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TEACHERS' COMMUNICATION STYLES, STUDENTS' PROFESSIONAL GROWTH AND THE DISCOURSE OF INTERACTION

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. The study design was a joint effort. Both authors contributed to the literature research and both participated in coding the secondary data. The results and conclusions are the joint work of both authors. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, the teacher's role is to be the voice of knowledge while students listen and ask questions. The teacher's role is changing: in the future, the teacher needs to be able to tutor students' capabilities, network with the world of work, and facilitate joint knowledge creation with the world of work. In this article we approach teachership from the point of view of the teacher's communication styles and her capabilities in interaction. Our qualitative analysis suggests that the teacher's communication style has an important effect on student socialization and professional growth. The connection, however, is complex. Students in the early phases of their studies tend to appreciate and expect the expert-teacher and a conventional, unilateral information exchange. However, once students progress on their path of professional growth, the situation changes. The expectations shift towards interaction, guidance and co-learning. From the teacher's point of view, there emerges a need to grow with the student and change the communication style accordingly.

Keywords: Communication; coaching; professional growth; interaction; Finland.

1. INTRODUCTION

The traditional set-up, where the teacher represents the voice of knowledge and students merely listen and ask questions, is changing. The teacher's role is expanding. It is no longer sufficient to focus only on teaching; educators also need to pay attention to tutoring students' capabilities, networking and facilitating joint knowledge creation with the world of work, and finally, participating in research and development activities. Pedagogical solutions today increasingly include participatory, collaborative and interactive learning situations. These new

requirements have a dramatic impact on the communicative skills needed in the educational profession. Moreover, communication in its many forms is a crucial part of the cooperation between universities and the world of work [1,2,3].

In this article we approach teachership from the point of view of the teacher's communication styles and her capabilities in interaction. Our experiences focus on universities of applied sciences, where working life cooperation and related requirements are very much in focus. The university of applied sciences, or vocational university, is a European form of higher

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education offering undergraduate and graduate education with a vocational focus.

The background of the study is in the Finnish educational system, where universities of applied sciences have a substantial role in developing the local working life. Moreover, because of low power distance in this Northern European culture [4], teamwork and coaching are a more natural transition than in some other cultures. Universities of applied sciences in Finland are known for the ability to introduce new and experimental participatory and integrative pedagogical models.

Participatory pedagogics refers to pedagogical solutions that enable students to strengthen their involvement. It results in active learning situations, where students may bring in their own ideas and feelings, freely express themselves, and find their own voice [5,6]. Integrative pedagogics combines genuine situations from working life with learning. An integrative pedagogical model guides planning of learning environments and situations in ways that enable the combination of elements of expertise, theoretical knowledge, practical knowledge, self-control skills and sociocultural knowledge [7]. Concrete participatory and integrative models for use in learning environments include project-based learning and development-based learning. In such models genuine assignments from working life and interactivity form part of the overall learning process [8,9]. Communication is particularly important in these kinds of learning environments.

In this article, we approach the teacher's communication styles from the point of view of two discourse communities: the educational discourse community (the world of university) and the professional discourse community (the world of work). The focus of the research is to assess how a teacher's communication style impacts student socialization and professional growth. We are also investigating how the potential impact is seen in students' expectations and their conceptions of "good teaching".

2. PEDAGOGICAL COMMUNICATION AND STUDENTS' PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

As Crafton and Kaiser [10] discuss, it is through language and communication that student instructions, guidance, and feedback take place. Yet this is still only a shallow view of the power of communication. The teacher's communication has a powerful influence on the socialization and professional growth

of the student, both through direct guidance, and indirectly through the behaviors of the teacher.

Pedagogical communication has been on the research agenda for a long time [11]. The effects of a teacher's verbal and nonverbal signals have been investigated from various angles, such as their effects on students' attitudes toward studying and willingness to participate [12,13].

In practice, however, it seems that teachers may perceive communication issues as rather secondary to the actual subject matter. Research suggests that teachers may not pay attention to their own communication style and its potential effect on the atmosphere of learning [14,15,16,17].

The traditional discourse of teacher communication emphasizes the communicator's expertise and assertiveness. However, the roles of tutor and facilitator require different skills than the roles of knowledge distributor and performer [10,18]. Teachers can particularly affect the scope for guidance and collaborative thought, promote a culture of debate, and influence the ways in which students present themselves and communicate. Teachers are expected to provide encouragement, feedback, motivation and a suitable atmosphere for interactivity, while making themselves present and accessible, sharing the culture and communication conventions of their professional field, and also demonstrating a model for self-presentation (author reference).

