



AARHUS UNIVERSITY



Coversheet

This is the accepted manuscript (post-print version) of the article.

Contentwise, the accepted manuscript version is identical to the final published version, but there may be differences in typography and layout.

How to cite this publication

Please cite the final published version:

Bager-Elsborg, A. (2018). How lecturers' understanding of change is embedded in disciplinary practices: a multiple case study. *Higher Education*, 76(2), 195-212. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-017-0195-0>

Publication metadata

Title:	How lecturers' understanding of change is embedded in disciplinary practices: a multiple case study
Author(s):	Anna Bager-Elsborg
Journal:	Higher Education
DOI/Link:	https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-017-0195-0
Document version:	Accepted manuscript (post-print)

General Rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

If the document is published under a Creative Commons license, this applies instead of the general rights.

How lecturers' understanding of change is embedded in disciplinary practices. A multiple case study.

Anna Bager-Elsborg

Centre for Teaching and Learning, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark

Abstract

In the literature higher education teaching is typically conceptualised as generic or determined by disciplinary characteristics. Academic development literature mirrors this dichotomy when discussing the starting point for development work. However, this focus on universal characteristics overlooks crucial aspects of contextual influences on teaching and of lecturers' willingness to change and develop their teaching. This article contributes to the existing literature by illustrating how understanding of and willingness to change is a part of a disciplinary practice. The analysis demonstrates how disciplinary dispositions create frames of meaning in which the understanding of change is embedded. Further, it is argued that academic development has a greater chance of succeeding if it aims at the working-group level, challenges the disciplinary values, and takes an outsider perspective.

Keywords: Teaching; discipline; change; moderate essentialism; academic development

Introduction

Higher Education teaching is often researched as an activity determined either by an individual conceptualisation of teaching (Kember, 1997; Samuelowicz & Bain, 2001) or by a collective disciplinary culture (Neumann, 2001; Neumann, Parry, & Becher, 2002). Mirroring these positions, the academic development literature debates to which extent the generic or the disciplinary traits of teaching dominate and whether or not academic development needs to be discipline-based to be effective (Healey & Jenkins, 2003, 50-51). However, both positions have a tendency to overlook *why* we teach (Neumann, 2001; Trowler, 2012), and how lecturers *interpret* their disciplines in their lived practices. In order to understand how teaching activities and the change of them make sense, we need to change the scope of analysis from abstract constructs such as conceptions of teaching and discipline culture to the local teaching practices (Trowler, 2008). To do so, this article analyses university teaching seen as through the lenses of social practice theories. It explores how seventeen lecturers in two different disciplines reason about changing their teaching practices and how these reasons relate to their disciplinary dispositions. The article, therefore, adds to the existing literature in two ways: Firstly, it reveals how lecturers' understanding of *change* of teaching activities is tightly embedded in their disciplinary dispositions and, secondly, the article points to the implications of these insights for academic development.

Discipline and teaching

Young (2010) argues that development work needs to focus on improving general teaching skills because few teaching and learning issues are truly discipline specific (p. 116) and pedagogical challenges are the same across disciplines. For a long time, university teaching has been researched as an activity influenced by lecturers' conceptions of teaching (Kember, 1997; Pratt, 1992; Samuelowicz, 1999; Samuelowicz & Bain, 2001). Conceptions can be defined as 'specific meanings attached to phenomena which then mediate our response to situations involving those phenomena. (...) In effect, we view the world through the lenses of our conceptions, interpreting and acting in accordance with our understanding of the world' (Pratt, 1992, 204). Teaching approaches and teaching practices have been found to relate to teachers' abstract conceptions of teaching (Ho, 2000). Similar conceptions of teaching have been identified across cultures, disciplines and contexts supporting the idea that teaching has generic traits (Kember, 1997; Samuelowicz & Bain, 2001; Trigwell & Prosser, 1996; Wegner & Nückles, 2015). Likewise, Kreber (2010) concludes that teacher identities are shared across disciplines. Thus, teaching is an activity with shared features across contexts because it is influenced by a cognitive conception of what teaching is. As a result, teaching can be improved by addressing and changing inexpedient teaching conceptions (Ho, Watkins, & Kelly, 2001; Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne, & Nevgi, 2007).

In contrast, the literature focusing on academic discipline as predictor of teaching characteristics claims that teaching is heavily influenced by the epistemological traits of the academic discipline taught. In an extensive literature review Neumann, Parry and Becher (2002) found a relationship between epistemological characteristics and preferred teaching methods. Lecturers from hard sciences tend to prefer large group lectures whereas lecturers from soft disciplines are more likely to choose discussion groups and small class teaching. Traditionally, disciplines have been categorised according to the epistemological structures and the extent to which there are agreed procedures and paradigms within research (Donald, 2002, 10). Biglan's framework with hard/soft, applied/pure, and non-life/life sciences is such a categorisation widely used to explain differences between disciplines (Biglan, 1973; Jones, 2011). Hence, a given discipline predicts preferred teaching methods but also ways of thinking about teaching (Lueddeke, 2003; Smeby, 1996). Healey and Jenkins (2003) argued that teaching is determined by the social and epistemological traits of the discipline. That is, some disciplines have distinctive forms of teaching such as laboratory work and all disciplines have different conceptions of knowledge which is strongly related to the development of curriculum and teaching (Healey & Jenkins, 2003, 50-51). Consequently, challenges and pedagogical problems are related to the discipline and therefore they suggest that academic development has to be rooted in disciplines to be legitimate and effective. Shulman (2005) argues that it is possible to identify signature pedagogies that are 'types of teaching that organize the fundamental ways in which future practitioners are educated for their new professions' (p. 52). The concept has been applied over a wide range of disciplines (Chick, Haynie & Gurung, 2012; Gurung, Chick & Haynie, 2009) with the aim of acknowledging inherent differences in disciplines and the derived consequences for teaching.

