



# Helping teachers to focus on learning and reflect on their teaching: What role does teaching context play?



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## ABSTRACT

In this study we examine the factors that lead educational programs to achieve their outcomes, in this case helping participants to improve their teaching through becoming more learning-centered and reflective practitioners. In comparing the results from programs with similar aims with evidence from our program we find teachers' pedagogic environment to play a critical role in influencing transfer of program knowledge into participants' teaching. A synthesis of results from our and other programs suggests that engaging participants in action research can be an effective way to help participants to overcome barriers in their pedagogic context. Systematic support of participants through coaching appears as another element important for participants' success. These tools can help to enhance both participants' thinking about teaching and their daily pedagogic practice.

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## 1. Introduction

The study of effects of educational programs aims to uncover reasons why some programs achieve their outcomes (and others don't) in order to enhance the program design and provide others with useful information for program development. With this paper we wish to contribute to this discussion by examining the outcomes of an educational development program and the factors that influenced its results. This program aimed to help university teachers to enhance their pedagogic practice through developing their learning-centeredness, reflective approach and the use of theory while designing, conducting and evaluating their teaching.

The current study seeks to improve on past research in three main ways. First, this study adds to existing literature about how knowledge from educational development programs translates into participants' teaching. Studies that previously examined this problem reported difficulty in getting program graduates to apply program knowledge in their teaching (Hockings, 2005; Ginns, Kitay, & Prosser, 2010; Nevgi, 2012; Karm, Remmik, & Haamer, 2013). This study shows how participants demonstrated

learning-centeredness and a critically reflective approach in examining their *everyday* teaching. Second, given the concerns about the robustness of previous program evaluations (Weimer & Lenze, 1998; Stes, Min-Leliveld, Gijbels, & Van Petegem, 2010; Saroyan & Trigwell, 2015), this study was designed to move beyond participant opinion to explore changes in their thinking. Third, this study documents how action research can help participants of development programs to focus on learning and regularly reflect on teaching and learning, which appears to be a more effective strategy than, for example, previously used peer discussions (Karm et al., 2013).

The paper is structured as follows. The frameworks conceptualizing program goals, design and evaluation are described followed by the goals of the study. Then the nature of the program and the methods enabling program evaluation are elaborated. This creates the context within which to report the results, implications and contributions.

## 2. Conceptualizing educational development program design and evaluation

### 2.1. Teaching context in Slovakia

In May 2008, the Government of Slovakia adopted a plan aimed at the modernization of the key sectors of public policy, including

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higher education. The plan identified the introduction of courses for doctoral students as higher education teachers as one of the important measures to achieve its aims. Following this, public institutions could apply for funding to introduce educational development programs. Our program, entitled *Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, resulted from a successful application in this call.

At that time, higher education in Slovakia struggled with a number of challenges, which were also typical for many other post-communist countries. These included, for example, a prevalent focus on teaching rather than learning, reliance on in-class teaching and not on independent learning, assessment through end-of-term exams instead of continuous assessment, using oral exams rather than a variety of assignments, etc. (For a description of similar pedagogic challenges in the region see Renc-Roe (2006, 2008) and Karm et al. (2013).) However, while many institutions in non-post-communist countries have already introduced strategies to address these challenges-like policies enhancing teaching and learning at the university level, grants for course innovation, conferences and journals where teachers exchange their views on higher education pedagogy (Knapper, 2012), these were yet non-existent in Slovakia.

## 2.2. Underlying development principles

When starting to design the program, we primarily drew from the foundational literature on higher education teaching and learning. Educationalists (Biggs & Tang, 2007; Ramsden, 1992) have identified one of the chief impediments to good quality teaching to be teachers holding a “teaching-centred” conception, in which teachers place importance on their own performance and consider education mainly as information transmission. In contrast, those teachers who think of teaching in a “learning-centered” way tend to focus on how their students learn, and design their classes to facilitate student learning (Biggs & Tang, 2007, 19), which is viewed as more effective in developing students’ abilities than a teaching-centered approach (O’Neill & McMahon, 2005, 33).

