

# ***The role of teachers in professional studies and perspectives on networked learning***

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the roles of teachers in higher education with regard to networked learning. Based on the assumption that learning is a social endeavour that incorporates both individual learning and learning with and from others, learning requires a relation between the learner and the subject, a relation between the learner and others, and last but not least a relation between the learner and the teacher. While lots of attention has been put on learning not least from a social constructive view on how to establish a learning environment in order to support learning processes, the central role of teachers in this process has often been neglected. Starting from this perspective the paper presents findings from an explorative qualitative study on the roles of teachers in learning processes in the context of higher education, more precisely in professional studies in Germany. Based on the study's findings future perspectives for the roles of teachers in higher education with regard to networked learning are outlined.

## **Keywords**

Higher education, professional studies, roles of teachers, teaching strategies, networked learning.

## **Introduction**

In the light of the social demands and the ongoing changes modern societies are facing, new modes of teaching and learning in higher education gain relevance. (Barber, Donnelly, & Rizvi, 2013; Willcox, Sarma, & Lippel, 2016) The concept of lifelong learning, in Europe and beyond, promoted by the Bologna process and the establishment of the European Qualification's framework presents itself in different shades and is adopted in various ways by higher education institutions for the enhancement of teaching and learning (Sursock, 2015): It ranges from widening participation to forms of work based learning, from opening universities for disadvantaged groups to students in different phases of their (working) lives, from short tailor-made programs (in cooperation with companies or other partners) to job-accompanying part time bachelor's and master's programs for professionals (as form of professional studies) and to different modes of delivery – making use of opportunities provided by information and communication strategies (ICT). What unifies these different developments is the focus on students, their different backgrounds, and their learning pathways that bring them (back) to universities as lifelong learners. (Slowey & Schuetze, 2012)

This paper focuses on teaching in professional studies and thus, on teachers in this context and their roles. This focus springs from the assumption that teachers have a crucial function by guiding and facilitating the learning processes of students – even more relevant in the light of current developments, above all students as lifelong learners, the central role of ICT, and the phenomenon of digitalization (The German Forum for Higher Education in the Digital Age, 2016; Willcox et al., 2016). Whereas networked learning is commonly understood as connecting learners with learners, teachers, learning communities and learning resources – all supported by ICT (Goodyear, Banks, Hodgson, & McConnell, 2004) – it has a broader meaning in this paper: students with professional backgrounds also need to connect learning within the professional world with learning in the academic world (Cendon, 2016).

In the first part of the paper the term professional studies and its features are presented and contextualized within the German context. The second part briefly maps research done with regard to roles of teachers and highlights findings and gaps. Part three focuses on the roles of teachers within professional studies, presenting the outcomes of a qualitative explorative study on roles of teachers in professional studies, based on grounded theory. The fourth part summarizes central findings regarding roles and attitudes of teachers. Finally, future perspectives for roles of teachers in networked learning are outlined.

## Professional Studies - the context

The term 'professional studies' or 'continuing higher education' denotes different forms of lifelong learning at higher education institutions in Germany that address students with professional experience (Hanft & Knust, 2009). Whereas Germany can be seen as late-comer with regard to lifelong learning policies in higher education (Wolter, 2012), in the last few years national educational policies have led to an increased number of programs in the context of professional studies addressing both graduates with work experiences as well as professionals without higher education entrance qualification. Professional studies are situated in a quite hybrid position between higher education, adult education and vocational education. Programs often exceed traditional disciplinary contexts and are built in an inter-disciplinary or even transdisciplinary manner. (Cendon, 2016) To allow student to study alongside work or family duties, many programs have been developed as job-accompanying programs – varying from modules, certified programs up to bachelor's or master's programs – with modes of delivery that show different variations of blended learning, mixing online modes with face to face and distance learning. Corresponding study models and adequate pedagogical models integrate professional practice and professional knowledge of the students in one way or the other as part of the studies. (Cendon, Mörth, & Pellert, 2016) Whereas students as lifelong learners are addressed and much energy is used in developing curricula integrating practice in various ways, the central role of the teacher in the learning processes of students as 'transmission belts' for learning seems not to be in focus. Rather than becoming obsolete in the learning processes of students (as radical constructivism advances) teachers have new roles and enter new forms of relationships with their students.

