

CLUSTER 3 COMMENTARY

ACTIVATING TEACHING METHODS: MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES FOR EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Peter Van Petegem, University of Antwerp

The active participation and engagement of students may significantly contribute to their learning. In-depth involvement can be helpful to increase students' understanding of the concepts, methods and skills taught within a course. For a teacher it can be challenging to foster a learning environment that enhances deep learning.

Teaching methods: means that serve an aim

The chapters from Kováčová and Fujdiak describe the efforts and results of the research they have conducted to increase participation and engagement by activating students during their respective courses. In many educational development programs, active teaching methods are propagated. The variety of activating methods covered in the two papers is impressive: different discussion formats (plenary and group), brainstorming, mind mapping and role play as opposed to and presented as an alternative to classic lecturing methods. However, when being caught up in the enthusiasm of applying alternative teaching methods, the fallacy can arise that their usage becomes an aim on its own. Before considering alternative teaching methods one has to bear in mind the learning outcomes of the course or program. In that sense, lecturing can serve a number of aims (for example to offer an introduction to concepts, structures and frameworks) while active teaching methods are more appropriate for other aims (such as the application of concepts and skills in a complex problem or case study). Fortunately, this goals-means displacement is not the case in the two aforementioned chapters.

Impact of teaching methods versus assessment

When reading the chapters, it is relevant to keep in mind that both authors are in an academic position that limits their degrees of freedom in regard to the redesigning of their learning environments. Of all the efforts mentioned, one of the strongest measures is to foster deep learning and higher order thinking skills by redesigning assessment criteria. The way students are assessed (and their perception thereof) is decisive and actually determines the way they learn: an assignment that requires skills and the application of the subjects' concepts that go far beyond the traditional method of learning by heart, will challenge students to study accordingly. Despite this well-documented importance, both authors are not (yet) in a position that they can redesign the assessment criteria of their courses. Therefore, the relatively small impact that both authors found upon evaluating the outcomes of their teaching innovations might not be very surprising:

changing only the teaching method without a more holistic approach to alter and align all course elements is likely to result in limited success.

Context matters, also for teaching methods

The case studies in this cluster originate from the Czech Republic and Iran, two very different contexts with surprising similarities in the findings of both papers but also with interesting differences. In the latter country, it is curious that note-taking during lectures seems not to be a habit. This particular difference is obviously observable in lecture halls, the differences in approaches towards learning in groups are not directly visible but they might be more important. The familiarity of students with teaching methods that foster students' active learning (as compared to, for example, traditional lecturing) has its impact on the feasibility of the implementation of the innovation. This too might be a reason for the limited significant findings in both studies. This remark also illustrates that the transferability of professionalization programs to other contexts and cultures is limited and needs to be approached with intercultural sensitivity.

Teaching methods as a trade-off between giving autonomy and providing structure

The two chapters are indicative of the delicate balance one has to bear in mind when activating students on the one hand and providing guidance and structure to students on the other hand. In order to engage students, the role of the teacher moved away from being the all-knowing expert to being a coach. However, that should not contradict with the crucial role of the teacher to provide students with sufficient structure. Students' autonomy needs to be guided in order for the learning process to be effective. When students experience a lack of structure and guidance, they might feel lost and express feelings of frustration. For a teacher this balancing act is quite challenging: it is easier to build structure via well-prepared lectures than to create structure in a learning environment where students have a lot of autonomy and responsibility over their own learning processes.

Applications of the self-determination theory to the educational context might offer inspiration for educational developers. This theory highlights the importance of three basic psychological needs: autonomy (the need to perceive one's true self as a source of motivation and action), relatedness (the need to feel connected and having a sense of belonging and competence (the need to feel effective and capable) (Ryan and Deci 2000). These needs impact students' well-being, motivation and engagement. In order to meet those needs (e.g. in the context of higher education), providing structure *and* creating an autonomy conducive style as a teacher are crucial (Vansteenkiste et al. 2012). As the discussion of the teaching context from the chapters suggest, students are little used to learn in an environment that nurtures autonomy and increased responsibility, which might have had an impact on the findings as well.

Educational development research challenges

Both chapters showcase the opportunities that can be created by challenging teachers to become researchers of their own teaching practice. In view of educational research, a strong operationalization and instrumentalization of the concepts studied (e.g. active versus passive learning) are desirable. Next to that, a multi-method approach might avoid that the complex reality is reduced to simplistic contradictions. Hence, the variety of methods used in the papers is impressive: apart from questionnaires, student feedback; minute papers; assignments; and observational evaluations are collected. Concerning the latter: we have to be aware of the limits and bias that might occur when observing while teaching. A very powerful addition to educational development purposes next to own observations is peer-observation. This applies both to the observer, who can serve as a critical friend, and to the teacher being observed. As is the case for student feedback, the feedback one receives from a peer-fellow teacher can be very enriching and inspiring as a formative assessment approach, in the true meaning of the concept.

Sustainable innovation through educational development

As educational developers we hope to introduce new learning approaches and methods by professionalizing young staff at our institutes. But if the context does not (or only partially) allows for this, or when young staff is met with cynicism by more senior colleagues, many efforts and good intentions can die a sudden death. It would be naïve to neglect these circumstances. When we aspire that educational innovations, like those described in the chapters, get consolidated not only at the course level, but also incorporated at the study program or institutional level, it is not sufficient to focus only on competence development of staff at the early stages of their careers. These actions need to be complemented with efforts focusing at the level of senior staff, and people with policy power, such as heads of study programs, heads of department, educational deans at the faculty level and educational policy makers at the institutional level. One cannot expect from the youngest generation to change educational practices according to new principles advocated in the educational development program in a sustainable way without the explicit support, involvement, and contribution from senior staff. The latter group should then be subject of designated educational development programs as well.

Get inspired

I invite the audience to read both chapters to find out to what extent the teacher-researchers succeeded in their efforts to apply student centered methods to make their teaching more effective. These chapters are inspiring examples on how to encourage active participation as a teacher in a variety of ways and in different contexts and how to make its impact visible as a researcher.

References

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Peter Van Petegem is full professor of education sciences at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Antwerp. He teaches education policies, school policies and management in the Master Program Training and Education Sciences. He is member of the research group Edubron (www.edubron.be) and former head of the Center of Expertise in Higher Education (www.ua.ac.be/echo) responsible for the instructional development of teaching staff at the university. His research interests include the evaluation of education innovations, school and education policies, environmental education and education for sustainable development. He (co-) authored 200 peer-reviewed A1 articles, which appeared, for example, in *Learning and Instruction*, *PLOS-One*, *Higher Education*, *Educational Research Review*, *Teaching in Higher Education* and *Studies in Higher Education*. He is Editor-in-Chief of *Studies in Educational Evaluation*.
peter.vanpetegem@uantwerpen.be