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Teacher Exchange as a Tool for Improving Pedagogical Expertise

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Introduction

International staff mobility and teacher exchange programs between universities are a valuable resource providing university teaching staff with an opportunity to gain useful experience in intercultural contexts and in developing their pedagogical expertise on different levels. It is of utmost importance that universities encourage members of teaching staff to participate in staff exchange programs as visitors and hosts, because teacher mobility is a valuable asset to universities in their quest for pedagogical excellence and to enhance the quality of teaching.

In this article, I discuss the benefits of staff exchange programs and the ways in which they promote the use of innovative approaches to teaching from a teachers' perspective. I interviewed two members of the teaching staff in the Department of Language and Communication Studies (University of Jyväskylä) both of whom have been very active in participating in various teacher exchange programs as visitors and hosts [1], in addition to which I will also draw on my own experience as a visiting teacher and host.

Dialogue and the exchange of ideas at the core of teacher exchange visits

It is not uncommon to think that staff exchange visits boil down to the courses and contact hours taught during the visit. From the administrative point of view, this certainly is the case. Regarding the duties and responsibilities of the visiting teacher, exchange agreements specify the required number of contact teaching hours during the visit. In this view, a staff exchange visit may appear as a one-way process in which the visiting teacher delivers certain academic content and acts as a representative or ambassador of the university pedagogical culture of her own country.

While staff exchanges involve teaching a certain number of contact hours and interaction with students representing a different pedagogical tradition and culture, teachers rarely see actual teaching as the most valuable aspect of their visit. The teachers interviewed for this article reported that the exchange of ideas with members of the teaching staff in the host department and university was more beneficial for the development of their pedagogical and methodological expertise than the actual contact hours taught in the classroom. The importance of the exchange of ideas and dialogue was also brought up in relation to hosting

exchange visits. Dialogue can be seen as a space where different pedagogical traditions, teaching philosophies and methodological ideas can be openly discussed and elaborated, and challenged if needed. The cross-fertilization of ideas is creative by nature and can lead to novel and innovative pedagogical solutions.

From the students' perspective, it is equally important to understand that a visiting teacher is not only a mediator of certain academic content, but also a representative of a different pedagogical culture, characterized by pedagogical 'otherness'. The majority of the student population has studied in the educational context of a particular country, which means that they often take for granted certain aspects of that educational system and culture. This can prevent them from seeing the forest for the trees. The pedagogical 'otherness' that characterizes the visiting teacher's approach can contribute to students' abilities to reflect on the differences between different pedagogical approaches but also on their own learning strategies. For instance, in the Department of Language and Communication Studies at the University of Jyväskylä, a substantial part of the student body are future language teachers and for them, in particular, a critically reflective attitude to one's own teaching and the underlying pedagogical philosophy is a central professional skill. Exposure to different pedagogical traditions is an important asset for their professional development.

I illustrate the points made above with a successful teaching exchange. A Russian teacher visited the Department of Language and Communication Studies for one week in fall 2018. She had extensive previous experience in teaching Russian as a foreign language to students with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds in Russia, in addition to which she also had worked at our university for a couple of years, more than two decades ago. Prior to the visit, she had discussed the syllabus and the contents of ongoing courses with the local teacher responsible for hosting her. The classes she taught were received very well by the students, and the learning outcomes were great. Apart from carefully preparing her classes and knowing the syllabus, she was able to recognize the differences between the Finnish and Russian pedagogical cultures and adapt her pedagogical choices and style of classroom interaction to the pedagogical expectations of Finnish students (e.g. tolerating long pauses, not pressurizing students to answer, respecting personal space). The ability to understand the importance of pedagogical otherness and reflect on the differences between pedagogical cultures and one's own pedagogical choices was probably the most important key to the success of her teaching exchange visit.

Chto delat' – What is to be done?

Staff exchange programs and teacher mobility are an important resource for enhancing the pedagogical competence of teachers in the quest for pedagogical excellence and to meet the demands of the era of globalization characterized by growing mobility and pluralism. What is to be done in order to maximize the benefits of the existing staff exchange programs?

First, the idea of teacher exchange and staff mobility has to be re-conceptualized. Instead of seeing a teacher's visit only in terms of delivering particular academic content to the students of the host university, it should be viewed as a dialogical space for developing innovative approaches to teaching via the cross-fertilization and critical evaluation of different pedagogical traditions and cultures.

Second, universities should do more to encourage teachers to participate in staff exchange programs. In practice, this can be done, for instance, by organizing knowledge-sharing events on departmental and faculty levels, concentrating on good practices, making visit reports available for the teaching staff within universities, recognizing the importance of teacher exchange visits for their pedagogical development and performance.

Third, in order to maximize the benefits of the visit, it is crucial that the visiting teacher does their homework before the visit. This involves being familiar with the programs and profiles of the target university in terms of both teaching and research. It is important to examine the syllabi and curricula to find out whether there is interesting content or courses the visiting teacher would like to bring back to the home university. Attention should also be paid to what kind of pedagogical and methodological expertise exists at the target university. For instance, if the teacher is interested in developing on-line teaching skills, it naturally makes sense to visit a department that has strong expertise in that particular area. In our department, all visitors are contacted prior to their visit by the teachers responsible for the courses the visiting teacher will be teaching. This allows the visiting teacher to plan their classes as well as the pedagogical approach beforehand, to make sure that her teaching will meet the goals and contribute to the learning outcomes of the course.

Fourth, it is crucial to have opportunities for sharing ideas and experiences, discussing the methodological implications of different teaching philosophies. In order to facilitate the exchange of ideas and dialogue between colleagues, one can use various forms of interaction and collaboration, including the observation of teaching sessions, participating in departmental meetings and so forth. By observing teaching sessions at the host university, the visitor can get new ideas for developing her teaching at different levels, including the structure of lessons, the use of various tools, the use of technology, forms of interaction, types of assignments, classroom design, forms of group work and so forth. In our experience, informal discussions with teachers before and after teaching sessions have also been very constructive. Interaction and collaboration between the visitor and members of the teaching staff at the host university is likely to translate into the improved quality of teaching.

Notes:

[1] I would like to thank Dr Judit Hahn (University Lecturer of English) and Alexei Lobski (University Teacher of Russian Language and Culture) for their input.

