Problems experienced by higher Education teachers: an analysis of cases submitted for the intercultural Reflecting Team

Summary

The method intercultural Reflecting Team (iRT) gives higher education (HE) teachers the opportunity to discuss problems in teaching with a transnational group of other HE teachers. This case study aims at providing insights into the cases identified by HE teachers to be of interest to be discussed in a transnational reflective session, but also which cases are chosen by the group to be actually discussed. The idea is to give facilitators, who are usually academic developers, insights into mainly chosen problems during teaching and to be prepared, when offering reflecting team sessions.

Keywords

International reflection on teaching, Problems in teaching, Coding scheme

IntRef
Intercultural Reflection on Teaching

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Aims of the case study

- Provide information about problems identified by teachers to be discussed in a collegial reflective group.
- Giving an outlook on which problems were chosen throughout our project for discussion by the participants – either because they had a brought common ground for the group /similarity in problems over the international contexts OR because they were identified as especially unusual and therefore interesting?
- Providing information for facilitators, which topics might arise in iRT-session for discussion, which could lead to informed preparation beforehand.

Introduction

The IntRef project aims at providing opportunities for international academics to reflect on their teaching (Kreber, 2004, 2005; McAlpine & Weston, 2000). In academic development, it has been repeatedly pointed out, that the importance of contextual differences is not to be neglected (Parsons et al., 2012; Reimann et al., 2020; Stes et al., 2010). This includes policy contexts and the way academic development plays a role within institutional contexts. Nevertheless, it also refers to how teaching is discussed in different contexts of higher education. This is a challenge for the comparability of research results but could at the same time be viewed as a chance for contrasting the individual context of teaching for academics, when teachers from different background talk about teaching as a common topic. Differences between disciplines have been centre of discussion (e.g. Neumann, 2001), for instance in the specificity of language when it comes to teaching (Smeby, 1996) as well as the preference for certain practices, e.g. in assessments (Ylonen et al., 2018). In addition, contexts cannot only vary between disciplines but also between national backgrounds. There is broad research about challenges of international students who have to adapt to foreign cultures of teaching (e.g. Ujitani & Volet, 2008). From the teachers point of view, there is far less research, but there are examples of teachers experiencing cultural differences that impact for instance their teaching abroad (e.g. Mermelstein, 2018).

For the purpose of creating a situation where meaningful reflection of teaching can be facilitated, interdisciplinary or national differences can serve as a reference point for challenging assumptions and beliefs about teaching and could therefore be fruitful for including them into academic development aiming at the reflection in teaching. With the help of video technology, it is relatively easy to create situations in which a transnational collegial discussion about teaching can be facilitated. One of the three methods introduced in the IntRef project is the intercultural Reflecting Team.

The **intercultural Reflecting Team (iRT)** applies models of collegial co-supervision. The method itself derives from therapy context (Friedman, 1995; Kleist, 1999; Pender & Stinchfield, 2012). In the iRT, academics provide problems encountered during teaching which are discussed by a transnational group facilitated by video-conferencing. The 'provider' of the situation learns from observing others discussing their problem.

Over the course of the project, participants repeatedly reported that they found the problems provided by the international academics surprisingly similar, not only across disciplines but across the nations involved. Some examples from the method's evaluation are collected to illustrate this: The evaluation of the iRT included an open question about the three *main things learnt* through the participation. From the 32 participants, 14 referred to a perceived similarity, either general (e.g. *Very similar challenges in the teaching context*. or *Other teachers struggle as well*), with reference to disciplines (e.g. *Shared problems despite subject differences*), to national contexts (e.g. *Other country, same problems, Problems and ideas are similar in different (European) countries.* or *Even in other countries teachers deal with similar issues.*) or combined (e.g. *Methods and strategies are surprisingly similar between different disciplines & universities & nationalities.* or *Issues can be very common across institutions and internationally.*). Only one participant explicitly mentioned perceived differences as one of the main things learned (*Cultural differences in teaching*). However, the evaluation revealed a positive overall judgement of the discussion in the international group and most likely, the perceived common ground between the academics made the conversation easier to run and the results easier to transfer for each person. Most of the utterances do not refer to the ways that the problems are addressed, so this might be an additional benefit, as one of the participants mentioned: *People with different backgrounds see a given problem from different perspectives*.

With this case study, we took a closer look at what the problems actually were that the academics chose as cases for the collegial discussions and whether these are widespread or showed similarities. Cases like the ones collected could serve as preparation for future iRT facilitators but could also be used in the wider context of academic development so serve as sources of reflection (Shulman & Colbert, 1989).