The teacher's communicative style has an effect on student learning processes. For example, Brockbank and McGill [19] suggest that a learning path that proceeds to the level of reflective learning cannot happen unless the teacher employs at least some elements of facilitation in her teaching. Lecturing simply is not enough in enabling reflective dialogue; and in the absence of reflective dialogue, reflective learning cannot occur.

The importance of pedagogical communication is emphasized in universities of applied sciences, the purpose of which is to train students in a working life centric manner. In the world of work, cooperation, shared expertise and joint learning have largely replaced the goals of individual learning. The purpose of the individual is increasingly one of complementing others' knowledge and skills so as to attain common goals [20,21,22].

The problems in pedagogical communication become prominent in this context, where the role of cooperative learning should prevail. The traditional discourse of teachership construes the teacher

primarily as an expert knowledge sharer. From the point of view of pedagogical communication, we argue that this view does not sufficiently support cooperative learning and working life centrality. The new culture of cooperative learning and working life centrality demands a new type of approach to teaching in general and specifically, pedagogical communication.

The traditional discourse on teaching builds upon transfer of knowledge, where the teacher is essentially filling students with information. In Freire's [23] terminology, students are the empty "vessels" to be filled through "banking" data. This criticism, although old, appears still valid. Brockbank and McGill [19] argue that even the contemporary teacher, who only assumes the role of the expert, is in fact employing the banking model as discussed by Freire.

The issue is larger than that of just facilitating discussion in class. The expert-teacher can have classroom discussion take place, ask questions and get responses. Nevertheless, deep interaction may still be out of reach. It is the task of the teacher to create an atmosphere of discussion and exchange of ideas. Her own communicative style can encourage or discourage the birth of such an atmosphere [24].

Livingston [25] argues for a need to shift our attention from teaching to learning, particularly in the context of higher education. Learning takes place when the students and the teacher engage in joint reflection and when the setting facilitates open learning and discussion. Brockbank and McGill [19] argue that a teacher stuck in the role of the expert can effectively hinder student activation and empowerment, and hence kill true interaction. The end result is a frustrating experience, where the discussion participants fail to reach another.

2.1 Who has the Power to Talk?

Encouraging student interaction is implicitly also about the use of power. A teacher taking the path of facilitation must also accept the change in her own position and stance. Heron [26] compares this to the clash of two cultures. The conventional educational culture relying on teacher expertise and authority may, in the worst case, lead to oppressive teaching short on autonomy and holism. Holistic, student-centric and cooperative learning requires a different starting point.

We think there are two incompatible discourses clashing. Higher education institutes aim to educate students for the world of work. However, does the educational culture relying on lectures and expertise

always guide students into open interaction and the discourse needed in the world of work?

As a result, the authority needed of the teacher changes [26]. Whereas the teacher's authority relied on expertise in the conventional discourse, today's "tutelary authority" becomes central in the participative culture of education. Tutelary authority is still partially reliant on expertise, but importantly, it is also about the teacher's capability of effective communication and guardianship, implying trust.

Meyers [15] raises an important topic relating to the trust between the teacher and the student: caring. The teacher's approach to caring seems to be a fairly new topic in the context of higher education, even though it is a critical antecedent to student-centricity [27,28]. Perception of caring can also relate to the teacher's style of communication. A distantly communicating expert may also be felt as a person of emotional reservations. This may explain the strong links of student-teacher connectedness to academic achievement [29]. The resulting culture of interactivity profoundly guides students' abilities and opportunities to participate confidently and get equitably involved in the planning and realisation of learning situations. Students should dare to experiment and question assumptions. Teachers for their part should be able to tolerate uncertainty and changing emotions [17].

2.2 Where do we Communicate?

Students have the ability to take a critical look at educational institutions and whether learning has a connection to their current or future world of work. For a university, a typical, particular operation culture is formed rather quickly. The university's culture represents common moral practices, social traditions and common values. An educational institute's culture of communication is different from communication cultures in the world of work [30].

The cultural qualities of the university become relevant from the point of view of learning and the processes of learning, as the commonly accepted habits, values and norms start to be reflected in students' ways of thinking and acting [31,32].

In the context of the university of applied science, a student is part of two discourse communities: the education community and the professional community. The demands of these two can be drastically different. The separation can often be seen in e.g. students' final theses, where the demands of academic writing and everyday workplace reporting clash. Such different demands may build up to

contradictions between the discourse communities [24].

