collaboration. According to Laurea's pedagogical strategy our students are treated as junior colleagues in an organization – we give them challenges, responsibility and respect with clear leadership. The perspective of students being as junior colleagues has also brought up some challenges among staff – not all of the staff are in favour of this but instead would like to treat students as the recipients of new knowledge. Fortunately, the number of these lecturers is decreasing year by year as the LbD-model gets more deeply rooted in the daily operations of our organization.

The perspectives of deep leadership (see Nissinen 2006) are based on transformational leadership by Bass and Avolio 1994. These four cornerstones of deep leadership can naturally and creatively applied in modern higher education institutions to the learning processes where people work together to achieve the objectives. Learning in these latest higher education pedagogical models like LbD (see Fränti&Pirinen 2008; Kallioinen 2008; Rajj 2007; Pedagogical strategy 2007) seems to be organized as a work of an expert, where the objective for learning is mutual and everybody is a learner in the competence development process. The flexible and dynamic action evolves within the framework of these networked partners.

3. The four cornerstones of transformative teaching applied from deep leadership

The future looks challenging for the universities to produce new knowledge and competence in this changing operational environment. In this chapter the four cornerstones of deep leadership (see Nissinen 2006) are applied in the higher education context and the working-life related learning process of the students. The transformative role of teachers is strengthening along with the cultural change in teaching.

TRUST

Can our students trust us?

Building trust is the first cornerstone in deep leadership. Trust comes from working together, openness, equality, honesty and respect. It is said, that 'bad feeling does not learn' which means that the students' focus in learning environment should be channelled in constructive, intentional and collaborative, positive working instead of dealing with different kind of frustrations. The role of teacher teams becomes extremely important in building and maintaining trust. More experienced colleagues create the atmosphere of trust in junior colleagues. Building trust is not only speech but there are always actions to speak for themselves. The students should have solid trust in the professional guidance offered to them during their learning path.

INSPIRATION AND MOTIVATION

Can we inspire and motivate our students? Where does motivation come from?

Inspirational motivation as the second cornerstone means that we should enhance the kind of situations where the objectives of learning are set high, the students are challenged to mutually formulating the objectives for their learning process and they are encouraged actively and positively to exceed their limits of learning. Inspiration and motivation are added by enthusiastic and committed teachers who work in a positive and optimistic way. Good learning climate promotes remarkably learning and motivates students. Therefore it is essential to learn to identify the learning/working climate, which is an ability that improves with experience.

INTELLECTUAL CHALLENGING

For what reason? Why? How? What else? What new? How else could this be done?

Insightful, focal questions are based on the third cornerstone which is challenging the student intellectually. Encouraging the students to creativity, new solutions, new perspectives and innovativeness creates a perspective for the future, where it is important to question the world around us. Critical thinking enhances intelligence, promotes argumentation skills and enables richness of diversity to come forward. Collaboration also challenges intellectually as in active interaction you need to accomplish things and produce results, make choices and decisions as well as learn from mistakes.

STUDENTS AS INDIVIDUALS

Who are you?

The fourth cornerstone is to treat the students as individuals. It is a very important factor in developing competence of the students. In big student groups individuals often ‘disappear’ in the crowd and it is not easy to get to know students individually. Challenges for pedagogical design lie in the organization and guidance of various group processes so that the students feel and experience that they are treated as individuals – if not always, at least from time to time during the entire learning process. Individual development needs vary and this should be taken into consideration. Treating students as mass will not enhance individual competence development and therefore the learning spaces and places should be designed to promote individual professional growth and good quality learning.

Transformative teaching brings about similar results as deep leadership: efficiency, satisfaction and entrepreneurial spirit, which are essential for getting good results (Nissinen 2006). Efficiency in this context means exceptionally high quality in behaviour and attitudes, smoothness and construction of cooperation as well as reaching and exceeding the results. The atmosphere of success with a natural development and developing objective shows outside and works as an extra incentive at the same time. Extensive satisfaction means genuine experience of being one of the actors to create the elements leading to success. Being one of the transformative teachers in this particularly efficient and successful university gives also satisfaction. Entrepreneurial spirit promotes strategy work, commits teachers to the chosen pedagogy and enhances collaboration. At the best we can talk about the ‘Flow’ that empowers people.

