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Short bio: Martin G. Erikson is Associate Professor of psychology at the Department of Educational Research and Development at University of Borås, Sweden, and is currently the university's Chair of the Research and Education Board. He completed his PhD in psychology at Lund University in 2006, with a dissertation on *possible selves*. His main research interests concern various aspects of the self-concept, science studies and matters concerning quality and management in higher education.

Proposal

Title: Eight Challenges for Institutions who Wish to Handle Teaching Competence as a Strategic Quality Goal

Abstract: Teaching competence is often discussed in relation to rewards of present day achievements, rather than in terms of strategic long-term quality. A call for a shift towards a long-term quality perspective on teaching competence is presented, and eight challenges, which have to be met in such a process, are identified. These challenges concern the active responsibility of institutional management and the professoriate; promoting demands of highest academic standards for educational specialists; selecting an appropriate time-frame, and relevant concepts (with a particular focus on the excellence-concept). Further, the challenges include the teachers' understanding of their disciplines, of educational theories and of research methods relevant for evaluating educational results. The final challenge concerns programs for rewarding teachers. Taken together, these challenges presents features, which are suggested to promote a quality culture where teaching competence is seen as a long-term quality goal.

Text of paper:

In recent decades, we have seen a growing interest in acknowledging teaching skills in higher education. A common theme is the concern that teaching skills often come to be regarded as less valuable than research skills, a concern with strong roots in Boyer's (1990) writings and the subsequent movement promoting 'Scholarship of Teaching and Learning'. As a result, schemes for rewarding teaching competence have been developed in many countries around the world, both as national and as institutional initiatives (e.g., Chalmers, 2011; Chalmers,



Lee and Walker, 2008; Chism, 2006; Gosling, 2004; Olsson & Roxå, 2013; O'Meara, 2005; Turner & Gosling, 2012). Still, it has been argued that well-formulated policies on teaching competence, with clear goals to be achieved, are scarce (e.g., Biesta, 2009; Chism, 2006; Ramsden & Martin, 1996). Many institutions issuing rewards apparently have not found it necessary to establish criteria and some institutions are even explicit in regarding teaching skills as something that cannot be described in general terms (Chism, 2006). While the focus has been on the rewards of individual teachers, Skelton (2008) argued that the relation between teaching competence and strategic development has been ignored. It can be further argued that this imbalance has received surprisingly little interest. In particular, the discussion has concerned the rewards for previous achievements rather than a promotion of future development in desired directions. Still, if our overall goal is to secure and develop educational academic quality, it ought to come natural that the definition, development, assessment and reward of teacher competence should be seen in the framework of long-term strategic quality enhancement. The purpose of the present paper is to identify challenges of seeing teacher competence in terms of strategic quality dimensions. The challenges are intended to serve as tools for institutions wishing to give teaching competence a more prominent role in their long-term quality programs.

First challenge: To define and take responsibilities

In order to place teaching competence in a context of long-term quality enhancement, institutional and departmental management as well as of the professoriate must assume active responsibility for taking these dimensions into account. In particular for institutions currently focusing on teaching rewards, this responsibility includes taking a lead in shifting the perspectives to long-term future development. A danger here is the lower status of teaching in comparison to research: For an institutions where the management and the professoriate are focused on the quality and the strategic development of research, leaving the matter of teaching skills to educational specialists, the efforts needed to actually grasp the complexity of teaching competence and to give it enough attention should not be underestimated. Here, it can be argued that the professoriate ought to be expected to assume more responsibility for intellectual leadership in, and the academic quality of, teaching (e.g., Macfarlane, 2012). For example, the professoriate cannot be left out when dealing with the different quality cultures that exist in various disciplines; differences which are reported to have caused problems in previous attempts to develop teaching competence (Chalmers, 2011; Huber & Moreale, 2002; Neumann, 2001).

Second challenge: Handling academic developers as a strategic quality resource

In many institutions, teaching competence is a responsibility handled over to educational specialists and academic developers. While their role will remain crucial, their assignments must be set by those responsible for strategic quality, both among management and senior scholars at large. It is hardly the responsibility for academic developers to set the ambition for how teaching competence ought to develop as a strategic quality resource. The demands on academic developers and educational specialists must also be particularly high and everyone, from students to the vice-chancellor, has the right to place such demands. It is crucial that the achievements of the educational specialists and the academic developers have so high academic standards that they gain the respect of the professoriate at large. Further, Patel (2013) showed that educational developers often are positioned outside the main academic



environments, sometimes giving developers a restricted outlook on scholarship as well as few opportunities to engage in it (see also Fraser & Ling, 2014). Patel (2013) argued that, in some institutions, educational developers need help in establishing a culture of scholarship for their own activities and in interacting with the rest of the institution's research community. I suggest that such efforts in themselves ought to be seen as a matter of strategic quality enhancement, where the management has a great responsibility for promoting such a development.

