

Challenges and opportunities of teaching competence evaluation

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Abstract

This paper concerns the evaluation of teaching competence at two large Finnish universities. The assessment considers the teaching experience and merits presented in the teaching portfolio, teaching skills shown at the teaching demonstration, and the issues arising during the interview concerning teaching competence. The different developmental paths are reflected through the combined framework of scholarship of teaching and learning, pedagogical leadership, professional as well as organizational development.

Introduction

Teaching assessments through teaching portfolios has been considered an important means by which the university sector could enhance the appreciation of, often disregarded, teaching competence among academics. This paper discusses the challenges and opportunities of teaching competence assessment.

Theoretical approaches

Multifaceted teaching competence of the academic staff has become a desired feature. The teaching competence of academic staff extends from personal teaching skills, practice-based development, pedagogical training, research on organizational development all the way to the involvement in implementing strategic issues within the university (Land, 2004). By teaching portfolios, the academics can show their teaching experience and how they have developed teaching and learning from various perspectives. We are convinced that the expectation of versatile competence and making it visible by the teaching portfolio will further the desire for professional development and also make way for the appreciation of teaching development within the university community. The prerequisite is a transparent assessment model that also breaks into the present teaching and learning culture by providing more discussion spaces regarding the variable ways we support student learning.

The aim of the assessment practice is to make the teaching competence visible and increase the appreciation of teaching competence. The scholarship of teaching (e.g. Boyer, 1990, Kreber & Cranton, 2000) entails that the experiences and developmental practices of teachers should be made public. This implies that the academic staff should reflect on their practices in literary form, and possibly publish their practice-oriented research about their teaching in scientific journals. The assessment of teaching competence should, thus, also consider the competence of reflective practice. However, the scholarship of teaching can be approached in various ways (Trigwell & Shale, 2004).

The model for university-wide assessment of teaching competence builds on existing practices and it is an ongoing process. The efforts for the change in practice may not be viewed as extensive organizational change or novel innovation, but as planned change concerning a strategically important practice which has been institutionalized (Kezar, 2001). The model we have implemented is multilevel; it concerns individuals (presenting teaching competence), departments and schools (assessment procedures) and the university (tenure track committee). With time, the practice should impact the academic values such as the appreciation for teaching competence. In case of Aalto, and, at least, of some faculties at the University of Helsinki, forces for the change have been internal and affected by the leadership vision and their support to the operative change agents (Kezar, 2001).

It is important to promote strategic and systemic development of the learning institution and to attach teaching and learning more closely to strategic issues at the university (D'Andrea & Gosling, 2001, 2005). In this study, we are discussing two different developmental paths at two large Finnish universities. At Aalto, the implementation of the teaching competence assessment system has been university-wide and it is linked to the very fundamental task of the university, namely educating new generations. The establishment of tenure track system is a strategic issue at Aalto and one of the ways in striving for research excellence and pioneering education. The interest of the university is to have academic staff with the desire and ability to enhance learning. The advancement on the track requires evidence of developing teaching competence since the recruitment. At the University of Helsinki, tenure track is also in use, but not in such a large extent as at Aalto. However, systematic processes and tools have been used in various faculties during the recruitment processes of permanent teaching staff.

Appreciation of the efforts in teaching and teaching quality do not improve unless the institutional culture changes; and this leads us to also consider the question of educational leadership (Knight & Trowler, 2000). According to a study by Gibbs, Knapper and Piccinin (2008), the pedagogical leadership has a central role in supporting and fostering excellent teaching at university. However, several pedagogical leadership models exist, and excellent teaching can be promoted by many different ways and taking into account the cultural aspects of departments.

From the pedagogical leadership point of view, it is important to recognize and reward excellent teaching and teaching development efforts. The leaders of the university have to show a good example of excellent teaching and appreciation of good teaching. One of the most important tasks for a pedagogical leader is to support the academics to be proud of being good teachers, and acknowledge that they, together with their colleagues, create excellent teaching which supports student learning in their departments. (Gibbs, Knapper & Piccinin, 2008.)

