

Sussi Louise Zimmermann  
Roskilde University, Denmark

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# How to make better mistakes?

## Inspiring reflective and innovative teaching through creative approaches to teachers' learning experiences

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Innovation in teaching is at the heart of a dynamic learning culture in higher education institutions. Teaching is, or should be, an inherently creative process. It should be a voyage of discovery for not just the learner but for the teacher. However, in the contemporary environment of higher education there is an increasing focus on regulation and accountability. Teaching and the teacher are increasingly the subject of centralized quality control and an increasingly (paranoic?) focus on how the institution performs against a basket of key performance indicators and in the competitive battle for position in the university world rankings. In this environment teaching can easily become risk averse. Innovation may be stifled because of the fear of making mistakes impacting on performance and perception.

This paper explores this problem from the perspective of teacher rather than student learning in relation to the role of teaching. It draws on the experiences of an ongoing institutional research and development project (IRD) aiming to raise the future levels of reflective practice, critical thinking and innovative teaching amongst teaching staff at Roskilde University, Denmark. Using the dictum *If you don't innovate, someone else will* – (Francis Bacon), the Teaching and Learning Unit set out to change their approaches existing practices to attract attention to the importance of learning quality for staff as well as students. The project aims to improve the teaching experience and learning success from the bottom up. As a consequence, the Unit assumed that the concepts of learning and teaching identity formation are situated, dynamic and culturally constructed in diverse learning context(s) (Lave 1991).

The project has been active since 2008 but was reformulated in 2011 to consider the issues of reflective practices, critical thinking and innovative practice and to build these into the specific

contents and provision of teacher development. Hence provision now includes workshops in reflective practice, creative teaching, reflective teaching portfolios, collegial supervision and coaching over a three year period. The ground premise of the courses is that they have to stimulate: enjoyment, creativity and confidence to *learn from mistakes*, divergent thinking and reflective practice. The key questions posed in this process are:

- ◆ What do we (the institution/staff development units etc.) want the teachers to learn?
- ◆ How are the goals achieved?
- ◆ Who are the learners and how do they learn?
- ◆ What motivates them to make the effort?
- ◆ Where and what do they learn?

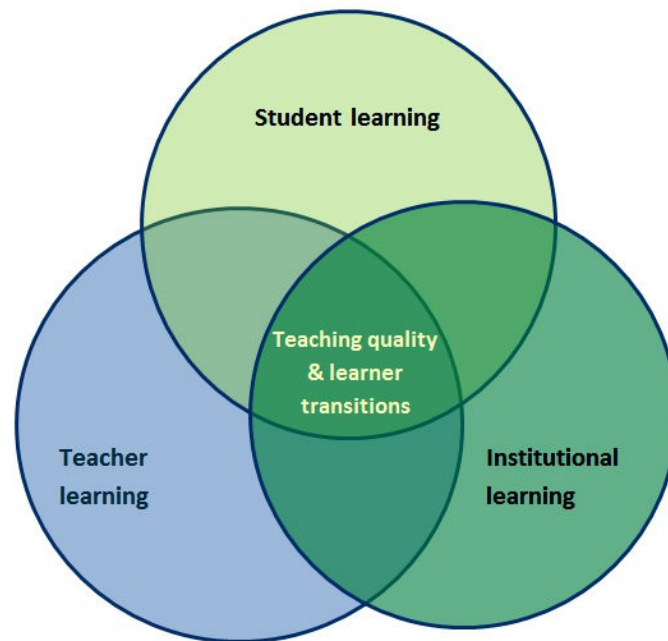
These questions also link directly to the University's organization of its teacher qualification programme, also known as the Adjunct Education Programme (AEP). An earlier report had already highlighted key difficulties such as: The AEP being a well-kept institutional secret and the quality and impact on teaching quality not measurable. In response to these findings the unit set out to completely change the AEP and embark on a journey of high visibility and cross-institutional collaboration. The purpose of the re-construction was simple – to provide top-qualified, exemplary and innovative learning opportunities for teaching staff and foster measurable impact in teaching quality and teacher satisfaction. To do this, a policy decision had to be made – based on the initial questions above. As a central unit catering for all disciplines, this was not an easy task. The one thing we did agree on was that '*all teaching staff must be/come reflective teaching and learning practitioners.*' Reflecting that teacher identity is not seen an object but a '*constant becoming*' (Wenger 1998).

## **Methodology**

Inspired by Donald Schön – *the Reflective Practitioner*, Chris Argyris – *Teaching Smart People How to Learn* and 'Social Learning Theory' in various interpretations (Vygotsky (1978), Lave & Wenger (1991), Wenger (1998)) we set out to do things differently. Located in a learning context completely based on Problem Oriented Project Based Learning in flavour better known as *the Roskilde way*, where the primary basis of student learning is project work in groups, the parameters of the educational ideology for the AEP were given. Teachers are facilitators and known hierarchies of position and power between staff and students are constantly 'negotiated'.

The body of knowledge used to develop the new strategy for staff development in learning and teaching quality is largely emic (Merriam 1998:6). The project is located within qualitative methodology and is inspired by Naturalistic Inquiry (Lincoln 1985). It seeks to uncover the

meanings of experiences and practices among teaching staff and develop an understanding of the relationship between these and the context of the institutional teaching ideals. Learning on all levels (student, staff, institution see model 1) is considered to be part of a complex pattern of social interdependent interactions.



Model the dimensions of learning and teaching (Zimmermann 2013)

In this way both learning and identity transition is constituted through a relationship between the individuals, the social and the situation.

## Findings

The paper draws primarily on the institutional data collected on the experience of these approaches during the initial year of implementing the new approach to teacher learning. However, it also draws on a broader set of conversations with others engaged in teacher qualification and learning in other Danish universities. In setting out the findings therefore the paper will raise broader theoretical and empirical issues relevant to the sector. *How to make better mistakes* is one of the central paradoxes of becoming more innovative. As Dodgson et al. put it: “The essential paradox of innovation is that whilst it is clearly evident, ex post, how important it is for corporate and, indeed, national competitiveness and quality of life, it is by no means evident, ex ante, which particular innovations will be successful. (Dodgson, M et al. (2005: 23). A key finding from the project to date is that changing the learning ideals in staff development to harmonise those expected of the students does foster some resistance to the idea of taking risk in order to innovate. However, the personal supervision of all participants and the increased focus on enjoyment and creativity in the teaching

practice is also highly motivating, especially for new and younger staff. As Aristotle said, “Teaching is the highest form of understanding”.

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