1-2013

Towards a Comprehensive Model of SoTL at a German University

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Abstract

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is the underpinning element of the project "teach4TU" at the Technische Universität Braunschweig in Germany, funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research and coordinated by the Center of Excellence in Lower Saxon Higher Education (CELSHE). "teach4TU" aims at the university-wide enhancement of the quality of academic teaching and learning by offering multi-level trainings as well as funding innovative teaching projects. Central elements of "teach4TU" are traditional seminars, peer observation, peer and individual consultation, and team teaching. They all lead to a broad exchange on pedagogical topics, foster teaching collaborations, and set the path for a comprehensive approach to SoTL. The project has started in spring 2012; therefore this paper presents a con

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Key words: international SoTL, organizational change, teacher training, innovative teaching, teaching portfolio

Introduction

The Federal Ministry of Education and Research has launched a large-scale program in 2011 to enhance the quality of academic teaching and learning (BMBF, 2012). From 2011 to 2020, around 2 billion Euros are planned to be invested into this program in two time periods; 186 universities all over Germany are funded for the first period from 2011/2012 to 2016. The Technische Universität Braunschweig has taken this chance to establish a program for all its academic teachers. Starting in April 2012, the credo of this program called "teach4TU" is to get academic teachers together. It is a fact that talking about one's teaching experience enhances the reflection on it and therefore reaching a deeper level of understanding (MacDonald, 1999, Prebble, 2005, Bell, 2001). This is why "teach4TU" includes peer observation, peer consultation, and team teachings next to traditional seminars on topics around teaching and learning in Higher Education. Another level of getting teachers together is the program for innovative teaching in which several teaching projects receive funding for the realization of original and creative ideas. "teach4TU" is coordinated and executed by the Center of Excellence in Lower Saxon Higher Education (CELSHE) under the leadership of the vice president for teaching, learning and further education at the Technische Universität Braunschweig.

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is understood here as a "broad set of practices that engage teachers in looking closely and critically at student learning for the purpose of improving their own courses and programs. (Hutchings, Huber, & Ciccone, 2011, p. 7)". In all elements of "teach4TU", this definition is kept in mind to set the path for a scholarly approach to teaching and learning at the university. In the following, these elements will be described with the goal to point out aspects that are beneficial to SoTL.

Training Program for Academic Teachers

The training program for academic teachers, mainly for mid-level staff (non-tenure, doctorates, and post-doctorates) is offered on three levels altogether. The first level called "Basic Training" covers a basic knowledge of teaching and learning in Higher Education. Especially the training concept of this level is based on the longtime experience of the CELSHE (Marx, 2006). The second level called "Co-Teaching" concentrates on competences in peer consultation and co-teaching as well as a deepened knowledge of teaching practices. The third level called "Academic Consultant in the Disciplines" focuses on the further development of a special field covering competences in moderation and organizational development. Additionally, a special program is offered for professors and assistant professors.
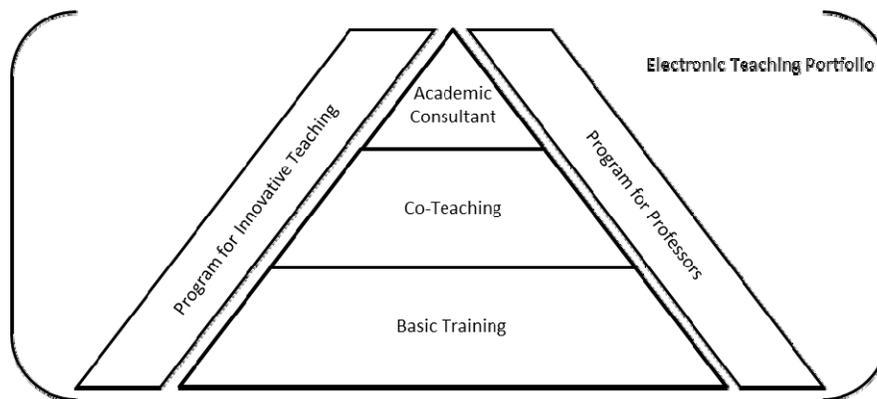
Figure 1. Multi-levelled training program framed by special programs and electronic teaching portfolio

From the three levels, the first has been put into practice since fall 2012. The other two levels are going to start in the course of 2013, therefore they are described on conceptual terms.

