

Center for University Teaching and Learning

A-Z University Teaching & Learning

Reflecting your own teaching

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Teaching only makes sense when it is aimed at learning. However, it is not always clear whether learning actually takes place when something is taught. If teaching effects are designed according to a utilization of learning opportunities model, as done by Fend (2001) (cf. Figure 1), then instructors' teaching as a whole represents an offer that ideally leads directly to the intended effects, namely optimal and intended student learning.

However, we all know that this is not always the case, since the efficacy of the offer depends on both the individual students' learning qualifications and the institutional and organizational frameworks. This brings us to the problem of fit: the offer must be adapted to the respective learning group.

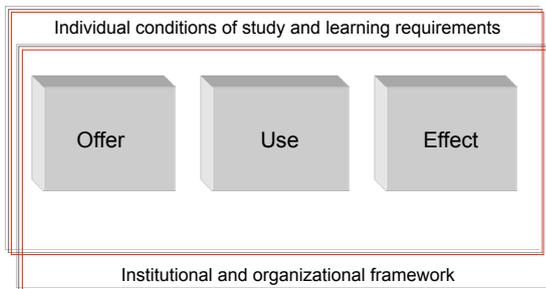


Figure 1: Quality of courses: A systemic model (adapted from Fend, 2001)

Taking the initiative to evaluate one's teaching - what tools?

In order to find out whether the fit is right, it is not only reasonable but actually necessary to reflect on one's teaching: Planning, organizing, designing, and reflecting on teaching and learning processes together make up the core of teachers' professional skills. Therefore it is appropriate also to plan and organize the reflection on one's own teaching in order to obtain useful results that can be used to further develop one's teaching expertise. There are different ways to take the initiative and evalu-

ate one's teaching. The following strategies, among others, are of particular importance:

- Self-reflection
- Colleagues sitting in on lectures
- Expert feedback (Experts sitting in on lectures)
- Student feedback

Student surveys in particular are often used to obtain feedback about one's teaching skills. This has also led to a broad discussion concerning students' ability to judge the quality of teaching, although skepticism about student judgments has not been proven empirically so far. However, it is important that the purpose of the survey always determines the method. What exactly is it that you want to know? What kind of "data" do you need? These are key questions that make it easier to select an appropriate approach or tool.

Self-reflection

In "Neues Handbuch für Hochschullehre", Voss (2001) published an article on this topic which contains an extensive and practically tested list of questions on how to improve one's teaching behavior: Based on an awareness of problems, problem analysis and possible solutions are proposed. Simply "browsing" possible problem situations provides specific tips for one's own behavior.

A teaching portfolio is also very suitable for effectively combining theory and practice and thereby purposefully improving one's teaching. In addition, a teaching portfolio is a tool that can be used to document one's teaching activity for others.

Colleagues sitting in on lectures

Colleagues sitting in on lectures is a type of group supervision in which colleagues of the same subject give each other advice and support - without the help of a

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professional supervisor. The main goal is always helping people to help themselves. The focus is on case discussion, which begins by illustrating a specific real-life problem and then working on it as a group. The process is structured into steps or phases and is generally specified in the form of a guideline. One common and effective technique was designed by Wahl (2002, p. 239f., in German). Working in pairs (in tandem) is particularly worthwhile: visiting each other's classes (including prep and follow-up discussions) is very helpful for reflecting on one's teaching (cf. also Bell, 2005).

Experts sitting in on lectures

As part of lecture visits, you have the chance to talk with a university teaching expert. Based on your specific lessons and individual issues, you can discuss learning objectives, methodology, course structure, appropriate use of instructional media, lecture and communication styles, and more. Having someone sit in on your lectures enables you to reflect on your lessons and to explore and optimize alternatives.

Student feedback

Some methods are very easy to apply and allow you to immediately see how the students rate the lessons or whether they are making learning progress. The short description on "Classroom assessment techniques" and the extensive book on the same topic by Angelo and Cross (1993) provide useful insight.

If you are planning a larger final survey with questionnaires, it is better not to give these in the last session so that there is still time to discuss the results with the students.

The Center for University Teaching and Learning at the University of Zurich provides questionnaires as well as support for developing customized questionnaires and analysis tools.

Resources

You can find short descriptions on the following topics:

- Teaching portfolio
- Classroom assessment techniques
- Colleagues sitting in on lectures

www.hochschuldidaktik.uzh.ch/hochschuldidaktikaz

Information on experts sitting in on lectures is provided at www.hochschuldidaktik.uzh.ch/hospitation (in German).

Literature

Angelo, T.A. & Cross, P.K. (1993). Classroom assessment techniques: a handbook for college teachers (2 ed.). San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass.

Bell, M. (2005). Peer observation Partnerships in Higher Education. Milperra: HERSDA.