

The context of scholarship of teaching and learning: identification and understanding of different microcultures

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ABSTRACT: Scholarship of teaching and learning takes place in contexts. These contexts or microcultures in which the teachers perceive and practice teaching and learning are the focus of this paper. Taking our point of departure in the heuristic model of four types of microcultures (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2015) this paper seeks to investigate ways to identify and describe microcultures in a higher education organisation.

By analysing the requests for obtaining licenses for an educational software program among teachers at the University of Southern Denmark we have identified two representatives of cultures with less or no dialogue on teaching matters and one representative of a dialogical culture. As a method of detecting other members of the microcultures at stake we use a snowball sampling method. The informants (12 in all) are interviewed through semi-structured interviews.

Preliminary results from the interviews point to empirical differences among the microcultures in question. The representatives of the dialogical culture show a strong sense of community and describe a shared responsibility for the development of quality in their teaching. The representatives of the other microcultures describe their communication with colleagues as happening by coincidence and teaching seems to be an individual affair.

The results point to a new way of identifying different microcultures. By using the requests for educational software licenses as an indicator for microcultural status we are able to learn more about different types of microcultures and thereby obtain a more nuanced knowledge of the contexts in which the scholarship of teaching and learning is to act in and upon.

1 INTRODUCTION

As Graham Gibbs argues, teaching development has to be sensitive to context (Gibbs, 2013). The identification of context or the microculture in which the teachers perceive and practice teaching and learning is the focus of this paper as “research aimed at capturing the impact of professional learning at the meso and macro levels is in its infancy, and would benefit greatly from further studies.” (Saroyan & Trigwell, 2015, p. 99).

In line with the metaphors *tribes and territories* (Becher & Trowler, 2001) and with ideas on *teaching and learning regimes* Trowler and Cooper (2002), Roxå and Mårtensson focused on the process through which culture is constructed and maintained, that is the collegial interactions that over time stabilise traditions and other cultural features (Mårtensson, 2014; Roxå, 2014). They suggested that local cultures, so called microcultures, in the meso level of higher education organisations could be categorised through three dimensions: trust, shared responsibility and enterprise (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2015) (*Fig. 1*).

	High level of trust High significance Strong ties Sense of belonging	Low level of trust Low significance Weak ties Sense of coexistence

<p><i>Experience of a shared responsibility</i></p> <p>Do things together</p> <p>Negotiate what to do</p> <p>Are impacted by what the others do</p>	<p>The Commons</p> <p>Share a concern for a practice. Things are being negotiated in relation to the shared concern. An undertow of consensus.</p> <p>‘We’re in this together.’</p>	<p>The Market</p> <p>Share a concern for a practice. Ideas compete. Things are negotiated with an undertow of conflict. Relationships are formalised through contracts.</p> <p>‘I look after myself.’</p>
<p><i>No experience of a shared responsibility</i></p> <p>Do things in parallel</p> <p>No negotiation</p> <p>No interference from the others</p>	<p>The Club</p> <p>Members are together without sharing a concern. Descriptions from practice are not challenged. Friendship and consensus is highest priority.</p> <p>‘We’ll always support each other.’</p>	<p>The Square</p> <p>Members share a space with strangers with no collective concern. Things are negotiated only when necessary. Members enter into relationships and leave them continuously.</p> <p>‘Who are these people?’</p>

Fig.1. Four basic types of microcultures where the variation emerges along the dimensions of whether the members trust each other and whether they experience a shared responsibility for the practice at hand. The third dimension relate to whether the microcultures display an inner enterprise, a drive for development, or whether they are oriented towards preserving a status quo. Each ideal type of microculture may or may not display such an enterprise (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2015).

