

## **Perceptions of quality and changes in teaching and learning by participants of university staff development courses<sup>#</sup>**

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**Abstract:** Quality of university teaching is becoming a big word in university documents and debates, together with quality assessment and quality assurance. Teaching for quality requires substantial changes in conceptions of teacher's role, especially a shift from the teacher as transmitter of knowledge to the teacher as facilitator of student learning. This is a prerequisite for changes in teaching approaches and student learning (from a reproductive to more meaningful orientation). Such changes are not easy to achieve as university teachers still perceive themselves mainly as researchers, their thinking about and training for the teaching role being negligible or completely absent. The study, carried out among former participants of staff development courses at the University of Ljubljana, has shown a relatively modest impact of courses on conceptions and actions, limited to more motivated teachers. University teachers' perceptions of incentives and obstacles when introducing changes in teaching have shown that students were regarded mostly as »allies« whereas departmental climate and circumstances in broader academic environment as obstacles. A more systemic approach is needed, aimed at improvement of teaching quality at university level.

**Kew words:** conceptions of learning, university teaching, staff development, teaching quality, changes

## **Kako udeleženci tečajev visokošolske didaktike dojemajo kakovost in spremembe v poučevanju in učenju**

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**Povzetek:** V dokumentih in razpravah o univerzi se vse bolj poudarja pomen kakovosti študija, hkrati z vrednotenjem in zagotavljanjem te kakovosti. Bolj kakovosten visokošolski pouk pa terja bistvene spremembe v pojmovanju učiteljeve vloge, zlasti premik od učitelja kot prenašalca znanja k učitelju kot spodbujevalcu študentovega učenja. Te spremembe so predpogoj za spreminjanje učnih metod in študija študentov iz reproduktivnega v bolj smiselno. Sprememb te vrste ni lahko doseči, saj se univerzitetni učitelji vidijo predvsem v vlogi raziskovalcev; zanemarljivo malo ali nič pa ne razmišljajo o svoji pedagoški

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vlogi in zanjo tudi niso deležni usposabljanja. Raziskava, izvedena med bivšimi udeleženci tečajev iz visokošolske didaktike na ljubljanski univerzi, je pokazala, da so imeli ti tečaji le rahel vpliv na pedagoško delo in še to pretežno pri bolj motiviranih posameznikih. Analiza spodbud in ovir, kot jih učitelji doživljajo, ko skušajo uvesti pozitivne spremembe v svoje delo s študenti, je pokazala, da vidijo študente predvsem kot »zaveznike« v tem procesu, oddelčno ozračje in okoliščine v širšem akademskem okolju pa kot ovire. Za izboljšanje kakovosti pedagoškega dela na univerzitetni ravni bi bil potreben bolj sistemski pristop.

**Ključne besede:** pojmovanja učenja, univerzitetno poučevanje, izpopolnjevanje učiteljev, kakovost pouka, spremembe

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Quality is becoming a big word in debates about the development of higher education in Slovenia, together with quality (self)assessment and quality assurance. High-level aims to be attained by the students, like ability for creative and critical thinking, independent learning, problem solving abound in mission statements of institutions. But conceptual and practical links to what actually happens in overcrowded lecture halls and examination rooms are fragile and sometimes nonexistent. One-way lecturing and formal exams with questions of low cognitive level still prevail in many institutions.

University teachers still perceive themselves mainly as researchers; their thinking about and training for the teaching role being negligible or completely absent. Also official definitions of quality are mainly limited to quantitative criteria (student drop-out, duration of study, graduation index). The quality of teaching/learning process and of study outcomes, defined by the quality of student's approach to learning (surface – deep learning) and resulting knowledge in terms of deeper understanding of key ideas of the discipline, ability to make connections, to think independently and critically, to creatively apply knowledge to professional problems (Biggs, 1999; Nightingale & O'Neil, 1994; Ramsden, 1992) are still to a large extent neglected.

