

“They don’t show up”

The role of hidden teachers in sustaining teaching in German higher education

While in Germany there is a wide range of literature on higher education policy reforms their impact on teaching on faculty level has so far not been explored. In drawing on actor network theory we intend to show that due to a peculiar entanglement of the products of these policies – staff planning charts, capacity norm values, student numbers, block grants, etc. –, in several cases administration defines teaching loads above what actual teaching staff on faculty level can provide. In order to close this gap, faculties have to find a way of accommodating a teaching load that is true to administrative calculations but fictional in reality. Paradoxically, the only way to do so within the given policy entanglement is to use academics for teaching on the premise that they explicitly do not count as teachers: they hide from administrative view.

Teaching is not an easy task, not least in the university. In fact, judging from the wide-ranging literature on quality in teaching, teaching support instruments, and teacher training centres in Germany it seems to be the heart of a problem regarding proper education. In nearly all of the cases this problem involves a teacher that should find a way of engaging mostly everybody in his/her class. So while a lot of questions are raised to address the various best ways of doing this, only a few people seem to be astonished by the rather unique fact, that a *person* actually made it in front of a number of students at a specific time in a specific room somewhere in the university buildings. Even more so, this specific arrangement and its conditions seem to play a rather marginal role in the question of good teaching, at least in Germany. Turning the picture around, there is a rather broad discourse on individual conditions of this arrangement. Questions of higher education funding, legal conditions and teacher obligations, teaching hours and of proper management play an important role but seldom search the link to other discourse fields entangled in teaching not least the actual teaching itself.

Thus in in our presentation we will approach the organization of teaching at a German university¹ not from the perspective of a specific policy line but – “study[ing] up” (Law, 2009: 150) – from the question of who and what is involved if it comes to making sure that students actually meet a teacher when attending a class. We draw on actor network theory (for education: Fenwick and Edwards, 2010) in order to understand the non-linear-entanglement of human and non-human actors leading to the fact that at the investigated university teaching in several disciplines can only be sustained if faculties manage to hide some of their teachers. For our analysis the regulatory framework plays an important role: since the 1970s, access to Higher Education is based on constitutional law and produced via complex calculations –the German capacity law – which involve moveable figures of staff charts, contact hours, student applications, civil-servant-status, room size and fixed normative numbers that represent the teaching load per teacher and student throughout his/her whole degree program. Several of these moveable figures – such as the staff chart – originate in specific modes of higher education funding as well as historical developments (curriculum, course structures, etc.). In the end these calculations fixed the highest possible student intake number of a degree program given that an equivalent number of students apply. Only if this number reached entry restrictions could be installed.

¹ The research is based on explanatory field study and part of the research project “who teaches what under which conditions? An analysis of the structure of academic teaching at German Higher Education Institutions” and is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research. Our empirical work is based on interviews with teachers and deans concerning their teaching and the organization of teaching at five faculties from on middle-sized Western-German university.

Changes among these figures such as increasing faculty in staff charts concurrently had effects on the student intake numbers (rising).

Severe funding constraints, the Bologna Process accompanied by degree accreditation and a new emphasis on quality in teaching, devaluation of law-making from the Federal to the state level, as well as new public management reforms have partly altered, contradicted, and neglected the existing capacity framework.

While funding principles have changed and curriculum and course structure have been altered, the moveable figures of the capacity law still remain the basic termini for “summarizing a set of spatially dispersed tasks” (Nespor, 2006: 25) in the organization of teaching. They remain as the visible picture that is used to calculate the student intake numbers. However they have not and less and less are representing the enactment of teaching on the local level. Neither do contact hours equate the actual teaching load nor do staff charts represent the actual faculty. In fact administratively calculated intake numbers and therefore teaching loads are often defined above the teaching load the actual teaching staff on faculty level can provide. The administrative picture materializes in either students expecting courses to be held by fictitious teachers or higher student numbers in courses of the existing faculty. In order to make sure that a reasonable number of students meet a real teacher in class, faculties have to find ways of increasing their teaching capacities without making it visible to capacity law. Next to splitting courses and working overload they use temporary funds to employ contingent faculty that explicitly doesn’t count as teachers. But most prominently they use academics on research contracts. Apart from some informal time-tables for day-to-day orientation, there is no contract, no evidence that the research staff’s teaching actually takes places. Faculty must hide these teachers from the eyes of capacity: “they don’t show up” (deanery, natural sciences).

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