Significant networks and significant conversations of applicants for the Teachers' Academy

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Abstract

The University of Helsinki established a Teachers' Academy in 2012 to reward excellence in teaching. It was based on the model of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL) and international examples of reward systems. This study focuses on the teachers' significant networks and conversations in the first application round. The applicants' networks were institutional disciplinary networks and research networks. Their meaningful conversations were informal conversations with colleagues, students, peers and educators in pedagogical courses.

Introduction

The University of Helsinki was the first university in Finland to establish a Teachers' Academy in 2012 to reward excellence in teaching. It is a multidisciplinary research intensive university with 11 faculties operating in four campuses. The Academy aimed, first to improve the status and quality of teaching in the academic community and, second, to invest in the quality of learning and learning results. A third aim was to provide an important step in an excellent teacher's career and reward members of the academic community for their teaching qualifications and expertise. The Academy forms a multidisciplinary community for teachers that also provides collegial support in the development of teaching and learning and promotes good practices at the University.

This paper examines the teachers' significant networks and conversations as forms of collaborative educational development at the launch of the Teachers' Academy in 2012 (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009a, 2009b). The research questions are: (1) What networks and communities related to education do the teachers' describe? (2) With whom do they describe that they have meaningful conversations about teaching and learning?

Background of the Teachers' Academy

The Teachers' Academy was based on a theoretical model of SoTL (Boyer, 1990; Trigwell, Martin, Benjamin & Prosser, 2000; Kreber, 2002; Roxå, Olsson & Mårtensson, 2007). Employing this SoTL model required that university teachers become involved in reflection and formal approaches to inquiry. This referred to peer-reviewed publicly disseminated research on teaching and learning with a focus on comprehensive improvement of student learning.

In the application process the applicants demonstrated their scholarly approach in a teaching portfolio by describing, analysing and highlighting their teaching expertise in relation to the following criteria: (1) Continuous development of expertise of teaching and supervision, (2) Teaching and supervision practices that enhance students' learning, (3) Expertise in using and developing the teaching materials, and (4) Participation in the collaborative development of

teaching. In international perspective, the fourth criterion of collaborative development of teaching was a distinctive feature of the Teachers' Academy.

The teachers themselves applied for the fellowship of the Academy. University teachers, university lecturers and professors were able to apply. Application documents included a teaching portfolio, short academic CV focusing on teaching expertise, references from students, peers and unit, as well as short evidence supporting the application.

When the Teachers' Academy was designed, international examples of reward systems and their effectiveness were studied. In particular, the Pedagogical Academy at LTH, University of Lund (Roxå, Olsson & Mårtensson, 2007; Olsson & Roxå, 2008; Mårtensson, Roxå & Olsson, 2011; Olsson & Roxå, 2013; http://www.lth.se/fileadmin/lth/genombrottet/LTHsPedAkad2005_eng.pdf), The Higher Education Academy in the Great Britain (http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/individuals), Australian Learning & Teaching Council's Awards for Teaching Excellence (http://www.altc.edu.au/awards) and the academy movement in medical schools in the USA, for example the Academy at Harvard Medical School (Thibault, Neill, & Lowensteind, 2003; Irby, Cooke, Lowenstein & Richards, 2004; http://www.hms.harvard.edu/academy/), were examined.

Academic teachers' collaboration
The international perspective of collaborative development of teaching and learning was a distinctive criterion of the Teachers' Academy. Excellence in this collaborative development was demonstrated when teachers served as key members of their community, promoted collegiality in their unit and collaboration between teachers, researchers and students, and built national and international networks.

Collaborative development of teaching and learning was anchored to the social theory of learning. Lave and Wenger (1991) emphasized that knowledge was co-constructed, and learning was situated in specific contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Wenger further developed a model of Communities of Practice (CoP) referring to groups of people with a common interest and goal, who collaboratively developed the practices where they learned from each other by sharing information and experiences (Wenger, 1999, 2000, 2009).

