Non-formal faculty development. Conceptual considerations and implementation in practice

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Abstract

Non-formal faculty development offerings might reach those lecturers who, for a variety of reasons, are reluctant to attend formal faculty development programs. It can also provide an opportunity to supplement informal workplace learning with evidence-informed knowledge. A centre for teaching and learning at a German university has implemented non-formal learning opportunities through an open learning portal. Lehrblick.de offers lecturers from all departments access to a bilingual, accessible service that provides them with concise, quality-assured content on innovative topics in teaching and learning in higher education, regardless of time or location. With this approach, it reaches nearly 10 times as many lecturers every month as the university's formal faculty development program.

This contribution describes theoretical considerations of non-formal faculty development, its design and implementation in faculty development practice.

Keywords: Faculty development; non-formal training; open learning portal.

1. Introduction

In the past 20 years, high quality teaching at universities and thus faculty teaching competencies have become increasingly important. As a consequence, German universities have systematically established Centers for Teaching and Learning that provide various faculty development programs.

2. Formal continued training and development

Typically, Centers for Teaching and Learning offer workshops for faculty development (Centeno García, 2021). In these workshops, participants acquire theoretical and evidence-informed knowledge about teaching, learning, and assessment. Other workshops focus on improving observable teaching skills (e.g. designing slides for academic presentations) or mastering a specific teaching method (e.g. problem-based learning) (Amundsen & Wilson, 2012). During the workshops, experts in faculty development deliver theoretical knowledge based on didactic principles that encourage participants to apply this knowledge outside of the workshops to their own teaching practices.

In recent years, alternative formats for faculty development have been established (Franke, Sekyra & Vöing, 2021). Working groups, peer discussion groups, and other formats are centered around reflecting on one's own teaching style. They aim to impart practical knowledge (e.g. designing laboratory exercises) and tips on how to deal with specific problems (e.g. classroom interruptions). To meet these objectives, these courses are often facilitated by faculty from a variety of domains with extensive teaching experience.

The formats described above are all events lasting a few hours to a few days at a fixed time and location. The courses have clearly defined intended learning outcomes and are anchored in a curriculum.

3. What prevents university instructors from attending workshops

Although the number of faculty development programs has increased both in terms of quantity and quality, Fleischmann, Schroeber & Tuschak (2017) estimate that only 5% to 25% of faculty make use of these offerings. The authors analyzed several studies to identify three main reasons for this reluctance.

(1) They are unaware of the course offerings. Some lecturers are unaware that their university offers faculty development courses. Most likely, they discover it by chance, e.g. by hearing about it from a colleague.

(2) They cannot attend courses. Although many Centers for Teaching and Learning have significantly increased their capacity: Workshop places are limited and tend to fill up quickly.

As a result, some people are simply unable to enroll in these courses. Some lecturers are also unable to participate in those courses due to conflicting class schedules. A second barrier to entry seems to be long-term planning: registration for workshops usually begins 3 to 6 months in advance, and some instructors are reluctant to commit that far ahead of time. Language barriers can also make it difficult for some people to attend courses. The number of international instructors who teach in English and speak little German is on the rise as universities become more international. However, only a handful of faculty developers at German universities are able to offer courses in English.

(3) They do not want to attend courses. A final reason is that some educators do not even want to take part in faculty development workshops. They do not want to take time as other academic commitments (e.g. research, committees, networks) take precedence over attending courses. Some instructors also might find the atmosphere uncomfortable and feel that these courses are beneath them. The fear of losing face might prevent them from discussing their own shortcomings with colleagues. Professors are used to being in control, so they might be afraid to give up their authority and status: Participating in faculty development workshops, however, requires them to give up this role and take on the perspective of the participants.

4. Workplace learning

Even though only a small percentage of instructors attend faculty development workshops, does not mean the majority of faculty do not develop their own set of skills. However, for the most part, they do so in an informal setting, directly at workplace (Smith, 2019). In a study by Oleson & Hora (2014), nearly 80% of university instructors reflect on their previous teaching experiences and monitor student reactions. Approximately 20% of instructors use feedback about their teaching performance and 13% discuss their teaching performance with colleagues.

Those informal learning settings, however, run the risk of passing on outdated knowledge or even myths about teaching and learning without reflection. Smith (2019) therefore emphasizes the importance of faculty development to "assure access to research-based knowledge and skills to mediate the potential misconceptions that arise within social networks of varying expertise" (p.16).

There is strong empirical evidence for both, formal and informal approaches, to be effective in promoting the development of teaching expertise (Myllykoski-Laine et al., 2022; Van Geyte & Hadjianastasis, 2022). Therefore, there is little point in comparing the different approaches (Amundsen & Wilson, 2012). Instead, it is worthwhile to consider which offering may provide the best of both worlds.

5. Non-formal faculty development

5.1. Conceptual considerations

Between these two poles, non-formal education occupies a middle position:

"Like formal education (but unlike informal, incidental or random learning), non-formal education is education that is institutionalised, intentional and planned by an education provider. The defining characteristic of non-formal education is that it is an addition, alternative and/or complement to formal education within the process of lifelong learning of individuals" (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012, p. 11).