The commons has been empirically investigated before by Roxå and Mårtensson (2011) who also in detail describe their method on how to identify this specific microculture. The identification process entails a series of interviews with relevant leaders and students, additional material from quality assessments, interviews with student unions and the authors’ personal experiences from the faculties. Although this method seems to be a straightforward process it also has some limitations. First, it is a resource demanding process to identify a microculture by conducting interviews with several informants and additional cross-checking with quality assessments. Second, this method identifies microcultures from the outside, meaning relying on other people’s opinion and views on the given microculture. And third, it seems as if this method is useful only to identify the type of microculture called *the commons* and not other types of microcultures.

So, the question is, are there other ways to identify microcultures that take the above mentioned challenges into account? This paper aims at testing a method to identify not only *the commons* but also the other forms of microculture in a resource efficient way by the means of information from the microcultures themselves.

2 DESIGN

During the past four years the Centre for Teaching and Learning at the University of Southern Denmark has conducted approx. 10 two-day courses on how to use student response systems (SRS) in your teaching. As part of a course the participants are provided with a license to use SRS software on their own computer. A short while after a course has taken place the course leader is sometimes approached by other teachers with mail texts like: I have heard about a license for using SRS from my colleague x, who has attended your course on SRS. Can I have a license too?

It is our hypotheses that (1) these mails requesting license for SRS initiated by a colleague attending a course on SRS indicate that course participants are members of a culture where colleagues are in dialogue on teaching matters on a regular basis, like *the commons*; (2) course participants from whom we do not receive any following mails from colleagues represent cultures where colleagues irregularly or perhaps never are in dialogue on teaching matters, like *the market*, *the club* or *the square*.

This leads us to the following design of identification of microcultures. By crosschecking lists of participants from the previous four courses on how to use SRS in your teaching with mails with the above-mentioned content three informants are selected:

Course participants	Mails referring to colleague participating in course
X	None
Y	None
Z	One or more mails from colleagues requesting license

If our hypotheses are right, then informants X and Y represent cultures with less or no dialogue on teaching matters, and informant Z represents a dialogical culture.

As a method of detecting other members of the microcultures at stake we use a snowball sampling method. Snowball sampling is a useful method in situations where the informants are hard to identify either because the topic of the research is sensitive or because the communication networks are undeveloped (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 158). After having identified the initial representative informants X, Y and Z we use these informants to point us to other members of their culture and these, in turn, identify others:

X (identified by license request) > X₂ (identified by X) > X₃ (identified by X₂) > X₄ (identified by X₃)

The informants are asked to identify another significant person in their community, also known as the *reputational snowball* method (Farquharson, 2005).

Individual interviews with informants X, Y and Z were conducted in September 2016. Ending the three interviews the informants were asked to identify another significant person in their community (snowball sampling). The remaining nine individual interviews (with X₂₋₄, Y₂₋₄, Z₂₋₄) were conducted in October 2016.

All interviews were semi-structured on how the teachers planned and talked about teaching with their colleagues, lasted app. 60 minutes and were recorded. After each interview the interviewer wrote down overall points and immediate impressions from the interview.

3 DATA

Below, the three microcultures are described through thick descriptions, a commonly used technique in ethnographically inspired organizational research (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007). Each thick description seeks to condensate and synthesize data following a thematic analysis done first individually and later in comparison by the interviewers.

3.1 Microculture X

This microculture (15 persons) is part of a department which is organized in six sections according to research interests. The microculture consists mainly of persons located in one research section but in some cases cooperation on teaching matters happen with persons from another research section. The informants describe research as the one thing that connects the members of the group, a feature that will probably increase in the future as the departmental strategy is to create even more specialized research groups in order to do better in the competition with similar research groups at other universities. In opposition to the strong sense of community regarding research is the sense of teaching as an individual affair. Teaching is one's own business which is seen as a good, almost along the line of the freedom of research at universities.

Communication between group members on teaching matters is hence minimal but not absent. Dialogues between members happen primarily when one member takes over a course from another and there is a need for handing over syllabus lists or other content related documents. Dialogues can also happen over lunch or in the hallway on good experiences with techniques and tools useable in different teaching situations, but these dialogues are very infrequent. Sometimes one member approaches colleagues when s/he needs the group's consent regarding a subject matter. An informant calls this "disciplinary backing", i.e. he is backed up by his colleagues to make certain choices on the

content of courses in case of student complaints. In general, members of this MC seem only to learn about how their colleagues do teaching when they are told by their students.