The key conflict between the generic and the discipline positions is whether teaching is understood better by looking through the lenses of the discipline or by generic theory. Both perspectives examine teaching while focusing primarily on the determining concepts of either knowledge or culture. Both perspectives overlook the embeddedness of teaching in social practices. This study takes a social practice view on teaching in order to unfold the relationship between discipline-context and teaching. Social practices are routinized behaviour, which are embedded bodily, behaviourally, and in understandings as well as in discourses (Reckwitz, 2002: 250). Social practice theories rest on the assumption that the world is social and negotiated. More specifically, this study applies a moderate essentialist position towards discipline as the theoretical framework because this approach challenges the assumptions of the disciplinary perspective as well as the generic perspective. It offers a framework for examining disciplines as negotiated practices, embedded in organisations, interpreted and enacted by individuals.

Aim of the article

This article examines the extent to which lecturers' reasons promoting or opposing change in teaching are related to disciplinary dispositions. Reasons for promoting or opposing change are chosen as the focus of the analysis partly because the theme emerged in data and partly because lecturers' understanding of change is highly relevant in an academic development perspective. Based on interview data with lecturers in two departments (academic law and business administration) at a large research-intensive Danish university, this study offers insight into the way a discipline practice shapes lecturers' perception of change. Through a multiple case study, it addresses the question of how the understanding of change is embedded in discipline practices.

Theoretical framework: a moderate essentialist position

The moderate essentialist approach argues that disciplines do not have a set of essential characteristics and that disciplines do not determine behaviour (Trowler, 2014). Instead, disciplines are conceptualised as 'reservoirs of knowledge resources which, in dynamic combination with other structural phenomena, can condition behavioural practices, sets of discourses, ways of thinking, procedures, emotional responses and motivations.' (Trowler, 2014, 1728). That is, disciplines are more than knowledge and the relationship between discipline, and behaviour is complex and contextually contingent.

The moderate approach emphasises that disciplines are much more than their epistemology and allows variation to exist within a discipline. Disciplinary practitioners reshape and negotiate disciplines locally on a daily basis. The moderate essentialist position is conceptually built upon Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance. Instead of talking about disciplines as having certain core characteristics, discipline members belong to a community with certain rules that make more sense than others (Trowler, 2014, 1722-23). This has been described as teaching and learning regimes (TLR) where constituting moments such as recurrent practices, rules of appropriateness, power relations, tacit assumptions about teaching and learning, and discourses shape what it is possible to do or say in a certain context (Trowler, 2008). Consequently, disciplines are interwoven patterns of knowledge, language, habits and social relations that shape individual dispositions. Compared to deterministic explanations where certain types of knowledge lead to certain types of teaching,

the practice view shows how the knowledge of a discipline can be interpreted differently when it interacts with other aspects. Thus, disciplines as practices can be full of conflicts (Trowler, 2014). Choice of teaching methods is the result of conditions such as traditions, hierarchies, and economic constraints. To open up these interrelated structures of meaning, the analysis in this study focuses on four key aspects of the disciplinary TLR.

The first aspect is *criteria for success*. What is perceived as valuable, is of great importance because success grants access to material as well as symbolic resources within a community (Lamont, 2012, 202).

The second aspect is *assumptions about students and student behaviour*. Ulriksen (2009) conceptualises lecturers' expectations and experiences as the 'implied student' of a study programme. He finds that teaching methods and study structure are developed and adapted towards the students that lecturers expect to meet. Consequently, a number of tacit assumptions about what makes sense, are revealed in the exploration of assumptions about students.

The third aspect is the *purpose of teaching*. The purpose of teaching guides what is done and what would be perceived as reasonable behaviour in a specific context. Purpose points towards legitimate ends and appropriate means to achieve those ends (Trowler, 2008, 92).

Finally, the analysis examines the *organisation of teaching*. The meaning structures of disciplinary dispositions are embedded in and have consequences for practice - the organisation of activities. This reciprocal relationship between individual dispositions and organisational structure manifests itself in routines and habits played out as ways of organising teaching and learning activities (Trowler, 2008, 67). The moderate essentialist position towards disciplines is especially well suited to understand how reasoning relates to disciplinary positions because it allows for discourses, habits, feelings, and motives to be a part of a discipline (Trowler, 2014). The discipline is not simply knowledge but a frame of meaning that makes some actions more meaningful than others. Thereby, it is possible to open the black box of disciplinary teaching.

Methods

The study was constructed as a multiple case design in order to be able to compare the two cases and, thus, understand both cases better. Yin defines a case study as: 'An empirical inquiry about a contemporary phenomenon (e.g., a "case"), set within its real-world context – especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident' (Yin, 2012, 4). To unfold and understand local meaning construction among lecturers, it was necessary to explore their context and to explore how they made sense of their everyday practices. Case studies are especially strong when the purpose is to understand meaning and investigate the context in-depth (Gerring, 2008, 37). The choice of two cases made it possible to analyse each case in depth and still get the advantage of comparing cases.

Case selection

Two disciplines within two departments were selected for this study: a business administration and an academic law department at a large research-intensive Danish university. To be able to answer how the understanding of change was embedded in the two disciplinary practices, it was necessary to choose disciplines that shared a number of features. By conducting the case study within the same faculty, it was possible to approximate a most

similar systems design logic (MSSD). MSSD often implies a variable and causation logic aiming to control for some variables while creating natural variation on others (Seawright & Gerring, 2008, 304). The purpose of this study was not to demonstrate causality or isolate variables, but it was still relevant to ensure similarity on as many organisational aspects as possible in order to be able to compare differences and similarities. The cases are similar in several ways: The departments experience the same financing structure and demands from faculty management. Hence, differences in lecturers' engagement in teaching development initiatives are not due to differences in resources or management support. Second, the cases are similar in relation to size, student numbers and teaching methods. Both departments teach undergraduate classes as large-scale lectures supplemented with small-class seminars. At the graduate level, teaching is mostly conducted as seminars with smaller groups (15-40 students). Third, the departments operate in the same buildings at the campus. Lecturers' offices, meeting rooms and teaching facilities are placed in the same buildings. Fourth, both disciplines would be categorised within the area of soft applied sciences in Biglan's framework (Biglan, 1973). From a strong essentialist point of view, they should thus be similar in relation to knowledge forms and social traits. According to Neumann, Parry and Becher (2002), disciplinary category determines group characteristics of lecturers. For example, we should expect lecturers in soft applied disciplines to welcome programme revisions and prefer teaching to research (p. 411). In sum, by choosing cases with similar attributes makes comparisons between what differentiates them, in this case discipline, more possible.

