

Characteristics of Effective and Sustainable Teaching Development Programs for Quality Teaching in Higher Education

This presentation will address the following conference aim/question: What are the contextual factors and the prerequisites leading to the quality of teaching and learning?

Topic 3: Pedagogical operational methods in the specific context of the institution

Abstract:

What characteristics do effective teaching centres concerned with quality teaching share? How do these centres measure success, build sustainability and anticipate the needs of faculty? In this presentation, I will highlight the findings of a multi-year, international study designed to explore how a select number of teaching centres have developed, established, maintained and assessed effective and sustainable teaching services with the aim of providing support services for quality teaching. Preliminary findings provide an extended understanding for educational developers, administrators and other stakeholders about how to implement effective and sustainable teaching centres. Discussion will consider a framework for assessing the efficacy of teaching centres given increased expectations of students, the anticipated influx of new professors and the influence of change on campuses around the world.

Purpose

The growing need for teaching centres to help instructors of higher education move toward facilitating quality teaching is being propelled from several directions: efforts to enhance the quality of the student learning experience and therefore the quality of teaching, the constant churn of new technologies, and the evolution of higher education institutions driven by, and driving, changing expectations and institutional rankings. The need for effective and sustaining teaching centres is also linked to a desire for innovations in teaching and learning methods. And yet, the role of teaching centres in supporting quality teaching remains ambiguous.

To some degree, teaching development programs offered by teaching centres have a responsibility to ensure instructors move beyond traditional classroom approaches (e.g., lectures). Innovative teaching strategies can include not only diverse teaching methods, a mix of face-to-face (F2F) and online approaches, but also nurturing communities of practice throughout institutions of higher education. However, innovative teaching development initiatives are not without tensions. There is a need to gain better understandings of how teaching development centres intend to support their instructors as they adopt new and/or innovative approaches in their own teaching practices.

The overarching objective of this study was to gain a broader understanding of these tensions. To achieve this objective, this study was designed to explore how institutions of higher education develop, establish, maintain and assess effective and sustainable teaching development services. Interviews were conducted with leaders of teaching centres in higher education institutions. The data for this study builds on a prior study by helping to assess strengths and challenges of teaching centres while making a contribution in assisting to meet the growing teaching staff move toward quality teaching.

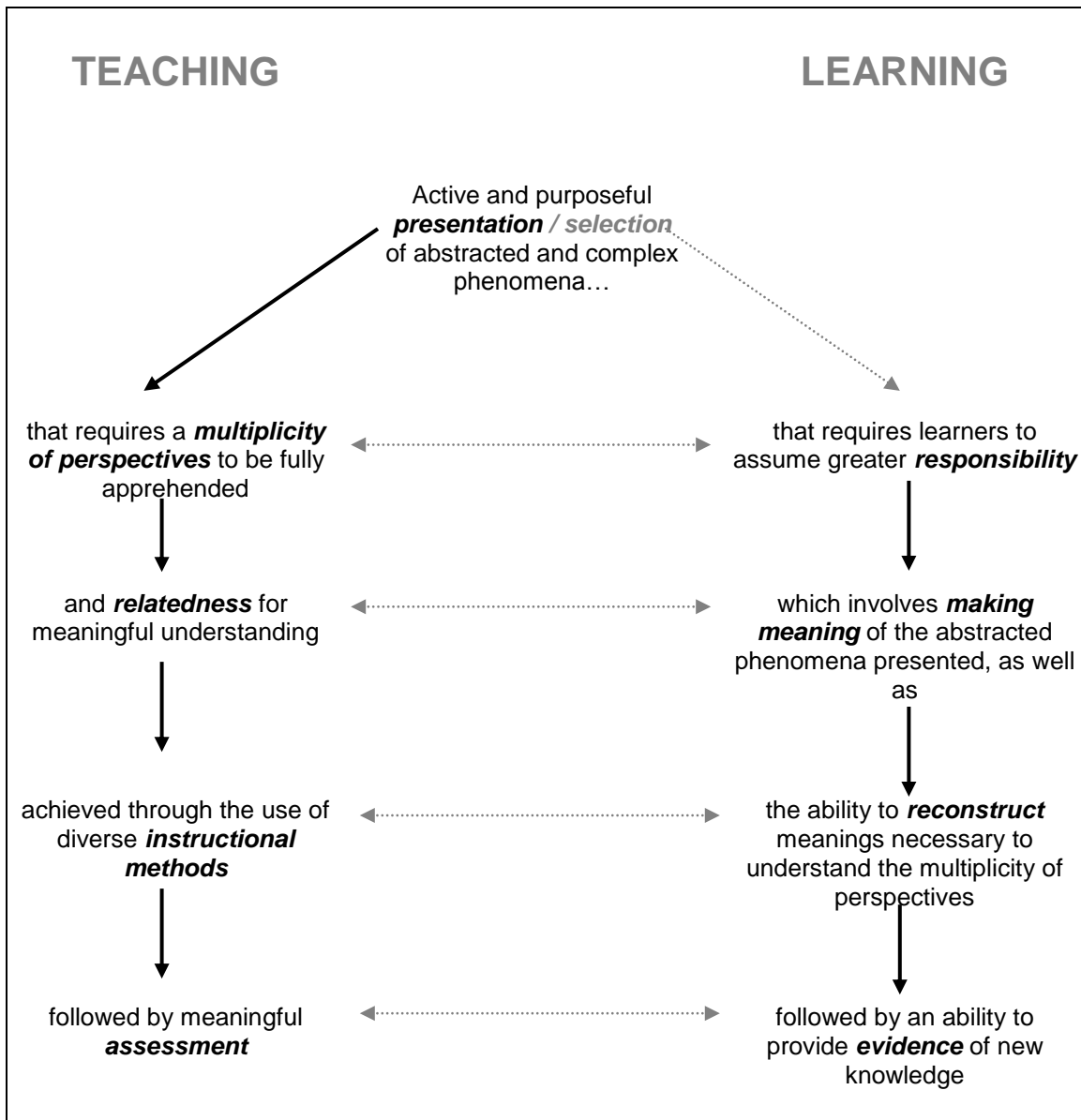
Quality Teaching: What is it?

