

Teachers' perceptions about their practices: A qualitative research at the University of Padova

Aquario, Debora ^a; Clerici, Renata ^b; Da Re, Lorenza ^a; Felisatti, Ettore ^a,
Mazzucco, Cristina ^a; Paccagnella, Omar ^b; Serbati, Anna ^a

^aDepartment of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology, University of Padova, Italy, ^bDepartment of Statistical Sciences, University of Padova, Italy.

Abstract

The aim of the paper is to present the results deriving from the qualitative analysis of open-ended questions included in the Prodid Project Questionnaire. Prodid (Teacher professional development and academic educational innovation) is a research project conducted in 2014-2015 at the University of Padova, which aimed at developing strategies to support academic teachers to enhance their teaching competences. The questions were formulated in order to collect teachers' points of view on excellence and innovation, perceived critical aspects in their teaching practice and the need for support to improve teaching. The analysis was conducted through the use of software Atlas.ti 7 in order to highlight, on the one hand the strengths and weaknesses of current teaching practices, and on the other hand, the need of support to improve teaching skills and enhance teachers' professionalism. Findings are presented by illustrating the distributions based on the different Schools in the universities as well as the thematic issues that emerged from teachers' answers. These results informed the professional development activities organized at the University for junior and senior staff in 2015.

Keywords: *higher education; teaching and learning; qualitative analysis; teachers' perceptions, staff professional development.*

1. Introduction

The paper is aimed at presenting the results that emerged from the qualitative analysis of open-ended questions collected through the questionnaire used in the research project "*Teacher professional development and academic educational innovation*" (Prodid).

The Prodid Project started at the University of Padova in 2014 with the aim of developing strategies to support academic teachers to enhance their teaching competences. One of the actions promoted by the Project concerned the exploration of teaching beliefs and practices through a structured questionnaire administered to all academic teachers in the institution.

The questionnaire (Dalla Zuanna et al., 2016) included a final section with three open-ended questions, aimed at exploring specific aspects of teaching, i.e. the *excellence and innovation* used by them in their teaching activity, the *critical aspects* encountered in daily practices and the type of *support* perceived as necessary for the improvement of the teaching process. 158 answers about excellence were collected, 468 about critical aspects and 371 support requests.

2. Method

Answers were transcribed and analysed with content analysis using Atlas.ti 7 by a team of researchers¹. Three hermeneutics units (one for each question) were created. After the coding phase, codes have been grouped into "families" (one for each question).

Families created referring to excellence and innovation are listed below:

1. University-community relationship
2. Teaching in English
3. Focus on students
4. Use of students' evaluations of teaching (SET)
5. Use of technologies
6. Teaching practices
7. Teacher's traits

¹ Following an inductive approach, the entire data set was read twice to ascertain that themes identified reflected the data and to code any additional data within themes that had been missed in earlier stages. All analysis were discussed within the whole research team (triangulation of investigators; Denzin, 1978).

8. Desires (18 answers): a family in which statements about teachers' desires have been included.

Critical aspects codes were grouped in 4 families:

1. Students' traits
2. Teacher's traits
3. Organizational aspects
4. Teaching evaluation.

Finally, *support* codes were grouped into 4 families:

1. University – community relationship
2. Human and financial resources
3. Contextual factors
4. Training/educational courses.

3. Results

3.1. Excellences and innovations

Table 1 describes the code families with the frequencies and percentages, while in Table 2, a distribution of answers on teaching excellences by School is presented.