Data collection

Data includes 17 in-depth interviews with lecturers (9 from Law and 8 from Business Administration). All lecturers interviewed were also active researchers. Participants were strategically selected based on four criteria: 1) Lecturers teaching different aspects of the programme (undergraduate and graduate levels), 2) lecturers from different mandatory courses, 3) male as well as female lecturers at all career levels, and 4) research as well as teaching experience. All interviews were conducted in Danish during the spring semester of 2014. The interview form allows for complexity, apparent contradictions and competing viewpoints to exist at one and the same time, which is a characteristic of ongoing practices. Thus, the interview method allowed interview persons to express contradictory opinions in the same interview and to unfold lines of argument. To allow lecturers to focus on elements that were important to their teaching, a semi-structured interview was used. The semi-structured interview is structured enough to guide the conversation, and open enough to allow the conversation to develop in the most interesting direction (Flick, 2002). The interview-guide was organised according different themes. Each theme was approached with one main question and with several other questions relating to the same theme. This created many possible ways to talk about the same theme. The interview guide focused on lecturers' experiences with teaching. They were asked to describe their teaching practice (e.g., 'what do you do when you teach this course?'), their exams (e.g., 'will you describe what you look for in an assignment?'), and their students (e.g., 'how would you describe a typical student?'). The theme of change in teaching and development of teaching came up spontaneously during these interviews when lecturers explained why they taught as they did. Lecturers were asked to elaborate on thoughts about reasons for their choice of teaching method, course design as well as dispositions for change of teaching. Consequently, interviews ended up prioritising

what lecturers found most important for their teaching. Approximately 19 hours of interviews were transcribed verbatim by the author or one of four research assistants according to a set of written guidelines made by the author. A total of 500 pages were produced. Quotes have been translated by the author and all names are pseudonyms.

Data coding and case analysis

First, an initial thematic analysis of the interviews was conducted, identifying overarching themes of teaching, student behaviour, and discipline characteristics (Boyatzis, 1998). The aim was to uncover a coherent narrative of meaning within each case, which formed the backdrop of the next part of the analysis. Second, all the interviews were analysed guided by the selected theoretical dimensions searching for statements about change and stability in teaching. Third, all statements were scrutinised and reasons were divided into two categories – either reasons promoting changes in existing teaching practice or reasons opposing change in existing teaching practice. Fourth, reasons either promoting or opposing change were compared to examine consistency within cases and to relate reasoning with other recurring themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The two cases were also compared to see how reasoning differed between cases – how did lecturers’ arguments relate to their disciplinary dispositions, and how did they manifest themselves in practice. This gave new meaning to utterances about change. The results show how reasoning promoting or opposing change relate to disciplinary reasoning.

Results

This section presents the results of the analysis. Firstly, reasons promoting or opposing lecturers’ change of their teaching are briefly presented - separately for each case and summarised. This provides an overview of types and distribution of reasons in the two practices. Secondly, reasons are elaborated on and related to the aspects of disciplinary dispositions highlighted in the theory section. That is, criteria for success, assumptions about students and student behaviour, and the purpose of teaching are analysed. Finally, through the analysis of organisation of teaching, it is shown how disciplinary dispositions are embedded in practice.

Reasons promoting or opposing lecturers’ change of their teaching

Business administration

In the discipline of business administration, changing teaching activities was an everyday action for most lecturers. During interviews, they often explained how they tried something new in one semester, and evaluated and changed everything the following semester. Changes were often initiated by student wishes expressed in evaluations or as a reaction to their behaviour. One lecturer wanted students to participate more in class. To motivate them, she changed her assessment from written to oral. Several lecturers mentioned how they changed content or structure to improve dialogue with students and to try to engage them further in discussions. Other reasons would be the publication of new material more relevant to the course or personal enthusiasm about a topic. In addition, several lecturers mentioned getting new ideas from teaching development courses. Moreover, external demands or larger intake of students would put pressure on lecturers to change their teaching. Teaching was frequently changed, and the reasons for doing it were numerous. When lecturers from business

administration talked about changes that they could make or wanted to make, but had not made, they were almost apologetic. They seemed to expect that they ought to try something new. Reasons for not changing their teaching encompassed lack of resources, especially time, that teaching was already well-evaluated by students, or that the effort of changing their teaching would not pay off. In sum, lecturers from business administration were eager to change their teaching. Several felt that they ought to develop their teaching. Yet, sometimes lack of resources prevented them from doing so.

Academic law

In academic law, lecturers’ change of their teaching was more rare and often initiated by external demands such as faculty policies or new university legislation. One lecturer said that the faculty management did not understand the structure of legal education and had just demanded a new structure of the courses offered. However, she emphasised that rules were to be followed, and the team of lecturers worked hard to implement the new rules in a way that kept academic standards intact. Some lecturers innovated in their teaching without external pressure, though. Sometimes lecturers changed their teaching inspired by participation in lecturer training courses, and sometimes because they observed lack of student skills at the final exams. The most important reason for changing teaching was to educate better lawyers. For the lecturers of academic law, it was crucial to maintain the values of predictability and stability of the discipline. Accordingly, stability had intrinsic value. Lecturers explicitly mentioned the discipline as an important reason for their choice of teaching method, and the careful planning of their teaching made lecturers reluctant to change. For a group of them, the tradition of lectures played a defining role and they emphasised the tradition of teaching methods.

Table 1 summarises the reasons promoting and opposing changes given by the lecturers.

Table 1. Reasons for promoting or opposing change in teaching practice

	Promoting change	Opposing change
Business administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student evaluations • Student performance • New publications • Improvement of students’ performance • Wanting to try something new • Policy/economic demands (external) • Teacher training courses (external) • Feelings of individual responsibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual resources (time, research) • Student engagement and abilities • Well-evaluated teaching
Law	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvement of students’ legal skills • Employer wishes • Policy/economic demands (external) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accountable to tradition • Legal virtue of predictability • Structure of content

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher training courses (external) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complex organization of undergraduate teaching • Feeling of collective responsibility • Student engagement and abilities
--	---	--

Disciplinary dispositions

The previous section has illustrated the differences in the number and distribution of reasons for promoting and opposing change. The following section shows how these reasons are connected to disciplinary dispositions and therefore by no means coincidental.