Basic Training
On the first level, groups of 14 participants attend the program together for a period of one year. They come from different disciplines and have at least one upcoming course to teach. The program starts with two one-day seminars on the basics of teaching and learning as well as the practicing of methods. These seminars are offered before the semester starts to give the participants the opportunity to implement their new findings into their course. When the semester starts, they are making appointments to visit each other in tandems. They receive an introduction into peer observation and negotiate with each other on what to observe and how to give feedback. These peer observations are the first step of taking another view on teaching (Bell, 2001) and therefore of SoTL practice itself. In parallel with these peer observations, the participants are also offered to be observed by teaching experts from the CELSHE. On top of this, all participants attend two plenary appointments during the semester in which they get together for peer consultations. This means, they have the possibility to describe a problem situation in their teaching for which their co-participants make suggestions. This format also sets the path for SoTL. The close and critical look may lead to course improvement, not only for oneself but also for the co-participants.

Before the second semester starts, the participants attend another two seminars of which one covers the topic of classroom moderation and negotiation and an open topic

chosen by the participants, e.g. on technology enhanced learning or methods of assessments. During the second semester, they are once more observed by the teaching experts and attend two sessions of peer consultation. A new element which is yet to be planned is the co-teaching instead of peer observation. Here, the participants of the second level come into play. They support the participants in a more intensive way than just to observe one single course session. They give advice on the planning, attend one or more sessions, and give a more profound feedback on what the two have negotiated on as focal points. In analogy to a model by Böss-Ostendorf & Senf (2010) that describes the development phases of a teacher in five stages, they are entering the next level of SoTL. As the participants are being accompanied over a longer period, they are able to concentrate more on their teaching practices. In addition, the co-teachers have a deepened understanding of teaching theory and practice, so that the considered points of interest are more developed as well.

Co-Teaching
The concept of the training program's second level is being put on the road in order to start in the spring of 2013 when the second semester of the basic training program starts. The main idea here is to train academic teachers to become peer consultants, so that they serve as multipliers of good teaching. The goals are to foster the interdisciplinary exchange on teaching within the university, to reach more academic teachers than central institutions can ever reach, and to achieve a bottom-up cultural change on academic teaching. The training covers aspects of SoTL and consultation to achieve both, the ability to articulate a profound understanding of one's own teaching and to share one's knowledge about teaching with colleagues. This program is not putting as much stress on the format of seminars as the basic training, but focusses more on peer consultation and peer teaching development. This of course involves questions on teaching practices in an increasingly scholarly manner.

The participants in this program practice peer teachings with co-participants from the co-teaching program as well as with participants from the basic training program. This leads to more exchange about teaching beyond the borders of training programs. Furthermore, the co-teachers are of course free to choose their peer teacher in their own subject field or elsewhere not connected to the programs. By establishing a culture of exchange and knowledge sharing, it is intended to set up a community of teaching practice.

Academic Consultant in the Disciplines
As the third level of the training program is consecutively based on the first two, it is yet to be conceptualized and planned to be started in the fall of 2013. It takes a step further from the co-teacher program. The perspective changes from an individual point of view on professionalized academic teaching to a more organizational point of view. While the co-teaching concept is based on mainly interdisciplinary teaching couples, the academic consultant focusses on his or her own discipline. It is the goal to further develop a very subject oriented culture of teaching and learning, not only for oneself but together with like-minded colleagues of the same institution. The range of action is broader, as it is also possible to change the nature of modules or even whole degree programs. This involves a very sensitive approach to organizational change management; therefore the participants in this program are to be trained mainly in the managerial areas such as moderation, negotiation, or organizational learning processes. On the level of personal development, it is planned to set up a SoTL project here, so that the participants can research their own teaching. By the end of the program, they can rely on well evaluated evidence on the excellence of their teaching which is based on what the Carnegie Foundation defines as scholarly work (Hutchings et al., 2011).