Third challenge: The timeframes of seeing teaching competence as a strategic goal

Institutional management and the professoriate ought to define the development of teaching competence they wish to see in three, five or ten years' time. Here, it becomes evident that they need to understand the full complexity of teaching competence, or such a task would not be feasible. In particular, institutional management and the professoriate should consider the degree to which teaching has lower status than research in their institution and how this possible gap has influenced expectations regarding teaching skills. To formulate such strategic goals of expected teaching competence is not the least to take a stand on ambitions. It may even be harmful to define teaching skills to be rewarded based on teachers' present-day performance, if these do not measure up to a standard that could be achieved or even expected. Here, Roxå, Olsson and Mårtensson (2008) were clear: Institutions with the ambition to enhance teaching practice must be explicit in the demands they make on their teachers. Teachers seeking assessment and rewards will, if the policy is well devised, strive to attain the level of competence that is rewarded, while competence not pointed out in the policy will be less likely to be developed. Therefore, the identification and definition of criteria for rewarding teaching skills ought to be based on an analysis of the competence actually needed and the results of development of these competences.

Fourth challenge: To see what is communicated through concepts and policies

When formulating policies, in particular when also aiming to enhance academic quality, concepts and conceptual clarity must be taken into account. The adoption of concepts and the way they are handled, for example when shifting focus from teaching rewards to the development of teaching competence, is a factor influencing both employee motivation and other stakeholders' attitudes. An interesting example of this is the notion of 'teaching excellence', which has been used rather freely in recent years (e.g., Chalmers, Lee, & Walker, 2008; Healey, 2000; Skelton, 2008; Turner & Gosling, 2012). In academia, 'excellence' has previously been used predominantly in reference to outstanding research and research environments. To be defined as an excellent research environment, the researchers must have a solid international reputation concerning both quality and quantity of research and it must have advanced the frontiers of research. The management and professoriate of an institution wishing to use the concept of teaching excellence must, thus, consider what teaching activities are to be expected from an individual teacher if teaching excellence is to measure up to the kind of quality associated with research excellence. Still, these discussions are absent from the literature on teaching excellence, even when the concept of teaching excellence is subject to critical scrutiny, as, for example, in Skelton (2008). The main question here is simple: What messages are being sent to various stakeholders if different standards are used to define teaching excellence and research excellence? One possible interpretation is that teaching is less important than research and, thus, that there is no need to



maintain comparable standards. Another possible interpretation is that it is not feasible to place as high expectations on teachers as can be placed on researchers. Are these the impressions we wish to convey to prospective students?

Fifth challenge: Understanding and promoting teachers' disciplinary competence

Teaching requires a broad understanding of the discipline, not only because disciplinary knowledge provides the framework for what to be taught, but also because the teacher's outlook on quality, relevance and applicability are rooted in her/his socialization in a disciplinary culture (e.g. Healey, 2000; Hutchings, 2000; Neumann, 2001). Shulman (1986, 1987) argued that disciplinary knowledge is not only a matter of understanding theories and concepts, but also of being able to determine what students find difficult to grasp and what is appropriate to teach. This concerns for example what students must not be allowed to miss, or their understanding of how old theories, now disregarded, still are important for the understanding of a discipline's development (Bass, 1999; Riordan, 2008; Shulman, 1987). Different levels also call for different disciplinary knowledge: The demands placed on a PhD supervisor differ considerably from those placed on a lecturer in an introductory undergraduate course. Still, in her review of reward programs, Chism (2006) found that mastery of subject matter was regarded as an aspect of teaching skills in only 24% of the programs reviewed. I will go so far as to suggest that before we can employ ways of defining, recording and assessing relevant disciplinary knowledge with validity and reliability, our grasp of teaching competence and its development will be very limited.

Sixth challenge: Enhancing quality through teacher's understanding of educational theories

Proficiency in educational theories has been pointed out as fundamental for teaching competence (e.g., Kreber, 2002; Kreber & Cranton, 2000; Magin, 1998). While different educational theoretical standpoints will have their various defenders, Schulman (1986, 1987) pointed out that teaching competence is dependent of an amalgamation of educational and disciplinary knowledge. Ramsden (1998) also argued that proficiency in educational theoretical knowledge could help teachers develop a more professional outlook on their role. Still, academic teachers outside the field of education often have little interest in this area. If a quality program can meet this challenge, it would not only be an opportunity to improve educational quality but would most probably help enhance the status of teaching at the institution. It is also important to point out the richness of potential theoretical approaches outside the realm of traditional learning theories. A limited theoretical model concerned with a particular aspect, for example students' self-confidence, may not solve all problems for an institution's teaching staff. Still, for a teacher unfamiliar with the educational literature but with a concern for students encountering difficult material, such a model may be of much greater value than more elaborate and advanced models.

A long-term development of teaching competence must also support teachers' familiarity with educational literature relating to their own field. For example there are about twenty scientific journals publishing papers on medical education, and at least three journals publishing exclusively on higher education in psychology. Let us assume that a teacher has spent time on new elaborate teaching practices without even searching such literature of relevance. This teacher may simply have spent a great deal of time constructing methods already developed and published. It is hardly in the interest of an institution to encourage such a waste of time or such experiments on students.



