

Teaching conceptions of practitioner-lecturers in applied higher education institutions

Elina Reva^{a1}, Mari Karm^b, Liina Lepp^b, Marvi Remmik^b

^a *Tallinn University, Institute of Educational Sciences*

^b *University of Tartu, Institute of Educational Sciences*

Summary

Introduction

Previous studies on university teaching (e.g. Gourlay, 2011; LaRocco & Bruns, 2006) have pointed out that teaching requires teachers to have a thorough knowledge of the occupational field. „Knowledge of occupational field” means that competence is acquired in the course of studies and as a result of professional experience. As the consistency of theoretical and practical teaching is important in the curricula of applied higher education, practitioners are involved in teaching activities, in order to develop links between theory and practice for learners. Involving practitioners in tuition is widespread, especially in health, social and economic studies (Gourlay, 2011). The formation of links between theory and practice is one of the key outputs when teaching occupations require practical skills (Boshuizen, Schmidt, Custers, & Van De Wiel, 1995). As Santoro and Snead (2013) have found, it is the practical occupational experience of practitioner-lecturers that is valuable when teaching future professional experts. Since supporting students’ learning and shaping their practical knowledge is a result of teaching quality of universities (Dall’Alba, 1994), the evidence-based research of teaching practice of practitioner-lecturers needs further attention.

Previous researchers have studied how teachers adjust to university life, including teacher identity formation (Gourlay, 2011; Shreeve, 2011; Smith & Boyd, 2012) and teaching conceptions (e.g. Ezer et al., 2010; Kember & Kwan, 2000; Postareff & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2008). Researchers have also analysed lecturers’ experience in university teaching, teaching conceptions and teachers professional identity (e.g. Eley, 2006; Kember & Kwan, 2000; Postareff & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2008; Smith & Boyd, 2012; Young & Erickson, 2011). Less attention has been paid to the teaching practice of practitioners

¹ Institute of Educational Sciences, Tallinn University, Narva Road 25, 10120 Tallinn, Estonia; ereva9@gmail.com

who continue their occupational work, and teach at the same time in the university (e.g. Gourlay, 2011; LaRocco & Bruns, 2006).

According to Pratt, Boll and Collins (2007), the role of practitioner-lecturers is mainly related to the creation of a practical learning context, which demands the implementation of learner-centred teaching methods. For example, Collins and Pratt (2011) find that practitioner-lecturers who have both professional, as well as teaching expertise, are capable of relating theory and practice to learners in a better way.

Earlier studies about teaching conceptions (e.g. Ezer et al., 2010; Kember & Kwan, 2000) suggest that teaching conceptions are distinguished on the basis of how the teacher understands teaching and how he teaches learners, and this impacts the teaching-related activities of the teacher. Teaching conceptions can be either teacher-centred or learner-centred.

This study has been motivated by the problem that the teaching conceptions of practitioner-lecturers affect their teaching and have impact on the quality of university teaching (Dall'Alba, 1994). Awareness of teaching conceptions enables the planning of the education of practitioner-lecturers, as well as develops and influences at national level the decisions related to the education of practitioner-teachers (Watt & Richardson, 2007).

Based on the research subject, the objective of this research is to describe the meaning of teaching by, and teaching conceptions of, practitioners who teach in applied higher education institutions. Answers are sought for the following research questions:

1. What meaning do practitioner-lecturers acquire from teaching?
2. What are the teaching conceptions of practitioner-lecturers?

The concept of practitioner-lecturer has been used to define practitioners who are working professionally and at the same time teach at the university, and occupation to define the main profession of practitioners.

Methodology

Data was collected by semi-structured interviews from 15 practitioner-lecturers. The interview questions gave the interviewees an opportunity to describe and explain the subjects, allowing researchers who analysed the data to identify the topics that were not directly asked from the interviewees (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Semi-structured interviews were leading participants to self-reflection, thereby enabling to express the significance of the research findings.

The choice of analysis of the research data was based on the researchers' aim to analyse the conceptions of university teaching of practitioner-lecturers.

For data analysis of this study, qualitative content analysis was applied, as the method applied for interpreting the content of text data by using systematic encoding process. The method of qualitative content analysis was preferred in this study for examining transcripts of interviews and written data (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). The advantage of qualitative content analysis lies in the possibility to bring out both clear messages as well as hints, which made it possible to interpret and give meaning in the course of systematic data analysis. During the process of inductive content analysis of data, open coding, category creation and aggregation into main categories took place (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Data content analysis was directed by the research questions. When inconsistencies occurred in the coding or categorizing, decisions were justified on the basis of data, and researchers found consensus in the course of discussion. In order to increase the reliability of the work, the first author carried out the repetitive coding after some time.

Results and discussion

As a result of data analysis, two main categories stood out: 1) the meaning of teaching for practitioners (subcategories: teaching as a possibility to develop a career; teaching as an incentive to one's own professional development; teaching as time-consuming extra work; 2) practitioner-teachers' approach to teaching (subcategories: consideration of students' prior knowledge, creating study materials; usage of learning methods; linking theory and practice in teaching).

The research results proved that the practitioner-lecturers described themselves as being in the role of a developer of occupational practice in university, and in the role of a learner. According to their conceptions, the practitioner-lecturers considered their personal occupational development, as well as the development of the occupational society, to be important when teaching in higher education institutions. Practitioner-lecturers especially appreciated their professional expertise and practical experience, which they considered to be also the foundation of teaching. Practitioner-teachers found that it is possible to transfer occupational experience to learners through teaching.

According to the conceptions of practitioner-lecturers, teaching in a higher education institution was associated with a deeper understanding of their occupation. Practitioner-teachers' descriptions of teaching practice showed that the most widely used format in teaching was that of the lecture, including interactive lecture. It was noteworthy that although the

lecture was the predominant form of teaching, the need to diversify the methods of teaching was felt. The results pointed to the similarity of the results of previous studies (e.g. Samuelowicz & Bain, 2001), highlighting that the dominance of the teacher in teaching process refers to the teacher-centred teaching conception. The desire to diversify teaching which was manifested in practitioner-lecturers' conceptions, pointed to some change in the conceptions, from information mediators to creators of learning (Brammer, 2006; Samuelowicz & Bain, 2001). The results of this study showed that teaching conceptions of practitioner-lecturers inclined towards a teacher-centred conception, which was expressed in the need to choose the information necessary for teaching, to determine the content of learning and the context to be taught. Results of this study indicate that the practitioner-teachers need support in teaching, and education in teaching. The practitioner-teachers are experts foremost in their professional field, and teaching in university is an additional work for them.

The results of this study indicated that the practitioner-teachers:

- prioritized their occupational role in university teaching; in the role of the lecturer, the existence of occupational experience was valued;
- considered occupational experience as the basis of teaching, and considered it possible to transfer experience to learners;
- learned to know their occupation more thoroughly by teaching it;
- developed a personal practice of teaching based on the existing learning and teaching experience;
- were inclined towards a teacher-centred conception in their teaching conceptions, as implied by the way of thinking indicating dominance in teaching.

Keywords: practitioner-lecturer, teaching in university, teaching practice, teaching conceptions