To promote discussion about good teaching as well as good learning various forums and discussion groups need to be created in the departments and also at the university level (Gibbs, Knapper & Piccinin, 2008). These forums can be seen as communities of practice where people who are interested in teaching and learning can interact and support each other and learn together (Wenger, 2006). Through discussions, the members of a group can create a common understanding of what is good teaching and what elements it contains. These groups should meet regularly (Gibbs, Knapper and Piccinin, 2008).

Pedagogical leadership includes strategic vision and mission, guidance, staff development and curriculum work (Hirsto, Siitari & Ketola, 2006; Korhonen, Nevgi & Stenlund, 2011). In order to improve the value of teaching, alongside with research at universities, it requires the identification, defining and developing of pedagogical leadership as part of the academic leadership (Korhonen et al., 2011).

Method

The aim in this paper is to describe some of the central issues in the development of teaching competence assessment practices in two Finnish universities and reflect the challenges and opportunities faced so far. The reflection is based on documented experiences. In both contexts, the assessment takes into account the teaching experience and merits presented in the teaching portfolio, teaching skills shown at the teaching demonstration and the issues arising during an interview concerning teaching competence. The teaching competence is evaluated at school or faculty level teaching assessment committees, but some common university level guidelines are provided at both universities. The freely available and transparent principles of assessment, the process description, guidelines and assessment criteria are thought to promote equal and fair assessment in both contexts.

Findings

The assessment model at Aalto University

A tenure track system was established in 2010 at Aalto University. Since 2010 231 tenure track positions have been available and some 162 professors have been nominated on the tenure track. Some of the nominated academics may have had a second review as they are advancing to the next level on their tracks. Thorough reviews are conducted at the recruiting, tenuring and promotion stages considering scientific and/ or artistic competence, service (as activity in the scientific community and society) and teaching competence.

The already well-established system of external review of scientific competence and service to community was in use; however, the model for assessing teaching competence needed further development. The president of Aalto University had confirmed the principles and practical guidelines for the tenure and lecturer tracks, including the general principles for the presentation of teaching competence in a teaching portfolio. To complement the outlined principles, we elaborated the guidelines for the compilation of the teaching portfolio, designed a system of assessment committees, described the assessment process and devised the assessment criteria. Good practices were already in use at different Aalto University schools; however, there was a need for a uniform model that would be similar at all the schools, streamlined instructions for compiling a teaching portfolio, and transparent and consistent assessment criteria for assessing all aspects of teaching competence. The aim was to ensure consistency in practices and assessment criteria across the university.

The teaching assessment is comprehensive as it covers the teaching experience and merits presented in the teaching portfolio, teaching skills shown at the teaching demonstration or

authentic teaching situation and the issues arising during the interview concerning teaching competence. In order to ensure professional and equal assessment each Aalto school (six schools) has nominated a teaching competence assessment committee. The committees familiarize themselves with the portfolios, attend the teaching skills demonstration, interview the candidates and write statements regarding the teaching competence. In order to support the work of the assessment committees and to make the assessment criteria transparent and aligned, we use an assessment matrix. The matrix has five quality levels and includes the areas of competence outlined in the teaching portfolio. The matrix also contains the criteria for assessment of teaching skills during the teaching demonstration (see Evaluation criteria on the tenure track, 2014).

The candidate is considered for the position by the evaluations of research/artistic work, teaching competence and service shown as activity in the scientific community, leadership and societal interaction. When the candidate is reviewed for a permanent position on the tenure track (associate professor, full professor), the proposal is viewed and approved by a university level tenure track committee and the final decision is made by the president of the university. The minimum requirements for tenures are 1) excellence in research and/or artistic work and high quality teaching or 2) excellence in teaching and high quality research and/or artistic work. The key criteria in teaching for a tenured position are: teaching experience including supervision of doctoral, master and bachelor level theses, development of teaching and experience in course development in the field, pedagogical education and studies, the quality of student feedback, collegial feedback and utilization of student and collegial feedback in developing teaching, and the ability to teach). The message should be clear; at Aalto University teaching competence is noticed and appreciated and the professional development in teaching competence is as important as the competence in scientific, and in some cases artistic work.