Criteria for success

Changes within teaching were affected by criteria for success within the disciplinary community and by organisational recognition. A main criterion for success in the business administration setting was students' evaluation of teaching and the extent to which students were satisfied with the content of teaching. Among the lecturers of law, student opinion did not count as much. The most important criterion for success was that students obtained relevant competences to be a part of the legal profession after graduation. The criteria for success became apparent in the interviews in the lecturers' argumentation for whether teaching worked well or ought to be changed.

One way of measuring the success of teaching was the number of students, who turned up in classes:

‘I have observed other lecturers' classes and I am proud that most of my students turn up. Approximately 80 percent, I would guess. That is much better than what the other lecturers experience. Anyway, half of the 80 percent is doing something else while being present, but they do turn up.’ (Natalie, Bus.adm.)

The quote illustrates that teaching success became a parameter for comparison amongst colleagues. It was important how well the lecturers experienced that they performed in comparison with their colleagues. In addition, the theme student evaluations was brought up several times in interviews with lecturers from business administration. Many lecturers compared their evaluation scores, the amount of activity in class, and number of students attending. Adaption and change were tools that lecturers had at their disposal in order to improve their performance.

‘I know that some of my colleagues use more interactive tools to test understanding. Ideally, I want to use clickers or poll online or something like that. Actually, I have attended some courses to learn how to do it, but I never really started. It is a bit of a barrier, but ideally I will start using it soon.’ (Christine, Bus.adm.)

Christine felt that she ought to do more to activate students and engage them during classes, and she was embarrassed that she had not done more already. She argued that she knew that it

would help students' learning and force them to engage in her teaching. However, she had not had the time to implement it. The analysis showed that lecturers' experienced a time pressure. The investment of time in the development of their teaching was a resource taken from other working areas especially research. Several lecturers stressed that because teaching was not valued to the same extent in the organisation in relation to e.g. promotions, it became a trade-off between time invested in teaching compared to time invested in research. One lecturer explicitly said, that no one would mention your teaching unless student evaluations were terrible. Otherwise, teaching was your own business.

In the context of law, it was not the students' opinions that qualified teaching as successful. Instead, future employers had a lot to say. One lecturer made sure that the external examiner (working as a barrister) approved of her new ways of teaching before implementing a change.

'Before I started, I had a chat with him [the external examiner] and I said "I would really like to know what you think about my idea before I launch it", and he was enthusiastic about it. He was also tired of listening to the same old story.' (Sara, Law)

It was not because Sara expected the external examiner to give better grades or change his behaviour, but she wanted to make sure that the skills and competencies she tried to help students improve, were the ones needed by future employers. The lawyer became the guarantor of quality in her development of her course. She felt that future lawyers needed to be better equipped to meet the high standards required. This was a strong professional motive for her to change her teaching. The standards of the legal profession were mentioned explicitly as reasons for change. Thus, lecturers orientated towards their colleagues outside the university, were willing to calibrate their teaching, but they did not intend to give in to pressure from elsewhere. In general, external regulation enforced without consideration for the legal profession was criticised. One lecturer specifically expressed fear that changes would lead to lower academic standards.

'It is with great grief, if we feel pressured to lower the standards to meet the demands from politicians. We find it very, very sad.' (Judith, Law)

In both cases, lecturers referred to their contacts with future employers, but for different reasons. For the lecturers of law, it was related to securing quality standards. For business administration lecturers, it was about securing relevance of content so students received the most useful material for their future careers. Thus, the same apparent argument had different meanings in their respective disciplines and had implications for lecturers' willingness to change their teaching.

Assumptions about students and student behaviour

In both departmental contexts, the lecturers' expressed expectations to student behaviour that entailed an implied student. In both cases, students were described as determined, focusing on their future careers. However, lecturers' perception of legitimate student behaviour differed. Lecturers in business administration expected students to choose and define their own brand, but lecturers also wanted students to learn something in spite of their extrinsic motivation. Teaching was adapted and changed to accommodate student wishes, but also to avoid a free

riding behaviour. Despite the fact that law students were also categorized as being goal-oriented and determined, the consequences for the adaptation of teaching were quite different. As mentioned earlier, teaching was not changed to accommodate student wishes.

All lecturers in business administration described students as very selective; some even described them as resource optimising. Students would only turn up if they felt that the lecturer and the course had something to offer.

‘Students focus on the end-goal more than the process... and of course you have to. Our students are good at networking and sharing information. They always know if something is different in one course compared to another. Sometimes that is a big problem.’ (Karen, Bus.adm.)

Karen accepted students’ focus on the end-goal as a reasonable strategy. However, sometimes students expressed this strategy as a demand for equal service from supervisors. Lecturers found that students focused on how to make decisions, make businesses work and on the real-life implications of theories. This focus turned into persistent demands for real-life relevance of all teaching. These perceived demands from students challenged the degrees of freedom for the individual lecturer and sometimes limited the space for action.

‘If the students are not interested, I will of course return to more traditional teaching methods. It is my little teaching experiment and some students will be very enthusiastic about it. That is my experience at least.’ (Natalie, Bus.adm.)

In that sense, student demands became a double-edged sword. Student wishes and student behaviour were important reasons for change, but within certain limits. Teaching still had to live up to criteria for success, which primarily was student evaluations in this case. For several lecturers, students’ consumer behaviour was an explicit part of the curriculum. Students would seek information from each other about who were good supervisors, interesting lecturers, etc. Some lecturers found it frustrating that students were resource optimising. Yet, Louise stressed that it was only logical within a business discipline and she therefore organised her teaching accordingly with strong incentives for students to participate. So did David who did not want to change his teaching as it was well-evaluated by his students.

‘I expect them to prepare for class but I’m aware that the majority don’t. (...) I could spend more time and energy making quizzes to see if they understand what I’m saying. But actually, I don’t see that as my job.’ (David, Bus.adm.)

Students’ education was their own individual responsibility. Lecturers accepted and sometimes even expected students to try to pass courses with minimum effort, and it became the students’ own problem whether they swam or sank.

