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Initiating academic development – insights from a teaching portfolio pilot project at the University of Graz

Abstract

In 2015, a teaching portfolio pilot project was conducted at the University of Graz. This workshop report aims at sharing insights and lessons learned from that project, but also tries to outline changes in the European higher education landscape which indicate the usefulness of teaching portfolios as an instrument to support the development of academics. Selected overall project findings are complemented by in-depth reflections of one of the authors who participated in the workshop. This approach was chosen because of the importance of reflection for academic development, but it also affirms the pilot project's success as it shows how a main objective of the teaching portfolio – to initiate reflection – has been achieved.

Keywords

Teaching portfolio, development in teaching, reflection, pilot project findings

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1 Introduction²

This workshop report sets out to present insights and lessons learned from a teaching portfolio project conducted at the University of Graz in 2015. Facilitating reflections on teaching concepts and habits in the classroom is one main objective of a teaching portfolio. In line with this intention, reflections deliberately make up an important part of this contribution. The contemplations and evaluation findings are contextualized by a broader discussion of higher education development in Europe, political and strategic thoughts on the teaching portfolio, and teaching development measures at the University of Graz. The aim of the paper is to highlight how teaching portfolios support the development of academic identity and teaching as it is discussed in the literature (e. g. MACLAREN, 2005; SZCZYRBA, 2009; SZCZYRBA & VAN TREECK, 2015; TIGELAAR et al., 2006; TRAUTWEIN & MERKT, 2012).

2 Recent changes of teaching and learning in Europe

“Changing landscapes in teaching and learning” was the title of the 2014 annual conference of the European University Association (EUA). It focused on ongoing processes of change in higher education as well as on recent innovative teaching approaches and considerations of future implications on learning and teaching processes. Also, in 2014 the European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF) took up the topic in the conference “Changing education – QA and the shift from teaching to learning” addressing student-centered learning (SCL), the diversified student population and new teaching methodologies. These conferences, among many others, made the changes concerning university teaching comprehensible and facilitated discussions on ways of dealing with them. The Trends Report (SURSOCK, 2015),

² We thank Gerald Lind for his thorough reading and the many useful comments.

a survey with 451 participating HEIs from 46 countries, made these proclaimed changes in the European HE landscape and related institutional strategies visible. The survey results indicate that teaching in general is commonly seen as responsibility of academic staff who is in charge of developing curricula, working with students, etc. Hence strategic staff recruitment became an important priority for institutions alongside evaluation of academic staff and development of teaching skills. In comparison with the Trends Report from 2010, Andrée Sursock noticed a strong progression towards an introduction of new ways of teaching. (SURSOCK, 2015, pp. 82-83)

Recent developments in HE systems all over Europe are embedded within a wider context of changes regarding organizational structures as well as personnel structures or new approaches of decision making and quality management (e.g. SCHNEIDER et al., 2009). Expectations for individual academics to react to changes regarding teaching and learning – within the context of massification of education – are high. There is a strong demand of competence-oriented teaching and learning, the use of innovative methodologies, and appropriate quality assessments. Especially novice academics perceive the growing demands as a huge challenge and are occasionally confronted with conflicting goals (ESDAR et al., 2011). Careers are based on high quality research output that comes along with requirements in teaching, administrative work, and – in times of financial cuts – third-party funding. Besides, further obligations to apply university strategies such as internationalization, transfer of technology, etc. put pressure on teachers. To meet all these expectations and to handle current diversification among the student body, regarding changing ways of communication, learning, and working (SCHULMEISTER et al., 2012) or varying competence levels (HEUBLEIN et al., 2010), are not only duties of the academic teachers. It is also very much the responsibility of organizations to provide a productive environment and to support the ambitious efforts of its staff.

3 Teaching (support) at the University of Graz

The University of Graz is one of the HEIs that responded to the Trends questionnaire. Its mission statement proclaims that teaching has the same relevance as research and that one focus lies on research-based but also on innovative and interdisciplinary teaching. According to the mission statement, the approx. 31,000 students are seen as responsible for their own learning processes. At the same time the university supports their active participation in the development of teaching³.

Since the mid-2000s, several projects have been developed to improve academic teaching, including the ‘Teaching Portfolio’.⁴ There are numerous reasons why the University of Graz is setting up such projects. Among others, there is a strong political will by the rectorate to provide quality teaching, to systematically support the development of academic teachers, and to find appropriate or new approaches to do so because the international reputation of HEIs depends to a certain extent on the quality of their study programs.