Non-formal training opportunities might reach those lecturers who, for a variety of reasons (see section 2), are reluctant to attend formal faculty development programs. It can also provide an opportunity to supplement informal workplace learning with research-based knowledge.

Web-based asynchronous environments seem to be well suited for this purpose. They enable access to information regardless of time or place, and allow for the combination of different media. The content and pedagogical principles must, however, meet the same standards in terms of content and didactic quality as formal training.

5.2. Lehrblick.de as an example for non-formal academic development

The Centre for University and Academic Teaching at the University of Regensburg has decided to implement this through an open learning portal (https://lehrblick.de/en/). Lehrblick.de provides a non-formal educational offer that extends the established formal formats of faculty development (see section 1).

5.2.1. Approach

As to formal workshops, the editorial team at lehrblick.de largely relies on three different, valid sources of information when writing articles: Theoretical knowledge, expert knowledge, and practical tips. The different sources of knowledge are reflected in the portal's individual categories:

(1) Theoretical knowledge. A crucial source of evidence-informed knowledge are articles published in peer-reviewed journals. In the Teaching Concepts Section, the current state of research on teaching and learning in higher education is reviewed and discussed. As an example, the article 'blended learning' (Hawelka, 2022) summarizes a meta-analysis on this topic from the Educational Research Review.

(2) Expert knowledge. Professors with extensive experience in teaching can be an invaluable resource for their less experienced colleagues. In spite of this, expert knowledge (e.g. from award-winning professors) often goes lost because these experts have too few opportunities

to share their knowledge (Shim & Roth, 2009). In the Teaching Practice Section, instructors from various disciplines present methods and approaches they have found to be successful in practice, not just in theory. In this way, faculty members are able to gain insight into teaching culture beyond the bounds of their usual community of practice. For instance, in an article by Jossberger (2022), the author describes the implementation and benefits of learning journals in seminars.

(3) Practical Tips. Even the smallest changes can have a noticeable impact on how lecturers approach learning processes. In the category Teaching Tips, there are a wide variety of tips and tools provided to help instructors make their daily lives easier and to improve teaching performance. For example, in one article on lehrblick.de, Bachmaier (2022) provides recommendations on how physical signals can be translated into the digital space.

To ensure that the contributions actually address issues pertinent to developing teaching competence, our selection of topics is guided by the Framework for Teacher Expertise in Higher Education (Van Dijk et al., 2020).

5.2.2. Didactic and Media Design

The articles are short stand-alone, usually single-objective units that include text combined with video and graphics. In order to maximize the effects of combining text and images ("multimedia principle"; Mayer, 2021), we follow the basic principles of multimedia design, such as spatial proximity between graphics and text, a reader-friendly design of embedded graphics and diagrams, and a deliberate use of colour.

To reduce extraneous load (Paas & Sweller, 2021), the articles are designed in a way that makes them understandable for the target audience. In order to achieve this, the structure of the texts plays a crucial role: a consistent order of content and concise headings structure them visually as well as linguistically. Reader-friendly layouts with easy-to-read fonts and highlighting of important text components ("signaling principle"; Fiorella & Mayer, 2021) help maintain reading motivation.

Particularly in articles in the Teaching Concepts Section, we take care to adapt the content of the original journals to the readers' knowledge and to always explain technical terms.

5.2.3. Accessibility

By using a keyword index, readers can quickly locate articles and a search function makes it possible to easily find specific topics. Lehrblick.de is a responsive portal, which means that it is accessible from any internet-enabled device. In order to facilitate access for people with disabilities, alternative text is provided for embedded images and graphics, and transcripts are added to all embedded audio files.

The teaching portal is designed to accommodate bilingual access. About a third of articles are already bilingual, and all articles will be available in English and German starting in May 2023.

5.2.4. Quality assurance

Quality assurance is an essential part of the entire editorial process: The editorial team works with an academic advisory board to select topics for the blog. Authors committed themselves to follow the guidelines for ensuring good academic practice (DFG, 2019) when writing articles. Internal guidelines for content structure and style promote consistent content creation - regardless of whether the contributions are written by members of the editorial team or by guest authors. Prior to publication, all articles are peer-reviewed for form and content.

5.2.5. Use and Reception

The portal has been publishing articles every 14 days since March 2021. Through the University's landing page, various social media channels (especially Twitter, LinkedIn) and RSS feeds, faculty are kept up-to-date on current issues.

An average of approximately 480 lecturers read the posts each month, with up to 580 readers per post. This means that lehrblick.de posts reach nearly 10 times as many lecturers every month as the University's formal faculty development program.

6. Conclusion

Lehrblick.de offers lecturers from all departments access to a bilingual, accessible service that provides them with concise, quality-assured content on innovative topics in teaching and learning in higher education, regardless of time or location. Through this non-formal program for faculty development, lecturers who are reluctant to attend formal offerings as well as informal communities of practice get evidence-informed impulses for designing their courses and assessments.

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