

INSPIRING CHANGE IN TEACHING IN CENTRAL EUROPE AND ELSEWHERE

Agnes Simon, Masaryk University

Teacher development courses of the past have often resulted in situations where participants changed their perceptions of teaching but not their practice (Simon and Pleschová 2013). Participants of this development course, regardless of whether or not their work has been showcased in this book, not only shifted their perceptions but also effected some change in their practice. They had little choice about the latter as the course required them to teach and incorporate new teaching methods into their practice. Although this change may not be lasting, course participants have already passed the hurdle of gathering courage to try their hands at doing something different than what they did or observed in the past. As a result, many felt that they have become more confident even if their teaching has not gone exactly according to their session plans. The chapters in this book give a good representation of how far course participants have come in shifting their thinking and practice toward learning-centred teaching in primarily teaching-centred educational environments.

How daring the authors were in terms of their innovations was left to them but it was influenced by a variety of factors other than their habitus. Because we wanted them to gain actual teaching experience, we had set some of the limitations by requiring them to centre their innovations around classroom practice. Accordingly, a good number of the authors focused on areas that were concerned with student participation in class, engagement and the related impact on learning (e.g. Awuah; Fujdiak; Karas; Kováčová; Padrtová; Tkaczyk; Voca). But several authors have chosen to work in areas that one would not immediately associate with classroom activities like assessment (Gachallová), course design (Kašpárková) or research and writing competencies (Rapošová; Minin; Jaklová Střihavková) and combined these with pertinent classroom activities. Pleschová and McAlpine (2016) uncovered the importance of contextual factors on the content and approach of one's teaching in Central Europe and the chapters in this book reaffirmed their conclusion as well as showcased how to overcome such barriers. First, existing institutional practices meant that authors (e.g. Tkaczyk; Pechersky) whose departmental practice heavily relied on frontal lecturing, took a keen interest in establishing a more learner-centred classroom while, for example, Jaklová Střihavková was more concerned with aligning the already active learner-oriented classroom activities with the nature of the assessment exercise.

Second, whereas some teachers (Srnišová; Tkaczyk) worked in departments that had standardized teaching requirements allowing for little diversion in classroom practices others at the other end of the spectrum (e.g. Karas; Padrtová) could use classroom time according to their best judgement.

Third, the number of classes taught differed greatly from author to author: for example, Kováčová had only one class each in both Brno and Teheran that she could freely design, Pechersky taught

the same topic to three different groups of students, while Srnišová and Rétióvá led all seminar sessions of a course, and Padrtová and Minin were responsible for various facets, ranging from designing and delivering to assessing their courses.

Fourth, class size not only substantially varied from four to one hundred thirty-nine students across the chapters, but those who were not the lead teacher of the course often learnt the exact number of registered students – not to mention those who actually showed up in the class – at the last minute. This required teachers not only to be adaptable in their teaching but also to deal with the outcome of lacking the amount or quality of data that their research design had required. It is to the authors' credit, and to the benefit of the reader, that these novice teachers have navigated the obstacles successfully and put forth interesting, meaningful and methodologically sound chapters.

Indeed, regarding methodology, authors did not only rely on data triangulation and mixed-methods research to assess the impact of their teaching innovations, but they also brought their disciplinary research perspectives, practices and methods to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL). One could argue that this makes this volume methodologically eclectic or even incoherent, but we see this as an advantage. While the variation in methods may widen the horizon of those primarily trained as educational or academic developers beyond their disciplinary practices, the novelty is not simply in applying the tools of one's own field to SOTL studies – after all, every discipline publishes such articles in their respective disciplinary journals as well as books. The value is in bringing together diverse research methodologies – as well as adding a varied topical and disciplinary focus – in the same volume, and thus offering the readers a chance to get a glimpse of the variation in approaching and analysing the outcomes of teaching and learning across several disciplines.

This book is, however, more than just novice teachers trying their wings in writing about their students' learning. It is also an opportunity to learn more about teaching and learning in Central Europe. In general, concepts and methods of teaching and learning in higher education travel well across regions reinforcing earlier findings. Yet, we cannot ignore findings that point out that active learning exercises are not always or immediately effectual. Where Pechersky uncovers that students are not necessarily more satisfied with the newly introduced learning-centred approach to learning, Tkaczyk shows a lack of improvement in student interest. Tkaczyk, Pechersky, and Kováčová all fail to find increased levels of student engagement, while both Kováčová and Karas reveal that more learning-centred education does not always translate into gains in student learning outcomes. These results suggest that learning-centred education has benefits for Central European university students, but the introduction of this approach to classroom practice should not ignore the teaching and learning context of the region.