Several studies emphasize the specific role of a person's own professional discourse community. For example, in the engineering community, the focus is often on the topic and substance of a presentation. On the other hand, in the community of visual design, the style and manner of the presentation become important, particularly emphasizing visual aids and contact with the audience [30,33]. Gilbuena et al. [34] term this disciplinary discourse crucial in socializing students into their future professions.

It is important to observe what takes place in the process of growing into a member of one's professional discourse community. For working life-centric learning, it is necessary to identify what conventions of communication relate to which discourse community. Particularly, it is essential to question the necessity of learning tasks and settings only built for university processes, where the link to the world of work is weak [35].

2.3 Towards a New Discourse

We wish to raise awareness and generate discussion on the type of discourse community that a teacher represents and how that community's conventions are present in her communication. The traditional discourse emphasizes power, expertise and convincing rhetoric (e.g. [18,36]). But is this type of approach still viable, considering all of today's requirements?

Is the teaching profession assuming that the typical communication setting in the world of work is still that of performing and public speaking? Instead, should teachers consider the prominence of interaction and discussion in work, and the resulting necessity of building an atmosphere of collaboration?

It is possible that a teacher's strong, charismatic communication style may lead the student on an inefficient path, assuming the student considers the teacher as a representative of an expert in one's future profession. This is a paradoxical observation, since powerful, convincing expert communication has been considered a virtue of teaching for a long time.

The teacher's professional discourse community has changed, however. The task of the teacher in creating knowledge is to assist in generating an atmosphere where the student feels true interaction and where the student's voice is heard. This is a central observation with respect to the working life skills of these future

professionals. Teaching can no longer be limited to transferring knowledge.

The effects of open, interactive communication may be broader than only those relating to learning and the atmosphere of learning. Wilson [37] has studied teacher interaction and immediacy from the perspective of the teacher's satisfaction with her work. There seems to be a positive connection between verbal and nonverbal immediacy and job satisfaction. We consider it possible that a teacher starting to develop her communication style may also gain positive job satisfaction results. The road to new type of interaction may also be a way of relieving oneself of the burden of excessive knowledge.

2.4 Data Collection

To assess the research question, we analyzed a set of student feedback data. We had access to actual student feedback from a Finnish university of applied sciences. In the university, feedback is collected on a constant basis, typically after each course or study unit ends. Although the majority of feedback collection focuses on numerical assessments, the form has spaces for optional verbal feedback as well. We only focused on the free comments.

Undergraduate students in Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences are typically in their early twenties, although it is also possible to enroll as an adult student. Since the feedback data is anonymous, we have no possibility of analyzing the demographics of the respondents. This has no major impact on the qualitative analysis, as our interest is in the recurring themes in the discourse, and not on who provided the text. For qualitative analysis, we chose a data set of all verbal feedback provided in two study programs, collected after various courses at different times in 2013. In sampling terms, this is a convenience sample.

The data consisted of free text comments gathered during a six-month period in a medium-sized higher education institute in Finland, with around 8,000 students. The data is collected anonymously so that individual students cannot be identified from the data. Prior to analysis, all references to teacher identities were also removed from the data to protect their anonymity.

The data set contained 351 textual units, totaling 1,109 lines of text. Despite the anonymity of the data, from the content we could assess that there were roughly equal amounts of feedback from students in their first, second, and third years. The data consisted of business students' and nursing students' feedback,

also roughly divided 50/50. Feedback is collected after every course, although responses are voluntary. The number of textual responses is quite small in comparison to the number of students. Hence, not many students chose to provide the optional verbal feedback. Because of the anonymous nature of the data, however, we have no information as to how many people provided the responses.

Although the purpose of the feedback form is not directly related to communication and communication styles, we found that the greatest part of the free comments concerned these issues nonetheless. Hence, we had a large amount of information to work from.

The purpose of the analysis was to gain a deeper understanding of the meanings related to perceptions, expectations and other representations in the data. For this purpose, a qualitative approach is suitable. We sought for commonalities, differences, metaphors, examples, juxtapositions, as well as assumptions relating to actor roles in the data [38]. Using qualitative coding, we looked for themes relating to teacher communicative styles in the data and the student's expectations of the communication. Two researchers coded the data first separately and then collaboratively. We were particularly interested in how the students talk about teacher's approaches to lecturing and interaction in class and how this is reflected in students' own professional growth.

One key question in the analysis relates to the paradox of "good teaching". If the teacher's job is to ensure students' professional growth as interactive communicators, is this goal best achieved through the traditional discourse of an expert teacher, powerful lecturer, and skilled speaker, or the new discourse of the teacher-coach, who stands back when needed, letting students fill the communication space? In short, what is the example that teachers show their students in terms of communication style? Comments in the data that concerned how a teacher spoke, lectured, or provided guidance, fell under this first theme.