4. Competence development and promoting learning in LbD-model

The transformative teacher must always strive to achieve good, high-quality planning, implementation and evaluation of teaching in order to develop competence of the students; this also applies to the LbD model. As a summary of this article, I’ll present the factors that promote learning in Figure 2 below. In the teacher's job, subject-specific competence is an important factor, but it is tightly linked with interrelational competence, including the perspectives of interaction, learning atmosphere and working as an educator. It also reflects our time, in which top-level technical expertise is not enough; human skills are needed in order to promote high-quality learning and to produce good education.

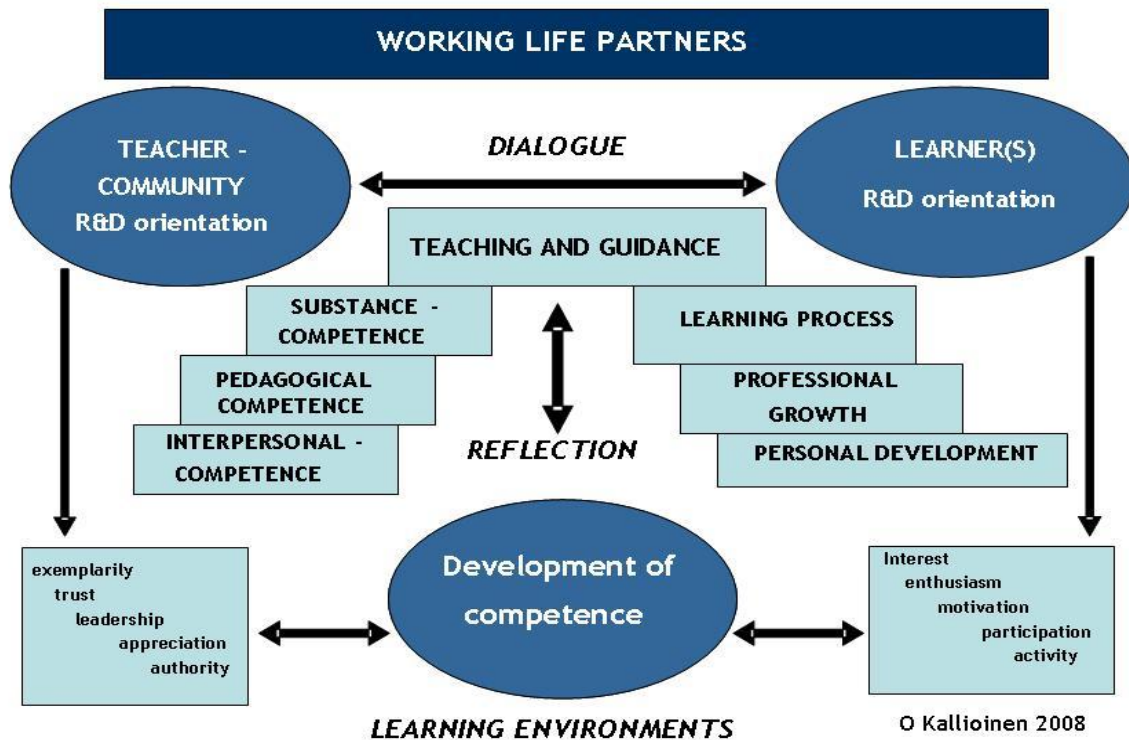


Figure 2. Factors that promote learning in LbD-model

In the teaching community the crucial factors are not only subject-specific competence but also a research-oriented, developmental approach, interaction, encountering people dialogically, and having the pedagogical competence. The qualities of an expert promote the implementation of good, high-quality teaching, and foster the students' motivation and participation. From the point of view of students, the emphasis is on guidance, the learning process, communal reflection, professional and human growth, and a research-oriented, developmental approach to work.

The purpose of this article was to open some doors into the phenomenon of transformative teaching, where we work together to create the new reality of teaching and strive to understand and evaluate the challenges set for it from our own perspectives. Everyone participates in this knowledge construction from one's own circumstances and creates a dialogic relationship with the views and interpretations presented here. I hope the thoughts and ideas evoked by this article will come to life and extend into each reader's individual operations in diverse teaching and learning environments in higher education.

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