

# Novice university teachers' teaching conceptions based on photo interviews

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## SUMMARY

### Theoretical framework

The profession of a university teacher is gradually gaining more complexity. The main issues that academics identify as significant include the changing nature of their role concerning increased responsibilities, the challenge of being a quality teacher while producing assessable research outputs, role conflict, insufficient institutional support and continual organisational change (Billot, 2010). It is pertinent to achieve a balance between research work and teaching. Some staff acknowledge that they cannot undertake research as well as commit professionally to their field of practice and the effective teaching of students. This combination of responsibilities is time-consuming and teaching, administrative and research expectations may conflict with each other (Billot, 2010).

When discussing university teachers' work, their teaching conceptions should not be discarded. Research has demonstrated that university teachers' teaching conceptions have an impact on their teaching practice (Trigwell & Prosser, 1996). By analysing different studies of university teachers' teaching conceptions, Kember (1997) finds that the conceptions could generally be placed under two broad orientations: *teacher-centred*, those that focus on the communication of defined bodies of content or knowledge, and *student-centred* that focus on student learning. Postareff and Lindblom-Ylänne (2008) analyse descriptions of teaching by university teachers and find that most of the descriptions can be divided between content-centred and learning-centred conceptions.

In addition, some researchers (Åkerlind, 2004; van Driel, Verloop, van Werven, & Dekkers, 1997) find that in between the teacher-centred and student-centred approach exists the teacher–student relations focused approach.

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In analyses about teaching conceptions, researchers have paid attention to what extent teaching conceptions are constant and to what extent they are changing, and what direction the changes are taking. Earlier studies (Kugel, 1993; Sherman, Armistead, Fowler, Barksdale, & Reif, 1987) have demonstrated that at the beginning of their work, university teachers' teaching conceptions are more teaching-centred, and as teaching experience increases and as a result of training courses, the conceptions shift towards learning-centredness. At the same time, studies (Norton, Richardson, Hartley, Newstead, & Mayes, 2005; Remmik & Karm, 2013) indicate that novices can be placed at different locations on the teaching centred–learning centred axis, and depending on different factors (personal experience, training courses, community traditions, student feedback), changes can shift towards teaching or learning centredness. A university teacher's teaching conceptions are also impacted by how he/she sees his/her development as a university teacher. Studies by McAlpine and Weston (2000), Åkerlind (2003) and Postareff and Lindblom-Ylänne (2008) show that teaching conceptions play an important part in the extent to which university teachers are willing to develop their teaching at all, and which changes they are willing to make in their teaching practice. For instance, a university teacher with a teaching-centred conception focuses more on the subject's content when developing his/her teaching, while a university teacher with a learning-centred conception develops himself/herself in order to find ways to support student learning (e.g. feedback collection and analysis).

Changes in universities and in university teacher's activities mean that beginning university teachers are already expected to cope with several different tasks early in their career, including teaching. Therefore, it is important to study and understand how novice university teachers conceptualise their activities at the university, which learning conceptions their activities are based on, whether they develop themselves as university teachers and how.

Based on the aim of the research, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How do novice university teachers describe their work at university?
2. How do novice university teachers describe their teaching conceptions?
3. How do novice university teachers see their development as a university teacher?

## **Method**

Previous research has shown that it is complicated to investigate the ideals, concepts, beliefs and values of individuals, since people are not often aware of the concepts their professional practice is based on. Using visual research methods has given good results when investigating the underlying concepts (Taylor, 2002; Weber & Mitchell, 1996; Woodley-Baker, 2009). Photographic interviews provide richer data than simple verbal interviews as photographs focus on and guide the process of the interview. Photographs also provide the impetus for interviewees to conceive and verbalize their understandings. The photographic elicitation interview process does not only elicit more information, but rather evokes a different kind of information (Harper, 2002; Rose, 2007).