From the student's professional growth perspective, we considered it necessary to include as much information about the student's expectations as was possible. References to the subject matter helped us identify the phase of the student accurately. Talk about expectations was readily available in the data. These fell into the second theme of the analysis.

3. RESULTS

Our main finding is that the teacher's communication style and the student's expectations of the communication are in a complex interaction. Hence, there is no single "correct" solution. The phase of the student in her professional growth path largely determines where the expectations fall and what is considered "good teaching". The Figure describes this connection in a visual form.

In the Figure, student's expectations are on the horizontal axis. These range from mostly extrinsic motivators to mostly intrinsic motivators. The quotes in italics are translated from data.

The teacher's communication actions are on the vertical axis in the Figure. What is considered "good teaching" in the data, is not a single phenomenon, but rather, a continuum that ranges from traditional class lecturing to individualized guidance and free interaction.

According to our analysis, students in the early phases of their studies tend to emphasize "correct data", "straight facts", and the grades they receive. This closely borders the discussion on external motivators in learning. Students have still to see the purpose of their studies in terms of learning, as the key driver is mostly "getting an A". This is the situation in the lower left quadrant.

The "good teacher" in this discourse is a person who is clear in assignments, delivers facts straight and true, and leaves preferably no space for interpretation. In this discourse, students seem to be unable to identify the purpose of a complex task with no single "correct outcome".

"...unfortunately our team report was missing parts that earned us a lower grade. I feel this was largely because the teacher's instructions were ambiguous."

What is noteworthy in this discourse is not that some teacher's instructions were ambiguous. The key is that the comments are consistently related only to grades and assessments. There are no examples of students protesting that they did not learn from the exercise.

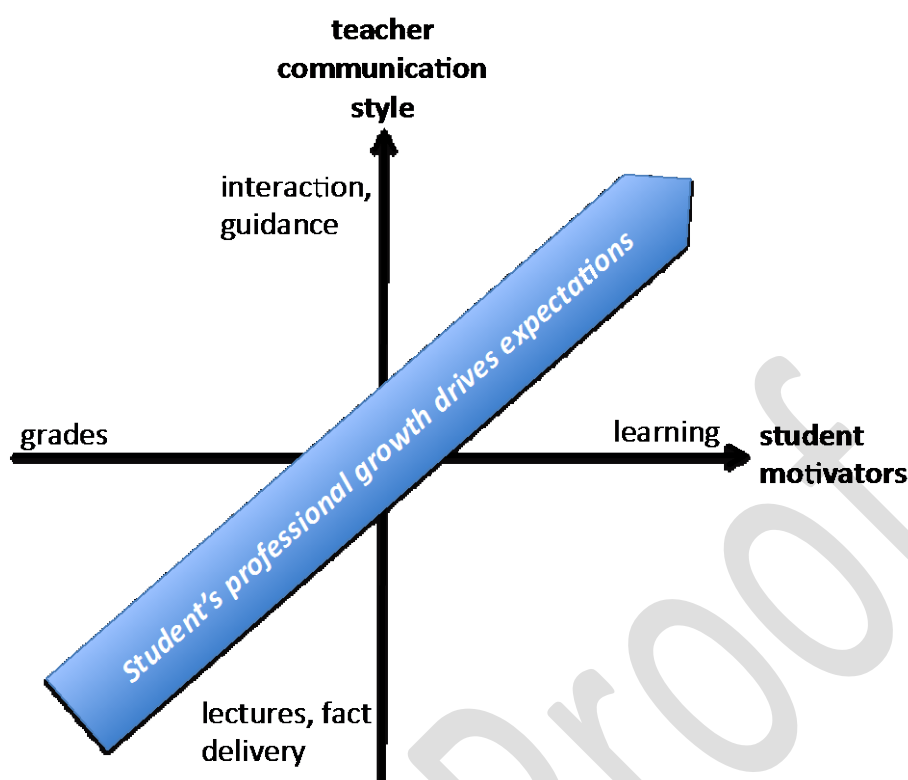


Fig. 1. Teacher communication styles and student expectations in data

Vivid classroom discussion is perceived as “distracting” and “annoying” because it interferes with the teacher’s presentation. It is as if the teacher becomes a replacement for a textbook, a fact-delivery device and that discussion has little value. This represents a students’ strict adherence to conventional authority. Only a person with the appropriate titles is someone worth listening.