According to the 3P model of learning and teaching does (Biggs, 1999; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999), the quality of learning outcomes is affected not only by what characteristics students bring into the process and by what the teacher does, but also by what the student does. *»It is helpful to remember that what the student does is actually more important in determining what is learned than what the teacher does«.* (Shuell, 1986, cit. after Biggs 1999). Teaching for quality means to use active methods that help students to adopt meaningful and not reproductive approaches to learning. Methods of teaching and assessment tasks have been found to be strongly related to university teachers' conceptions or orientations to teaching. Research, combining qualitative and quantitative methods (interviews and factor analysis of the corresponding questionnaire) has revealed two main teaching conceptions or orientation in university teachers - knowledge transmission and learning facilitation (Gow & Kember, 1993). Those in turn have been found to be strongly related to teaching

models, to quality of student learning (surface, deep or achieving approach) and to study outcomes (Kember & Gow, 1994).

On the other hand, substantial changes in university teachers' conceptions of learning, teaching and their role, especially a move from the traditional role of the teacher as transmitter of knowledge, are not easy to achieve. Kugel (1993) describes stages of a typical or desirable professional development of university professors as a gradual shift from the focus on self through the focus on subject finally to the focus on student (who is at first being regarded as receptive, then as active and finally as independent). Unpleasant surprises (when students have not learnt what they have been taught) are most often the driving force behind those changes. Because of the typical university socialisation and prevailing academic culture, this is not an easy and straightforward process (Marentič Požarnik, 1998). Teachers' perceptions of their teaching environment – student characteristics, control over curriculum and methods, number of students and class size, workload and institutional support have all been found to be closely associated to their approaches to teaching and to possible changes (Prosser & Trigwell 1999).

In many countries, organised attempts to support university teachers in the development of their teaching competence have emerged in the last decades. At the University of Ljubljana, optional courses to improve university teaching (lecturing, small group work, assessment...) have been offered since 1975 to teachers and assistants. The underlying philosophy, based on cognitive paradigm, was to combine the development of teaching skills (this is expected by participants) with the broadening of their awareness, understanding and conceptions of learning and teaching. As the teachers are supposed to move away from the transmission mode, the approaches during the course employed minimal amount of lecturing, but were mainly based on Kolb's cycle of experiential learning and on collegial (peer) learning (Handal, Lucke & Lauvas, 1995; Marentič Požarnik, 1995).

The officially approved introductory course for lecturers consists of 2 three-day modules, with an application / reflection phase in-between. Mini lectures, simulations of group work, discussions on excerpts from student interviews and corresponding literature and a reflective diary formed the main part of the module, putting teachers in the role of active and reflective learners. As courses are optional, only those teachers attend that already feel the need to improve or change their existing teaching approaches. At the start, they usually just expect to get ready-made »tips« to improve their presentation skills and students' motivation and to cope better with the student diversity and large groups. Initially, many are surprised as they are put into the role of active learners that have to figure out answers by themselves. But in questionnaires after each module, most participants express satisfaction with the active methods used, especially microteaching, with the cooperative and friendly climate and the possibility to exchange experiences with colleagues from different departments. As it is not clear whether this satisfactory experience has any influence on their subsequent thinking about teaching and on their teaching strategies, we de-

cided to carry out an exploratory study with these questions in mind.

### **Aim and method of the study**

The study was aiming at former participants of staff development courses in order to find out whether they perceived any long-term effects of the courses. We intended to explore the following research questions:

- What are the participants' conceptions of quality in university study, what are their views on »good« teaching and learning and on the respective roles of the teacher and students.
- Do they perceive any changes in their thinking about university teaching and about actual teaching activities as consequence of the courses.
- What changes did they introduce in their teaching after the course and what were the perceived sources of support and obstacles when trying to introduce those changes.

The study had an extensive part (based on a questionnaire) and an intensive part (using semi-structured interviews). In both parts, basically the same general questions were included. The interviews helped us to probe more deeply into the qualitative aspects of teachers' perceptions and conceptions.

We sent the questionnaire to 209 former participants; we received 49 answers. So we can not generalise the results obtained; we can only presume that those more motivated have answered, so the answers represent the »better part« of all participants.

The interview was carried out with 10 participants, chosen on the basis of their willingness to take time (about one hour) for the interview. The answers on the interview questions were transcribed, divided into meaningful units and categorised; the categorisation was carried out independently by the two researchers.