Seventh challenge: Enhancing quality through skills in educational research

In order to develop educational practice, its outcome must be investigated and presented in a way that safeguards the validity and reliability of the teachers' studies. This calls for skills in educational research methods and for skills in writing comprehensive reports on the findings made through these methods. Further, Hounsell (1996) argued that the ability to influence teaching standards and practices in a discipline, nationally or internationally, is a crucial criterion for scholarly teaching. An institution wishing to develop teaching competence as a quality goal ought to consider the benefits of expecting such influence. If we wish to talk about 'excellent teaching' being on a par with 'excellent research,' it is even reasonable that such an international impact must be a basic prerequisite for 'teaching excellence' (see also Boyer, 1990; Skelton, 2008). Further, a research-based approach may provide new perspectives on the improvement of teaching. For example, Bass (1999) argued that one general difference between teaching and research is that a 'problem' in teaching is something unwanted, while a 'problem' in research is the motor behind the entire enterprise. To reverse this outlook in teaching could be a thrilling challenge for an institutions management and professoriate. There are also possible chain effects: Bernstein (2013) suggested that new educational developmental projects would be easier to initiate if there were good and inspiring examples to learn from, and that the better the examples, the higher a new project can aim (see also Chism, 2006; Shreeve, 2011).

It is not feasible to require that all teachers have advanced knowledge in educational research methodology, but institutions taking a serious approach to educational development should ensure that such methodological competence is available to teaching staff. In fact, it is not unreasonable for teachers to demand that arrangements for help with evaluations be made at the institutional level. As argued by Sharma and McShane (2008), adopting an elaborated research design when evaluating innovative educational projects will also bridge the gap between disciplinary research and teaching, augmenting the academic status of the latter.

Eighth challenge: Defining a quality-focused reward system

Last but not least is the need to define reward programs for skilled teachers that will meet the strategic needs, once these have been defined and decided. While many reward systems exist, their benefits are not always clear and need to be further investigated: Chism (2006) argued that little is known about how teaching rewards actually influence behavior. However, it stands to reason that one goal of rewarding teachers must be to encourage teachers to strive for improvement. It has indeed been argued that reward systems not designed for quality enhancement even can be counterproductive (e.g., Olsson & Roxå, 2013). Still, rewards policies sometimes represent symbolic acknowledgment of the importance of teaching more than actual efforts to recognize truly skilled teachers according to Chism (2006). Moreover, Chism (2006) concluded that the main effect of teaching rewards seems to be affirmation of individual teachers rather than inspiring others to follow in their footsteps. Therefore, there seems to be good reasons to find new approaches to the rewarding of teaching competence. In particular, the advantages of not focusing solely on rewarding individual teachers need to be taken into account, as teachers perform in educational environments and these environments may prove to be as valid a level of analysis when assessing competence and developmental projects as the individual teachers (see, e.g., Abualarub, Karseth & Stensaker, 2013, for a discussion of developmental perspectives on educational environments).



By shifting the focus from rewards to strategic quality, it seems reasonable to reward teaching as an on-going process where teachers are not given a reward as a culmination of a development but also as a starting point for new challenges. In such a project, the complexity of teaching competence can become an asset instead of being a problem. Instead of defining ‘what constitutes a skilled teacher,’ institutional management and the professoriate could define standards for ‘what constitutes a teacher who is skilled and determined enough to be given the chance to develop even further.’ A basic approach could be to reward specific innovations or development projects, evaluated using proper research methods and in relation to a sound theoretical foundation, particularly if they could lead to a peer-reviewed publication. Another approach could be to widen the ways teaching competence can give career opportunities. One example is post-doc positions for educational research relating to the post-docs discipline.

Also the use of teaching portfolios for assessment purposes should be put into question if a quality focused reward system is to be developed. As suggested by Erikson, Erlandson and Erikson (2015), the practice surrounding these documents would benefit from more rigorous scholarly expectations, particularly if used in an attempt to enhance teaching skills (see also Buckridge, 2008).

Conclusions

Taken together, the eight challenges shows the complexity of teaching competence but also the relevance of seeing teaching competence in terms of strategic quality enhancement. Not all the challenges presented above will be equally relevant for all institutions, and their demarcations are arbitrary. Still, by exploring them they can give each institution a tool for analyzing how their own policies, organization and practices support teaching competence as a long-term strategic quality goal. If a common theme for the challenges should be identified, it could be the need for a quality culture promoting the development of teaching competence in all its complexities. Every institution has a quality culture, but not always the culture they could benefit from the most. The challenges outlined above indicate values, practices and outlooks that could constitute a culture promoting teaching competence as a matter of strategic quality. After all, it is difficult to imagine an institution that would not benefit from making teaching more interesting and rewarding for both the teachers and the students. It is worth mentioning the importance of concepts once more: Today, many institutions are occupied with notions of teaching excellence and student satisfaction. With new approaches to teaching competence, we might hope for a future where we shift towards student excellence and teacher satisfaction.

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