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Students' Competency - The Intersection of Didactics and Organisation of Higher Education



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Abstract

Output orientation in the realm of education has become a requirement for higher education that is now slowly starting to be manifested in its curricula. This raises the question: what competences students are supposed to develop in the course of their studies and how these competences can be developed. In a first step, this article will therefore deal with the notion of competence. The next step involves an analysis of the various approaches to didactics in higher education, which plays an important role in the promotion of students' competency as well as in the design of individual lesson plans and of the curriculum for individual classes as well as for the entire programme. This section will also touch on the interconnection of research and teaching. It will be shown that, due to the specific way in which higher education is organized, any course of studies promotes the development of competences, which might seem, at first sight, beyond the grasp of didactics of higher education. The core of this article will be the introduction of a model which depicts the development of students' competency in the intersection of didactics and organisation of higher education. The development of students' competences is subject to various factors influencing each other. This article does not aim at presenting conclusive results but is intended to spark a productive debate.

Students' Competency

The notion of competency has found widespread popularity in social and scientific discourses, because it also incorporates the individual's capacity for self-organisation (ideally present as a disposition) in addition to traditional conceptions of knowledge and skills (Kirchhöfer, 2004, p. 63). One of the best-established definitions was formulated by Weinert and forms the basis for numerous further definitions, essentially dominating the discourse on matters of education, at least in Austria. The concept of competence refers to an individually or interindividually available collection of prerequisites for successful action in meaningful task domains. (Weinert, 2002). Even though the delineation to other concepts can be difficult, this definition at least allows for the identification of various basic characteristics of competency (Kaufhold, 2006):

- Competency is concerned with specific situations which call for action.
- Competency is tied to a specific situation and a specific context.
- Competency is tied to the subject.
- Competency can be developed.

Competency only becomes visible through performance. Only then it becomes apparent what kind of use people make of their competency in a specific situation (Slepcevic-Zach & Tafner, 2011).

Competency is therefore content specific; it is manifested in the way people deal with the kind of problems they encounter in their (professional) life and it is always "something deeply personal and at the same time more precious than anything bought or gifted" (Ziegler, Stern, & Neubauer, 2012, p. 14).

The following definitions and considerations are mostly concerned with schools (Slepcevic-Zach & Tafner, 2012), but can be easily transferred to the realm of higher education. Any programme of higher education is usually designed to provide a science-based preparation for a professional career, even though individual programmes (especially in the case of universities of applied sciences) may differ widely with regard to their specialisations. From the students' perspective, the applicability of skills and knowledge in various situations is of great importance. The above listed characteristics of competency can also be found in higher education. The development of students' competency is, next to research, one of the core tasks of any university. This task has not always been paid sufficient attention from the universities (for example in Austria), which is reflected in the discourse on the didactics of higher education and the development of students' competency.

Development of Competency between Research and Teaching

Recently there has been renewed scientific interest in the didactics of higher education. Questions concerning didactic and methodological implementation, as well as the general objective and mission of universities, have been raised (Egger & Merkt, 2012). Like any institution in the domain of education, universities are often accused of resisting reform. This accusation is however missing its target since universities find themselves in a process of constant change, even though these changes might be triggered more by external initiative rather than the institutions' own desire for reform. Teaching at universities in particular has been subject to many changes recently, on the structural level as well as with regard to foundational values. Universities (at least in the German speaking countries) attach great importance to the unity of research and teaching, so it is somewhat baffling that "years may pass until a student has struggled through the chaos of the foundation courses and encounters research for the first time. Many faculty members view students merely as a nuisance, singularly devoted to preventing them for their true calling: research." (Hielscher, Koch, & Schmidt, 2002, p. 1). This attitude can be easily explained by the fact that nearly any faculty member in higher education (in most of the European countries) is evaluated based on their reputation, which is primarily based on research output, acquisition of third-party funding, and the list of publications. The quality of teaching is essentially irrelevant from that perspective (Höscher & Suchanek, 2011). Although this disparity of ideal and reality persists, competency-based teaching and learning is attracting more and more attention, primarily in the context of a comprehensive notion of quality management.

A comparison of various courses of studies however also shows differences in students' competency levels that cannot be traced back to teaching alone (Shaeper, 2008; Schaeper & Briedis, 2004). The different levels of importance attached to codification and regimentation, classification and framing, transparency and coordination in different disciplines, and curricula and organisational structures of programmes seem to explain these differences (Bernstein, 1977; Schaeper, 2008). Development of competency at universities is therefore not restricted to teaching, but takes place in various areas, on a conscious and subconscious level. Formal, non-formal, as well as informal educational processes have to be considered. Formal learning takes place in educational institutions (eg. at a university) with structured learning objectives, learning time, etc. being pre-defined. This kind of learning culminates in certification, if successful. Non-formal learning is systematic too (in terms of learning time and learning tools) and goal oriented but does not take place in educational institutions and its results are (usually) not certified. Informal learning finally does not occur in a structured fashion or an institutional context and is not certified. It can be goal oriented, but not necessarily (European Commission, 1995). Informal learning must not be disregarded, even in educational institutions, since it is assumed to make up for more than three quarters of human learning in general, according to the estimations of the Faure-report (Faure, Herrera, Kaddoura, Lopes, Petrovski, Rahnama & Ward, 1973; Molzberger, 2007).