Concerning the aspect of quality assurance, instruments have been put in place to allow course feedback and enhancement, e.g. a competence-oriented course evaluation (PAECHTER et al., 2007). Nevertheless, in the past years a certain insufficiency was articulated by students and teachers regarding the course evaluation’s practicability. This perspective was supported by the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) which audited the University of Graz in 2013. To further facilitate the development of teaching quality, FINHEEC (2013) recommended that “the students’ perception of the quality of teaching [...] ought to be supplemented by other information sources and perspectives, for instance more systematic responses and analyses by the teaching staff” (42). The suggestion to

³ <https://www.uni-graz.at/en/university/information/about-the-university/mission-statement/>

⁴ The Department for Educational and Student Services and the Center for Teaching Competence are the responsible units to carry out diverse projects to support academic teaching and to promote the enhancement of teaching.

provide “more regular ‘spots’ for discussion and analysis” to establish a system that is “more oriented towards enhancement” (73) can be effectuated manifold. The teaching portfolio was selected because of positive experiences at various HEIs. Further, it adds another perspective on teaching and learning to the current system at the University of Graz. A teaching portfolio represents one of three possible views on teaching – next to students’ and external views (e.g. through peer observation).

4 Findings and lessons learned

The teaching portfolio as it was presented in the pilot project is an instrument that enables teachers to be prepared for the diverse student body, reflect their behaviour, and to develop new approaches for the classroom (e.g. FUTTER, 2012; TRAUTWEIN & MeRkt, 2012; SZCZYRBA, 2009). By offering workshops in which the teaching staff is introduced to the teaching portfolio, the university contributes to its responsibility to support the development of teaching. Before reporting selected findings some general information on the project is given.

4.1 Pilot project “Teaching Portfolio” at the University of Graz

The pilot project “Teaching Portfolio” consisted of two two-day workshops held in 2015 by didactics expert Birgit Szczyrba from the TH Köln – University of Applied Sciences, one concentrating on the elements of a teaching portfolio, the second introducing the scholarship of teaching and learning. Participation was open to the academic staff of the university. Fortunately, academics from all six faculties and of all possible employment statuses (from doctoral candidates to professors) attended.⁵ In total, there were 13 participants and around the same number of inter-

⁵ The evaluation led to the conclusion that the teaching portfolio could be very useful for staff with development/qualification agreement (22 lecturers/63 assistant professors) and temporary professorships (4). Nevertheless, it could also be interesting for regular teach-

ested individuals who were not able to attend. The process of reading and evaluating teaching portfolios was simulated by inviting a member of each of the six faculties to read available portfolios. Four of these six volunteers were interviewed after reading two portfolios. The findings gained through the evaluation which consisted of written and oral interviews as well as non-participant observation revolve around the following questions: What interests and motivations led lecturers to write a teaching portfolio? What did participants experience during the workshops and writing process? How can the teaching portfolio be implemented by a university and what parameters have to be considered? Answers to some of these questions will be provided in the following (1) through the eyes of a participant and (2) through the eyes of the project evaluators. The aim is to answer the overall question of how teaching portfolios contribute to and support the process of development of academics, academic identity, and professional growth.

4.2 Development of academic identity through group composition

From the very first email supplying information and inviting to participate, the wording was such that any faculty member of the University of Graz could feel addressed, no matter the different phases of professional development. In the end, this interdisciplinary approach made sure the group consisted of participants from different academic disciplines and departments, ranging from novices to experienced teachers holding predoctoral, doctoral and postdoctoral qualification (habilitation). The interdisciplinarity had the effect that one reflected more upon his/her own field of study, habitus, and academic culture, that is his/her multifaceted professional identity. (participant's perspective)

ing evaluations (124 professors) and applications (200 university assistants without doctorate, 110 university assistants with doctorate on temporary positions, and 1091 external lecturers) (staff numbers as of 12/31/2015).

A teaching portfolio may prove helpful for new and experienced lecturers alike (examples in SZCZYRBA & GOTZEN, 2012). New teachers may use the portfolio to support the start, more experienced ones to reflect their teaching habits. Therefore, the pilot project set out to offer a teaching portfolio introduction to anyone interested, regardless of discipline and position.

Suggestion 1: Heterogeneous workshop groups (discipline, position)

Interdisciplinarity in terms of the group composition was a positive side effect of the goal to get the broadest possible feedback by creating a diverse participant group. During the workshops, it soon became apparent that the participants profited strongly from the experiences and accounts of academics from other faculties and employment statuses. To be confronted with a different academic culture, different methods, expectations, teaching settings as well as different perspectives and levels of experience helps to reflect the working environment at the own faculty/department and its effect on the own (hierarchical) position. Thereby, it provides an opportunity to reflect on one's academic identity by comparing it with the dominant habitus and characteristics of the disciplinary culture. It also makes visible the many factors that have an impact on teaching, some of which teachers cannot control.