However, becoming learning-centered can be difficult. Students who have previously experienced more teaching-focused approaches may reject the learning-centered approach (O’Neill & McMahon, 2005, 33). Further, an espoused desire to be more learning-centered may be constrained by a lack of knowledge (McAlpine & Weston, 2000). One mechanism for facilitating a more learning-centered approach amongst teachers is a critically reflective approach (Mathias, 2005; Boyle & Boice, 1998). While *critically reflecting* on teaching, teachers (a) habitually think of the reasons why good or poor quality learning is occurring in their students, (b) identify, in particular, both positive and problematic aspects of one’s own teaching, (c) come up with alternative ways of teaching, (d) test them in practice and then (e) reflect on whether the outcomes on student learning are improved (Cowan, 2006).

Nevertheless, this can be very challenging if teachers lack understanding of how people learn. Teachers need first to develop insights into how learning occurs and how it can be enhanced rather than being solely trained to carry out teaching techniques (Ramsden, 1994; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Biggs & Tang, 2007). If teachers get such a solid *background in pedagogic concepts* they can then make informed decisions as to which teaching methods to choose to help students to learn more effectively. Examples of these pedagogic concepts include those related to teaching such as constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2007) and Bloom’s taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002), and those related to learning such as deep and surface learning (Marton & Säljö, 1976), external and internal motivation for learning (Kvasz, 2005), etc.

The intended outcomes of our program thus reflected these three most challenging things for new teachers to learn as

described in the literature. The program aimed to help participants become:

- (1) *learning-centered*, which means that the teacher’s focus is on how his/her students learn, rather than on his/her own performance in all activities related to teaching from curriculum design and lesson planning across leading classes to student assessment. Student choice is facilitated; the student is encouraged to do more than the lecturer and/or the shift in the power relationship between the student and the teacher can be observed. The teacher pays attention to who his/her students are and how they learn, so that good learning can occur.
- (2) *critically reflective*, which implies that the teacher demonstrates that he/she has thought about the reasons why good/poor quality learning occurs in his/her students; these reasons are summarized in a clear and comprehensive way and seem realistic. The teacher can identify both positive and problematic aspects/outcomes of his/her own teaching and the assumed reasons for them. The teacher may also manifest the connections he/she can see between his/her own research and teaching. Based on this understanding, the teacher can suggest changes for future teaching and their expected effects on student learning.
- (3) *theory-informed*, which presumes that the teacher has learnt a set of concepts, models and principles related to various aspects of teaching and learning. The teacher can use the theory when designing and evaluating his/her teaching.

## 2.3. Evaluating educational development programs

There is a growing literature reviewing and critiquing program evaluation, particularly the mechanisms used to evaluate effectiveness (Levinson-Rose & Menges, 1981; Weimer & Lenze, 1998; Stes et al., 2010; Saroyan & Trigwell, 2015). A consistent critique across the decades has been the reliance on participant satisfaction/opinion as a principle means of evaluating program results. Much of the past research into the outcomes of development programs are derived primarily from participants’ perceptions of program conduct and its outcomes (see for example the studies by Renc-Roe, 2006; Truijen & Van Woerkom, 2008; Hubball, Clarke, & Poole, 2010; Wang, Pengu, Pearson, & Hubball, 2011; Karm et al., 2013; Chng & Soong, 2012). This has important implications for the value of previous studies’ findings.

Therefore, this study was designed to evaluate program impact on participant thinking and practice in relation to program outcomes by using more robust methods than solely participant perceptions of program outcomes—as has been done in most previous studies. A range of kinds of data were collected from participants and program facilitators and triangulated to establish a clearer relationship between the program and its impact on learning.

## 2.4. The influence of teaching context as reported in literature

Despite methodological shortcomings, we have found previous studies useful because they reported on the program outcomes as perceived by the participants and they identified barriers for a better enhancement of program outcomes. For example, studies into how programs for teachers from Central and Eastern Europe and Asia influenced their thinking reported that participant teachers had become more learning-centered as well as critically reflective in the course planning stage (Renc-Roe, 2006, 2008; Wang et al., 2011; Renc-Roe & Yarkova, 2012) but progress in their conceptions was limited by a number of factors. These included prevalence of teaching-centered approaches in participants’ higher

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