Different Approaches to Didactics of Higher Education

The question of didactics of higher education is currently experiencing a certain renaissance. The last time such concerns had dominated the European scientific and social discourse had been in the 1960s. Even then there was a general consensus that didactics of higher education must not be confined to methodological issues of teaching but had to be "developed with a strong sensibility for a highly differentiated system of disciplines with varying contents, objectives and methods and a pronounced commitment to the scientific method" (Wildt & Jahnke, 2010, p. 4). This led to the further differentiation of various approaches in didactics of higher education. Huber (1979) distinguishes the following six approaches:

- teaching technology approach
- sociopsychological approach
- curricular approach
- theory of science approach
- professional experience approach
- socialisation theory approach

These categories can be extended to situation oriented, participant oriented, as well as practical experience and project-oriented approaches, under consideration of socioeconomic and institutional framework requirements (Wildt & Jahnke, 2010). Nowadays, research into didactics of higher educations can be grouped into three main branches (Metz-Göckel, Kamphans & Scholkmann, 2012), which overlap in certain areas. The first branch is devoted to academic teaching per se and is concerned

with students' learning progress and development of competency. Another concern is the measurement of this development (Braun & Hannover, 2008). The second branch is focussed on teachers, their qualification, further training, and promotion by the university (Dany, 2007). The third branch is finally comprised by interinstitutional research in higher education concerned with the structures and processes of education on the university level (Auferkorte-Michaelis, 2005; Metz-Göckel, 2008; Metz-Göckel, Auferkorte-Michaelis, & Zimmermann, 2005). In addition, there is research on super-ordinate and overlapping topics, such as changes on organisational level of programmes, junior staff development, modularisation, and competency orientation of curricula (Faulhammer, 2005; Staudacher, 2012; Wergen, 2011). Research into all these three branches as well as into the overlapping topics is primarily aimed at the development of students' competency, even though different approaches may be pursued.

Anyone interested in teaching at the university level will soon encounter the catch phrase "research-guided-teaching". Universities have a variety of tasks, the most important being research and teaching, forming the main pillar of "tertiary education in system of mass education" (Pellert, 1999). Luhmann views research and teaching as separated systems, "but the fact that they operate on a unified basis has a hardly determinable impact on scientific publications and a maybe even stronger impact on a certain science focus and alienation from practical experience characteristic for university education." (Luhmann, 1997, p. 784). Another aspect to bear in mind is the fact that the development of students' competency is not the sole responsibility of didactics of higher education, but also the objective of numerous measures in the area of human resource management and individual and organisational development. Such measures, even when undertaken without the guidance of any didactic considerations, have a non-negligible impact on teachers and students.

