

Communities of Teachers and Learners at Universities



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Background

The university distinguishes itself significantly from the preceding educational institutions. One of the main characteristics is the university's understanding as a community of teachers and learners in order to advance the research activities (Wilhelm von Humboldt, 1810). Furthermore, there is the understanding that the university offers the access to these communities and furthers the link to research activities. University teachers see themselves more as researchers rather than teachers. Nevertheless, they form, together with the students, a research community of teachers and learners.

Rationale and Aims

How does the research community of teachers and students represent itself at the university?

Some Research Questions:

- 1) What are good conditions for teaching and learning?
- 2) How can research be linked into university teaching?
- 3) Are students interested in taking part in these communities?
- 4) Do lecturers accept students in these communities?
- 5) ...

Sample and Analysis

Pre-Test: N = 435 (five university departments)
Best Teaching Award 2007: N = 1849 (all university departments)
Best Teaching Award 2008: N = 1655 (all university departments)

- > Descriptive quantitative analysis of closed questionnaire items
- > Inductive and deductive content analysis of open questions

Data Collection

Since 2006, the "Credit Suisse Award for best Teaching" is awarded each year to the "best" teachers at Swiss Universities and Universities of Applied Sciences. The University of Zurich developed theory-based criteria for assigning this award (Futter & Tremp, 2008). The survey for the Teaching Award is conducted annually with changing priorities.

Referring to 1) Features of Good Teaching

Students' view (A)

Number of statements: 5892 (N= 1777); allocated to 46 codes; summarized in 10 categories

Category: Subject matter	Number of counts
Practical relevance	245
Interesting subject	229
Depth of analysis	120
Latest developments in research	93
Own experience and research	33
Reference to other topics	30
Thorough exam preparation	15

There is no significant difference in the number of allocated counts to the 46 codes between students in different academic years.

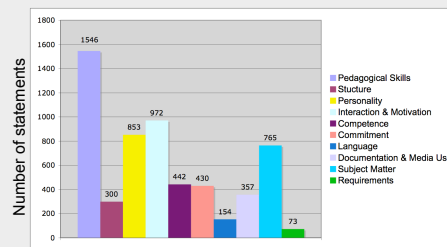


Fig. 1: 10 categories (according to Rindermann, 1999)

There is a major gender bias concerning the number of allocated counts (min=0; max=12) ($t=-3.441$; $df=1770$; $p<.001$). The statements from women ($M=3.44$, $SD=1.667$) can be allocated towards more codes compared with the statements from men ($M=3.18$, $SD=1.577$).

Teachers' view

Kember and McNaught (2007) define ten criteria of good teaching by interviewing the award winning teachers. Some criteria correspond more to the students' views described above for example ("interaction and motivation"), others correspond more to the teachers' concerns about student learning.

Students' view (B)

Are teachers that showed high achievement in one of the focus criteria (CC) rated by students also among the best in regard to the general criteria of teaching (GC)? (see table 1)

Focus: Counseling and coaching of students (CC)		CC	GC
Personal commitment	University teacher	1*	5
	responds to the student's concerns, supports the students in their academic activities.	2	24
Competence	works with the students to solve their problems, introduces students to academic working methods.	3	6
		4	2
Organisation and reliability	has a structured approach to the personal consultation, is well prepared for the students' consultation.	5	13
		6	15
General Criteria of good university teaching (GC)		7	22
University teacher...		8	8
Aims, objectives and organisation	structures the subject matter clearly, gives useful feedback.	9	4
		10	19
Supporting teaching and learning	responds to the students' questions / concerns, creates a positive environment for learning and understanding.	* Award-Winner UZH 2008	
	creates a sustainable interest in the subject, encourages students to critical thinking.	Table 1	

Referring to 2) Link between Research and Learning

Focus: Link between Research and Learning	
Research-based Learning	University teacher... wakens students' interest in research, enables students to develop their own research questions.
Research Methodology	refers to research methods used, introduces students to academic methods and ways of thinking.
Academic discourses	practices with students how to critically analyse research results, refers to current research questions and projects.

In order to develop a valid and reliable questionnaire pre-tests conducted with undergraduate students from five different university departments were evaluated. The results revealed that there is little or no academic discourse in the undergraduate courses. Furthermore, the students struggled to understand the questions and the intention of the survey itself.

Discussion

Students and university teachers appear to have similar perceptions of the characteristics of good teaching. Interestingly, each group associates the success of good teaching to the performance of the other group. A trend can be observed where the university basically offers the environment to build this community between teachers and students. It has to be noted, however, that the results have to be treated with caution because of the cultural differences between the studies used. Both surveys are not representative, because of the self selection bias in the data collection. Although community building can be found by looking at teachers' and students' understanding, there wasn't found an understanding of a research community in the tradition of Humboldt. Another indication for this result is that the link between research and teaching is not strong. Only little academic discourse takes place within the courses themselves.

Therefore, the question arises if there are really **research communities** of teaching and learning at the universities or if there are just communities of "cooperation" that include university teachers and students. In this respect, it remains to be seen if research communities at universities can continue to grow in the future.

References:

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