Pedagogical courses as a way to support communities of practice focusing on teaching and learning

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Abstract: This paper argues that pedagogical courses for university teachers should be designed with a socio cultural perspective on learning in mind. It also presents an example of such a design.

Teaching and learning regimes (Trowler, P. and A. Cooper; 2002) are ways to understand crucial aspects of teaching and learning used within e.g. departments. They are constructed within communities of practice (Wenger; 1999) where colleagues use whatever resources they have in order to make sense of their teaching and learning context. Development of teaching needs to address this circumstance. Pedagogical courses for university teachers might be one of the most powerful means to do so.

Keywords: pedagogical courses, communities of practice

Introduction
“Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott et al. 2002). This means a group of individuals engaged in the enterprise of improving their common practice, and they do so because they want to. The idea about communities of practice appears powerful when it comes to strategies about improving the quality of a practice. This text focuses on improving university teaching, especially pedagogical courses as a means to improve teachers’ ability to support student learning. It will discuss pedagogical courses in relation to the idea of communities of practice as it is formulated by Wenger (1999).

Communities of practice
The process where people spontaneously develop their practice together appears to be very natural within academia. We have all been part of groups engaged in trying to develop something. Members of the group have discussed problems, tried different solutions, and discussed the outcome without much interference from people outside the group. Over time the practice has improved and so has the outcome.

Etienne Wenger (1999) describes this as a result of an interplay between participation and reification. Members participate by doing things and saying things. Actions and their results are then observed by the group and evaluated, given meaning in the context of the practice at hand. This is the moment when the meaning of the action is reified and it is thereby possible to make further use of.
Viewed like this a practice is constituted as the interplay between individual action and the group's evaluation of the action in relation to the aims of the practice, as the group understands it. Consider, for instance, a group engaged in a project. It can be a group of boys building a tree house. The construction has stopped because of a problem the group has encountered. One member suggests a solution and the others react to it by nodding or being encouraging in different ways. Since the reaction was positive the offered solution will probably be put in operation and the group will evaluate the further outcome together.

In the example one individual offers his view by suggesting something, he participates. In the next phase the group evaluates the suggested solution, attach meaning to it, and the meaning is reified in a shared experience. It can also be documented in writing and signed by the members – that would constitute a formal contract. Usually, however, the reification is manifested in the shared experience of how the group reacted to the offered solution.

What Wenger offers is a perspective where natural ways of improving practice are described. Critical aspects emerge in his description and are thereby possible to monitor. The underpinning idea within Wenger's perspective is that individuals have a natural drive to engage in processes like the ones described. Individuals need responses from other individuals while constructing a meaningful reality, a phenomenon often discussed in literature (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Vygotsky, 1978; Asplund, 1987; Vygotsky, 1999; Säljö, 2000).

Over time a group, which members interact on an ongoing bases, will construct its own understanding of the reality in which their practice is imbedded. The members will view phenomena in similar ways and use similar words to express this understanding. The group will, over time, develop more and more unique ways of talking about and doing things. Moreover, the individual members' identity will be influenced by the fact that they belong to a certain group.

In the context of university teaching the result of the process Wenger describes has been labelled Teaching and Learning Regimes (Trowler and Cooper 2002). The term refers to the fact that teachers within departments understand things like knowledge, learning, teaching, students, quality, etc, in specific ways. Teaching and Learning Regimes are often internalised by the individual during undergraduate and doctoral studies in an apprentice-like process. The Teaching and Learning Regimes, as pointed out by Trowler and Cooper, are often not explicitly formulated. Therefore they are complicated to discuss and since they are part of the individual's identity and linked to emotions, hierarchies, power relations, etc.

A Teaching and Learning Regimes can be viewed both as an opportunity and a constraint. It is an opportunity because it guides decisions and secures a level of quality. On the other hand it might constrain the individual's possibility to experiment and develop new methods for teaching. It inhibits change and has a conserving function since it is hard to explicitly analyse and discuss.

If university teaching is to develop and improve, teachers must develop and perhaps change their view of teaching and learning – at least if the perspective outlined above is relevant. The remains of this text will discuss how pedagogical courses for teachers can be used in order to overcome the rigidity of over reified Teaching and Learning Regimes without threatening their position as carriers of quality and meaning.

**Pedagogical courses**

Traditionally, pedagogical courses for teachers are about assembling often un-experienced teachers from different subjects, to seminars, workshops, lectures, etc. Teaching and learning and other related topics are
discussed, read about and reflected upon in writing. After the course the teachers return to their teaching positions within departments and are supposed to use insights done during the course experience.