The image of a law student drawn by the lecturers was a hard-working and conscientious student. Only through their hard, individual work, would they end up being shaped into lawyers.

‘Students need to sit down in a sufficient amount of time and study and try to solve these problems until their thinking becomes structured in the right way.’ (Daniel, Law)

It was not because lecturers always experienced that their students acted conscientiously but it was out of the question to lower the standards. Several lecturers mentioned the number of students enrolled and they worried about the lack of student abilities, but they all stressed the importance of upholding the academic standards. Students would simply have to work hard to succeed.

‘Some students are confused about the material I present in my lectures. It is very difficult for them to grasp. Only the extremely skilled students can keep up – the rest will follow eventually. I simply like to set the bar high. I think I owe it to everyone – the students, society – everyone.’ (James, Law)

Teaching was conducted to provide the best possible education for students who graduate to enter a specific profession. The implied student presented by law lecturers was aware of his or her duties and willing to work hard to become a member of the profession whereas, for the business administration students, this was a matter of individual responsibility. Law lecturers were not willing to adapt or change teaching because the criteria for success were externally defined.

Purpose of teaching

There were considerable differences in the way lecturers perceived the purpose of their teaching. Business administration lecturers wanted to provide their students with the best possible and relevant teaching for them to succeed with their individual projects. The purpose of teaching was to inspire students and motivate them to study sufficiently hard to pass. However, the majority of lecturers had no clear picture of a coherent study programme, and each course was an isolated event with a purpose determined by the lecturer. Lecturers of law also wanted students to do their best, but within the expected trajectory defined by the profession. They wanted students to understand the structure of content and be able to talk and think like lawyers. The different purposes also had consequences for lecturers’ willingness to change their teaching.

In business administration, lecturers perceived their teaching as an offer to students. They hoped that students would be interested and participate actively as the following quote suggests.

‘My role is to offer this lecture and they [students] don’t have to show up, but I like it when they do. It is their choice – they could just stay home and read and that would be fine too. I think my role is to explain things and show some examples.’ (Louise, Bus.adm.)

Most examples came from real life businesses or public organisations with the purpose of helping students see the relevance of the theories. Because students were expected not to be very interested in theory, lecturers tried to apply theory to cases. Lecturers took it upon themselves to offer up-to-date readings. In part because they experienced that students repeatedly requested relevance. In part because new literature was available, and their field of research changed rapidly.

‘Students really like if there is a link to practice – that it is of immediate use. For example, “how will this enterprise perform better?” “How will I perform better?” Therefore, I ensure that the practical implications from subtle

theoretical points are clear. I made this a point the second time I ran the course. I sense that students are happy about it.’ (Peter, Bus.adm.)

This quote illustrates the interrelatedness between different aspects of the disciplinary dispositions. The criteria for success, his expectations about student motivation and the purpose of teaching. He had added new articles to his course because he wanted his students to be acquainted with recent research. He focused on planning his teaching to help students see the relevance (purpose). He did not expect that many of them would actually read the texts (expectations). Yet, in the end, it came down to whether students were happy about it, and he felt he had spent the appropriate amount of time on it (criteria for success). Because the purpose of his teaching was to offer relevant and new material, it was often adapted and changed.

In academic law, the purpose of teaching was to deliver the necessary content for students to become qualified lawyers. The lecturers emphasised the importance of getting students to see the structure of legal content and interrelatedness of topics. For law lecturers, changes were difficult to implement and involved the programme’s relationship to the profession. There was a strong coherence and interrelatedness between content, methodology, and teaching of law. In this context, one lecturer explained how stability and predictability were virtues in his field.

‘Sometimes one realises that change is perceived as good per se, but it challenges the discipline of law. (...) Remember, predictability is a part of the lawyer’s DNA. That is, we only make changes if change makes sense.’ (James, Law)

Instead of talking about change, he talked about fine-tuning and making minor adjustments to a well-functioning machine. Teaching was developed over a long period of time in accordance with professional standards. With respect for tradition, in consideration of the intended outcomes, the purpose of teaching was to guide students into this tradition.

‘The problem is when structure is so important for their opportunity to understand - not only to remember, but also to understand - you start to gamble when you change lectures into small class teaching.’ (John, Law)

As it appears from the quote, John believed that the way they taught was the best way to achieve the purpose he experienced as crucial for law students. He wanted students to discuss and apply the content. Changing teaching into small class teaching would provide this chance. However, it would rob the students of getting the same qualified teaching because he himself would not be able to teach all seminars. In that sense, the fact that he taught became the assurance of quality. Here, as in the case of business administration, the purpose of teaching (educating future lawyers) was strongly related to the criteria for success (what future employers valued) and the assumptions about students and student behaviour (work hard with little influence). Therefore, changes were implemented only if they supported these purposes.

Organisation of teaching

The analysis of the data revealed that the disciplinary dispositions not only defined criteria for success, assumptions about students, and the purpose of teaching, but were also connected to the way teaching was organised. This had implications for whether it was possible to change the teaching practice within the communities.

In the discipline of academic law, a number of professional values seemed to decide which aspects of the teaching practice it would be possible or desirable to change. The collegial sense of collectiveness was strong. Most of the teaching undertaken at the undergraduate level was a complex system of several lecturers coordinating a number of aspects to make sure all relevant material was covered. Thus, changes needed to be well founded whether it was in reading materials, contents or teaching structure because everything was designed to serve a certain purpose. Several lecturers referred to the books as defining for content and teaching.

‘I go through the book – chapter by chapter. I wrote this book with two colleagues, and we made this book so it is designed to our course. Not just that – it needs to be a classic within this field of law too.’ (James, Law)

In that sense, changing the practice became very cost-intensive. The collective aspect featured strongly when lecturers talked about the organisation of their teaching. They distinguished between ‘my own course’ (typically graduate courses with few students) and ‘our courses’ (undergraduate courses with many students).

