

It takes two to Tango!

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Abstract — If you want to become “teacher of the year” - how do you do? The easy answer is to get yourself a group of “students of the year”! But, if you don't have that – how do you help your average students to become “students of the year”? In order to do that we must be active and take pedagogical leadership.

In this roundtable we want to discuss questions like:

- How can we stimulate the students' interest in the course subject?
- How do we make the students contribute to the teaching and learning?
- How can we support the students' work outside of scheduled time?

In short, how do we make sure that the students remember the teaching (how much they learned) in our course five months later when they have to nominate and elect “teacher of the year”?

PRELUDE

With a nod of the head and a knowing glance he invites her to dance. He lifts her right hand with his left hand, places his right hand on her back and holds her firmly but with a distance as if they were squeezing a third person between them. The music begins. For a few moments they sway in each other's arms while they take in the music – and then they begin to dance. They struggle to “fit together”. He scolds her: “Get some personality in there! Don't just moon about enjoying my dance!” Technical clumsiness is forgivable; emotional sloppiness is not, because emotion – strong, intense, focused emotion – is what it is all about. One cannot move without the other. The man's hand tells the woman where to go and the legs tell each other what to do. Gently he pushes her away and immediately she turns around and stands face to face with him again. He leans towards her and she leans back. Eventually they begin to feel a connection with the music, a certain surrender to the steps, a relaxing sense of floating along with their partner. They hit the coordination of the basic steps and circle harmoniously around the floor. They focus on their partner, on the music – and they dance with their hearts. It takes two to Tango!

I. INTRODUCTION

GETTING the prize as “teacher of the year” is very nice and flattering and something that encourages you to give that little extra to next year's students as well. However, as a reflective teacher you might start asking yourself why you got

the prize this year and not last year – you were the same teacher, it was (almost) the same course, the same everything, except from the students – what a great bunch of students they were this year! But what made them become that this year and not last year? Probably not something you did consciously – so what is it you need to do to get “a great bunch of students” – and the prize – also next year?

From these initial thoughts the focus soon shifts to the more important question – “what is good teaching” – and that question is what this paper/roundtable really deals with.

We tentatively define “good teaching” indirectly by the people involved. A “good teacher” is one who is good for the students' learning and who is able to facilitate deep learning in (all) the students – so being a good teacher is not a traditional popularity contest. A “good student” (learner) is one who is easy to teach and who allows us to excel in our teaching – so being a good student is not a traditional IQ contest.

There are a number of things that we believe lead to good teaching and learning, and these we do **not** want to discuss in this paper/roundtable:

- Active students learn better than passive!
- Students must take responsibility for their learning!
- Teachers must show (pedagogically) leadership!

What we **do** want to discuss in this paper/roundtable is *how* to implement our basic assumptions of *what* leads to good teaching and learning, and will give us the prize as “teacher of the year”.

In the following chapters, we will investigate in more detail *what* it takes for teaching to be good. First we look at it from the students' and our faculty's point of view, followed by a short review at what the literature on pedagogics has to say. After that, we look into *how* we can implement this by formulating a number of questions to be discussed at the roundtable.

II. EMPIRICAL BACKGROUND

Let us for two seconds – and for the sake of academic argument – assume that we are really aiming at “teacher of the year”. Let us go and study what the students actually write when they motivate the nomination of a person as “teacher of the year” – and let us compare that to what our faculty wants to promote as “good teaching” through their evaluations.

We have picked (randomly) a number of student motivations for nominating “teachers of the year” and have analysed them for motivational keywords. This gives us an impression of what it is that the students consider as “good teaching”.

From our sample of motivations the following keywords emerged: enthusiastic, engaged, direct contact with students,

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passionate, great knowledge, positive attitude, interested, able to listen to the students, adaptable, promotes understanding over learning by heart, able to activate, able to motivate learning and cooperation, good lectures, key knowledge transfer, use humour, involvement, uses new pedagogical methods, commitment, caring for the students.

Two things that are evident from this list are that the students:

- do **not** focus very much on the teacher's professional subject knowledge in their motivations. Maybe because these are pedagogical prizes, maybe because it is taken for granted, maybe because most teachers actually have a sufficient professional subject level (and always a level that is higher than the students' initial level in a course) – so the “competition” is not on the level of professional subject knowledge, but on the level of “good teaching”.
- do focus quite a lot on their impression of the teacher himself as a person. This is not surprising since it is much easier to evaluate a person rather than the effects of that person's doing.

The other player in defining what good teaching is, is the faculty through their obligatory course evaluations. Our faculty uses Ramsden's Course Experience Questionnaire [3, 9] for evaluating courses. The questions in the questionnaire can be grouped into four categories according to their focus:

- good teaching (i.e. giving helpful feedback)
- clear goals and standards
- appropriate workload
- appropriate assessment

Once again there is little or no focus on the teacher's professional subject knowledge or the actual contents of the course. The main difference from the student's nominations is that the faculty evaluations focus more on the effects of the teacher's doing rather on the teacher itself. Good teaching (in the meaning that deep learning is achieved) is promoted through clear learning outcomes and goals, by assessing understanding and not learning by heart, and by subjecting the students to a workload that actually allows them to “digest” the material in a reasonable time.

