

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

0279

“I could have graded your paper if you had met the minimum criteria of an academic paper” –  
Diverging academic practices in the field of practice ‘examinations, proof of performance and grading’

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**Research Domain:** Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

**Abstract:**

The consequences of the cultural impact of teaching and learning practices are rarely discussed, although it is evident that there are problems that might have intercultural ramifications. Existing studies focus heavily on the deficits of international students when, in fact, the root cause of problems often requires a much broader lens (Ryan, 2013, p 2). By comparing field-specific social practices I have identified several cultural divergences expressed by mobile actors of different national Higher Education systems (France, USA, Germany). For this poster I will point out the highly relevant field of practice concerning examinations, grading and proof of performance. As my qualitative content-analysis-based study shows, there are various culture-based approaches to grades and performance, which can result in misunderstanding and failure for students.

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**Paper:**

Internationalization touches all levels of HE (e.g., research, teaching and learning) as well as all actors (e.g., faculty, staff, students) (Schumann, 2012). Within this change process, there is a contradiction between the purported openness of universities to a global perspective, on the one hand, and local and national laws, rules, and operating mechanisms they operate under, on the other (Moosmüller, 2013). This contradiction brings about new problems that have intercultural ramifications and, as such, there are still major deficits in the research looking at how to approach a variety of problems, including the high dropout rates of international students in Germany (Heublein et al., 2012).

Although universities were originally a European institution, national models developed in the course of early modern times due to political and religious segmentation and were consolidated during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. From this initial segmentation, national models eventually emerged with their own specific academic practices, with Germany having a special role in generating the first model of a modern research university (Clark, 2006). Of course, these practices have always been permeable, hybrid, and influential of one another (Rüegg, 2004). But in spite of the Europeanization and globalization of HE, recent studies show significant differences in the interplay of research and teaching within Europe, and of course, also when comparing academic practices worldwide: in

academic styles, i.e. knowledge acquisition; in learning and teaching styles; and in interaction between students and professors (e.g. Schumann 2012; Ricken 2010).

So the basic assumption of my study was that, in the face of mobility and internationalization, students, faculty and administration have to deal with various challenges caused by different teaching and learning practices. In the following I will illustrate this with the example of practices concerning examinations, proof of performance and grading, which includes a general attitude towards grades as well as the communication of the teacher's expectations regarding assignments and grading criteria, and last but not least, a different understanding of teachers' and students' roles.

### **Theoretical frame and methods**

The theoretical frame of the study is a praxeological approach. Teaching and learning practices are considered to be field-specific 'social practices' which are organized along practical lines by a practical meaning ('sense pratique') (Bourdieu, 1972). That means that a social practice is a "routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements", it can be "a way of working", or any other activity based on a common "understanding, knowing how" (Reckwitz 2002, 250). Hence, if a practice is "a routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood", (ibid.), the understanding is "largely implicit and largely historically-culturally specific" and based on a "collective, shared knowledge" (ibid. 254). Social practices manifest themselves in behavior, doings and sayings (Schatzki 1996), but also in organizational structures. The praxeological approach aims at deciphering these informal logics; i.e. highly specific knowledge structuring life and working styles and facilitating appropriate action (= social practices) in order to generate practical knowledge

My data consist of interviews with 44 mobile students and professors who have moved between Germany and the US and between Germany and France. The analysis is based on qualitative content analysis (Schreier 2012). For a clear systematization, I chose the following evaluation steps: After relating the identified codes to social practices concerning teaching and learning, I labeled different fields of practices (achievement and grading; transfer/acquirement of knowledge; communicative interaction between students/professors) which involve coherent social practices. This will be illustrated here in the field of practice of assignments and grading.

Evaluation of the data regarding social practices in the field of examinations, proof of performance and grading shows that there is a large scale of diverging practices and expectations concerning the communication of the assignments and the grades, whether and how criteria are made explicit and how grading is done. A comparison of corresponding practices makes clear that they diverge in many aspects. The interviews show that here are differences in

- what is communicated (e.g. the genre, expectations in form and contents, detailed criteria)
- how is it communicated (e.g. syllabus, handout, orally...)
- communication structures, i.e. possibilities to ask questions about the assignment
- form and composition of the assessment.

The following table outlines the field of practice "examinations, proof of performance and grading" with its central practices

<b>Field of practice</b> “examinations, proof of performance and grading”
communication of assignment criteria
supervision of assignments
assessment / grading systems
regulation of performance
forms and formats of assignments
evaluation
standards of academic work

Differences have been perceived in all of these practices. After all, the data illustrate that, when actors from different academic systems interact, they perceive a significant range of diverging practices in the field of field of practice of examinations and proof of performance. Furthermore, it becomes evident that the differences imply a critical potential of frustration for both teachers and students.

### **Discussion**

On the basis of examples in Germany, France and the US, the results show that there are many diverging practices in the field of “examinations, proof of performance and grading”. The results tie up to the large-scale study (MuMiS) carried out by Knapp / Schumann (2008) and Schumann (2012) by differentiating the research question and giving more detailed examples. The premise that academic practices, or here specifically, teaching and learning practices, are rooted in national education cultures is often criticized by scholars claiming that the gap between disciplinary cultures might be more striking (e.g. Liebau/Huber 1985) and by those who see HE institutions as “transcultural spaces” (Darowska et al. 2010). Another criticism might be that even within social sciences in the given countries, there might be divergences in teaching and learning practices, e.g. due to institutional or individual reasons.

Notwithstanding their limitations, the results allow considerations of how faculty teaching in intercultural contexts can provide a better orientation for students (and professors) coming from different academic backgrounds, and also what implications can be derived from these findings for educational development. It becomes apparent that my survey provides relevant findings for the enhancement of educational quality and the improvement of student learning in internationalized contexts by adding an intercultural perspective to classroom practices. There is still very little research done in this area, at least in Germany. Existing studies focus too heavily on the deficits of the students when, in fact, the root cause of problems often requires a much broader lens (Ryan, 2013, p 2), for instance the involvement of faculty.

### **Outlook**

As a general conclusion, it can be stated that “cultural understanding of the self and others” is an

important competence aspect of faculty in international teaching and learning arrangements (Otten et al. 2013, 243). Ideally, mobile students and professors should receive training where they can become aware of the diversity of practices and pertinent expectations. Working with empirical results like the ones presented here can deepen the knowledge and the understanding of different social practices and their culture-immanent significance.

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