<i>Excellences and Innovations</i>	N.	%	% (Teachers)
Teaching practices	67	48%	60%
Focus on students	23	16%	21%
Technologies	20	14%	18%
University-community relationship	12	9%	11%
Teacher traits	11	8%	10%
Teaching in English	4	3%	4%
Use of SETs	3	2%	3%
Total	140	100%	

Tab 1: Excellences and innovations. Families

School	
Agrarian and Veterinary Medicine	12%
Economy and Political Sciences	5%
Law	1%
Engineering	30%
Medicine	8%
Psychology	7%
Natural Sciences	12%
Humanities	25%

Tab.2 Excellences and innovations. Distribution by School

A common strength that emerged from the text seemed to be the use of *active* teaching practices: teachers affirmed that practices implying students' active participation (i.e. group works, laboratories, exercises, seminars, experimental designs, case studies, lessons by experts, problem based learning activities) were frequently used in order to enhance motivation and to foster a productive relationship between theory and practice.

Among excellence, teachers also mentioned their deep involvement in keeping alive the debate around the discipline. This was possible not only through an openness towards the scientific and professional world, but also by being committed to continuing education and professional development (*"In my lessons I invite experts from the field in order to establish a strong connection between what I teach and what they will find outside"*; *"my lessons start with a presentation of the results of a scientific research and this is the starting point for a collective discussion"*).

Another issue concerned teacher-student relationship. Teachers shared in their answers as excellence their attention towards some aspects such as: the involvement in lessons, respect, sharing educational objectives and assessment criteria at the beginning of the course, the possibility for some students to be part of group research projects, the attention towards individual students' differences, the search for challenging teaching styles and approaches in order to foster the development of higher order thinking skills (*"I pay attention to students and to my relationship with them, valuing their experiences and challenging them, motivating to their future"*).

3.2. Critical aspects

School	Students' traits	Teachers' traits	Organizational aspects	Teaching evaluation
Agrarian and Veterinary Medicine	37	4	60	2
Economy and Political Sciences	18	5	18	2
Law	9	0	8	3
Engineering	34	11	75	0
Medicine	15	5	36	0
Psicology	2	0	6	0
Natural Sciences	24	5	21	0
Humanities	23	0	45	0
Total	162	30	269	7

Table 3 Critical aspects. Distribution by School presents the distribution among School of critical aspects that emerged and difficulties highlighted by teachers.

Among critical aspects, all codes could be seen as obstacles for good teaching activity. For example, some students' traits such as lack of interest or of motivation or of prior knowledge, as well as "their heterogeneity in their previous education or in their skills" and irregular attendance were all considered critical aspects that made teaching in an appropriate manner difficult. Other perceived critical aspects were: a poor knowledge of English and passive participation during lessons ("always the same 4-5 students participate to the lesson, while most of the class is silent"). Moreover, the lack of technical support and of adequate time for preparing the course, as well as the inadequacy of some rooms, represented contextual and organizational factors that influenced the quality of teaching negatively.

Among teachers' traits, the answers concerned: a non- assertive communication style, low availability for students' needs, difficulties of linking disciplinary content with students' professional future activity, difficulties with bureaucracy, difficulty in keeping

alive students' interest towards the discipline, limited collaboration among colleagues, lack of professional development to learn and improve teaching competences.

In general, critical aspects concern more students and organizational issues than teachers themselves.

3.3. Support

As in previous paragraphs, in Table 4 the distribution of the answers by School is described.

School	University – community relationship	Human and financial resources	Contextual factors	Training
Agrarian and Veterinary	6	27	34	0
Economy and Political Sciences	3	17	22	2
Law	0	9	7	2
Engineering	5	20	47	27
Medicine	0	14	23	10
Psicology	0	8	7	0
Natural Sciences	0	5	22	2
Humanities	2	15	30	5
Total	16	115	192	48

Tab.4 Support requests. Distribution by School

Most of the support requests concerned the context (192 answers): more time to cover all aspects related to the discipline, improvement of online connections in the classrooms, reduction of number of the students, better use of virtual platforms, reduction of burocratic aspects, further exchanges with other Universities' colleagues, better coordination between courses, flexibility in the course timetables.

A specific aspect is related to the need of training courses on different topics such as: communication and public speaking, teaching practices and methodologies, strategies for authentic learning, technologies for blended and online teaching, methods for students' learning assessment.