The assessment practice at the University of Helsinki and the Faculty of Theology

At the University of Helsinki the Senate made a principle decision that teaching skills should be better regarded in the recruitment processes (year 1994) and that academic portfolios would be used in the recruitment processes as well as in progress evaluations (year 2000). At the end of the 19th century and in the early years of the 21st century, the University of Helsinki organized some courses on writing and compiling portfolios. However, the practices of using portfolios for assessment in different faculties remained quite diverse.

During the first decade of the 21st century, many faculties benchmarked each other's practices of teaching competence evaluation and built similar assessment matrixes and rubrics. The areas of assessment were defined, at that time, in the national law regulating universities. The changes made nationally to the regulation of universities by the new University Act (558/2009) strengthened, or in some ways also granted, the autonomy for the Finnish universities to regulate their decision making and many other processes. This led many universities, including the University of Helsinki, to issue their own kinds of regulations to regulate the recruitment of the academic personnel. The University Act (558/2009) states on a general level on the teaching personnel as follows:

“A university has professors and other teaching and research staff, and other personnel to execute other tasks. Further provisions concerning the

qualification requirements of the personnel and relevant selection procedures shall be laid down in the university regulations.”(Sec.31 § 1)

Of the teaching staff, only professor category is mentioned in the University Act (558/2009), and some regulation is provided:

“A professor shall carry out and supervise scientific or artistic work, give education based on it and follow developments in science or art and participate in societal interaction and international cooperation in his/her field. “(Sec 33 § 1)

Further regulations are set by every individual university in Finland. The University of Helsinki states in its regulations regarding an appointee to a professorship that:

*“An appointee to a professorship shall hold a doctoral degree and have top level scholarly qualifications, experience in the supervision of scientific research, **the ability to provide top level teaching based on research and to supervise theses and dissertations** as well as documentation of international cooperation in the research field that the appointee represents. Holders of professorships shall also be required to have the skills necessary for serving as an academic leader. (Amended 13 June 2012.)”*

The regulating guidelines go further to describe about the dimensions to consider in assessing, for example, the teaching competence:

*“When considering the applicant’s qualifications, attention shall be given to scientific publications and other research results of scientific value, **teaching experience and pedagogical training, the ability to produce teaching material, other teaching merits and, if necessary, a demonstration of teaching skills as well as the applicant’s participation in doctoral education.** Account shall also be taken of the applicant’s activity in the scientific community, success in obtaining external research funding, international research experience and international elected positions as well as leadership and interaction skills. (Amended 13 June 2012.)”*

In comparison to professorship, lecturers are required to be able to provide “high quality” teaching based on research instead of having “top level” ability. This meant a kind of change also to the assessments of teaching competence, because before the University Act (558/2009), the national university regulations required a good competence in teaching from the lecturers compared to the satisfactory competence required from the professors. Due to this change, also the faculties were to re-evaluate their teaching competence assessment criteria and matrixes.

The re-evaluation has, for the time being, lead to more diverse approaches to teaching competence assessment among the faculties in the University of Helsinki. However, all the faculties have teaching skills committees, which are required by the university regulations. Nevertheless, some faculties have refined their matrixes and some have decided not to use them, but prefer rubrics. This means that faculties have different practical meanings for the “top level” and “high quality” ability to teach. However, when appointing a professor, teaching skills/competence assessment results are first utilized by a faculty level search

committee, which submits its final proposal to the faculty's dean. The dean may add comments to the documents before the proposal is sent to the Helsinki University's Chancellor, who makes the final decision.