## How teachers teach - findings and gaps

The question of how teachers should teach in higher education has been first addressed by Malcom Knowles more than 40 years ago. Knowles distinguishes between two forms of students' learning in higher education - teacher-directed and self-directed learning - and outlines what it means for teachers to support students in self-directed learning and hence become a facilitator for their learning (Knowles, 1975). A few decades later, in the 1990s research has been done on approaches to teaching in higher education connecting it to students' approaches to learning with reference to Knowles' findings (Marton, Beaty, & Dall'Alba, 1993; Trigwell & Prosser, 1993). A meta-analysis of interview-based investigations on conceptions of teaching done by Kember (1997) shows similarities to Knowles' findings: The teacher-oriented/content-oriented conception and the student-oriented/learning-oriented conception form the poles of a continuum of five dimensions of conceptions of teaching: Teaching as (1) imparting information, (2) transmitting structured knowledge, (3) interaction between the teacher and the student (as transitional bridge), (4) facilitating understanding on the part of the student, and finally (5) bringing about conceptual change and intellectual development to the student. In each conception teachers act in different roles: Whereas in teacher-oriented conceptions (1 and 2) they solely act as presenters of knowledge, they act both as presenters and as tutors, inviting students to actively participate in an interactive process in the transitory bridge (3). In student-oriented teaching (4 and 5) they act as facilitators of the students' learning processes (4) and as change agents or developers supporting the development and the (changing) conceptions of students (5). Interestingly, the role of teachers as developers and change agents occurred in postgraduate teaching only. (Kember, 1997) Kember's systematisation is still used in conceptualizing roles of teachers in higher education (Entwistle, 2009; Roberts, 2004). Much is also translated in textbooks for good teaching in higher education.

Recently, Cutajar (2016) who provides a brief overview on assigned roles for teachers in networked learning investigates students' perceptions of accounting teachers as contributors to their learning yet assigning them roles. Her approach shows how important it is to link the perspectives of teachers and students when investigating roles of teachers. This gains even more relevance as relationships between students and teachers and their assigned roles in higher education change within networked learning and hitherto clear boundaries are shifting (Beaty & Howard, 2010).

Being aware of the importance of connections between both sides' perspectives, the existing research gap in higher education is: how do teachers teach students with professional experiences - investigating this from the teachers' perspective.

## Roles of teachers – methodology and model

The author undertook a qualitative explorative research study with experienced teachers in higher education who teach in professional studies, thus working with students who have professional experience (Cendon, Mörth, & Schiller, 2016). From March 2013 to June 2015 seven guideline-based expert interviews were conducted with nationally and internationally active teachers in higher education from Germany, Austria, Canada and the Netherlands. All interview partners had long-time teaching experiences in continuing education within higher education and outside higher education in professional and corporate contexts including online and face to face teaching. Four interview partners were university professors, three interview partners worked as trainers and consultants. Five of the interview partners were teaching in job-accompanying master programs at the same university specialized in professional studies, two taught in similar programs at other universities.