### **Process of the study**

Photographic interviews were used as the research method for studying the formation of teaching conceptions among novice university teachers. During the first stage of the study, life history interviews were conducted with the participants. The next step involved a photographic interview with 13 of the participants. The participants were requested to find photographs that illustrated answers to questions on learning, teaching and the image of a university teacher (e.g. What is your vision of teaching? What is a university teacher?). The participants were requested to take photographs, they were allowed to draw images if they preferred or select photographs from their own albums.

Indirect analysis was used in the interpretation of the photographs: the interviewees themselves selected and interpreted the photographs they had brought along. All the interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. The next stage involved analysing the interpretations and explanations offered by the interviewees, but the photographs themselves as independent material were not analysed. The interviews were analysed by making use of thematic analysis.

## **Results**

Novice university teachers as a group should not be treated in a general manner since they are individually and intrinsically different in how they approach research work and teaching. Their teaching conceptions and willingness to change, develop and improve differ.

The university teachers interviewed discuss the relations of research work and teaching. Some clearly emphasise teaching as being most important for them. Some highlight the understanding that doing research is most appealing in working at a university and that doing research forms the basis of a teacher's professional character as well as making teaching more stimulating.

The conception of teaching among novice university teachers can be teaching-centred or learning-centred. The study confirmed the findings of earlier studies, showing that novice university teachers can have a learning-centred approach, but they might have difficulties in implementing it in practice (Mälkki & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2012), since they lack the necessary skills, work techniques, teaching methods or suitable environment (support from colleagues).

The vision of oneself as a university teacher in the future is based on ones present identity, activities and understandings on the one hand, while this image is affected by the dominant norms and ideals in a university, on the other hand. It is imagined that in the future, one will advance to become a subject expert, and the increased amount of knowledge and experience guarantees more influence. In these discussions and images, the tradition of a university becomes clear, namely, the norm that requires everyone in a university to be an expert sharing knowledge with students in a teaching-centred approach. The classical traditional teaching-centred conception comes to the fore among novice university teachers who are rather learning-centred in their present activities.

Among novice university teachers, there are also some who have very clear and traditional perceptions of teaching: a university has to provide an academic education, which is also a means to academic lecture-based teaching methods.

The further development of a novice university teacher has multiple directions, namely, a novice university teacher may become more teaching-centred due to tiredness, student opposition or the pressure of university traditions. Nevertheless, a novice university teacher may become more learning-centred once the necessary skills, teaching methods or a supportive environment (support from colleagues) have been obtained.

The following patterns could be outlined based on an analysis of photographic interviews:

1. Traditional university teachers. The representatives of this group do not contemplate much about teaching. Teaching is performed without doubt in the traditional manner and no intentions of further professional development are elicited.

2. Doubtful and searching university teachers. The representatives of this group contemplate the identity of a university lecturer and teaching but are not certain of their teaching methods. They may be learning-centred at present but at the same time doubt whether this is the most suitable way of teaching at a university. They also have doubts about matching their present identity and future images.
3. Confident university teachers. The representatives of this group contemplate teaching, they have undergone changes and feel they have found a way of working and teaching in a university which they intend to continue and improve.

The further development of novice university teachers depends of their own agendas, conceptions and environment.

Photographs appeared to be a useful tool for both researchers and novice teachers. The researchers received an opportunity to obtain a glimpse of the unconscious thoughts of novice teachers about teaching, but they also helped the interviewees to view their professional self and their values in teaching.

The use of photographic interviews provided an opportunity to get together with the respondent repeatedly, and therefore, created closer contact and was a prerequisite for greater participant openness. It also gave researchers an opportunity to specify the themes covered in the first interview. The use of photographic interviews in the research meant that respondents were more deeply involved in the research: searching for or taking the photographs led the respondents to think about the questions more thoroughly. At the same time, some opted out of participating in the interview precisely because it seemed time and energy consuming for them. In addition, some participants saw the photographic interview as a research method that seemed unconvincing, and they did not want to get involved in questionable research. Therefore, the sample may be biased, as it is made up of the university teachers for whom visual methods were suitable.

*Keywords:* novice university teacher, teaching concepts, photographic interview, higher education