Common for many of these courses is a focus on the individual teacher. By exposing the teacher to experiences different from his or her own, processes supposedly start within the teacher resulting in a changed teaching practice when returning to the students. Such changes have been detected and connected to the course experience (Giertz, 1996; Gibbs & Coffey, 2001; Ho, Watkins et al. 2001). Considerable difficulties have also been documented. In some cases this is described as due to the “the well-known defensiveness teachers display in relation to their entrenched existing conceptions” about teaching and learning (Ho, Watkins et al. 2001), or due to the fact that the teacher is not an isolated individual but also part of an often departmental or subject-related culture, which sometimes makes it hard to change practice (Trowler and Cooper 2002; Healey and Jenkins 2003).

The example at Lund Institute of Technology

This section presents a pedagogical course designed to take on the challenges discussed above. It distinguishes itself from many other pedagogical courses because it targets both individual and socio cultural objectives.

The quality of teaching at Lund Institute of Technology is more and more viewed as a departmental concern, not as something solely owned by an individual teacher. It is believed that only by seeing it as a departmental concern teaching can be continually discussed and thereby continually improved.

The course is a part of a wider initiative, The Breakthrough Project, aiming for improved teaching and learning at Lund Institute of Technology. The overall objective is a cultural shift where the view on teaching changes from being teaching centred to learning centred (Barr & Tagg, 1995). Other features of the Breakthrough Project are a reward system for professionalism in teaching, and an aligned policy for evaluation. (The initiative also includes other shorter pedagogical courses offered to teachers than the one described in this text.)

The course described here is designed for experienced teachers. It has duration of 200 working hours and is distributed over seven months. 24 participants from Lund Institute of Technology are admitted each year. It is appreciated by former participants and is considered to be demanding.

In the context of this paper some features of the course are specifically important:

- The composition of groups
- The project
- The peer teaching assignment
- The admittance procedure

The composition of groups

The participants are organised in groups of four. Preferably the members of the group come from the same department. The reason for this is that the participants thereby get the opportunity to try out the relevance of new perspectives and new terminology with close colleagues throughout the course. For example, a concept new to the participants can hopefully help them to understand new aspects within their teaching and learning context. If they participate as individuals they might, when they return from the course, have difficulties in explaining and negotiating meaning to and with colleagues. In the course they work together with colleagues and are therefore able to negotiate relevance and meaning.
immediately in a social process. By doing so the understanding of concepts and perspectives are adjusted to the teaching context already during the course experience.

In Wenger’s (1999) description of communities of practice every community creates borders to other communities. If teachers participate individually they will become part of a new community during the course, negotiating meaning in relation to other participants. The result of this negotiation must then be renegotiated and adjusted in relation to the Teaching and Learning Regime governing practice in their departmental context.

Being part of a group of colleagues makes it possible to do the final negotiation of meaning already during the course. The group of colleagues can make immediate use of new concepts and perspectives in order to deepen their understanding of their own teaching and learning experience. Thereby the Teaching and Learning Regimes to which the teachers belong hopefully develops from the inside and already during the course.

The project

The major part of the course is a project carried out in groups. The project is related to the participants’ experiences of teaching and learning within their departments. Ideally it concerns development of teaching, courses or programmes. It offers an opportunity to use the time throughout the course to actually develop teaching. In return, the course puts pressure on the participants to use terminology and research material presented throughout the course.

The project supports the idea that the meaning of material dealt with during the course is negotiated among the participants. It also secures that new material interacts with existing Teaching and Learning Regimes. And as a consequence, these Regimes are influenced by discussions throughout the course and by the literature and research material used as resources within the projects. As a result, individual teachers develop their awareness of teaching and learning, and groups of colleagues make use of terminology and perspectives new to their Teaching and Learning Regime. Achieved is, hopefully, a sustainable change in how teaching and learning is experienced and discussed by teacher, even after they have returned to their teaching practices.

The peer teaching assignment

During the first day of the course the groups are given teaching assignments on specific themes relevant for the course. The groups are to organise a learning experience for their fellow participants. They are instructed to use it as an opportunity to try out and test new teaching techniques. Further it is emphasised that it is an opportunity to test their teaching capability in front of colleagues and that each group should improve their session in relation to previous groups.

The content of each session is presented to the groups as material: books and research articles on topics like assessment, gender, evaluation, etc. The groups are instructed to read the material and choose whatever parts they want for their teaching session. They are also encouraged to include other relevant material.

Again the emphasis is on creating an opportunity for the participants to engage in material presenting concepts and perspectives, which are new to them. The reading and the discussions within the group may even be considered as more important than the actual teaching session. It is the discussion among colleagues that is crucial and secures a process where research material is tested in relation to the participants’ actual teaching and learning experience. The fact that the peer teaching assignment results
in a situation where a group has to take responsibility for how research into teaching and learning is interpreted is a bonus. It emphasises communication among colleagues with background in technology, and the content of the communication is pedagogical research.