‘Actually, it was a written exam when I took over the course. I noticed that the students made some aggravating basic mistakes that ruined their assignments. Therefore, I would rather have an oral exam.’ (Henrietta, Law)

Henrietta said that the oral exam gave her the opportunity to find out whether students understood things the right way, and she gave them a chance to practice the spoken legal language. The changes were possible in her own graduate course and substantiated by shared norms about what future lawyers should be able to do. At the same time, when asked how she contributed to the successful education of future lawyers she answered ‘I do not think I am important enough to contribute to that’ (Henrietta). She would not say that she as an individual lecturer contributed to educating skilled graduates. Instead, she emphasized the importance of the profession for society and the humbleness everyone, lecturers and students alike, had to show to do a proper job.

There was a strong ‘we’ when law lecturers talked about law education. “We teach, we emphasise, we want...”. In comparison, the ‘we’ did not figure strongly among business administration lecturers. On the contrary. In the majority of interviews, lecturers explicitly mentioned that teaching was not something that was discussed openly and teaching was an individual matter. Similarly, the discipline was described as fragmented.

‘It’s difficult for us to stay within the frame of traditional economics disciplines. Compared to other social science disciplines, ours is more fragmented.’ (Neil, Bus.adm.)

‘Our core subjects lack teaching capacity backed up by research. It’s like a doughnut - we are all in the periphery. Due to a heavy focus on external funding, we are all specialised in different areas.’ (Allan, Bus.adm.)

This fragmentation re-emerged in the organisation of teaching. Several lecturers described teaching as something private and highly individualised. Teaching was a matter of personal preferences and the responsibility of the lecturer was to deliver a service that students had the responsibility of managing in the best possible way. In this context, changes were solely demanding for the individual lecturer and therefore not as cost-intensive as in law. The trade-off between optimising teaching and spending time on research was individual.

Consequently, for business administration lecturers content and methods could easily change from one semester to the next, whereas changes at the department of law were not easily implemented and only made to ensure the standards.

How understanding of change is embedded in discipline practices

Table 1 showed the different reasons for promoting or opposing change in two disciplines. The analysis substantiated and unfolded the disciplinary differences in reasoning between the two discipline practices. Changes were more frequent in business administration where new research and a strong focus on relevance determined the content. Students’ opinions, their behaviour, and the lecturers’ assumptions about these framed what was possible and desirable. The logic of private enterprise and the individualised market was expressed not only in the curriculum but also in the views of students as consumers searching for a brand, teaching as an individual, private practice offered to students, and the trade-off reflection in relation to resources. The hesitation towards changes in academic law was also made intelligible. The strong relationship between the academic environment and the profession outside the university defined criteria for quality that were a guiding parameter for success. Students had to struggle to become a part of the profession and had to be transformed into lawyers over time. The structured content, the values of the discipline such as predictability and the collective organisation of teaching made changes undesirable in most cases.

Discussion

The above findings question whether it is in fact possible to understand teaching in a generic perspective. When comprehensive descriptions of teaching are condensed into broad teaching conceptions (Kember, 1997; Samuelowicz & Bain, 2001), the local practice is stripped away and an important layer of meaning disappears. Shulman (1993) argues that when teaching is treated as a generic skill that you add to the rest of your work, teaching becomes unimportant because it is detached from the life in the disciplinary community. The same applies to generic academic development. Without an understanding of the discipline and its legitimacy, the academic developer is in danger of becoming unimportant (Saroyan, 2014). The findings from this study show that it is in fact impossible to detach teaching from its disciplinary context. As these two cases illustrate, it is crucial to understand the context-contingent meaning structures to make sense of utterances about teaching. The results suggest that seemingly generic problems must always be interpreted within their surrounding practice. In both cases, lecturers described their students as instrumental, which is a recurrent finding in the literature (Ottewill & Macfarlane, 2003; Bunce, Baird & Jones, 2016). The consumer perspective challenges teaching and lecturers’ understanding of their work (Emerson &

Mansvelt, 2014; Emerson & Mansvelt, 2015). However, the results from this study emphasise that even though student instrumentalism appear similar – described with the same words – it is interpreted differently in the two disciplines. In business administration, the instrumentalism is accepted as a part of the curriculum. Students are expected to behave in a certain way and lecturers adapt their teaching to this. In academic law, lecturers observe the instrumentalism and ignore it because their understanding of success is to live up to standards negotiated elsewhere. In both cases, this layer of meaning would have been overlooked had the analysis only focused on statements about instrumentalism. The interrelatedness between perceptions of criteria for success and assumptions about students add an important layer of understanding to our understanding of their practices.

The above analysis supports the notion that the discipline is important for understanding teaching and learning. It is important to note, however, that this relationship is not deterministic in nature. The relationship between discipline, teaching and learning is complex, socially negotiated, and not only enforced by an epistemological understanding of academic discipline (Neumann et al., 2002; Smeby, 1996). Lecturers reasoned with reference to a layer of meaning embedded in their disciplines. The lecturers from academic law stressed fairness, predictability, responsibility to society, and future employers – virtues of the legal profession. In comparison, business administration lecturers talked about investment of resources. They navigate towards student satisfaction accepting the instrumentalism as legitimate. These structures of meaning, constituting the disciplines, shape the possible space for implementing change in these two cases. The micro-processes and the on-going negotiations mean that the relationship between discipline and behaviour is never static. Individual agency reproduce *and* challenge habits and routines. Taking a moderate essentialist position acknowledges the negotiated aspects of the discipline, and explains variation. Studies of shared teaching and learning characteristics (see for example the review by Neumann et. al. 2002) might overstate the predictive power of general discipline traits such as epistemological structures and social traits (Trowler, 2012). Lecturers' individual priorities and the possibilities of change will influence whether teaching is a shared responsibility as in this law setting or an often unacknowledged, individual effort as the one in business administration. The possible space for action defined by local negotiations *within disciplines* matter.

When focusing primarily on abstractions such as conceptions and epistemological traits, the practices around teaching and knowing are overlooked and it makes it difficult to understand why academic development initiatives can have different outcomes – even in organisations that are similar or with teachers with similar conceptions of teaching. Instead, it is necessary to open up the on-going negotiations of meaning and appropriate behaviour that takes place in all human interaction (Trowler, 2008). Taking a social practice view on teaching makes it possible to examine the micro-processes of social practices and the interrelatedness between discipline and the local context in relation to teaching. When disciplines are seen as negotiated practices, embedded in organisations, interpreted, and enacted by individuals, the contingency becomes evident. Habits and routines are legitimate ways to act within a specific community and individuals within this community will possess dispositions to navigate within this practice (Lamont, 2012). This changes focus from teaching as an abstract concept to teaching as local meaning which gives academic developers better prerequisites for supporting change.