Method

Characteristics of the material

We used written descriptions of cases prepared for iRT sessions by participants (N = 26) in the iRT sessions from November 2018 to November 2020. Participants were academics from the three European universities involved in the IntRef Project: eight from Durham University (UK), twelve from Goethe University Frankfurt (GER), and six from Padua University (IT). The academics came from diverse disciplinary backgrounds and represented different status groups involved with academic teaching. Two of the sessions were held binational and one with participants from all three universities. All participants prepared a case, whereas each two were chosen to be discussed during the sessions.

The written descriptions were collected in preparation of the iRT sessions. A prepared form collected the following information:

> 1. Your Case
> *Please describe your case or problem in a few sentences, e.g. what happened, who was involved, what happened beforehand, how did you or your students react, what have you tried already in order to solve the problem etc.*
>
> 2. Question for discussion
> *Formulate a question, which is as concrete as possible that you would like to be answered by the 'Reflecting Team'.*

Further information about the study programme and module or unit of the case was also collected to give readers some context.

Table 1 Example of a case and question for discussion (the content is published with the permission of the case owner)

Case description	Question for discussion
I was once moderating a sequence that led to a group work situation in which a person did not want to interact/cooperate with others due to his religious beliefs. Luckily the whole training module was backed with supervision sessions that helped me to dissolve the situation (not immediately but) later on. Even though I did not address any secular approach, it might have been an easy but strong argument against the displayed manner. There was a clearly visible red line that was supported by the whole class, exceeded by a single member. Facing phenomena like increasing nationalistic thoughts or 'hate-speech' in everyday media, seemingly interpreted by few people as legitimation for churlishness, is - in my opinion - washing out more and more of those red lines. Red lines that are no longer easily discussed in a logical context of secularism.	*How can I take a stand for/ against (political & socio-/economic) thoughts without risking to offer room or discussions but on the other hand strictly constitute/ reinforce needful 'red lines'?*

Category development

As a framework for the cases, we are referring to a model introducing basic dimensions of instructional quality (Kunter et al., 2013): *cognitive activation*, *learning support* and *classroom management*. These three dimensions have been found to be crucial in the initiation and maintenance of insightful learning processes. The dimensions were derived from secondary school context, but seemed as a good starting point for the categorization of the problems in our case study. We coded the *question for discussion* for each participant. If the question itself was not self-explanatory, information from the case description (*Your case*) was considered. Based on Kunter et al. (2013), we started to code the cases using the three core dimensions of instructional quality as categories. To allow for better differentiation, we added microcategories, which were complemented inductively to cover the range of problems. Table 2 informs about coding scheme we came up with.