## **Results and discussion**

### **Conceptions of quality in teaching and learning**

The analysis of answers on open-ended question *What are the essential ingredients of quality in university study?* has shown that participants' attention was most often directed toward high-level outcomes (products) of study (*“the ability of students to use their knowledge after they finish their studies, ability to think critically... – 39 % of answers,*); then to the student activity (*“independent, active learning, creativity of students” – 33 %*); next came good teaching which included transmission as well as some dialogue with students – 17 %, and least frequently teaching environment: meaningful programme, good working conditions – 11 %.

In the interviews about student's role, "good student" was described most often as interested, independent in thought and action, critical and self-critical. In the description of teacher's role, following facets could be discerned (listed in order of frequency):

- Teacher as a good transmitter of knowledge (including AV media),
- teacher who is able to activate students,
- teacher who creates good relationships with students (*"students should feel no barriers to ask even silly questions"*),
- teacher as a role model (of genuine interest in the subject matter),
- teacher as adviser on how to study,
- teacher as a "bridge" to problems of professional practice.

There was a certain gap visible between high-level aims and expectations about outcomes on one hand and the conception of teacher's role (mainly at the level of knowledge transmission) on the other. This was especially obvious in answers on the interview question about the division of responsibility between teacher and student. Typical answers: *"Teacher delivers – students receive knowledge."* *"Teacher is authority, defines goals, methods, assesses results - students take responsibility given by the teacher, are active"* (but active only in the predefined frame).

### **Perceptions of changes in thinking and teaching activities and the role of staff development courses**

The average perceived change in thinking about university teaching on a 7-point scale was 5,33. Typical example: *»I see students in a more active role; I try to start a dialogue with them«.*

The average perceived change in approaches to university teaching on a 7-point scale was 4,64. Examples of changes in teaching approaches, mentioned in the questionnaire (in percents of answers):

- Using more varied methods of assessment (37 %)
- Asking students for their opinion and proposals and trying to follow them (18 %)
- Introducing interactive and problem-oriented lecturing (14 %)
- More small group work (8 %)
- Looking for interdisciplinary connections (6 %).

In the interview, some teachers also mentioned that they got more self-confident. Thus, they can focus less on content and more on good transmission (rhetoric skills, clear explanation, more practical examples, use of AV media, selection of content). *"At the beginning, I had the intention to bring to students the whole amount*

*of disciplinary content, together with facts. Later I saw this was not so important.”*

To what extent did the teachers link those changes to experiences in staff development courses? In the interviews, nearly all the participants expressed the opinion that courses and workshops represented a very satisfactory experience, but did not change their teaching approaches or philosophy in any direct and dramatic way. The experience (that the majority described as pleasant and stimulating) gave a “push” to the direction in which they were already going. It gave them confirmation that their attempts were “right”. They perceived changes in their teaching as small, gradual, developing from ideas that “*were already here before*”. Example: “*This communication exercise gave me the impulse to think about others – how they are going to understand what I tell them. This is vital for transmission: Are students going to understand what I lecture them?*”.

They mentioned that during the workshop, they had time and opportunity to think things over and to focus their attention on their professional development. “*In everyday routine you do not pay much attention to your development. Things happen on their own. Then on the workshop, somebody directs you on thinking about yourself. And you say: O yes, before I thought that way, and now...*” It was also important to them to exchange experiences with colleagues (groups were disciplinary heterogeneous), to start a “culture of dialogue” and to “find the language” to talk about teaching problems. “*Now I can name things I have been doing before*” “*Now, when we meet with colleagues, we say: Hallo, how is teaching going?*”

In terms of their professional development after Kugel (1993), most participants made the transition from subject orientation to the first stage of student orientation; they started to regard *students as receptive*, and to take into account their limited capacity of reception, shortly: they tried to improve delivery. Only some moved to the second stage - to regard *students as active* and giving them practical assignments or engaging them in group work or in a meaningful dialogue. Nobody seemed to move to the stage of regarding *students as independent learners*. The impact of courses on teachers’ professional growth seems to be modest, but nevertheless important for those participants who would not find courage or time to think about and perform important changes otherwise. The results are in accordance with general findings that *»such workshops are only the start of a process because significant changes to teaching and learning require sustained effort over a lengthy period of time«* (Gow & Kember, 1993, pg. 32).