Suggestion 2: Trained evaluators with disciplinary relatedness

Another important result with respect to interdisciplinarity was gained concerning the process of reading portfolios. The fictive evaluators came to an understanding that it is not a problem for someone from another faculty to assess (1) the common theme and structure, especially the relationship between teaching philosophy and teaching methods, and (2) the relationship between text and references (e. g. syllabus, evaluation results). However, for a deeper evaluation, knowledge about the academic culture, the discipline, contexts, and the general framework of teaching at the department is required. "Teaching portfolios are a piece of discipline culture", one evaluator said. This needs to be considered when setting up teaching portfolios as an instrument to assess teaching quality/development among teaching staff.

4.3 Intrinsic motivation as main factor to foster the development of academics

As for motivation, the perception of potentially being able to influence one's working environment and professional context contributed a lot to high levels of personal investment and involvement in this demanding project. The workshops offered an ideal frame for collegial sharing of experiences and informal networking, hence encouraging professional development and enhancing retention and loyalty. And, lest we forget, one cannot stress enough the importance of perception, appreciation, and presentation of academic teaching as a strong motivator for the participants.

(participant's perspective)

In general, the motivations to participate stand in line with the intended goals of the teaching portfolio: to present, to reflect, and to develop. Additionally, the portfolio was expected to become more important for job applications in the future.

Suggestion 3: Professional workshop coaches raise motivation

During the first workshop, the teachers realized the potential of the teaching portfolio to even up the value imbalance between teaching and research. Reflecting on the teaching job and its high demands gave the participants a feeling of empowerment, pride, and motivation – also in respect to representing their teaching commitment. Hence, initial extrinsic motives to participate were soon complemented by intrinsic ones. This, of course, can only be achieved by professional workshop coaches who are enthusiastic about the topic and know how to stimulate participants.

4.4 Setting and organizational support as factors that encourage academics

It was very motivating to take part in this project, because it was a pilot project, so one could see oneself as a part of the vanguard or as a kind of explorer knowing to participate in something that takes place for the very first

time. Moreover, every email from the organization team was extremely motivating and encouraging. One felt very much accompanied and supported. The questionnaires before and/or after the workshops helped strongly in developing awareness of one's motivation to take part in the project resp. in reflecting effects and outcomes of participation. Overall, the pilot project's structure and organization (e.g. timetables, emails, reflections after the workshops) have positively influenced my way of thinking and eventually my way of teaching, making it more reflective, structured and transparent in terms of course timetable (syllabus), requirements, and learning outcomes. Somehow the project team members served as role models for me.

(participant's perspective)

Suggestion 4: Forms and possibilities of communication

The statement above indicates the importance of organizational support and an appreciative setting. If lecturers are asked to foster teaching quality, then the same interest and attitude should be expected from staff supporting those teachers and offering didactics workshops. In addition to respectful and motivating communication throughout the project, workshop participants need opportunities to contact the workshop facilitator and/or their colleagues with questions or problems. Regular contact and exchange also motivates the participants to continue the writing process – this could, for example, be achieved through an online platform, informal meetings or a jour fixe. However, as the previous paragraph already illustrated: The primary motivation comes from the teachers themselves and is fueled by inspiring and eye-opening experiences in the workshop.

5 Short résumé

The commitment and time invested in this pilot project was really worth it. I feel a much more developed sense of professional self, academic identity and perception of self-agency. My courses are far more structured now with greater transparency, but also more demanding for students in terms of

shared responsibility for an aligned, effective, and rewarding teaching and learning setting. The many opportunities for reflection brought to mind my resources and competences and made me take up reflections more often in class, encouraging students to reflect on their learning goals, styles, and outcomes. (participant's perspective)

In literature, the teaching portfolio is defined as an instrument that supports the representation, reflection, and development of academics as teachers at any stage of their career. It positively impacts professional growth through the reflection of daily habits and teaching concepts. The experiences from the pilot project stand in line with these previous findings.

One should not be too optimistic though – it is still scientific activities (publications and presentations) and third-party funded projects that establish the reputation of an academic. The teaching portfolio could easily be confronted with opposition from teachers who fear just another obligation as well as from portfolio-critical decision makers. Therefore, all concerned parties and stakeholders need to be informed about the portfolio's capacity for its successful implementation. Additionally, a strong and transparent communication concept is needed, also drawing on positive experiences of those who have been writing a portfolio.

In regard of recent changes, e.g. the composition of the student body or university funding dependent on graduation rates, it should be a priority to examine and reflect everyday teaching practices and analyze teaching methods with the guidance of didactics experts. Instruments such as the teaching portfolio are a key for a future-oriented change of teaching culture and represent an opportunity to launch developments from the individual up to the institutional level.

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