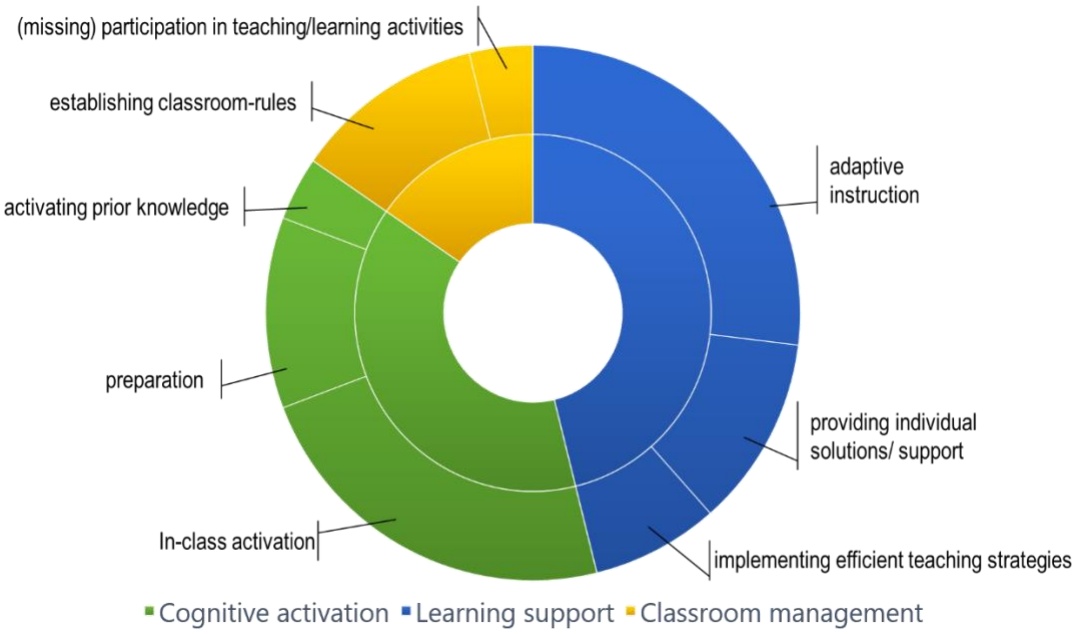
Table 2 Coding scheme

Categories	Microcategories	Example
Cognitive activation	preparation	*How can I encourage the students to prepare for an exercise, so that we can deduce and discuss possible solutions?*
	activating prior knowledge	*How might I better engage a broad discipline group without revisiting all of the level 1 content?*
	In-class activation	*How could I make students involve in the different group activities motivating more the students who complain?*
Learning support	adaptive instruction	*What can I do to keep "fast" students busy without distracting the others?*
	providing individual solutions/support	*In the case of a student who cannot attend a seminar until the end of the course, does it makes sense and is it fair (to all seminar participants) to request an alternative performance record and how can this be kept comparable?*
	implementing efficient teaching strategies	*What can I do to address students' questions/problems in a more efficient way?*
Classroom management	(missing) participation in teaching/learning activities	*How can we deal with students who refuse to work with others?*
	establishing classroom-rules	*What can I do to get respect from my students for the content of my course as well as for myself without being "evil"?*

Results

Figure 1 displays the categories as we found them in the cases analysed. Situations coded as learning support (46.15 %) and as cognitive activation (38.46 %) outnumber the problems referring to classroom management (15.38 %). Within the category learning support, the largest group of cases refers to adaptive instruction, whereas in cognitive activation, most problems refer to challenges in in-class activation.

Figure 1 Frequencies of categories found across all participants



Which of the cases were discussed?

Before each session, one case from each of the three locations was chosen for discussion through an online-voting. For a further focus, we extracted these cases (see Table 3). It is easy to notice that the majority of the cases chosen for discussion were challenges in cognitive activation and mostly questions of in-class activation.

Table 3 Cases that were chosen for discussion

	Category	Question for discussion	Context
COGNITIVE ACTIVATION	Preparation	*How can I encourage the students to prepare for an exercise, so that we can deduce and discuss possible solutions?*	Germany Chemistry, Biochemistry and Biophysics
	In-class activation	*What can I do to ensure that the classmates who are listening the group expositions get really involved in the activity and understand the link with the course material?*	Italy Psychological Science
	In-class activation	*What kinds of strategies seem effective for engaging even the shy and quiet students in group discussion?*	UK

	In-class activation	*How could I still propose and make students involve in the different group activities motivating more the students who complain? I am worried that I keep on giving too much power and importance to the students that complain rather than acknowledging the students who work actively without problems.*	Italy Animal Care
	In-class activation	*What kinds of strategies seem effective for engaging even the shy and quiet students in group discussion?*	UK Classics/ Classical Civilisation
LEARNING SUPPORT	Adaptive instruction	*What can I do to integrate them more without too much focusing on/prioritizing only these two students so that (1) they actually learn something in my class and (2) the other (German) students accept their lower level of German but at the same time don't have disadvantages when working together with them?*	Germany Southeast Asian Languages and Cultures
CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT	Establishing classroom-rules	*How can I take a stand for/against (political & socio-economic) thoughts without risking to offer room or discussions but on the other hand strictly constitute/ reinforce needful 'red lines'?*	Germany interdisciplinary

Implications and recommendations for coordinators and facilitators

Summing up the results, we found the board topic of cognitive activation to be of special importance for the teachers. In reference of common evidence-based views of 'good teaching' (Hattie, 2015), this is a favourable choice of content assuming that teachers experience the need to develop their teaching skills further, rather than focusing on a merely teacher-focused view. In addition, the provision of solutions for individual students or groups of students came up repeatedly in our case study. We believe that this goes along with a broader understanding of responsibilities in teaching, raising the question not only *how* solutions can be found but also *if* or *how far* the teacher is responsible for solving them.

Overall and taking the open comments from the evaluation into account, the problems discussed resulted a feeling of 'commonness' amongst the academics rather than being vied as especially unusual or uncommon. This could serve as an indicator for trans-disciplinary and trans-cultural validity at least for the countries involved, when planning to use collected examples from iRTs in further contexts of academic development. Hereby, future facilitators could use this as a source or prior information in preparing themselves for iRT session.

Also, the cases, together with their categorization, could serve as examples in academic development courses, e.g. following the ideas of Shulman and Colbert (1989) or in counselling of teachers in higher education. For this use. they could also be developed into critical incidents (Flanagan, 1954; for its application in HE, e.g. Khandelwal, 2009). Implications for future research could lie in the development of (self-)assessments with situated examples, e.g. using vignettes or situational judgment tests.

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