4. Discussion and conclusions

In summary, the answers collected could contribute to exploring teachers' points of view about their teaching practices and specifically their perceptions about what works and what needs to be improved. Excellence seems a very complex construct. We could try to consider it as a *continuum*: for some teachers, it is very strictly linked to *internal* factors (classroom teaching methodologies, relationship with students) whilst for others, it is mostly connected to *external* factors (professional world, research). In the middle of this *continuum*, teachers could have a role of mediation between internal and external elements. These results are coherent with some frameworks of good teaching (i.e. Domenech, Descals, 2003; Parpala, Lindblom-Ylänne, 2007; Semeraro, 2006a, 2006b; Tigelaar et al., 2004) in which *personal* and *contextual* elements are always part of the map of aspects related to good teaching.

The answers on critical aspects and support requests were closely linked: in fact, as expected, support requests reflected the aspects identified as critical, trying to find a solution (for example, if teachers say that they feel they are insufficiently trained to teach, the support requested concerned the need for staff development programs on teaching skills).

A relevant issue that emerged concerned student learning assessment: very few teachers cited this aspect as an excellent dimension of their teaching practice. When it happened, the answers reported: sharing assessment criteria with students, intermediate assessments during the course, self-assessment procedures and peer-assessment practices. In agreement with recent literature about assessment, these are all components of a new assessment culture (Dochy et al., 1999; Kearney, 2013; Topping, 2003), in which assessment is considered as a tool for learning and as an opportunity for students to become responsible for their learning itself (Sambell et al., 2013).

The results of this qualitative research project have been used to inform the design of junior and senior staff development programs for academics in order to address real learning needs. The questionnaire, including the three open-ended questions described in this paper, has recently been administered in 7 Italian Universities with the same

aim of investigating excellence, critical aspects and needs for the improvement of academics in their teaching practices.

References

- Carpenter, B., Tait, G. (2001). The rhetoric and reality of good teaching: A case study across three faculties at the Queensland University of Technology. *Higher Education*, 42 (2), 191–203.
- Dalla Zuanna, G., Clerici, R., Martinoia, S., Paccagnella, O., Paggiaro, A., Pierobon, S. (2016). La ricerca valutativa nel campo della didattica: un'indagine tra i docenti dell'Università di Padova. *Excellence and Innovation in Teaching and Learning. Research and practices*, 1(1), 17-34.
- Dochy, F., Segers, M., Sluijsmans, D. (1999). The use of self-, peer and co-assessment in higher education. A review. *Studies in Higher Education*, 24, 3, 331-350.
- Domenech, F., Descals, A. (2003). Evaluation of the University teaching / learning process for the improvement of quality in higher education. *Assessment and evaluation in higher education*, 28 (2), 165-178.
- Kearney, S. (2013). Improving Engagement: The Use of 'Authentic Self and Peer Assessment for Learning' to Enhance the Student Learning Experience. *Assessment and evaluation in higher education*, 38 (7), 875-891.
- Sambell, K., McDowell, L., Montgomery C. (2013). *Assessment for Learning in Higher Education*. London: Routledge.
- Semeraro, R. (2006a). *La valutazione della didattica universitaria. Paradigmi scientifici, rivisitazioni metodologiche, approcci multidimensionali*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Semeraro, R. (a cura di) (2006b). *La valutazione della didattica universitaria. Docenti e studenti protagonisti in un percorso di ricerca*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Tigelaar D.E.H., Dolmans D.H., Wolfhagen I. H., Van der Vleuten C.P.M. (2004). The development and validation of a framework for teaching competencies in higher education. *Higher Education*, 48:253-268.
- Topping, K.J. (2003). Self and peer assessment in school and university: reliability, validity and utility. In M. Segers, F. Dochy & E. Cascallar (Eds.), *Optimising new modes of assessment: In search of qualities and standards*. (pp 55-87). Dordrecht NL: Springer.