Implications for academic development

These findings substantiate observations of resistance and hesitation toward change made by academic developers (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Ginns, Kitay, & Prosser, 2010). Understanding teaching as an embedded practice shows why change is rarely rapid. Practices are by nature inert and develop slowly. When teaching is not an isolated, individual act but embedded in values, power relations, habits and routines, identities and feelings are at stake when practices are changed (Trowler, 2008, 101; Trowler, 2014). These results point to the following implications for academic development work. First, these results support the turn towards departmental or working-group level development initiatives (Knight & Trowler, 2000; Roxå & Mårtensson, 2013). For development initiatives to be successful, they need organisational support from department level management and the working group. Roxå and Mårtensson (2013) found that effects from teacher training is more likely to propagate into teaching practices if changes are negotiated locally and supported by a wider range of lectures in the same department. Similarly, Knight and Trowler (2000) suggest contextualised and contingent development strategies from management for changing behaviour due to the power relations and the collective nature of practices. Thus, knowing the embeddedness of change open our eyes to the emotional and organisational barriers hindering development as well as opportunities for promoting development. This is in line with suggestions from Boud and Brew (2013) who emphasise the need to ground development work in the theories of practice because this perspective moves development away from deficit assumptions and take the practice as a whole into account.

Second, the results in this article add to the findings from Roxå and Mårtensson (2013) and Knight and Trowler (2000) by adding a layer of disciplinary values. Thus, the results suggest that academic development could benefit not only from aiming at the working group level but also from explicitly addressing the negotiated disciplinary values within the working group. The findings of this study suggest that to know the values of law would make it easier to suggest legitimate changes. Changes of teaching was made only if they were perceived as beneficial to the purpose of the study programme. If the lecturers perceived suggested changes as legitimate, these changes were more likely to stay in place due to the sense of shared responsibility. In contrast, the analysis suggests that development initiatives in this specific business administration setting would be in danger of becoming superficial due to the fast adaptation of teaching to student wishes. If students are not satisfied, changes will most likely be gone next semester. Thus, in order to succeed the academic developer needs to address these different sets of values.

Third, the results emphasise that discipline-based development is not necessarily more likely to succeed. Development from within a department is at risk of taking tacit assumptions for granted. Pedagogies can be congruent with discipline beliefs yet inexpedient. Shulman (2005) argues that the signature pedagogies of the professions are not necessarily expedient but a result of a number of explicit and implicit negotiations within the profession. Offering an expert view on academic development, Handal (1999, 67) writes that ‘self-interpretation of one’s own practice is limited to the perspectives that one already has,

whereas the sort of hermeneutics we engage in with colleagues provides much greater potential for helpful criticism'. Thus, the outsider (e.g. the academic developer) offers an important view on existing practices that the insider cannot see due to the tacitness of values or to the power structures that make change and challenges difficult.

In conclusion, the academic developer needs to take on the role as an allied or a critical friend in the work with groups of lecturers (Debowski, 2014; Handal, 1999). It is very important that the developer brings in the expertise of the development practice combined with a sensitivity and curiosity towards the discipline in question to be able to act as a legitimate intruder (Handal, 1999; Saroyan, 2014).

Conclusion

The findings of this case study showed how lecturers' understanding of change was embedded and interpreted in discipline practices. The dispositions of the two disciplines became apparent in reasons for changing or not changing the teaching practices. Lecturers from business administration uttered opinions that made sense within the logic of an individualised and market-focused discipline where students were perceived as consumers. This made changes occur often. Likewise, academic law lecturers expressed their professional values strongly and made an impression of a tightly knitted structure of content, teaching practices, and employer expectations. This made changes rare, and all changes needed to be substantiated in relation to disciplinary values.

The literature on teaching and learning as well as that of academic development has traditionally taken an either generic or disciplinary point of departure. In this article, it has been argued that both perspectives overlook the meaning construction that takes place in local teaching practices. The study contributes to the field by demonstrating how micro-processes in a teaching environment shape the possible space for action. That is, reasons for change are not arbitrary. Lecturers' willingness to change their teaching is not simply conditioned by collegial support as prior research has shown, it is also conditioned by disciplinary dispositions. This is valuable knowledge in academic development work. Future research may explore the dispositions and interpretations across contexts but within the same discipline to go deeper into the mechanisms of interpretation in the discipline. In sum, this article supports the recent turn in focus towards teaching and learning practices and warns against deterministic views of disciplines. Further, it suggests that we start identifying and challenging local interpretations of discipline values as a starting point for academic development.

References

- Biglan, A. (1973). The characteristics of subject matter in different academic areas. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 57(3), 195. doi:10.1037/h0034701
- Boud, D. & Brew, A. (2013). Reconceptualising academic work as professional practice: Implications for academic development. *International Journal for Academic Development* 18 (3), 208-221. doi:10.1080/1360144X.2012.671771
- Boyatzis, R. E. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. London: SAGE.
- Bunce, L., Baird, A., & Jones, S. E. (2016). The student-as-consumer approach in higher education and its effects on academic performance. *Studies in Higher Education*, 1-21. doi:10.1080/03075079.2015.1127908
- Chick, N. L., Haynie, A. & Gurung, R. A. R. (2012). *Exploring more signature pedagogies : Approaches to teaching disciplinary habits of mind*. Sterling, Va.: Stylus Publishing.
- Debowski, S. (2014). From agents of change to partners in arms: The emerging academic developer role. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 19(1), 50-56. doi:10.1080/1360144X.2013.862621
- Donald, J. (2002). *Learning to think: Disciplinary perspectives*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Emerson, L., & Mansvelt, J. (2014). 'If they're the customer, I'm the meat in the sandwich': An exploration of tertiary teachers' metaphorical constructions of teaching. *Higher*

Education Research & Development, 33(3), 469-482.

doi:10.1080/07294360.2013.841653

Emerson, L., & Mansvelt, J. (2015). Buckets and fire: Metaphors in tertiary teaching. *Studies in Higher Education*, 40(10), 1872-1888. doi:10.1080/03075079.2014.886682

Flick, U. (2002). *An introduction to qualitative research* (2. ed.). London: SAGE Publications.

