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Impact of interdisciplinary communities of teachers on enhancing the scholarship of teaching and learning

An important aspect of making SoTL an integral part of a learning culture within universities is a sustainable change owned by the teachers¹. Engaging teachers in SoTL, making SoTL an integral part of their approach to teaching, often means that they have to move beyond disciplinary research boundaries and get familiar with more social science research methods^{2,3}. SoTL- communities, where teachers collaborate with colleagues, and peer review each other's projects, can be a driving force to support teachers in getting familiar with the approaches and methods of SoTL^{2,3}.

Within Utrecht University, until now, very few teachers are involved in SoTL, and no institutional support or teacher development programs involving SoTL are offered. To engage teachers in SoTL in this exploratory pilot, two interdisciplinary communities of practitioners were formed². In the first community teachers from the whole university could get involved on a voluntary basis. The second community consisted of teachers from different disciplines of the Faculty of Science and was part of a wider project on teaching innovations. Teachers met on a monthly basis to get instruction about methods of SoTL, and the opportunity to exchange experiences with their peers. The participants received a questionnaire at the beginning and the end of their SoTL-project (about 1,5 year) with questions about their views, behaviour and attitude towards SoTL. In addition, several participants were interviewed at the end of their SoTL-projects.

Based on the first explorative results conclusions can be drawn for future SoTL-communities and teacher development activities that are related to many of the current SoTL-discussions^{1,4}. The participants enjoyed being part of the community. Most of them managed to make scholarly changes in their teaching, and showed changes in their views on teaching and learning. However, only few of them managed to share or publish their results. Participants expressed a general feeling that they had to do it 'all alone' in their own time, making them feel extra workload. In addition, they felt that the time spend on the project was not rewarded, and appreciated, within their own department. Especially in the voluntary group this led to a drop out of more than half of the participants. The first experiences of this pilot emphasise the importance of support structures, especially the support of the institute and the appreciation of teachers engaged in SoTL⁵. Giving dedicated time for SoTL and valuing their contribution to teaching and learning seems the most important.

Proposal details

Establishing and sustaining a culture of scholarship of teaching and learning offers many challenges. Careful introduction of SoTL is needed with many aspects to be considered such as the development of support structures like pedagogical courses, and the inclusion of SoTL activities in tenure and promotion tracks^{1,5}. Especially within research intensive universities the integration of SoTL is particularly difficult. Often the 'research' of SoTL is interpreted as pedagogical research that should be performed by trained educational experts, and is therefore not a task of teachers within other disciplines⁶. In addition, promotion tracks are focused on research in their own discipline, and

teachers are not encouraged to keep up to date with teaching and learning conceptions and practices of that discipline⁷.

Recently SoTL became one of the cornerstones of the new Utrecht Centre for Academic Teaching (CAT) of the Utrecht University (UU), with the aim to make SoTL part of the learning culture of the UU. UU is therefore at the starting point of integrating SoTL, facing the challenges that are associated with this^{1,2,4,5}.

This explorative pilot study describes the results of two interdisciplinary pedagogical courses offered at UU, set up to engage teachers in SoTL. A community-based approach was chosen to make it able for participants to share their projects and to collaborate². The aim was to find out whether this SoTL-track showed a change in behaviour and thinking about teaching and learning? Furthermore, does being part of the community have added benefits to the learning of the teachers? The outcome shows indeed a change in the behaviour and attitude of the participants towards teaching and learning. However, it also confirmed the challenges with engaging teachers within the UU in SoTL, and the importance of institutional support, especially in the form of dedicated time and appreciation.

References

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