The Faculty of Theology adopted the systematic assessment of teaching skills in 2003. This entailed nominating a teaching skills assessment committee and creating the assessment criteria presented in a matrix form. So far there is experience in assessing several hundreds of candidates for academic staff positions. The assessment matrix has been continually revised and developed further. Following the University Act, the Faculty of Theology carefully re-evaluated their matrix and adjusted it slightly, but decided not execute large changes (see Assessment of teaching skills at the Faculty of Theology, 2010). The requirements in terms of teaching skills for an appointee of a professorship became slightly higher as the good quality of teaching competence was required also from the professors, instead of the former satisfactory. The "top level" teaching competence of the professors was thought to be achieved by the stronger research competence and teaching based firmly on research compared to the lecturers at the university.

Discussion of the opportunities and challenges through different paths

The maturity of the teaching competence assessment models at these two universities should be viewed against the timeframe and contextual issues. At Aalto University, the full implementation of assessment began in 2012 whereas at the University of Helsinki, the practice already has a history of over 10 years. The longer implementation period at the University of Helsinki has affected the model and guidelines. Moreover, one fundamental difference is that Aalto University has a university level tenure track committee that ensures the candidates to be appointed fulfil the quality requirements set by the university. This is not the case at the University of Helsinki. At the University of Helsinki, the Chancellor can be considered to serve as quality assurance.

Viewing successes at Aalto University, we consider creating and institutionalizing the model in such a short time encouraging. It is implemented as a permanent practice at all Aalto schools. The model is regarded as useful and advancing the acknowledgement of versatile teaching competence. The model, as well as the guidelines and assessment criteria, will be further developed. A necessary implementation requisite has been the visionary support from the university leadership.

At the University of Helsinki, and especially in the Faculty of Theology, the advantage is the longer timeframe of assessments, since the cultural change in the appreciation of teaching competence requires time. Furthermore, the support from the leadership as well as systematic and reliable evaluations, have made a difference. The assessment of teaching competence is quite well acknowledged in the recruitment processes, and assessment practices are somewhat transparent. The fact that teaching competence is acknowledged has also facilitated discussions of the general pedagogical issues.

Considering challenges at Aalto University, we are still working sufficiently aligning the model and assessment criteria at all the Aalto schools. Both universities continuously discuss the balance between research and teaching and their relational importance. This discussion is ongoing, and perhaps it should be. This way we have to regularly reflect on the nexus of

research and teaching. However, we also know that without good teaching we will not have good future researchers.

General discussion and practical implications

We regard the practice of teaching competence assessment an ingenious tool to develop the teaching and learning culture. The process of evaluation enables discussions of the quality and value of teaching and the merits of versatile teaching competence. It also has created new forums for discussing the quality issues concerning teaching and learning, for instance the assessment committees. The practice could be regarded managerial; however, it has many elements that complement the more obvious educational development activities such as pedagogical training and course development.

We have resorted to some theoretical viewpoints behind the idea to develop teaching through teaching competence assessment (scholarship of teaching, pedagogical leadership and educational/ organizational development), and described the processes of teaching evaluation from the institutional viewpoints at two different universities. Some important questions still need further investigation. Is this the way to recruit academics that are pedagogically competent and keen to develop their students' learning? Is this a relevant way to increase the level of pedagogical competence of academic personnel? Is this a valid way to increase appreciation of teaching? Are we able to develop an assessment practice that could be accepted by the academic community; after all, there seems to be a universally agreed practice when reviewing scientific merits?

What seems inevitable is that we need the leadership support to develop the assessment and adhere to it. A clear, collaboratively compiled model for the assessment appears to help the organization. Our study also suggests that, in order to keep the model and guidelines revised and up-dated, the members and sub-groups of the organization release the responsibility to someone. Additionally, for the academics to commit to enhancing their teaching skills, we need further indicators that teaching really matters.

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