Most students in Central Europe – those especially who come from public schools – have little to no experience in high-school other than frontal lecturing. When they are exposed to other

learning methods, they tend not to consider those to be learning opportunities but as an easy fun class devoid of serious learning. Often, they arrive to university lacking in critical thinking skills – or hide these well – being trained to acknowledge that the teacher knows best and when being asked for their opinions, few are willing to speak, not to mention contradict their teacher. They are even less used to bringing creativity and responsibility into the classroom. Without these skills, however, they will not be able to benefit from learning-centred approaches. This is not to say that some students do not excel in these areas but that teachers of higher education should be sensitive to easing their students into this new way of learning incrementally. Too drastic changes may undermine teachers' authority in the classroom (Norton et al. 2013) or have students lose the structure necessary for learning to take place as Peter Van Petegem points out in his commentary in this book. This also explains some of the less ambitious innovations of our authors: being from or spending substantial time in the region put them into a good position to understand that not only the content but also the manner of learning matter.

There is no reason why Central European students could not benefit from learning-centred methods and, parallel to this, become independent learners. The lexical knowledge that their lower-level studies are overburdened with could give them the advantage of combining knowledge and skills successfully, if at least their university education does not only focus on increasing their knowledge but also on developing such skills as public speaking, critical thinking and writing, problems-solving, working in teams and reflection. These skills are essential in making graduates succeed in the work place and in life, as both Kovačević and Rétióvá point out.

An environment that disproportionally emphasizes perfection tends to discourage the acknowledgement of one's mistakes and the identifications of areas that need improvement. However, without these, reflection, which 'involves examining the manner in which one responds to a given Situation' and integrating 'the understanding gained into one's experience in order to enable better choices or actions in the future' (Rogers 2001: 41), is not possible for either student or teacher. A real value of this book is for the authors to show their peers how to scrutinize their own work in a formative way in order to become better teachers. It is the area where chapters have improved most from the early to the final drafts, which we hope, will encourage more university teachers, including those from the region, to engage in reflection on their teaching.

In their commentaries, Quinlan and Mårtensson both note that individual chapters do an excellent job in situating their innovations in their immediate SOTL contexts. It is, however, our expert commentators who show how the chapters connect to other issues of teaching and learning (McAlpine; Quinlan; Van Petegem; Goody; Thomson) or point out implications for the future of higher education institutions involved in the process (Mårtensson; Roxå). This is important because, as Roxå argues, nascent teacher development courses or novice teachers are unlikely to change the culture of their institutions at once, but they can become the catalyst for such a change. Therefore, it is important that their teaching is relevant to the specific challenges that

the region as a whole, the education system of specific countries, the institutions of higher education and their particular departments, and the student body face.

Awuah and Pechersky tap into two developments that are not only essential to understand the regional needs and the future direction of higher education, but are relevant to most of Europe and, to some extent, other regions of the world. Pechersky points out how classroom diversity, including not only differences in nationality, language, culture, and preparedness but also previous student learning experience, influences the effectiveness of learning methods. Thus, with increased student mobility in Europe and around the world, it is important to recognize how such an international student body consisting of diverse backgrounds could best benefit from the process of teaching and learning. Awuah points to the related idea of teaching and learning through the mediation of a foreign language, which can hinder student participation, engagement, understanding, and thus, learning. Internationalization of the student body requires the internationalization of the curriculum as well as that of teaching practices. Consequently, Central Europe, which is slowly transitioning from teaching- to learning-centred education and faces the challenge of internationalization of higher education at the same time, can be at the forefront of combining the two. In the future, the region can prominently contribute to SOTL through the knowledge acquired during this experience.

References

- Norton, L.S., Norton, B. and Shannon, L. (2013) 'The impact of UK university teaching programmes on lecturers' assessment practice: a case for pedagogical action research', in E. Simon and G. Pleschová (eds.) *Teacher development in higher education. Existing programs, program impact, and future trends*, New York and London: Routledge, pp. 191-210.
- Pleschová, G. and McAlpine, L. (2016) 'Helping teachers to focus on learning and reflect on their teaching: what role does teaching context play?', *Studies in Educational Evaluation* 48, pp. 1-9.
- Rogers, R.R. (2001) 'Reflection in higher education: a concept analysis', *Innovative Higher Education* 26:1, pp. 37-57.
- Simon, E. and Pleschová, G. (2013) 'Creating successful teacher development programmes', in *Teacher development in higher education: existing programs, program impact, and future trends*, New York and London: Routledge, pp. 274-297.



Agnes Simon is an Educational Development Advisor at Masaryk University, working on the the Erasmus+ Project, Extending and reinforcing good practice in teacher development. She has dual interests in Political Science and Teaching and Learning. She specializes in American foreign policy, summit diplomacy, Central European politics, and the relationship of science fiction and politics. Her current research focuses on U.S. presidential summit meetings, the U.S-Soviet Hotline, and teaching about foreign policy decision-making. She taught in various private and public liberal arts and research schools in the United States, was invited to lead academic writing workshops and has been a facilitator in the ECPR Teaching and Learning Summer School. asimon@mail.muni.cz