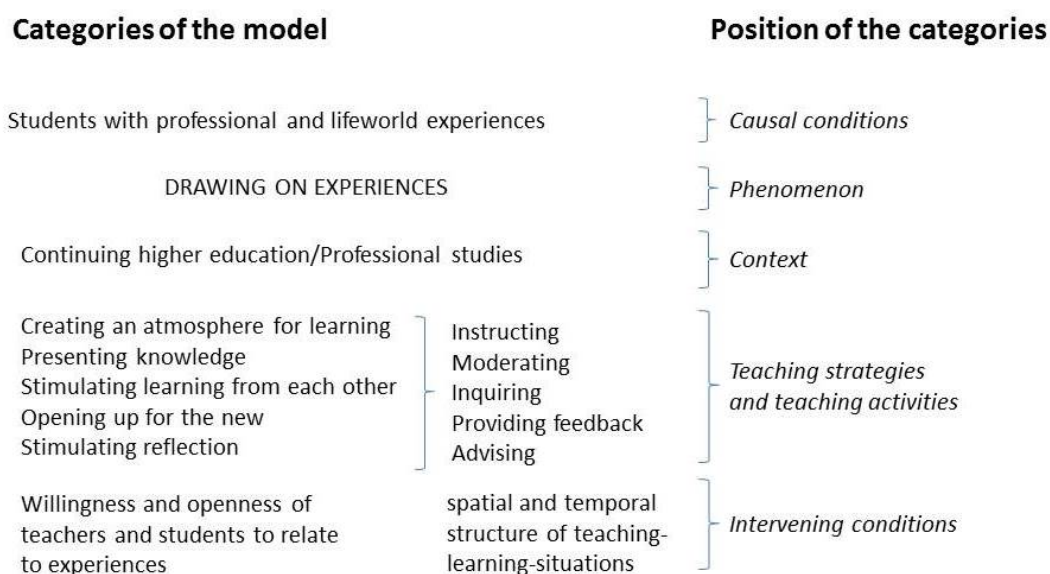
The analysis followed grounded theory methodology using "a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 24). Thus, a paradigm model is built around a phenomenon: subcategories are linked "to a category in a set of relationships denoting casual conditions, phenomenon, context, intervening conditions, action/interactional strategies, and consequences." (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 99) A paradigm model is basically constructed in the following way: 'Causal conditions' lead to the occurrence of the 'phenomenon'. The 'phenomenon' is the central idea to which all data is referring to; it marks the center of the paradigm model. The 'context' provides the setting in which the 'action/ interactional strategies' - purposeful and goal oriented strategies and actions taken relating to the 'phenomenon' - are taking place. These actions and interactions finally have certain outcomes or 'consequences'. (Strauss & Corbin, 1990)

The aim of the study was to conceptualize roles of teachers from their perspectives. As the approach was explorative, no hypothesis was formulated in order to approach the data as impartially as possible. The interviews were first coded on the basis of the following guiding questions: What is the role of the teacher? How does the person define herself as teacher? The first analysis showed that the focus on roles of teachers limits the perspective and that for a deeper analysis the teaching activities and strategies need to be focused, instead. Only by asking the following questions it would be possible to approach their roles: What are the teaching activities of the teachers? How do they act? On what do they depend, how do they vary? Which strategies do they follow? Which roles do the teachers adopt and when?

In the course of analysis different strategies were identified, whereas one strategy had an outstanding position: The teaching strategy 'drawing on experiences' to which all other strategies relate. Thus, 'drawing on experiences' is the phenomenon in the paradigm model and the other teaching strategies with their respective actions are the 'action/interactional strategies'. The causal condition for teachers drawing on experiences in their teaching are the students with their manifold professional and lifeworld experiences who are returning to university for continuing higher education. The context in which the phenomenon manifests itself is professional studies, more precisely job-accompanying study programs and modules at higher education institutions. Different teaching strategies aim at drawing on experiences via concrete teaching activities and entail particular consequences. Intervening conditions are factors that have restricting or promoting effects on the phenomenon: As individual framework conditions like the willingness and openness of teachers and students to draw on experiences, or as organizational framework conditions such as the spatial and temporal structure of the teaching-learning situations. The model is shown in the figure below.

'Drawing on experiences' relates to the students and their experiences from different contexts of their lives: teachers take the experiences of the students seriously and as point of departure for their teaching. Drawing on experiences also includes the teachers' experiences: they relate to the students' experiences on the basis of their own experiences or, by presenting examples from their own practice to provide reference points for the students' learning.

Drawing on experiences manifests in different dimensions: frequency (How often do the teachers draw on experiences?), duration (How long do the interactions last?), depth (Do the teachers draw on experiences superficially or in-depth?), continuity (Do the teachers draw on experiences punctually or continuously?), steering (Do the teachers draw on experiences in an instructive way or does drawing on experiences take place participatory in an open exchange of the students?), and structuring (How strong is the instruction of the teacher?).



