

Relations between teachers' approaches to teaching and students' perceptions of enhancing and hindering elements of the teaching-learning environment

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Summary

Theoretical framework

In the context of higher education, the university teacher has a main role and responsibility in developing the teaching-learning environment (TLE) of the course (Barnett & Guzmán-Valenzuela, 2017). Therefore, it is possible to describe the TLE of the course employing approaches to teaching theory, which focuses on teachers' intentions and strategies and captures several aspects of the TLE (Postareff & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2008). Previous studies have described two broad categories of approaches to teaching: content-focused and learning-focused approaches to teaching (Kember & Kwan, 2000; Postareff & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2008). The intention of teaching for **content-focused approach to teaching** is to transmit the course content. Teaching strategies are often described as delivering the course content and teachers' examples are employed. The role of the students is described as passive, i.e. main learning activity is to listen and absorb the information. The intention of assessment is described as ensuring the learning of the material and supporting external motivation. Therefore, more traditional assessment methods are adopted. The variety of both teaching and assessment practices is low.

The intention of teaching for **learning-focused approaches to teaching** is described more as encouraging the development of deep understanding, conceptual change and development of generic skills. Therefore, the role of students is often described as active creators and constructors of knowledge. Teaching strategies are described as offering possibilities for students to constantly engage and interact. The intention of assessment practices is to value and support the development of deep understanding and, therefore, more

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authentic assessment tasks are often employed. For this teaching approach the variety of teaching and assessment methods and tasks is high. Research in the field of approaches to teaching have also indicated that teachers may combine elements from both approaches (Postareff et al., 2008; Stes & Van Petegem, 2014).

Researchers on teaching and learning in higher education have indicated that the TLE of the course (i.e. teachers approach to teaching) does not directly influence students' learning, but more important is how students perceive the TLE (Baeten et al., 2010, Entwistle, 2007). In general, research has described elements that enhance and hinder students' learning or encourage deep or surface approaches to learning (Baeten et al., 2010; Esterhazy et al., 2019; Hailikari & Parpala 2014; Kyndt et al., 2011; Parpala et al., 2010; Parpala et al., 2011; Ruohoniemi & Lindblom-Ylänne 2009; Sambell et al., 1997; Struyven et al., 2006).

Students **perceive the TLE as enhancing** their learning or they probably adopt deep approaches to learning when they perceive elements of the TLE, such as: 1) alignment between learning outcomes, teaching and assessment; 2) pre-set timetables or study plans; 3) teaching is interesting and relevant; 4) there are possibilities to constantly engage with and apply learning material; 5) interaction with peers or the teacher; 6) enthusiasm of the teacher; support and explanations; 6) feedback and possibility to develop the assignment further; 7) authentic tasks. The elements of the TLE are **perceived by students as hindering** or students describe adopting surface approaches to learning when: 1) there are few classroom meetings, feedback and interaction; 2) the level of guidance is low (e.g. the assignments are ill-structured); 3) assessment is mainly summative. Too big or too little workload, or assignments that are too challenging or too easy for students (e.g. assignments/tasks) also hinder learning.

Previous research (e.g. Hailikari et al., 2018; Postareff and Lindblom-Ylänne, 2008), that describes the students' perceptions of the elements of the TLE that enhance or hinder their learning tends to be rather general or is focused on the curriculum level. Moreover, there are few researches that would explore the relations between students' perceptions of the TLE and teachers' approaches to teaching at the course level. Understanding these relations is crucial from the perspective of course development. Therefore, the current research is focused on exploring how the elements of teachers' approaches to teaching and the elements of the TLE that are perceived as enhancing or hindering their learning are related.

Research methods

This qualitative study employs a multi-case research design (Thomas, 2016) to capture how the teachers' approaches to teaching are related to the elements of the TLE that are perceived by students as hindering or enhancing. Firstly, in the process of selecting the cases i.e. courses for the study, it was important that their field, level, content and learning outcomes were similar as suggested by Baeten et al. (2010). Therefore, one case in this study represents one compulsory undergraduate course in the field of social sciences, which had the same content and similar learning outcomes. Secondly, it was important that the TLE of the courses would differ from the perspective of teaching and assessment practices. Three teachers responsible for teaching and assessment of the selected courses agreed to participate in the study. Data was collected employing individual semi-structured interviews from teachers and students (teachers N=3, students N=33). Qualitative inductive content analysis was used to analyse the data of both groups of participants.

Results

The study found that two teachers out of three combined content- and learning-focused approaches to teaching, thus reaffirming the results of earlier research (Postareff et al., 2008; Stes & Van Petegem, 2014).

Combining approaches to teaching does not necessarily mean that students perceive it as hindering their learning when they perceive how and what they must study. Students described an inconsistency between the learning process and the summative assessment method as a factor hindering their learning as the tasks implemented during the learning process guided students towards a certain way of learning. When a different type of a task was used as a summative assessment method, it resulted in the students not learning in the way a teacher assumed, nor in the way the examination paper was designed and by the end of the course students became disappointed. Consequently, it is very important for the teacher to describe his or her expectations more precisely when using different types of assessment methods and tasks.

Students perceived lectures and seminars interesting, when it was possible to solve problems and discuss the subject matter, in groups with peers, and thus, supporting their learning. Meaningful learning in seminars emerged in students' descriptions when they were well-prepared for a seminar. The opposite situation diminished student participation in lectures and seminars.

Students' descriptions showed that a continuous flow of assignments supports their learning when the amount of assignment is adequate and in case the assignments are compulsory (Ruohoniemi & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2009;

Varunki et al., 2017). This study enabled to understand the interaction between compulsory and optional learning activities. Results showed that when a teacher suggested a book to be read before lectures, most of the students did not comply. When a teacher wants bachelor's level students to carry out certain learning activities, the authors recommend making the assignments compulsory as students may have problems organising their learning and managing time (Hailikari et al., 2018).

As to the assignments implemented within a course it became evident that they supported students' learning if they were authentic, however, when a task was ill-formulated it did not support the learning process (Hailikari & Parpala, 2014). Furthermore, from the point of view of learning it is important that students have the possibility for feedback to improve their tasks, meaning that feedback will be productive from the perspective of learning as suggested by Esterhazy et al. (2019).

To sum up, combining approaches to teaching is not necessarily perceived by the students as hindering their learning. Students' learning is above all hindered by ambiguous expectations and instructions.

Keywords: teaching-learning environment, approaches to teaching, students' perceptions of enhancing elements of the TLE, students' perceptions of hindering elements of the TLE