Institutions of higher education have been exploring ways to improve teaching and learning practices through creative and innovative teaching methods. Specifically, through the use of diverse teaching strategies, it is possible to facilitate the development of argument formation capabilities, increased written communication skills, greater complex problem solving abilities, and increased opportunities for reflective deliberation—all of which have tended to be essential to the facilitation of higher order learning: the *sine qua non* of higher education. Quality teaching, then, is understood in this study as higher order learning, sometimes also referred to as deep learning.

Data from a prior study (Kanuka, 2002a; Kanuka, 2002b) lead to the conclusion that quality teaching undergoes the following sequence: the teaching process should be a planned and purposeful *presentation* of abstracted phenomena that includes a *multiplicity of perspectives and information* to be fully apprehended with *relatedness* for meaningful understandings achieved through the use of diverse *instructional methods*, followed by meaningful *assessment*. The sequence of events for quality learning that emerged was: a need for learners to assume greater *responsibility* that involves *making meaning* of the material presented as well as the ability to *reconstruct* meanings necessary to understand the multiplicity of perspectives, followed by an ability to provide *evidence* of new knowledge.

The principles are also interrelated between the teaching and the learning dimension (horizontally). As with the linear relationship within the teaching and learning dimension, the system of events is prefaced with the presentation of *abstracted phenomena* by the instructor that requires an inclusion of a *multiplicity of perspectives* to be fully apprehended by the learners. To be fully apprehended, the learners must assume greater *responsibility*. In turn, to help the learners assume greater responsibility instructors need to provide the material with *relatedness* for more meaningful understandings and diverse *instructional methods*. And while the instructor can help in this process, ultimately, it is the learner who must *make meaning* of the material presented. Moreover, if a multiplicity of perspectives is to be achieved, then the learners must be able to *reconstruct* meanings. Finally, the system of events in credentialled post-secondary settings typically provides closure in the teaching/learning process with meaningful *assessment* activities and learners must provide *evidence* of the new knowledge they have constructed. The figure below represents the inter-relatedness of the teaching/learning process.

Process for Facilitating Higher Levels of Learning



Key to implementing the process for facilitating higher ordered learning (the figure above) is the use of diverse instructional strategies. The central difficulty, however, is that experimenting with diverse instructional strategies can be problematic in higher education settings—as teaching and learning can be a high-risk activity for both instructors and learners. For instructors, unsuccessful exploration may negatively impact end-of-course evaluation forms and teaching performance which, in turn, may negatively impact promotion and tenure. For students, unsuccessful exploration may negatively impact grades and motivation. Moreover, the application of many of creative instructional strategies requires sophisticated knowledge and skills of the use of teaching methods. Many, if not most, instructors in higher education do not possess these knowledge and skills. Hence, the need for an extended understanding of how teaching

centres can develop, implement, establish, and assess effective and sustainable teaching development services.

Methodology

Marshall and Rossman (2006) suggest that qualitative methods are well suited for exploratory or descriptive research that emphasizes the importance of context and setting as well as a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences with the phenomena. Accordingly, qualitative inquiry methods were used for this interpretivist research project. Participants were in leadership positions in university teaching centres and selected by first employing purposive sampling to "select unique cases that are especially informative" (Neuman, 2000, p. 198) and then snowball sampling as the initial participants suggested others that might be willing to discuss further.

The participants worked within the centralized university professional development centre. All participants were experienced the field of teaching in higher education and respected leaders in the field. Data for this study were gathered twenty participants who are administrators in teaching units from North America (United States, Canada), Scandinavia countries (Finland, Norway, Sweden), United Kingdom (Britain, Scotland, Ireland) and Australia.

