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Pedagogical leadership in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic

Kristiina Engblom-Pelkkala and Teija Lehto

Tampere University of Applied Sciences

Innovative impact

In the aftermath of the coronavirus lockdowns our society and the universities are reopening. The leaders and management teams in the universities are encountering the question how teaching and learning should be organized presently, and how in the future. This article emphasizes the necessity for pedagogical leadership in both instances.

The short term impact of this article relates to reflecting the present, paradoxical situation in which the pedagogical leadership of the universities appears to be right now. Some teachers and students want to return to the so-called good old normal and forget about the pandemic and online learning. However, learning and teaching in universities has changed for good during the exceptional times. This article also deals with long-term impacts of the current situation. A concrete example of a long-term change is the emergence of hybrid teaching and learning. It will be essential in the context of new, flexible teaching methods and learning environments.

Keywords: leadership, management, covid-19, pedagogy, strategy, planning, hybrid learning

Introduction

Higher education has changed profoundly during the Covid-19 pandemic. During the lockdowns the doors of educational institutions were closed, and teaching was arranged mainly online, with the exception of a few specific laboratory exercises.

The reorganization of teaching has challenged teachers and lecturers to reform their own work, their pedagogical thinking, teaching and existing competences. The lecturers have been strengthening their digital skills, as teaching in classrooms has increasingly shifted to video-based classes and hybrid teaching. Introduction of new digital tools has become part of their everyday professional tasks.

In the aftermath of the Covid-19 restrictions, our society and universities are reopening, and the universities' leaders are encountering the question how teaching and learning should be organized in the future. When teachers and students have shared their opinion on this, the feedback from both sides has been contradictory.

Strategic pedagogical leadership creates the basis for day-to-day management

Universities are managed through strategy, and their operations are based on pedagogical leadership. Strategy and pedagogical leadership form the solid basis for planning the operations and finances of universities, as well as for increasing their competencies and knowledge capital.

Pedagogical leadership comprises managerial and administrative activities, and it intertwines both the management of things and the leadership of people. Leading people as a pedagogical practice means a series of different, theoretically based activities designed to support the ecology of educational environments and their community. (Male & Palaiologou 2015, 220.)

The concept of pedagogical leadership is usually applied in contexts where leadership is specifically related to educational institutions. This distinguishes pedagogical leadership from leadership in other areas. Leadership is a highly contextualised activity. (Davies & Davies 2005; Leithwood & Jantzi 2005.)

Our present article is largely based on the results of the Finnish report "Kartta pedagogisen toiminnan johtamiseen" (Map for pedagogical leadership) (2021). We also refer to our personal experience of working in different pedagogical teams in higher education. Pedagogical leadership includes the leadership of the pedagogy executed in an educational

institution, the leadership of the pedagogical community, and management of both things and the people.

Pedagogical leadership aims at high-quality education

Pedagogical leadership aims at high-quality education and well-being of the working community. These factors systematically promote learning in the everyday working context of an institution, and they improve learning outcomes and increase satisfaction in the institution.

Functioning in the very core of the universities, pedagogical leadership relates closely to curriculum work, student guidance practices, pedagogical solutions that ensure the legality of activities, timeliness of the learning content, teaching methods and learning environments. Pedagogical leadership can play a significant role in meeting the demands of working life and developing competences of the teaching staff.

Within the process of pedagogical leadership, everyday learning is managed, ensuring that strategic goals are implemented in the core processes of learning and organization of education (Webb, 2005, 71). The pandemic experience has profoundly shaken our understanding how pedagogical leadership can be applied to guide the processes of university operations and to support learning. How can individual study paths be organized in the future? How should pedagogically functioning learning environments be built and maintained? How can we develop our teaching methods so that they support upgrading the skills of the teaching staff? In addition, how can we anticipate and assess the outcome of our pedagogical leadership in a world where hardly anyone can even predict the near future?

Longing for the good old normal

Pedagogical leadership stands in a paradoxical situation in higher education. Some teachers and students want to return to the so-called good old normal, and forget about the pandemic, online teaching and online learning. This group of people emphasizes that onsite education enables social encounters and makes it easier for the students to ask for and receive support from the peers and the learning community. There is no reason to deny this.

On the other hand, an ever increasing number of members of the academic community find that online and hybrid learning enables them to focus more intensively on the studies. Studying from home can also reconcile teaching, learning and the rest of your life. Working in the distance has been ecological due to the lesser need of travelling between home and the university. Those working or studying online have become aware of the benefits the new situation, and they prefer not to turn back to the practices exercised before the pandemic.

Among the basic tasks of the universities are studying, developing competences and supporting the well-being of

students and staff. Within the sphere of teaching, pedagogical leadership itself can take the form of a learning process that produces the skills needed by individuals and working life.

Taking a retrospective view, how did we respond to the new situation? Were we ready to change and adopt new ways of working, or did we stubbornly stick to our accustomed manners, even if they did not support the profound objectives of higher education? Have we just been waiting for the situation to return to normal? These two extremes, and everything in between, can now be applied as building blocks of visualization of higher education in the future.

Personal experience and thought-enriching diversity

Our experience of ourselves as actors defines to a large extent how we assess the current situation and the future. How do we respond to change, and to what extent are we self-directed, or are we rather community-oriented, expecting support in learning from the people around us? Pedagogical leadership has its foundation on a learning organization, teams, and networks through which different people, things, and knowledge can be holistically managed. It can also promote communality, thought-enriching diversity, and innovation. (Kartta pedagogisen toiminnan johtamiseen 2012, 5).

Pedagogical leadership can act as a tool in reforming the university as an organization and a workplace. Pedagogy could increasingly be lifted in the focus of development and everyday actions. It should be entangled in planning, as well as teaching and studying arrangements.

Pandemic times and isolation have certainly highlighted the individual differences between students. We realize that we should consider the diversity of students in the teaching arrangements to enable best possible learning results for as many students as possible.

Pedagogical leadership behind flexible learning environments and methods

Organization of teaching and learning is closely related to the development and management of learning environments and methods. The pedagogical strategy can direct the development of learning environments and learning methods and enable new innovative types of implementation.

Learning environments and methods should support student-centered learning in a flexible way. Institutional development plans should take into account the flexible use of different, diverse learning methods. Flexible IT technologies can provide students with alternative and individualized learning opportunities in a variety of work-oriented learning environments.

Hybrid teaching typically combines synchronous face-to-face classroom teaching with distance groups of students. From the teachers point of view, it is generally considered a

very demanding method of teaching. This method requires that the teachers are both willing and well-trained to work with the latest digital education systems. Successful hybrid teaching requires resourcing from the educational institutions in new learning environments.

All this requires sufficient skills from the actors, in which technology, study counseling, pedagogical planning and collaborative networking play an important role. The universities cannot ignore their responsibility to develop the competences of their staff in using flexible and innovative learning environments and methods.

Conclusion

High-quality pedagogical leadership arises from the responsibility and cooperation of all those who are involved in teaching. Pedagogical leadership becomes essential, as we are transitioning to a new normal after the pandemic.

There is a need to rethink what pedagogical and learning environmental solutions can support learning and well-being of the students. The sometimes even stereotypical question of online versus face-to-face teaching has expanded, as hybrid teaching has gained ground during the pandemic as a useful and flexible teaching method.

Comparable examples

Hybrid teaching

”The term hybrid teaching refers to a classroom session that is attended remotely by some participants and in-person by others.” (Teaching and Learning Centre 2022).

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