“It was really annoying that some of the older students counter-argued with the teacher all the time. As a result, we all had less time to listen to the lectures.”

Once students progress in their studies and on their path of professional growth, the situation changes. This is represented with the upper right quadrant of the Figure. Students with a longer history in studying start to emphasize different issues in the discourse. This is where talk of interaction, participation and co-creation starts to arise.

In this discourse, students approach the intrinsic motivators in learning, where learning itself becomes important, not the attached grades. Mentions about assessment and grades are completely absent in this discourse. Where the students of the first discourse seem very conservative, in this later discourse, there is more room for “different paths” and creative input. In

terms of power distribution, the situation is now different. There is more room for everyone to express their ideas and bring forth something that may be of use.

“It was refreshing to have the permission to think about issues.”

In this discourse, the “good teacher” is one asking questions and encouraging discussions. Students understand that in practical issues, there seldom are clear-cut “right” answers. In terms of learning, it is more beneficial to look at the various angles of an issue. The teacher becomes a coach and tutor.

“...free discussion in class helped create new insights and helped me apply the theory into practice”

Class discussion becomes a value in itself, as opposed to the first discourse, where it mostly intervenes with lectures. The student’s role changes from a recipient of information into a co-creator of learning. Simultaneously, the role of teamwork changes. Although references to team efforts were evenly distributed in the data, the tone of the statements changes as the discourse evolves. In the first discourse, learning is still primarily an individual outcome, even though team efforts are present. In the

second discourse, however, the nature of learning changes. Teamwork becomes a value in itself, through a better understanding of others' viewpoints and fostering the ideas produced in joint efforts.

4. SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Our qualitative analysis of a large set of student feedback data suggests that the teacher's communication style has an important effect on student socialization and professional growth. The connection, however, is complex. In our data, students in the early phases of their studies tend to appreciate and expect the expert-teacher and a conventional, unilateral information exchange. However, once students progress on their path of professional growth, the situation changes. The expectations shift towards interaction, guidance and co-learning. From the teacher's point of view, there emerges a need to grow with the student and change the communication style accordingly.

It is important for the teacher to recognize that her communicative style represents not only the community of educators, but also her professional community of discourse. The teacher's communicative style can either assist or impede an atmosphere of discussion, joint reflection, and interaction in the class. What, then, are the tools through which the teacher can create this atmosphere where students, teams, as well as other potential participants can freely express their knowledge?

Based on our findings, it seems that the interaction of the teacher and the student is a journey. The journey begins in a world of facts, formal objective assessments, and grades. This is the world where the expert-teacher and lecturer-teacher are at home. Interestingly, the students' expectations of this type of teachership are limited to the early stages of socialization. When the journey progresses, working life skills become more important. Students start to understand that they are learning for life instead of learning for "school". In the world of work, the benefits of perfect recall are greatly reduced. Instead, interaction and learning metaskills become paramount.

In the light of our results, the student's path of professional growth towards interpersonal competence starts from fact-based learning and progresses towards interaction. Hence, the teacher's job is even more complex. The teacher needs to be sensitive to the demands of students in different phases. The role of the teacher is not only about supporting communicative skills and coaching interaction, but also a question of guiding the student

through the process of socialization. Interpersonal competence needs to be coaxed carefully, building on small steps first and then speeding up later.

Students' professional growth consists of several simultaneous paths. Students need to become socialized in the university, learning how to act. They need to learn to manage their time and the demands of university. They need to build their own expertise, and learn how to interact and present their skills, capabilities and knowledge. While these can happen in parallel, there is also a sequence involved.

The teacher needs to adapt to the needs of the student in the student's present stage in the professional growth process. In other words, the journey towards students' professional growth demands that both parties grow in their roles. As the student advances, complex interaction issues and independent thinking become focal targets in skill development. The teacher's job is to be able to offer support in communication issues that are primary, given the student's development. This may demand stepping outside the comfortable role of the expert-teacher. The teacher needs to keep in mind her position in between two discourse communities. While the teacher is always an educator, in the light of communication skills and students' professional growth, she is also an example of the professional community. Our results suggest that these two discourse communities can coexist in a university of applied sciences. Students taking their first steps in professional growth only see the discourse community of educators. When students progress in their path, they begin to see the professional discourse community as well. This has substantial impacts on what types of communication styles students expect and value.

From a socialization perspective, our results indicate that the university's culture is working. As students become more socialized to the values of co-creation, equality and low power distances, their expectations change. This is an important observation, as team work, taking responsibility and listening to others are highly important skills in the world of work.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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