Each centre's website was reviewed prior to the interview for: descriptions and objectives of programs and initiatives, mission statements and philosophies, outlines of the work and services provided, strategy documents and plans, annual reports (if available), teaching resources provided for their faculty, research and project initiatives undertaken, the calendar of events, and listings of staff and working committees. Gaining this familiarity ensured that valuable interview time was not spent in high level explanations of each program, but rather enabled the participants to engage in more in-depth and focused discussion.

The semi-structured interview, focused on the following main topics:

- Teaching development program and key initiatives
- How the centre is positioned strategically within the university and how it does its work
- Challenges encountered
- Success stories and key learnings

Data Analysis

Merriam (2001) describes data analysis as the process of meaning making; "consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read" (p. 178). With a goal of constructing categories or themes that capture recurring patterns in the data, Merriam's recommendations guided analysis. Using the constant comparative method of data analysis, categories were created that reflect the purpose of the research, were exhaustive, mutually exclusive, sensitizing, and conceptually congruent.

Category construction began with the first set of notes (Merriam, 2001). After working through the notes, “like” comments and notes were grouped together and a running list of these groups created. The next set of data was treated in a similar way, and the list of notes and groupings was compared to the first set. The result was a set of categories derived from the data. Separate thematic analyses were conducted, followed by debriefing meetings to avoid researcher privileging, maintain trustworthiness of the data, and detect potential biases or inconsistent conclusions.

Findings

Our findings identified practices for effective educational development centres. These findings have been clustered into the following four themes.

Theme 1: Be Strategic

Within this theme, there is a need for teaching centres to:

- operationalise policy
- recognize the different stakeholders
- understand the need to work with the ‘all-powerful middle level’ (department heads / chairs)
- create a presence and links within the schools / faculties
- ensure there is high level support and involvement
- recognize that teaching centres typically have limited power but also recognize the power that a centralised unit has
- develop tactics / strategies when support from the top is not reliable
- understand the impact and work within the inter-relatedness of other university policy
- work toward making changes in policy leading to increased attention and focus on teaching and learning

Theme 2: Multilayered Approach

Within this theme, there is a need to:

- provide a cluster of offerings (e.g., credentialed programs, workshops, events, special projects)
- have a multi-layered approach (inter and intra / to initiatives outside and within the Centre)
- provide awards and recognition
- work strategically with individuals
- support informal learning
- have a communication plan that disseminates the value of the centre’s activities
- have a strong online presence

Theme 3: Do the Work

Within this theme, there is a need to:

- develop a specific and recognisable style for the centre
- be clear on the philosophical orientation, tied to the institution's Academic Plan
- cultivate relationship with departments – schools – colleges within the university
- be strategic in positioning the Centre
- develop a presence institution-wide (e.g., via learning communities)
- ensure all staff have credibility – this is critical
- provide programs and activities that are research / evidence-based; speaking academic talk
- provide evidence-based resources
- find entry points throughout the institution
- provide activities and programs face-to-face, and online

Theme 4: Drivers

Within this theme, there is a need to:

- use technology in ways that create openings; find the right mix
- address the challenges (vs. avoiding the challenges)
- do 'the Centre dance'
- provide leadership that creates an organizational culture that values teaching
- find out why people participate in the activities and programs
- ensure the centre is involved in institutional policy

Discussion

Preliminary findings indicate effective teaching development programs are research-based, credible, strategic and integrated. Successful teaching programs for instructors in institutions of higher education have moved beyond participation rates and satisfaction ratings in order to collect evaluation measures that demonstrate the breadth and depth of change in teaching and learning. The data from this study demonstrates teaching development programs exist along a survive-to-thrive continuum. In the former, the relationship between teaching practice and teaching development programs is reactive and remedial. In the later, teaching practice and faculty development programs create a synergistic relationship based on an expectation of continuous improvement and scholarship. Programs are able to thrive when leadership is credible, accountable, policies are aligned and the scholarship of teaching and learning is valued. A culture of professional learning based on innovation, risk-taking and meaningful rewards is fostered by and through the leadership of effective faculty development program.

Theoretical and Educational Significance

The results from this study are valuable with respect to assessing the strengths and challenges of teaching centres that offer teaching programs, while making a contribution in assisting to meet the growing teaching needs. The findings of this study also suggest leaders of teaching development centres must consider their program outcomes carefully

in order to build a centre that meets the needs of both participants and policy-makers. Given the significant resources typically allocated to teaching centres, the findings in this study can assist in framing what matters most in terms of offering programs that aim to facilitate institution-wide quality teaching.

In conclusion, the findings from this study have implications for teaching centres arising from the increased expectation of students, the anticipated influx of new professors and the influence of change on campuses around the world. Leaders of teaching centres need to account for the resources allocated to support programming through reporting practices that demonstrate the ability to enhance the student learning experience through the quality of teaching, while also contributing to the overall goals of the institution.

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