**Figure 1: Paradigm model ‘drawing on experiences’**

## Teaching strategies and teaching activities

Teachers follow different teaching strategies to relate to the phenomenon ‘drawing on experiences’: (1) creating an atmosphere for learning; (2) presenting knowledge; (3) stimulating learning from each other; (4) opening up for the new; (5) stimulating reflection. The first and the last mentioned learning strategies take a special position as they are also preconditions for the success of drawing on experiences. All five teaching strategies cannot be seen entirely separated from each other, as some of them are closely connected and as they are combined consciously within the concrete teaching practice. Depending on the teaching strategy, different teaching activities are deployed.

### Creating an atmosphere for learning

...it is important to create an atmosphere; well, humor is also important, I think; also to treat each other with respect, so that one says: ‘Yes, I can get involved with the others.’ Meaning, one has to create a feeling of trust. (I5, 45).

Establishing an atmosphere for learning has a special position within the learning strategies. Creating a convenient environment and an open atmosphere between students and between students and teachers can be seen as a precondition for drawing on experiences. Hence the atmosphere for learning is crucial for the success of the other teaching strategies. A central teaching activity within this strategy is creating trust, as it is a precondition for exchange. One teacher describes trust as mutual knowing about oneself and the other: "Trust means: Can I judge the other and can [s/]he judge me?" (I3, 141) Teachers create an environment that allows students to get involved (with others) and to contribute and share their experiences. Further teaching activities that add to an atmosphere for learning are providing space for students' experiences and contributions, appreciating their different realities and contributions. As consequences of these teaching activities teachers hope that students open up, share their experiences, listen closely to the others' experiences, and that they start a mutual exchange with their fellow students and with the teacher.

### Presenting knowledge

If there is something new, they [the students] need to get exposed to it, also here [at the university]. But this is methodologically not new. They have learned it this way. But this is not enough! [...] Reflection starts when I ask: ‘Are you satisfied?’ and my dialog partner would possibly say: ‘Well, content wise, if this is all, I am probably not satisfied, but if this is all you

have to offer, I am satisfied with what you presented.' And then I'd say: 'Sit down, you didn't pass.' Because this is only the start. Why is somebody satisfied with that? Why is somebody satisfied with something that does not get him anywhere in his [professional] practice? Thus, I am asking: 'Didn't you experience or learn anything else in your professional practice?' (I3, 31)

Presenting knowledge as teaching strategy intends to facilitate students' actual knowledge and to provide theoretical stimulation. Teachers present content and try to create interfaces to the experiences of the students by making propositions for getting involved. They do that by putting up content for discussion, by exposing it to the students' review based on their practice/experiences and by asking questions that should encourage students to relate the knowledge to their experiences from practice. As intended consequence, students should relate their own practice to theory and based on that, find new ways of dealing with their professional practice and to develop it further.

### **Stimulating learning from each other**

So they are coming from different angles and both angles are incomplete in and by themselves. [...] when it is possible to have practitioners and young students together that is ideal. I put them in teams. (I2, 60)

Learning from each other as teaching strategy puts the experiences of the students to the center. Teachers provide space for a mutual exchange of experiences and enable learning from each other by stimulating it. Their teaching activities entail initiating this exchange, guiding it in a sometimes more sometimes less structured way, and if necessary, moderating it. Exchange is supported either between more and less professionally experienced students or between students with different academic and/or professional backgrounds. Intended consequences are that students engage in mutual exchange based on their distinct experiences and thus enrich each other and learn from each other.

### **Opening up for the new**

...there are types of people who do not allow themselves to get irritated, who expect that this [what he or she learns] is confirmed in his/her practice. And if it is not confirmed in practice, it - unfortunately - is a poor and too theoretical continuing educational training. And of course, this [view] is not acceptable because this [training] lives from the confrontation between theory and practice and ... I think... sometimes ... yes, one has to endure that it can't be understood in this very moment, but it will unfold its value [later]. (I5, 37)

Experiences of the students in this teaching strategy are insofar starting point for learning and development as they are called into question. Only when students are able to question their prevailing assumptions, only if they are willing to 'unlearn', they will be able to open up for the new, to further develop and to advance their own professional practice. Teaching activities include irritations, e.g. through a confrontation with theories or content that conflicts with or questions the students' experiences. The activities evoke interest for the new even if it cannot be utilized and translated into their own practice immediately. Irritations are initiated by teachers but are also facilitated in group processes, in which students should irritate themselves mutually by their different perspectives on specific topics. Intended consequences are that students widen their view and thereby find new theories and approaches that enrich their professional practice and provide them new perspectives.

