

LOOKING BEHIND THE MIRROR: Who am I as a teacher?

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1. Introduction: Critically reflecting about teaching

Our main premise is that reflective practice is an important tool in practice-based professional learning settings where individuals (should) learn from their own professional experiences (Moon, 2000; 2005). It implies reflecting 'in' and 'on' action to engage in a process of continuous learning (Schön, 1983), where past and present reflection regarding the practice feed-forward future actions. Following Bolton (2010), it is essential to pay a *"critical attention to the practical values and theories which inform everyday actions, by examining practice reflectively and reflexively. This leads to developmental insight"* (p.XIX).

(Self-)Reflection may be considered a complex process constituted by different but interconnected elements that complement each other: (i) gathering information and/or data, (ii) assimilating/ analysing them, (iii) reflecting upon practice/evaluating it, and (iv) adapting thoughts on effective teaching and learning. Consequently, this can be stimulated by critically approaching literature on Higher Education (HE), especially peer-reviewed literature informed by the scholarship of teaching and learning (Boyer, 1990; McKinney, 2004; Richlin, 2001; Trigwell & Shale, 2004). In fact, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning emphasises the critical reflection throughout the entire process of searching for theoretical frameworks and identifying good practices (Fry, Ketteridge & Marshall, 2009), critically reflecting about them, collecting evidence, describing innovative and experiential approaches to learning critically by analysing and evaluating the results, sharing experiences and discussing with peers, and disseminating finding among academic. This is a progressive path but a circular one, where reflecting within oneself, with others (literature, colleagues, and the broadest academia) is essential to become a more enriched HE teacher and where teaching can be truly a *"transformative practice"* (Mezirow, 1994; Taylor, 2008).

So self-reflection can be enriched, it may be highlighted the 'power' of building and collecting evidence, for example by stimulating the existence of critical friends among the HE teaching staff, in order to receive feedback about what seems 'significant' about the practice, to promote peer questions and comments about written statements/ reflections. Additionally, students' evaluations are important so teachers can receive feedback about their practice effectiveness. Simultaneously, this interaction with peers can also be operationalised by (i) using peer observation: namely when directly observing teaching, analysing and reflecting, receiving constructive feedback, and sharing good practices; (ii) intensify peer dialogue: namely, when sharing understandings and *"construct[ing] culturally situated knowledge base"* (Pilkington, 2011), and developing a mutual stimulus to build communities of practice and engage in enriching networks.

Overall, the aim of this paper is what we have called *"looking behind the mirror"*, finding a synergy between (i) definitions of teaching: beliefs about teaching, the meaning of teaching in context, personal view (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Ramsden, 2003); (ii) definitions of learning: beliefs about learning, understandings of how students learn, discussions of learning parameters (styles, diversity, difficulties) (Gibbs, 1981); (iii) the view of the learner and student development (Entwistle, 1988); (iv) the student-teacher relationship: goals and expectations, personal skills and strengths (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999); (v) the evaluation of the teaching impact on learner: evaluating the outcomes of effective teaching (Brown *et al.*, 1997). Nevertheless, one should always keep a sensitive look over contextual factors such as the

particular discipline in which the teaching and learning takes place and the organizational necessities, student experiences, and political climates that characterise an institution. (Barnett, 2007). We consider that, just as the disciplinary culture influences teaching beliefs and conventions so do institutional contexts: the institutional mission and the role of teaching within the institution; students' expectations; the goals of the programmes; the academics' workload; physical, financial, and human resources; support available for teaching staff; among many other factors.

2. Description of the background and methodological scope

In Portugal, there is an absence of CPD courses directed to Higher Education (HE) teaching staff. Since they are not compulsory, they do not influence teachers' assessment nor their career progression. As such, the need for intervention in this area is overwhelming, despite of mainly being proposed by institutional training services on a voluntary/underpaid basis.

Within this context, at a HE institution CPD modules were designed, aiming to address several issues on HE Pedagogy, particularly on innovative and active teaching, learning and assessment strategies. One module was constituted by 30 hours and another by 15 hours. Both have most of the same contents in terms of pedagogical strategies that were used, such as: short active learning activities; linking teaching and research; undergraduate research activities outside and inside the classroom; cooperative learning; problem-based learning; reflective portfolio; and critical friendship. The contents were reduced in what concerns some theoretical background on HE political issues (namely regarding the Bologna Process and the Lifelong Learning agenda) and some other pedagogical strategies. Moreover, some discussions were shortened.

