

Null, Conflict, or Complementary? The Research-Teaching-Nexus in Academic Practice (0117)

The Research-Teaching-Nexus in Academic Practice

Since the 19th century the university has been the main site for research in Germany. At the university, scientists are appointed professors who have to engage both in research and teaching. Professors in general hold permanent positions. They are supported by academic staff with normally temporary contracts who are regarded as junior scientists, still being in the process of qualifying for professorship. While ultimately being shaped by the individual scientist in his or her everyday practice, the research-teaching-nexus is framed by the structure of academic labor, and more specifically by the individual scientist's position in the academic career system. On the basis of problem-centered interviews with scientists at German universities and quantitative data on teaching loads we explore how scientists shape the relation between research and teaching in their everyday practice.

Null – The Exclusiveness of Research

Teaching and research may be conceived as belonging to separate realms. The interviewees concede that *in practice* there is a clear hierarchy between research and teaching. Regardless of the individual scientist's position, the scientific community favors research achievements over teaching performance. Academic prestige is granted through the publication and dissemination of research results and the academic career system requires academic qualifications, i.e. a piece of individual research.

The dominance of research is further aggravated by the fact that research performance appears to be quantifiable, be it the amount of acquired third-party funding or the citation index. Yet for teaching performance, widely shared quantifying mechanisms do not exist and intra-institutional teaching evaluation results are not demanded in job advertisements.

Furthermore, research is tied to the scientific community. Scientists have to present their findings in articles, in books and at conferences; responses provide not only feedback, but mean also evaluation. Teaching, in comparison, is seen as individual endeavor. It may be evaluated but is in most cases not sanctioned, neither positively nor negatively. Therefore, teaching may simply be “a question of honor”, as one interviewee asserted.

Complementary – Assets of Teaching

Even though the interviewees generally ascertain a hierarchy between research and teaching, they also see some assets in teaching. First, teaching may lead to innovation in research, for example via new research questions or perspectives gathered in interaction with students. In this view, research profits from teaching, and vice versa: scientists are motivated to teach their latest research results. Second, some interviewees claim that they learn through teaching. They see teaching as an opportunity to systematically explore new topics, to update knowledge, and to test new hypotheses. Third, teaching may provide instant gratification. It demands direct communication and offers direct feedback from the students while research is evaluated indirectly and anonymously by the scientific community. Finally, teaching is the main instrument for recruiting future academics. The classroom, lecture hall or laboratory is the first place where academics and students meet, and it is only *after* this encounter that the integration into the scientific community can be launched.

Conflict – Getting Along with the Research-Teaching-Nexus

The complementary relation between teaching and research is perceived to be unstable. Formal regulations may limit flexibility in content, and therefore impede reconciling teaching with one's own research interests. Yet for the interviewees, the main conflict arises when they perceive their teaching as being at the expense of their research. The research-teaching-nexus then becomes a zero sum game where the more you teach, the less time you have for research.

This situation is most dramatic for junior scientists. Quantitative data on the teaching personnel and loads at German universities shows that teaching in large part is done by junior scientists, sometimes under precarious working conditions. Because teaching is only of secondary importance for their career advancement, time spent on research to obtain the necessary academic qualifications is existentially important for them. Our data shows that roughly 40 percent of the academic staff below the professorship teaches more than two courses. Of those with temporary contracts, roughly 25 percent teach more than two courses, and almost a half of those with part-time contracts (usually Ph.D. students who are regarded as academic staff in Germany) teach more than one course. For these junior scientists, time spent on their academic qualification has become a precious good, regardless of whether they appreciate teaching or not.

The interviews reveal that the number of courses is not the only determinant of the actual teaching load. Next to classroom teaching the course has to be conceptualized, coordinated, and organized, single sessions have to be prepared, students have to be supervised and examined. These tasks are usually not formalized. Depending on their position in the

academic hierarchy and access to resources, scientists can reduce their actual teaching load without teaching less courses: They can delegate parts of classroom teaching, supervision, and exam corrections to lower-ranked personnel, mainly junior scientists; they can use gatekeeper strategies to filter communication and supervision; and they can standardize parts of their teaching or exams (Schimank 1995).

Null, Complementary, or Conflict – Reconciling Teaching with Research

Those who postulate no relation between teaching and research in their practice may foreclose any conflict (Milem u.a. 2000). But mostly, the interviewees do not comprehend research and teaching as separate activities. Rather, there is a strong normative view that both are inherent to the academic profession. Even scientists at American research universities support this notion (Leslie 2002). The unity of research and teaching, pursued with equal motivation in practice, is regarded as *authentic* incorporation of being a scientist, *epitomized* in the role model of the professor.

If teaching is inherent to academic practice the relation between research and teaching is very likely to be both complementary and conflictual. This requires balancing the individual teaching load so that at least *some* teaching may be complementary to research. Yet the strategies to do so are limited by one's position in the academic hierarchy. Junior scientists are more prone to experience conflict since research is necessary for advancing their career while at the same time they lack the power to effectively shape the research-teaching-nexus.

References

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