### **Stimulating reflection**

But, the decisive factor is that one does not take one's own routines for granted. Having said that it takes me directly to the keyword for reflection: Mistrust the self-evident. And that's what I need to teach the students. (I3, 155)

The aim of this teaching strategy is that students widen their perspective and thus critically examine their basic assumptions. Here, the relation to the other teaching strategies becomes particularly obvious as 'to stimulate reflection' is an integral component of the strategies 'presenting knowledge', 'learning from each other' and 'opening up for the new'. Students should reflect on themselves, on group processes, on theoretical content, and on their professional practice in a systematic way; and this should be done both individually and collectively. The ability for self-reflexivity and structural reflexivity is an explicit aim named by the interviewed teachers. Reflection is stimulated from two sides: starting from theoretical content or starting from the professional or lifeworld practice. An important teaching activity is asking questions that stimulate reflection. By systematically

asking questions teachers try to stimulate students' reflection on their practice, its constraints and its possibilities. Another activity entails working with case studies: fictional but authentic case studies or case studies from the practice of the students (so called living cases) that are elaborated individually or in collaboratively. Teachers support the process by asking critical questions and hence stimulate critical assessment and critical thinking. One teacher describes this process as follows: "...encouraging to brush the own practice the wrong way." (I5, 25) Intended consequences of this strategy are that students acquire the ability for self-leadership developing a mature self-reflective personality. They should be able to recognize their scopes and courses of action as well as to successfully deal with the organisational framework conditions in the sense of a structural reflexivity. This strategy shows the relevance of the dimension time. On the one hand, time en bloc (i.e. through block seminars instead of two hours a week) is needed to guide instruction; on the other hand, a longer period of time is necessary so that students can engage with a topic in depth from different perspectives or with their own personal development.

## Roles of teachers revisited

The presented paradigm model and the related teaching strategies and activities allow going back to the initial question: What is the role of teachers?

The above described teaching strategies and activities indicate different roles of teachers. Teachers exert distinct modes of steering within the learning processes when performing these roles: They act as classical lecturers in the sense of experts in their academic or professional field, as moderators and as learning companions or tutors, as learning facilitators and as advisors that support the self-directed learning of the students. The role facilitator is of particular importance when it comes to promoting the active learning of the students through drawing on experiences. The aforementioned roles are not exclusively bound to specific teaching strategies but instead, different roles can be performed within one single strategy.

Teaching strategies and activities are underpinned by specific attitudes. The teachers show in their actions an appreciation for the students as holistic persons with manifold experiences from different contexts. This becomes apparent as the teachers ascribe expert knowledge to the students. Thus, they assume that students can provide substantial contributions and that they are willing to learn from each other and not only from the teacher – without fundamentally challenging the hierarchical relationship between teachers and students. Teachers show mindfulness in their strategies and activities e.g. when they describe activities to create an atmosphere of trust as precondition for an open discourse and the sharing of experiences. This again is a precondition for (mutual) learning. Teachers put themselves up for negotiation by taking a backseat and promote the (self-) steering of students. Although there exist 'basic concepts' for teaching activities, teachers show flexibility in need-oriented changing of strategies and actions, and hence situational openness. Last but not least, a basic understanding of teaching in higher education becomes visible that supports critical thinking, critical reflection, and personal development of the students and hence by far exceeds sheer presentation of knowledge and its application.

## Future perspectives for networked learning

What can be drawn from the results from this study for future perspectives on networked learning? Beaty and Howard (2010) focus on the changing relationship between teachers and learners in networked learning and extracted four sets of boundary issues around (1) expertise, (2) communities of learning, (3) content and communication and (4) continuing professional development for teachers in higher education. Taking these four boundary issues as point of reference I outline some future perspectives for networked learning based on the results of the study on roles of teachers in professional studies.