Gibbs, G., & Coffey, M. (2004). The impact of training of university teachers on their teaching skills, their approach to teaching and the approach to learning of their students. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 5(1), 87-100. doi:10.1177/1469787404040463

Ginns, P., Kitay, J., & Prosser, M. (2010). Transfer of academic staff learning in a research-intensive university. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 15(3), 235-246. doi:10.1080/13562511003740783

Gurung, R. A. R., Chick, N. L. & Haynie, A. (Eds.). (2009). *Exploring signature pedagogies: Approaches to teaching disciplinary habits of mind* (First ed.). USA: Stylish Publishing.

Handal, G. (1999). Consultation using critical friends. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 1999(79), 59-70. doi:10.1002/tl.7907

Healey, M., & Jenkins, A. (2003). Discipline-based educational development. In H. Eggins, & R. Macdonald (Eds.), *The scholarship of academic development* (pp. 47-57) The Society for Research into Higher Education.

- Ho, A. S. P. (2000). A conceptual change approach to staff development: A model for programme design. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 5(1), 30-41.
doi:10.1080/136014400410088
- Ho, A., Watkins, D., & Kelly, M. (2001). The conceptual change approach to improving teaching and learning. An evaluation of a Hong Kong staff development programme. *Higher Education*, 42, 143-169.
- Jones, W. A. (2011). Variation among academic disciplines: An update on analytical frameworks and research. *The Journal of the Professoriate*, 6(1), 9-24.
- Kember, D. (1997). A reconceptualisation of the research into university academics' conceptions of teaching. *Learning and Instruction*, 7(3), 255-275.
- Knight, P. T., & Trowler, P. R. (2000). Department-level cultures and the improvement of learning and teaching. *Studies in Higher Education*, 25(1), 69-83.
doi:10.1080/030750700116028
- Kreber, C. (2010). Academics' teacher identities, authenticity and pedagogy. *Studies in Higher Education*, 35(2), 171-194. doi:10.1080/03075070902953048
- Lamont, M. (2012). Toward a comparative sociology of valuation and evaluation. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 38(21), 1-21.
- Lueddeke, G. R. (2003). Professionalising teaching practice in higher education: A study of disciplinary variation and 'teaching-scholarship'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 28(2), 213-228.

- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis : An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.
- Neumann, R. (2001). Disciplinary differences and university teaching. *Studies in Higher Education, 26*(2), 135-146. doi:10.1080/03075070120052071
- Neumann, R., Parry, S., & Becher, T. (2002). Teaching and learning in their disciplinary contexts: A conceptual analysis. *Studies in Higher Education, 27*(4), 405-417. doi:10.1080/0307507022000011525
- Postareff, L., Lindblom-Ylänne, S., & Nevgi, A. (2007). The effect of pedagogical training on teaching in higher education. *Teacher and Teacher Education, 23*, 557-571.
- Pratt, D. (1992). Conceptions of teaching. *Adult Education Quarterly, 42*(4), 203-220.
- Reckwitz, A. (2002). Toward a theory of social practices : A development in culturalist theorizing. *European Journal of Social Theory, 5*(2), 243-263. doi:10.1177/13684310222225432
- Roxå, T., & Mårtensson, K. (2013). How effects from teacher-training of academic teachers propagate into the meso level and beyond. In E. Simon, & G. Pleschova (Eds.), *Teacher development in higher education. existing programs, program impact, and future trends.* (pp. 213-233), Routledge.
- Samuelowicz, K. (1999). *Academics educational beliefs and teaching practices.* (Unpublished Ph.D.). Griffith University, School of Curriculum.

- Samuelowicz, K., & Bain, J. D. (2001). Revisiting academics' beliefs about teaching and learning. *Higher Education, 41*, 299-325.
- Saroyan, A. (2014). Agency matters: Academic developers' quests and achievements. *International Journal for Academic Development, 19*(1), 57-64.
doi:10.1080/1360144X.2013.862622
- Seawright, J., & Gerring, J. (2008). Case selection techniques in case study research. *Political Research Quarterly, 61*(2), 294-308. doi:10.1177/1065912907313077
- Shulman, L. S. (1993). Teaching as a community property. putting an end to pedagogical solitude. *Change, 25*(6), 6-7.
- Shulman, L. S. (2005). Signature pedagogies in the professions. *Daedalus, 134*, 52-59.
- Smeby, J. (1996). Disciplinary differences in university teaching. *Studies in Higher Education, 21*(1), 69-79. doi:10.1080/03075079612331381467
- Trigwell, K., & Prosser, M. (1996). Congruence between intentions and strategy in university science teachers' approaches to teaching. *Higher Education, 32*, 77-87.
- Trowler, P. (2008). *Cultures and change in higher education. Theories and practice.* Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Trowler, P. (2012). Disciplines and interdisciplinarity: Conceptual groundwork. In P. Trowler, M. Saunders & V. Bamber (Eds.), *Academic tribes and territories in the 21st century. Rethinking the significance of disciplines in higher education* (1st ed., pp. 5-29) Routledge.

Trowler, P. (2014). Depicting and researching disciplines: Strong and moderate essentialist approaches. *Studies in Higher Education*, 39(10), 1720-1731.

doi:10.1080/03075079.2013.801431

Ulriksen, L. (2009). The implied student. *Studies in Higher Education*, 34(5), 517-532.

doi:10.1080/03075070802597135

Wegner, E., & Nückles, M. (2015). Knowledge acquisition or participation in communities of practice? academics' metaphors of teaching and learning at the university. *Studies in Higher Education*, 40(4), 624-643. doi:10.1080/03075079.2013.842213

Yin, R. K. (2012). *Applications of case study research* (3. ed. ed.). Thousand Oaks: SAGE.

Young, P. (2010). Generic or discipline-specific? an exploration of the significance of discipline-specific issues in researching and developing teaching and learning in higher education. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 47(1), 115-124.

doi:10.1080/14703290903525887