### **Perceived support and obstacles for changes in teaching**

We grouped the answers on the open question *What are main incentives and obstacles to introduce substantial changes in quality your teaching?* into those having to do with students, teaching environment and teacher him/herself (autonomy).

As can be seen from the tables, students and their favorable reactions are perceived as the main incentive, as »allies« in introducing changes in teaching. Other components of the teaching environment are mostly perceived as an obstacle. As there exists a certain coherence between perceptions of the teaching environment,

*Table 1: University teachers' (participants of staff development courses) perceived sources of incentives to introduce changes in teaching*

<b>Source of incentive:</b>	<i>f</i>	<i>% of all answers</i>
STUDENTS		53
– interest, satisfaction, positive reactions	24	
– better knowledge, study outcomes	8	
– expressed needs, expectations	5	
TEACHING ENVIRONMENT		20
– support of colleagues	4	
– departmental support	3	
– international contacts	3	
– technical equipment, rooms	3	
SELF		27
– wish to be a successful teacher	13	
– own initiative	5	

*Note:* Number of respondents = 49 (some have listed more than one answer)

*Table 2: University teachers' (participants of staff development courses) perceived sources of obstacles to introduce changes in teaching.*

<b>Source of obstacles:</b>	<i>f</i>	<i>% of all answers</i>
STUDENTS		8
– not motivated	4	
– not used to innovations	2	
TEACHING ENVIRONMENT		90
– too high workload	14	
– programmes too rigid or overloaded	14	
– too large groups	9	
– “lonely wolf” – no support from colleagues	8	
– good teaching not required for promotion	8	
– lack of rooms and equipment	7	
– no support by department or institute	4	
NO OBSTACLES	1	2

*Note:* Number of respondents = 49 (some have listed more than one answer)

conceptions of teacher's role and approaches to teaching (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999), any attempts to substantially change the situation have to be systemic. It means that they have to affect different components of the system, not only individual conceptions but also the teaching environment (for example, institutional climate, student – teacher ratio).

## **Conclusions**

In the study, there was an inherent discrepancy found between high level aims and expectations of “quality” products of university study on one side and traditional conceptions of teacher's and students' role and teaching approaches on the other.

Staff development courses did not play a decisive part in changing those conceptions; their role was found at least as enabling in the sense of directing attention to teaching and supporting the process of professional development of a reflective minority of teachers. Those participants who were already interested in changing teaching orientations and methods, moved one step forward to more student-centered, activating teaching approaches and started to regard students at least as “intelligent receivers” if not as active and independent learners.

Interestingly enough, students and their favorable attitudes were most often felt as support and “allies” in the process of changing teaching approaches, while institutional climate, rigid programmes, too heavy workload and other situational (institutional) characteristics were felt as major obstacles.

In the future, we plan to move the focus of the courses still a bit more from the training of teaching skills into the direction of changing teachers' thinking and conceptions, with the aim to make teachers more sensitive to their underlying philosophy of teaching and to give them a push to move away from the mere transmission role. Also, a move in the direction of embracing students' perspective, their experience of the study situation is important.

In the sense of a more »systemic approach« (Biggs, 1999; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999) we intend to carry out some courses at the departmental level, thus enabling a group of colleagues to jointly plan, introduce and evaluate changes in their teaching. We expect that courses for the members of the whole department, not only for individual participants as “lonely wolves” are going to create an institutional microclimate more favorable and open to change. More pervasive changes in teaching could be reached by a long term action research approach, supported by the institution.

Finally, it may be fruitful to influence university policy measures (for example, to increase the weight of well-defined criteria of “teaching excellency” in promotion procedures and in institutional quality assessment). The move to learning facilitation orientation, as important as it is for quality teaching and learning, is not going to be easy and swift, as the transmission orientation, with the preference for one-way



lecturing, is very deeply engrained in our whole academic culture.

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