Universities as Organisations

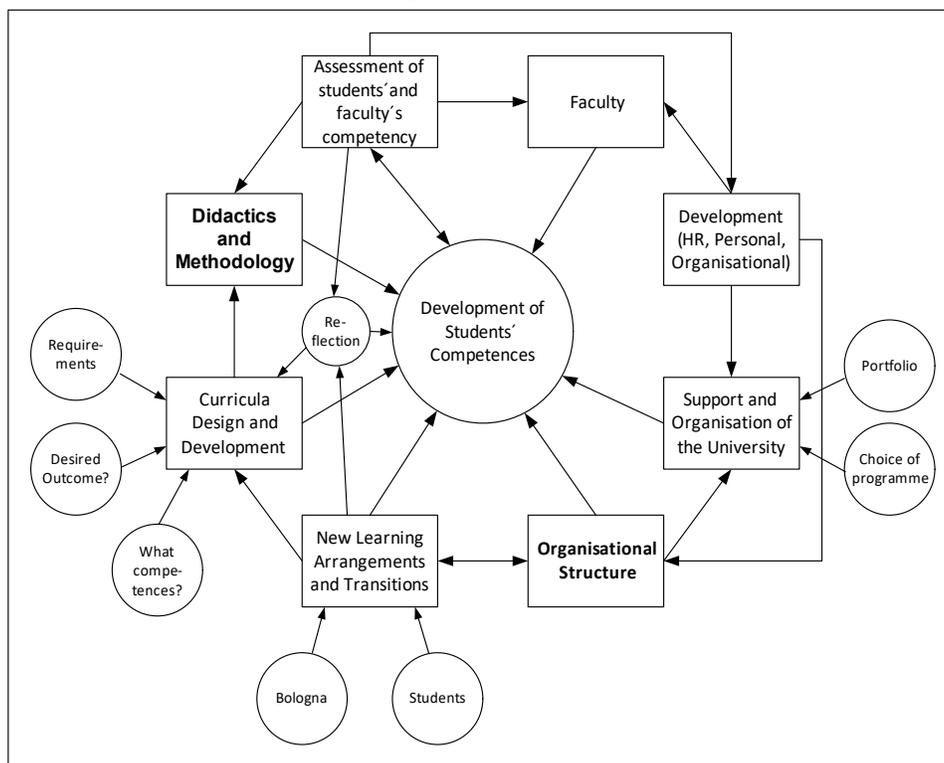
Universities are expert organisations since they do not only produce implicit and explicit knowledge, but also promote and disseminate it (Pellert, 1999). Expert organisations are viewed as knowledge based organisations which trade in personalized services with a high degree of customer-integration (Students are only viewed as customers in the context of administrative issues in this article. In the context of (research-guided) teaching, they are always co-producers.) These organisations display a lot of characteristics that are also found at universities: eg. orientation towards their own profession's respective disciplines instead of orientation towards the goals of the entire organisation, tensions between administration and profession, a high degree of individual autonomy, and a low degree of institutional autonomy. (Grossmann, Pellert & Gottwald, 1997). Just like institutions in general, universities are social organisations that shape the potential for activities, defining the framework of not just the agent's own activities, but also the activities of those around him. This process creates both formal and informal norms and notions of desirable outcomes within the context of universities (eg. third-party funding). Another result is a shared knowledge of the world within the organisation and how its components are interrelated (Schimank, 2008). The question of what category of organisations universities fall into, is best addressed by looking at the distinction of organisations formed around work

(work organisations) and organisations formed around shared interests (interest organisations) (Schimank, 2005). Work organisations are established by the main pillars of the organisation (eg. the owners), who then look for suitable employees. Interest organisations, in contrast, form around "individual agents with shared interests, who unite their individual potentials to better accomplish shared objectives." (Schimank, 2008, p. 160). This usually leads to problems, since universities are work organisations behaving like interest organisations.

Development of Students' Competency: Models and Factors

As an organisation, the university has been subject to a process of transformation from traditional agency to a learning agency (Meier, 2009). The reason why the university should become a learning agency is to support the students' learning. The model depicted in Figure 1 represents various factors influencing the development of students' competency. The focus is on factors emerging with the university itself and the society surrounding the institution. Any processes of socialisation beyond studies, education, performance motivation, relevant prior experience, etc. are beyond the scope of this model.

Figure 1. Model of potential factors influencing the development of students' competency



Didactics of higher education is concerned with didactics and methodology, assessment of students' and teachers' competency, curriculum design, new learning arrangements, and transitions between various stages of the educational system. Didactics is understood in the broadest sense, dealing with "questions

of teaching and learning on all levels of the educational system and in all areas of subject matter” (Terhart, 2009, p. 133), including methodology. Despite this broad understanding, curriculum design has been added as a separate factor, to achieve increased emphasis and also to acknowledge the fact that curriculum design is influenced by various factors which are entirely unrelated to didactic considerations. The main question is how individual factors influence each other. Each of these components is rooted in further areas of research, concerned with the choice of outcomes to be accomplished by a given curriculum with regard the specific competences to be developed in students. Assessment of competency furthermore must not be confined to grading and awarding of credits and certification but should also aim at providing constructive feedback to students and teachers. The top priority should be the support of learning processes and not so much performance assessment in the traditional sense. The teaching process itself is in the area of the faculty-members, the assessments, and the reflection. The organisational structure of universities also plays an important role in the development of students' competency. This involves the support provided to students by the organisation (counselling, jobs, library, etc.) as well as the field of human resource management (HR), personal development, and organisational development having a profound impact on faculty. This impact is not just manifested in trainings, but in the established organisational culture, which is, for instance, reflected in recruitment policies.

If there is to be a focus on teaching and thus on students' competency, the organisation university has to consider these interdependencies even for changes that do not directly fall within the category of didactics of higher education. It is also important to consider that not all competences the university claims to aim at developing among its graduates can only be developed in a classroom context. A capacity for self-organisation, assertiveness, and the ability to take criticism can be encouraged in the context of teaching, but they are also shaped by the organisation itself, its values, norms, and processes.

The model introduced in this article should be understood as a work in progress. It needs further refinements to capture the dynamic of academic competencies. The model serves to illustrate interconnections influencing the development of students' competency from the university's perspective. For this purpose, the university is seen as an expert organisation in the sense of a learning organisation. Individual factors have been elaborated upon. The results of such an analysis should help universities to better support students about the development of their competency, while acknowledging interdependencies influencing the organisation itself.

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