Teachers often tend to focus mostly on the professional subject knowledge – and tend to ignore or overlook the importance of how knowledge is presented to the students (i.e. pedagogics). Students probably believe that a teacher with average knowledge who is able to “transfer” all his knowledge to the student is preferable to a teacher with outstanding knowledge who is unable to “transfer” any of his knowledge to the student – and they may not be completely wrong.

III. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Now that we have listened to the students and the faculty, let us turn to the literature on pedagogics – according to research, what does it take to be a good teacher?

Several investigations have found only little correlation between traditional student ratings of teachers and student learning [4]. There are more sophisticated forms of students' evaluations not focusing so much on the teacher himself, like

Ramsden's Course Experience Questionnaire used by our faculty [3, 9]. However, if we want to maintain a high focus on the teacher then it is a good idea to focus on the teacher's leadership. The Hong Kong Study [8] indicates that effective classroom leadership gives extra effort amongst students. This is also confirmed by a Danish meta-study [7] of 70 studies published in the period 1998-2007 of the correlation between teacher competences and student learning. Pedagogical leadership with clear and explicit rules is one of three factors that emerge from the study. The other two being the ability to establish social relations with students, and both general didactic competences and competences in the topic taught.

Allen et al [1] especially indicate the benefits of transformational leadership in contrast to transactional leadership:

- Transactional leadership: focus on goal attainment with positive rewards and enforcement.
- Transformational leadership: focus on creating a common culture, be a coach.

This means that a good teacher is an active teacher who takes pedagogical leadership. A leadership that must be visible – the students are not alone with the responsibility for their own learning. **We**, the teachers, are responsible for “empowering” the students to take “responsibility for their own learning”. Davis et al, [5] stress the importance of providing opportunities for interaction and involvement where you can establish a climate that is conducive to responsible participation.

The framework eXtreme Teaching (XT) [2] emphasises the values of communication and feedback in both directions between teachers and students. Furthermore, there is focus on the values of courage and respect to/from all involved parts. Finally, XT is highly iterative, so you can “learn from your experiments” in time for this year's students to profit from it. This will allow the teacher to “form” informed students, tell them about the learning goals, show them his teaching methods, explain the pedagogy of learning – and **why** he is doing what he is doing.

INTERLUDE

For many, the tango is seen as a dance of passion in which the man takes command, guiding the woman as they glide across the floor, dramatically bending and twisting his partner. But tango hasn't always been danced that way, and new forms continue to develop. In tango's formative days of the late 1800s, African-Argentine tango partners danced apart rather than in an embrace, as is the standard today. However, women aren't always willing to give up control within the dance to their partners. Some have gone so far as to start practicing a form of tango in which the lead is passed back and forth between partners, sometimes referred to as interleading. Interleading is less about a new set of steps than a different perspective on the communication between tango partners, bringing that communication to the fore. Women taking control of the lead in tango is not new, but the practice is often kept quiet.

IV. DISCUSSION

Now when we have learned *what* it requires to be a good teacher, it is time to ask *how* do we actually do that? The roundtable session will focus on this *how* – and we are confident in that all participants will both give and get some new tools (or at least some tips & tricks) on how we simply, through our pedagogical leadership, can help our students to become better students – maybe even “students of the year“ (in the meaning active engaged motivated students = enabled students = students that take responsibility for their own learning)!

We will focus the roundtable discussions around questions like:

- How do we make the students contribute to the teaching? What types of contribution can we expect from the students?
- How do we transform students from passive listeners to active participants? Encourage them to ask “stupid” questions.
- How can we stimulate their interest in the course subject? If you are not interested what makes you think they would be?
- How do we encourage students to show up at lectures, exercises, labs, ...? As opposed to staying at home, read the book and come for the exam.
- How can we show the students that we really care about them and the course? Well-planned and structured course.
- How do we support the student's work outside of scheduled time? Prior to an activity (preparation) and after an activity (reflection).
- How do we reach students with different learning styles? Build in flexibility – but how is that done?

It would be cool to be able to “win over” some of the “I just need to get these five credits” students and get them interested in learning more than to just pass the course. In the literature this student approach is called strategic – students can take a surface approach, a deep approach, or a strategic approach to learning [6]. We believe that good pedagogical leadership from our part will guide students with a strategic approach towards a deep approach. But maybe we are just too naïve?

POSTLUDE

*Although the idea of the woman participating in the lead is not well received by many traditional tango dancers, some are trying to explore and promote the idea. Tango is still evolving, forever changing. Interleading opens the range and repertoire of the dancers. The basis for interleading is found in the personal code, the physical dialogue that develops between partners in which the woman sometimes suggests how the dance should proceed. It is **not** about reversing men's and women's roles in tango and having women lead all the time, rather it is about focusing on the dialogue between partners. A woman is free to interact with her partner and makes a proposal that the man decides whether or not to accept. There is an exchange of the lead back and forth just as there is in a*

conversation. From a practical standpoint there is only so much leading the woman can take on since she spends a good deal of her time walking backwards in the tango, but the exchange of the lead not only brings a couple into closer communication, it also leads to the creation of new steps and styles.

V. CONCLUSION

We do not expect the participants in the roundtable for this paper to reach a consensus on what will bring you the prize of teacher of the year – there may even not be a single way of getting the prize. However, we expect the participants to have become wiser on what good teaching *may* be and how it *could* be implemented – and hope that they and we will pick up a trick or two to try out next year to give everyone a tougher fight for the nominations ;-)

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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