Following Wenger’s perspective on communities of practice the different communities import material produced in very different communities (communities of pedagogical researchers) and negotiate it’s relevance in relation to the problems they themselves experience as teachers in technology.

Admittance procedure
The view at Lund Institute of Technology that quality in teaching is a departmental concern is supported by an organisation where boards responsible for study programmes “buy” courses from departments. High quality in teaching can, theoretically, be profitable for departments. Low quality, on the other hand, can render less funding. In reality this opportunity for promotion of quality in teaching is not yet widely used. However, it has entered the local debate, and the pedagogical course is deliberately aligned with the perspective. Therefore individual teachers are not allowed to apply to the course. Instead the Heads of Departments are informed about the opportunity to assign participants. In most cases the process is still initiated by individual teachers in so far that they negotiate participation with their Head of Department. But the procedure emphasises the departmental level and the Head of Department’s role as a leader for development of teaching and learning within the department.

Outcomes
Data usable for evaluation purposes were collected from two sources: a survey among participants, and a focus group conducted with heads of departments.

A survey among participants
In order to collect evidence describing the impact of the pedagogical course on a departmental level, one cohort was surveyed on the use of concepts and perspectives discussed during the course. Of special interest was if the participants used the concepts and perspectives during practice within their departments. If so, it could indicate a possible influence by the course on the participants’ context, and further on the TLRs influencing teaching practice.

The survey was conducted during the last day of the course with the help of a questionnaire searching for what terminology participants used while thinking or talking about teaching and learning within their departments. One question referred to if they used different language while discussing with colleagues who have respectively had not participated in the course.

In their answers the 22 participants, all experienced teachers, indicate that they do pick up terminology and concepts from the course. They use these words while thinking and talking about teaching and learning. The answers indicate that the participants use different terminology if they discuss teaching and learning with colleagues who have respectively have not participated in the course. This distinction is probably the most interesting observation: Participants communicate differently with colleagues who have respectively have not previously participated in the course. Some of the respondents indicate a clear distinction in their answer: “It is as if we belong to a secret club or something”.

It appears that the course contributes to a developed conversation about teaching and learning. It indicates a first step in a process of supporting communities of practice focusing on teaching and learning.
The heads of departments

Out of 21 Heads of Departments at Lund Institute of Technology 8 took part in a two hours focus group in April 2002. Two themes were discussed during a process of individual reflection, discussions in pairs and a plenary discussion documented on flip charts. The discussion focused on the educational development initiative as a whole, The Breakthrough Project, not on the course in particular. Even so, it indicates emerging communities of practice among teachers and acknowledges the pedagogical course as an important part of this process.

The first theme: *In what way has the pedagogical situation changed at Lund Institute of Technology during the last five years?*

In summary three aspects appeared (in order of significance according to the group): 1. The interest for pedagogical issues has increased (teachers discuss more and the discussions are also more informed), 2. lesser resources for teaching, 3. more diversity within the student body.

The second theme: *What effects can you see as a result of the last five years of educational development initiatives at Lund Institute of Technology?*

Summary: The collaboration between teachers has increased. The teachers have developed a language and thereby an opportunity to discuss pedagogical issues. An opportunity actually used by teachers.

As a whole the evaluation supports the conclusion that the course supports emerging communities of practice among teachers. They use pedagogical terminology in conversations and discuss more with each other. Both are important aspects while teachers construct meaning and try to make sense of what is going on in the teaching and learning context around them.

Discussion

Two traditional ideas about university teaching are: it is carried out by individual teachers (Ramsden 1998); teachers do not discuss teaching with each other (Handal, 2000). Of course individual teachers must be able to plan and carry out teaching, to observe the outcome and analyse findings. Pedagogical courses must include elements where these abilities are developed individually.

However, the point made in this paper is that teachers perform their practice of teaching in a collegial context and responses from colleagues are important while contemplating change and development. The assumption is that if university teachers discuss teaching and learning in a more and more informed manner they will also develop the teaching practice they are involved in. However, in relation to pedagogical courses there are problems to be aware of.

Firstly, the view on teaching and learning that influences thoughts and decisions within departments is socially constructed and maintained. Trowler & Cooper (2002) use the term Teaching and Learning Regimes in order to describe aspects of these views. If the assumption is correct and if Teaching and Learning Regimes: are influencing individual teachers, pedagogical courses must include elements addressing these socially constructed aspects.

Secondly, if pedagogical courses recruit individual teachers, all from different subjects, and develop their individual thinking, the outcome in terms of developed teaching can only be limited. Colleagues not sharing the course experience will defend the existing TLR to which a teacher returns. Of course, there are exceptions from this rather drastic statement, but we can probably expect a greater systemic impact from pedagogical courses if they also consider the social aspects discussed above.
References


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