Due to a lack of theoretical and empirical reflection, specifically within the Portuguese research context on teaching philosophy, we have qualitatively analysed and synthesised participants' answers and group discussion around a first activity carried out in both CPD modules. If the main objective, when delivering the CPD modules, was to enhance participants' self-reflection on their practices and their views about themselves as HE teachers, the main objective of this presentation is to reflect on the main trends of participants' contributions, emphasising the major emerging topics.

Before discussing any other subject, the first session intended to act as an ice breaking session, by triggering a self-reflection of the participants' identity as practitioners and about their practice and professional development. Therefore, to enhance participants' self-reflection on their practices and their views about themselves as teachers, we proposed following questions:

- ◆ What my main responsibilities as a teacher in HE nowadays?
- ◆ How do I see myself as a teacher in HE?/ What is the keyword that defines me as a teacher in HE?
- ◆ How do my students see me?
- ◆ What would I like to change to be a better teacher in HE?
- ◆ What are my characteristics that I will (definitely) not change?

Individually, participants were invited to randomly attach their short answers to a set group of questions in a white A3 sheet using sticky notes as the basis for a group discussion.

Therefore, a qualitative analysis and synthesis of 22 participants' answers of several academic domains (using sticky notes), and of the main aspects approached in the group discussion will be the basis for presenting the results.

3. Results

We will be presenting the answers to each question, in order to isolate the participants' perspectives on each particular theme. Aiming to make sense of the results, we tried to find categories that emerged from the results and that gather the data under the same 'semantic umbrella'. Nevertheless, we may already emphasise that the boundaries between them are very blurred, as it will be observed. However, this is an attempt to give another perspective to the data collected and to enhance the discussion.

3.1. What are my main responsibilities as a teacher in HE nowadays?

Firstly, there are some answers to this question whose focus is on students' holistic development, in particular with the objective of promoting their competences, generally. Therefore, there were several participants that stated that their main responsibilities are:

- To be (i) a trainer, (ii) a mentor; (iii) a facilitator of learning, because it is the student who must 'construct' his/her own learning path;
- To help students (i) to enhance their knowledge and competences (by motivating them and guiding them), particularly their capacity of analysis and synthesis, their critical thinking, (ii) to develop 'new' scientific and transferable competences, that allow them to be better citizens;
- To motivate the students, since teaching staff consider that one of the main problems nowadays is the lack of motivation for learning that students demonstrate;
- To open students' perspectives to other possible 'horizons', not only pedagogical, namely by giving them responsibilities.

On the other hand, there are other answers that highlight other aspect: the focus is on knowledge. In this case, the teaching staff is concerned about stimulating students' academic and professional knowledge and skills. We highlight the following aspects:

- To research and communicate the relevance of research results to the students;
- To be (i) demanding, (ii) flexible, (iii) open to changes, (iv) a guide, so the students achieve knowledge that will help them to engage in a productive professional activity;
- To transmit knowledge and suitable information, which can be important for students' future job.

Naturally, those categories intersect each other, but it is interesting to observe, for instance, one teachers' comment that aggregates both categories: *"to help the development of both personal and scientific competences valid for students' (professional) future life (who are also citizens), by actively participating/being involved in the teaching and learning process"*.

Finally, we have another category which we have called 'outliers'. On the one hand, the focus is on the personal scientific development of the teacher: to develop my own scientific knowledge. On the other hand, the focus is on institutional demands and standards: to collaborate to the success of the institution; and to teach with high quality standards. In these

cases, the 'direction' of teachers' responsibilities is not the student, but other types of demands.

3.2. How do I see myself as a teacher in HE?/ What is the keyword that defines me as a teacher in HE?

In what concerns this question, the teaching staff mentioned:

(i) Personal characteristics, such as: being responsible, committed, engaged, organised, empathic, motivated, dynamic and energetic, dedicated to the teaching duties and to the students, accessible, flexible, available, honest, concerned with students, trustworthy, sensible.

(ii) Professional characteristics, namely: being rigorous and demanding towards students' work and to their teaching duties (sometimes, they mention, they may be difficult to follow up); focused on goals and also in establishing rules and boundaries; being persistent/resilient; being a collaborator and a facilitator of students' learning and competences' development; enjoying teaching and being in contact with students and, as such, motivated to improve themselves as teachers and concerned in defining pedagogical strategies that facilitate students' knowledge acquisition and their overall development. Unfortunately, they consider they are also bureaucrats, due to workload they have in terms of documents they have to fulfil.

Although we have made this categorisation, it is impossible to disconnect personal and professional characteristics. Teachers' answers always brought into light both dimensions together. Therefore, the teaching staff, with whom we have contacted, demonstrates a balance between both dimensions.