In empirical studies on academic teaching communities and networks Roxå and Mårtensson (2009a, 2009b) observed that academics had significant networks in which they had sincere and meaningful conversations about teaching and learning. These networks were usually formed with a small number of people with whom the teachers put their teaching and learning experiences into words and co-constructively enhanced their understanding. These types of networks were crucial for constructing teaching and learning cultures at universities (Roxå, Mårtensson & Alveteg, 2011).

Method
The Teachers' Academy at the University of Helsinki and its impact in the academic community are investigated in a longitudinal research project. All 133 applicants of the first application round in 2012 were sent a web-based survey consisting of quantitative and qualitative questions. Altogether 46 applicants responded to the survey. Of these, 32 were women (70%) and 14 were men (30%). Their age ranged from 39 to 66 years. Among the respondents, 17 were selected and 29 were not selected to the Academy. The response rate

was 35%. Even though the response rate remained low, the respondents well represented the faculties, institutes and disciplines at the University of Helsinki.

The survey consisted of Likert-type statements and open-ended questions on quality teaching and learning. This study focuses on two open-ended questions: (1) Which teacher networks and communities do you belong to? (2) With whom do you have meaningful conversations on teaching and learning? The informed consent from the participants was requested in the questionnaire.

The respondents' answers to the open-ended questions concerning significant networks and conversations were studied with qualitative content analysis. The respondents' answers were thoroughly read through. The material was coded and the codes were further grouped and synthesized to create categories which represented similar meaning (Weber, 1990; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Findings

The applicants described that their significant networks were mostly formal and public. Most frequently they referred to disciplinary networks. These networks were at different institutional levels, in their home units, at the department, faculty and at university levels.

> *(I belong to the networks of) the lecturers and professors in my own unit, my department, the whole of the faculty, as a coordinator I belong to the network of developers of international studies.*

Furthermore, the teachers emphasized their national and international research networks. At the starting point of the Academy, some applicants expected that the Teachers' Academy would become a significant network for them.

The teachers' meaningful conversations were mostly informal conversations on teaching and learning with a small number of people interested in teaching. Nearly all respondents had meaningful conversations with their disciplinary colleagues. They also referred to conversations with their students and stimulating discussions with peers and educators in pedagogical courses.

> *(I have meaningful conversations) with my closest colleagues nearly every day, with students, in particular in feedback discussions, with my pedagogical "mentors" whom I meet from time to time. Also the discussions in the pedagogical courses have been meaningful for me.*

Some teachers had meaningful conversations about academic teaching and learning with their family members and friends.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to examine the teachers' significant networks and conversations as forms of collaborative educational development when they applied for the Teachers' Academy in the first application round in 2012. We found evidence of different types of teachers' networks. The teachers mostly described formal, institutional, public networks and research networks. At their best, these could be or become Communities of Practice (Wenger 1999), but they might also form part of the official management of education with formal agendas and little enthusiasm.

Teachers had meaningful, private and trustful conversations with disciplinary colleagues, students, peers and educators in pedagogical courses. These discussions promoted intellectual intrigue and conceptual change (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009a, 2009b) and represented the model of Communities of Practice where teachers shared experiences and co-constructed new knowledge and understanding of teaching and learning (Wenger, 1999, 2000, 2009). Nearly all the respondents had significant conversations with their colleagues, some also with their family members. Teachers valued the reciprocal learning between teachers, researchers and students, and reported having stimulating conversations in pedagogical courses with peers and educators.

The study has certain limitations. The response rate was relatively low (35%), as it often is in web-based surveys (Shih & Fan, 2009), even though the applicants were reminded three times. However, the well respondents represented the spectrum of faculties and disciplines at the University. The research material forms part of the first phase of a longitudinal study. In addition to the web-based questionnaire, other research materials, such as face-to-face interviews will be collected in order to examine in more detail the collaborative aspects of teaching, and the effect of the Teachers' Academy on this phenomenon.

Comparisons with other universities with similar reward systems would offer valuable information on how to further develop the rewarding of excellence in teaching, and to also study its interrelation with the teachers' significant networks.

Practical implications
- Academic teachers' collaboration in teaching and learning is rarely a criterion in rewarding excellence in teaching;
- Teachers require both formal and informal networks in academic teaching;
- Teachers value meaningful conversations on teaching and learning which stimulate their educational thinking and practice.

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