Expertise in networked learning is held both by students and by teachers and becomes "a shifting quality dependent on the activity, the roles taken by the participants and technological context within which learning is facilitated" (Beaty & Howard, 2010, p. 603). Students draw their expertise from different backgrounds, i.e. from their professional vocation, from expertise in technology and from expertise of the group that is built on individual experience and the backgrounds of the involved. The teacher "as a fellow holder of expertise" (Beaty & Howard, 2010, p. 605) brings in her academic knowledge and skills. In the study, the central prerequisite of collaboration and co-construction of knowledge based on shared expertise is shown in the teaching strategy 'creating an atmosphere for learning'. Students are invited to share their experiences and their expertise on an equal footing with teachers as experts. Furthermore, in the strategy 'stimulating learning from each other' teachers encourage them to learn from each other and enrich another through their academic and professional expertise.

The boundaries of communities of learning in networked learning are called into question as teachers and students are members in different networks, both professionally and academic, formalized and non-formalized, with different forms of engagement (Beatty & Howard, 2010). Following Wenger-Trayner et al. (2015) in professional occupations the body of knowledge are best understood as landscapes of practice that consist of different communities of practice. In professional studies students move between different landscapes: their professional workplace communities, their academic communities and their work life communities. These transitions provide challenges for them. (Fenton-O’Creevy, Brigham, Jones, & Smith, 2015) The study shows that one central issue for students is to translate experiences and the learning gained in the professional world into the academic world and the other way round. The teacher’s role in this endeavour is shown in the strategy ‘stimulating reflection’ that encompasses all teaching strategies: they aim to support students to become "reflective learners" (Cendon, 2016) in order to transform their experiences and their learnings for the respective landscapes of practice. Hence stimulating reflection in different forms is an important prerequisite in allowing students to move successfully between different communities of learning or more precisely between landscapes of practice.

In networked learning, communication is emphasized over content – hence the boundary between communication and content is less defined. Following Beatty and Howard (2010), the teacher becomes "the navigator of the content and the learning process" (p. 605). The results of the study show that teachers act as moderators of learning. Thus, content is embedded in the dialogue between teachers and learners, as well as learners and learners, always taking ‘drawing on experiences’ as reference point. The art of teaching is shown in the situational variation of teaching actions to connect content with the experience of the students. Therefore, the creation and dissemination of content is not only underpinned by communication but rather steered by it.

Continuing professional development of practitioners in higher education comes into question, as the distinction between teachers and learners becomes blurred. The experience of dialogue on equal footing and the shift of control from teachers to students can be unsettling for teachers in higher education. New ways of understanding of (one’s) roles as teacher are needed and backed by institutional support and a higher value of teaching in general. (Beatty & Howard, 2010) This can take different routes as the results of the study indicate:

First, there is a strong connection between conceptions of teaching and the understanding of one’s own role(s). This means that more focus needs to be put on the often (hidden) conceptions of teaching and to bring teachers in exchange about their teaching conceptions – not in courses about ‘how to teach’ but rather in moderated trustfully collegially conversations, including teachers from inside and outside university.

Second, to include all different roles in one person is a challenge. Teachers in higher education have different strengths, and that can be used for a differentiation of roles of teachers. Thus, a good presenter of knowledge or a captivating lecture is as important as a good facilitator or tutor. This differentiation can also be used to guide young and less experienced teachers in developing their scholarship of teaching (Biggs & Tang, 2011) and hence, support them in their personal development as teachers. Additionally, the integration of teachers from outside higher education helps to connect the professional and academic worlds in networked learning.

Third, engaged teachers need to get time for what they can do best. Thus, a central issue is to unburden them from what prevents them from good teaching. Within networked learning unburdening can mean support for translating concepts for teaching into different modes of delivery, support in the use of web-based tools, support when it comes to issues of intellectual property rights, and thus minimizing the technical and administrative effort for teachers. In a future perspective, this can mean to think about new functions within higher education: Willcox et al. (2016) recommend the profession of the ‘learning engineer’. The learning engineer is sketched as a professional who is both a learning designer and an engineer and who connects the worlds of research on learning, technology and teaching and is prepared to work with teachers, administrators and students. This would rather mean more institutional support and value for teaching in higher education and the support of good teaching in networked learning.

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