3.3. How do my students see me?

In this case, it is interesting to note that the teaching staff has quite a positive perspective on the way the students see them.

The first category is related to the relationship, to the teaching and learning interaction established between the students and the teachers. Consequently, they say that the students see them as being accessible, available, close, engaging, challenging, trustworthy to help students to overcome their difficulties, a collaborator, responsible (considering the awareness of the duties associated with the teaching and learning), dedicated and paying careful attention to students, someone who motivates the students to teaching and learning. Nevertheless, there is also a comment about "*not being in the same page*" as students'. Perhaps this has to do with the different perspectives teachers and students have over an issue; sometimes teachers are not fully aware of students' interests and expectations and this may create a gap.

A second category is more related to the knowledge and scientific preparation, that is, it is more related with teachers' academic background. The participants mentioned that students consider themselves to be demanding, rigorous, expert in a certain subject, someone who gives interesting lessons, and sometimes also boring, particularly when lecturing subjects that the students usually do not like and/or consider more difficult.

The last category is related to the personal characteristics of the teacher (as mentioned in the previous subsection). Therefore, students see their teachers as: empathic, respectful, tolerant, trustworthy, systematic/ organised.

Although it seems that the first category is the most predominant, again we stress that all these aspects intersect each other. But, in fact, it becomes clear that the students put a great emphasis on the relationship established with the teacher.

3.4. What would I like to change to be a better teacher in HE?

Following the same categories of the previous subsection, it is interesting to observe that, again, there is a predominance of topics mentioned by the teachers that may be under the 'semantic umbrella' related to the teaching and learning interaction established between the students and the teachers. We highlight the following:

- To be (i) more creative and innovative; (ii) more patient to deal with students' problems, particularly within more heterogeneous large classes; and (iii) more attentive to students who already have high-level competences in order to help them to enhance those competences even more;
- To improve pedagogical competences, so *"I can better deal with students' concerns, problems, and successes"*;
- Following the latter topic, to suit pedagogical strategies to different students' profiles;
- Accordingly, to improve (i) *"my competences to raise students' motivation"* and responsibility for them to acquire knowledge and develop competences; (ii) *"my teaching competences"*; (iii) the active participation of students during the classes, namely by putting into practice different pedagogical strategies in practical classes; (iv) the interaction with the students;
- To have proper (more) time to spend to teaching duties and students' support;
- To know how to teach student to learn how to learn.

In this case, there are other aspects that fall in the category related to teachers' the knowledge and scientific preparation:

- *"To raise my knowledge to transmit to the students"*;
- To be (i) more productive; (ii) more disciplined in terms of the elements I give to the students; (iii) demanding; (iv) more objective and efficient;
- To have more time to do research.

Finally, there are two 'hybrid' comments that can be related to both categories previously identified: to be able to stimulate the students to learn and do research, and to encourage more intellectual curiosity from students.

3.5. What are my characteristics that I will (definitely) not change?

Finally, regarding the characteristics that the teachers will not change at all, these may be associated with three categories that, once more, intersect each other. We follow the same categories found in the subsection 3.3.

The first one is more related to the teaching and learning interaction established between the students and the teachers. Teaching staff will continue to enhance: the proximity and concern with students' needs, the availability and accessibility to listen to students' difficulties and concerns, the anxiety to answer students' behaviours, the interest for innovation and students'

learning, the teaching centred on students' difficulties, the empathy with students, colleagues and other staff, and the principles and values of their mission as teachers.

In what concerns their knowledge and scientific preparation, they will continue to be rigorous and demanding, particularly in terms of the knowledge students have to achieve, and concerned in preparing the classes and all materials.

Finally, in terms of personal characteristics, the teachers will continue to use their sense of humour, to be spontaneous, to have a good working capacity, to be critical, to face challenges, to deny being accommodated with the 'normal' circumstances, and, of course, being faithful to their "*philosophic, political and religious DNA*".

4. Final reflections

Results portray the urge for an intervention in the pedagogical setting in the Portuguese HE institutions. The voluntary participation in the CPD course by the teachers evidences the acknowledged need for support in (re)thinking and questioning their teaching practices.

In this context, we stress the role of self-reflection with its power to trigger the "*looking behind the mirror*" attitude, and the consolidation and validation of many intuitive and informal practices. This 'teacher-centred reflective approach' is a must-have and the mirror is just a metaphor for going further (overcoming the constraints of appearance and performance) and deeper where the transformative power of the teaching practice takes place and develops by examining practice reflectively and reflexively.

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