Program for Professors and Assistant Professors
A special program has been established for professors and assistant professors, as this target group has slightly different topics of interest than mid-level staff members. This program focuses on aspects such as executive functions and personnel leadership. It offers single consultations and observations on demand by the teaching experts of the CELSHE. If requested, it is also possible to have team consultations and closed seminars for the professor's staff. The program is completed by regular events with expert lectures and discussions with representatives of the executive committee.

On top of this, professors are supported to foster the organizational development on teaching and learning aspects in so-called subject circles. In these circles, members from any status (students, tutors, mid-level staff, and/or professors) make enhancement on the teaching and learning in their discipline together. Ideally with the help of co-teachers and academic consultants, these circles are based on scholarly work and resemble an organizational level of SoTL.

Program for Innovative Teaching

In comparison to the training program for academic teachers, the program for innovative teaching has a more practice oriented, experimental character which is intended to communicate new ways of teaching to the public. Currently, nine projects are funded on an average of one year to realize their teaching ideas. The concepts range from learning by teaching with mobile laboratories in schools over game-based learning integrated into lectures up to a student-led exhibition project. These projects are subject to evaluation and therefore a great asset to SoTL.

Electronic Teaching Portfolio

A crucial element of "teach4TU" connecting all other elements is the electronic teaching portfolio. From 2013 on, it will serve as a tool for personal reflection on teaching on the one hand, and on the other hand also for the exchange of experiences. The user can collect digital artifacts on his or her teaching as well as write about key questions and topics that are either suggested by the system or posed by him or herself. He or she can decide on what shall be presented to the public and be subject to discussion. The electronic teaching portfolio can serve as a documentation tool for SoTL. In the training program, the portfolio can be used as a connecting element between the peer consultations and observations. It can be used during peer consultations by co-teachers, or it can be used collectively in a subject circle. The projects within the program for innovative teaching can use it to document their progress during the semester. Assistant professors can use it as a showcase-portfolio for their tenure assessment.

Questions

Since "teach4TU" has just started in 2012, there is neither enough information on teachers who are already actually practicing SoTL, nor have they been identified in the training programs yet. The projects within the program of innovative teaching will pronounce their topics of inquiry in a short time. So, the questions on SoTL are of a somewhat general nature: What is the point of interest in teaching and learning? Which are suitable methods for inquiry? How can teachers be supported by the CELSHE? In the course of the project, it will be a comprehensive task to gather evaluation results on motivation, acceptance and efficacy from each and single part of the project named

above. These will help to understand and anticipate the cultural change of teaching and learning, building the nurturing grounds for SoTL.

Conclusion

To sum it all up, even though the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning is not the primary goal in "teach4TU", all elements in the project serve as ideal grounds for a scholarly approach to teaching and learning. It is obvious that a cultural change cannot be undergone within a short period of time. It is therefore firstly intended to value academic teaching altogether by training, consulting, supporting and funding. An equally important element of SoTL besides inquiry and understanding of teaching and learning is to go public for exchange and collaboration. In the beginning, it was stated that the credo of "teach4TU" is to get academic teachers together, or in other words to be "a place where people can find colleagues for discussion and collaboration around pedagogical issues of common interest (Hutchings et al., 2011, p. 13)". This is meant on a one-to-one basis such as in peer observation and co-teaching, but also on a group level in peer consultations and subject circles as well as on a public level with the program of innovative teaching or the electronic teaching portfolio. While in Germany, the discussion circles around whether SoTL is an applicable issue for German academic teachers or not (Huber, 2011), "teach4TU" is making a clear step into this direction. In the years to come, it will be interesting to keep track on how SoTL develops with respect to individual cases as well as the university as an institution.

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