

CLUSTER 4 COMMENTARY

SMALL-SCALE SCHOLARLY TEACHING INNOVATIONS THAT MIGHT SPARK WIDER CHANGE

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Two scholarly teachers

In this cluster, two academic teachers describe how they improve their students' learning through a scholarly approach. In both cases the described innovation is formulated out of a thorough analysis of previous experiences in combination with consultation of the literature. Nikita Minin works on helping students to improve their writing skills, especially their capacity to write positions papers related to theoretical material presented in the course. The initial idea is that by writing the position papers the students develop a better understanding of the course content along developing writing skills. But the position papers written in previous courses were not of the quality Minin looks for. So, how can changes in teaching help students to write better, and thereby, to reach a better understanding? In the other chapter, Dubravka Kovačević faces a different challenge. From her previous observations she concludes that students, coming from various backgrounds, need to improve their ability to work in groups and to, prepare and deliver good-quality presentations together with their group mates.

To achieve his goal, Minin first presents to students how to structure a position paper and shares with them a rubric for assessing these papers. He focuses on giving feedback to students on their writing, much more detailed than a few sentences offered in the past. Through the introduction of audio feedback, he wants the feedback to be experienced by the students as more personal than before.

Kovačević, on the other hand carefully designed a sequence of tasks that become for students increasingly more difficult. In groups, students prepare and present a poster first and move on to design traditional presentation afterwards.

In both cases the authors describe an elaborate procedures for evaluating the results of their teaching innovations and provide evidence for positive impact.

As a reader I am struck with how much can be achieved when academic minds are turned towards student learning. Minin and Kovačević are both trained in their disciplines. They know what it means to be scholarly in their respective fields. They demonstrate here what can be achieved when teaching is treated scholarly: if teaching and its outcome are analysed, if some pieces from scholarly literature on student learning are used to generate a teaching innovation, and when teaching is carried out carefully. Of course, teaching will improve and, as a consequence, student learning will improve as well. This is what SoTL (The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning) is all about: taking teaching seriously (Bernstein and Bass 2005), using the academic mind and focus on a course, a portion of teaching, or student learning.

Collegial response

What is not apparent to the reader obviously is what happens next? The innovation is designed, carried out and evaluated. This is what chapters are about. These teachers have improved their teaching and they have told the story of how it was done. They have been scholarly about their own teaching. And, the papers are published. But as a reader one might be interested in the response from these two teachers' closest colleagues.

I will not pretend in any way that I know the answer. I will simply take the opportunity to point out the fact that academic teachers do not work in isolation. They belong to disciplinary communities and these communities have different approaches to teaching and student learning. Trowler (2008) describes these approaches as 'teaching and learning regimes', collectively formed tacit assumptions, recurrent practices, and other elements of teaching traditions. Any young academic has to orient him or herself to these regimes. In a celebrated article Jawitz (2009) follows four early career academics as they start to work within new contexts. He is especially interested in how these young academics acquire the local tradition in grading student work. As it turns out, they all encounter ways different from their previous experiences.

It appears that academic teachers, even though they are often situated alone with students in the classroom, have to relate professionally to colleagues who collectively construct the specific disciplinary community to which they belong. Becher and Trowler (2001) talk about academic tribes and territories. The territory is the discipline and the individuals who inhabit a certain context constitute the tribe. Different tribes develop different traditions for teaching even though they teach the same discipline.

So, I can only assume that Minin and Kovačević also belong to academic tribes where over time different teaching and learning regimes have evolved. These microcultural constructs (Roxå and Mårtensson 2015) that constitute the cultural patchwork and form our higher education institutions can encourage innovation in teaching to various degrees (Ginns et al. 2010).

Sparkling wider change

I know from thirty years of developing teaching in faculties and universities that change almost always starts with ordinary teachers changing their classes, which looks like small-scale. The excellent chapters presented here by Minin and Kovačević are examples of not only innovations in teaching, but also because of how the story is told and the innovation is evaluated, they illustrate in an excellent way how large-scale change starts. In fact, what Minin and Kovačević report has the potential, together with many followers, to change institutions to places where students learn and grow more effectively. Of course, it takes time to make this happen, yet it is dependent on courageous, curious, and skilful innovators – like the two teachers in these two chapters.

References

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