# Significant Networks for Educational Development

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***Abstract*— We are interested in elaborating how university teachers create and maintain their understanding of teaching and learning. To this respect the social context in which they act out their understanding seems to be important. In the literature there are examples of how stable teaching cultures appear, [1]-[3]. Some authors even label university teachers as conservative [4]. The issue here is not whether or not the teachers are conservative. Instead we would like to explore how university teachers socially develop and maintain their understanding of teaching and learning. This is done by using some theoretical perspectives together with observations. The overall purpose is to obtain a deepened understanding in order to develop strategies for more efficient academic development, and – in the long run – better student learning.**

## I. Introduction

In *Academic Tribes and Territories*, [5] Tony Becher and Paul Trowler explores academic life by combining a sociological and a cognitive perspective. Is it the people or the subject matter which most strongly determine the academic practice? Becher and Trowler almost exclusively discuss research. Other aspects of academic life, like teaching, are not dealt with in any depth. In this paper, however, teaching and its develop-ment is exclusively in focus even though we recognize that the principles used might be applicable also for other practices, such as research, administration, community work etc.

For our purpose we use a particular observation made by Becher and Trowler. They claim that academics, in their work, rely on two networks: one large network used for referencing, for orientation and evaluation. The other one, a much smaller network, is rather used for testing new ideas and for problem-solving. According to the authors the larger network might include hundreds of individuals while the smaller network might be limited to around ten individuals.

We will use this observation and hypothesize that it is applicable also when it comes to teaching and learning: a larger network for orientation and a smaller for testing ideas and, perhaps for resolving problems.

Following our line of reasoning the smaller network would be much more important while trying to understand how university teachers develop and maintain their understanding of the teaching reality that surrounds them. Because of the assumed importance of this smaller network we call them *significant networks.* The term is borrowed from social psychology where *significant others* refers to the individuals who are most important in the process of reality construction. "The significant others in the individual's life are the principal agents for the maintenance of his subjective reality. Less significant others function as a sort of chorus." [6]. We consider it fruitful to regard the smaller networks as consisting of significant others (in Berger's and Luckmann's terms) and the larger network as the chorus.

In the following we investigate two questions: Are there significant networks related to teaching? And if they do exist – what kind of processes do they host?

## II. Method

Data were collected on three occasions. In December 2004, a small group of experienced teachers (6 individuals), following a pedagogical course, were interviewed in a focus group. In October 2005, another group of university teachers (15 individuals, from humanities) was surveyed. In November 2005, a mixed group (45 individuals) of educational developers and university teachers was surveyed, at a national conference on teaching and learning.

## III. Results

1. The questions posed to the first group were: Why did you initially choose to discuss your teaching experiences with colleagues? What happened the first time you did?
The discussion during the focus group interview clearly indicated two things. Firstly, the teachers firmly reported that they did not talk to just anyone. Instead they were quite selective. One respondent said: "You know who to talk to – you look into the coffee-room for a certain individual." Secondly, the spark that started the process was almost always experiences from a problematic teaching situation.

2. The second survey was introduced to the group in relation to the term "critical friend" [7]. The two questions were: With whom do you discuss your teaching and learning experiences? What are the characteristics of the conversations you have together with your critical friend? Once again two things emerged from the discussion. Firstly: the critical friend can be almost anyone anywhere. They were by no means exclusively working in the same department or even the same institution.

Instead, in some cases, they were not even academics at all. Secondly, and confirming the first interview results, the conversations were mainly focused on problematic/challenging situations, and/or ideas about how to improve teaching.

3. 45 individuals answered the survey conducted during a national teaching and learning conference. The questions were: Together with how many individuals do you have engaging conversations about your teaching? Who are they? Where do you find them? Describe your conversations!

42 out of 45 answered the first question with *not more than ten individuals*. Again they were described as colleagues, relatives, friends, course members from a pedagogical course etc. And they were found in the same department, in the same institution, in other institutions, at home or just in different places.

Like in our previous interviews the conversations were described as focused around problems. But, since this survey was documented in writing, the material allowed a more elaborated description of the conversations: "Testing new ideas", "A search for new aspects in situations", "Sharing of experience", "Trying to deepen the understanding of something" etc. Overall the answers indicate challenge, support, brainstorm, planning, and development. The other person is often supportive and challenging, the conversations are trustful.

These results support the idea that university teachers rely on smaller networks while discussing or together with others reflecting upon teaching and learning. These networks are small, the conversations deal with the understanding of the teaching experience and are developmental, and they seem to be intellectual as well as emotional. Therefore we claim that these smaller networks are significant for the development and maintenance of the teaching reality – as the teachers understand it. Altogether these findings indicate the existence and importance of what we call *significant networks.*

## IV. DISCUSSION

In this section we discuss possible implications based on the theory and the data presented above.

1. Significant networks are important for the individual teacher's construction and maintenance of his or her understanding of the teaching and learning reality. One could say that within the network it is formulated what is right and what is wrong with regard to teaching and learning. During the process where these things are negotiated, within the network, the individual teacher gains a certain identity within the network. For a more elaborated description of the process, see [8]. When a teacher interacts with teachers who refer to other significant networks he or she might jeopardize this identity (assigned to him by significant others).

This is part of the explanation why individual teachers, within a department, can advocate totally different views on teaching and learning. Consensus cannot be reached without changes also in the significant networks that each teacher belongs to. The picture is further complicated because the significant networks are so dispersed that several of them might influence a discussion within a department at the same time.

2. Related to the issue of identity and status within a particular significant network, changes are rare and hard to induce – especially from the outside, e.g. from a manager's perspective. On the other hand, and with a reversed perspective, they are resilient and can withstand pressure from the outside in terms of cuts in funding and workload. Viewed like this they secure quality and guarantee maintenance of teaching and learning- at least according to the standard formulated by the network-members themselves.

The conclusion to be drawn is that changes in practice cannot be forced upon university teachers. They will use their networks in order to reinterpret policies and other regulative means of change. The phenomenon of reinterpretation has been documented in literature, [1], [2]. Therefore and arguably, the only lasting change in teaching and learning has to be formulated by and within the significant network. If so, on the other hand, the change in question will most certainly be long-lasting and carried out with engagement by the teachers.

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