

The Loneliness of the Higher Education Teacher. A Critical Discourse Analysis (0078)

Pedagogical solitude

Teaching in higher education often takes place behind closed doors, not only literally, but also in the sense that there is little dialogue among academic teachers about what happens pedagogically in their lecture theatres, classrooms and labs. Teaching seems to be treated and shielded like a private affair.

Palmer (1993) notes that 'Faculty, unlike many other professionals, lack the continuing conversation with colleagues' (p. 8). Hutchings (2002) adds that 'teaching, which one might expect to be the most social of work, done in community with others, is in fact much less so than research. Indeed, teaching is lonely work for many faculty'. Shulman (1993) refers to this phenomenon as 'pedagogical solitude'.

Pedagogical solitude is problematic for several reasons. It impedes the emergence of a shared understanding of good teaching; it inhibits the diffusion of teaching innovations; and it hinders collegial and organisational learning with respect to teaching.

In this paper I explore causes of pedagogical solitude by critically analysing academic teachers' discourses on teaching, learning, collegial relations and institutional conditions at *Sonnberg*, a German university of applied sciences. Previous research found a fairly high degree of pedagogical solitude to prevail at *Sonnberg* (Vogel, 2009).

Critical discourse analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a methodology providing theories and methods for the empirical study of the role that semiosis or meaning-making plays in social processes. According to Fairclough (2001), 'every practice has a semiotic element' (p. 234). Therefore, CDA also involves theorising the social processes themselves and, in particular, the power structures, which give rise to, and are maintained by, discourse (Oughton, 2007).

CDA regards discourse as a form of social practice and therefore as socially constituted. At the same time, discourse is also seen as a factor constituting 'situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people. [...] Since discourse is so consequential, it gives rise to important issues of power. Discursive practices may have major ideological effects – that is, they can help produce and reproduce unequal power relations [...] through the ways in which they represent things and position people' (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258).

The CDA in this paper is based on several in-depth interviews with professors at *Sonnberg*; on large collection of quotes by further professors; and on the unstructured observation of campus life and social interaction.

The discursively maintained normality of pedagogical solitude

The CDA in this paper is based on Fairclough's (2009) analytical framework which consists of four stages.

Stage 1: Focus upon a social problem, in its semiotic aspect.

Pedagogical solitude results from lacking communication. However, 'one cannot not communicate' (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967, p. 48) since any behaviour can be interpreted as a form of communication. So the semiotic aspect of pedagogical solitude is what higher education teachers implicitly say by treating their teaching as a private affair.

Stage 2: Identify obstacles to addressing the social problem.

The main obstacle to overcoming pedagogical solitude seems to be its very normality, causing a lack of problem awareness and thus inertia on the part of the professors. Two sets of discourses appear to sustain the normality of pedagogical solitude at *Sonnberg*: Working Conditions Discourses and Professional Identity Discourses.

The Working Conditions Discourses (see Table 1) characterise the working conditions at *Sonnberg* as limiting rather than enabling. The discourses are socially acceptable, commodified ways to explain, excuse or defend certain potentially questionable practices (including pedagogical solitude), practices which my interviewees felt compelled to legitimate.

Workload Discourse	Fragmentation Discourse	(Lack of) Incentives Discourse
<u>Teaching</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18 hours per week • Supervising, marking • Student emails • Lack of teaching assistants 	<u>Time</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Timetables • Teaching load 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching evaluation without consequences • KPIs for teaching favour quantity over quality • No sanctions for poor teaching • No academic development programme offered
<u>Administrative</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No secretariats or admin support staff • HE reform producing extra admin work 	<u>Space</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No common rooms • Offices spread across campus • Working from home 	
	<u>Academic discipline</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Few colleagues with same specialisation 	

Table 1: Working Conditions Discourses

Through their Professional Identity Discourses (see Table 2), most professors represent themselves as experts and authorities in their field or profession, not as teachers. They tend to regard teaching rather simply as the transmission of knowledge. The term *Stoff* (=material) is widely used to refer to the body of knowledge to be taught, as if it were objectively given. Due to these Professional Identity Discourses, the professors see no need and no reason to problematise and discuss their teaching with colleagues.

Expert/Authority Discourse	Committed Professor Discourse	<i>Stoff</i> Discourse	Discourses on Teaching & Learning
Professors ... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • held important positions before joining HB • are recognised in the field or profession • see students as unprepared for HE 	Professors ... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • are hard-working • are benevolent, understanding, fair, supportive • always do their best (within the limits of given working conditions) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Stoff</i> is what matters • Students must master the <i>Stoff</i> • <i>Stoff</i> tends to be constructed as real and objectively given • Perceived need to “cover” all the <i>Stoff</i> → pressure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching is the transmission of knowledge • Linear relationship between teaching and learning • What teacher does is more important for student learning than what students do

Table 2: Professional Identity Discourses

Stage 3: Consider whether the social order “needs” the social problem.

In the social order at *Sonnberg*, the professors are powerful and have little to fear from students, peers and even senior management. Being tenured, they enjoy a great deal of autonomy without seriously being held accountable, which also translates into a certain unwillingness to cooperate.

Pedagogical solitude, the social problem in this context, is both a symptom of *Sonnberg*’s social order and one of its main pillars. Serious pedagogical dialogue would necessarily challenge the Professional Identity Discourses and their simplistic underlying assumptions. It would also build up pressure to alter the working conditions, many of which are actually under the professors’ own control.

Stage 4: Identify possible ways past the obstacles.

Attempts to overcome pedagogical solitude can be expected to meet significant resistance, as this will also challenge the social order. A two-tier strategy may be required. On the one hand, the “old” discourses need to be superseded with “new” ones that have a mobilising rather than a decapacitating effect, and that detrivialise teaching. On the other hand, incentives and attractive forums for collegial dialogue (e.g. professional learning communities, teaching and learning conferences) need to be provided to trigger the process.

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