Teaching is also on the agenda at departmental meetings. Many of these meetings are however focused only on passing on information on new regulations to be implemented (by the individual teacher) and hardly ever are possible pedagogical methods for teaching under these new regulations discussed.

The non-dialogical approach to planning, conducting and evaluating teaching is not to be mistaken for an unwillingness to teach or to develop teaching. The members of the MC find teaching very exciting, care for the students' learning processes and would like to make their teaching even better, only they don't consider teaching as having a common focus.

3.2 Microculture Y

This microculture (30 persons) is one out of eight sub-units within the department containing 175 persons. This microculture is characterized by consisting of both researchers and full-time teachers. The informants describe their group as having a flat hierarchical environment where the assistant professors can speak equally with the professor, but it is still the professor who makes the final decisions.

With respect to teaching, the subjects are distributed among the teachers and from there it is up to the teachers' own discretion, as mentioned by one of the informants. However, sometimes two teachers plan a course and then coordinate who teaches the different parts of it without discussing the pedagogical issues involved. In general, the focus is more on coordinating courses to avoid overlap. Due to increased time pressure caused by a larger student intake and an increased number of internal examiner tasks, researchers and teachers are now talking less with one another. The full-time teachers think that research activities take up too much time, and the researchers think that the full-time teachers do not justify their position and teaching is secondary. Being a new researcher teaching in this MC is expressed as a tough challenge because junior members have experienced being assigned courses that were not within their competence and research area. Subjects that nobody wants are given to the newcomers. They hope some-day to get a chance to develop their own courses related to their research area like some of the senior members. One of the informants, a senior staff member, explained that he was asked to develop a course based on his research and that nobody was envying him at that time, but now he is satisfied with the possibility to use his research in the course and let students work with problems within the research.

Development and planning of course and learning activities are first and foremost done individually and under a distinct time pressure. In general, the time pressure experienced in the MC seems to have a negative influence on both the willingness for researchers and teachers to exchange knowledge about their teaching, as well as for the informants to attend staff development activities. In this MC, it seems that teaching success is determined by individual effort.

3.3 Microculture Z

This microculture (25 persons) is part of a department and is described by the informants as very collegial and social. The group eats lunch and drinks coffee together and there is a mutual willingness to help and provide feedback to each other on research as well as teaching matters. Research plays a slightly larger role than teaching in the group; the social and collegial atmosphere lives alongside the competitive nature of a university culture where grants and positions are given on the grounds of both teaching and research achievements – but mostly research.

There are quite few tenure positions in the MC, most of the group members are employed in short-term positions like research assistant, PhD student, and post doc. The senior members have all been employed in the group since their PhD. studies. This means that the senior members are seen as the carriers of the culture and as the mentors for younger employees both in terms of research, teaching and the social environment. The composition of the MC where the majority of employees are short-term members influences the way the MC goes about teaching planning and development. The long-term members typically have a longer teaching experience and have also already taught the courses that the short-term members are to teach in the future. Hence, senior members are seen as masters and junior members as legitimate peripheral participants in an apprenticeship relation; senior members and their former teaching material inspire the junior members in their planning of teaching and in time the junior members are given more and more responsibility for courses.

Implicit in the MC are hence the need for collegial dialogues on teaching. Talks on teaching are both formal at planning and evaluation meetings and informal at coffee breaks or in the corridors. The pedagogical issues discussed are both on a micro level (e.g. how to use a certain technique/tool or the order of content in a specific course) and on a macro level (e.g. the progression between two consecutive courses or experiences with students as learners). The culture is described as curious; you are genuinely curious and interested in how your colleagues go about teaching and what you could learn from them.

4 DISCUSSION AND PERSPECTIVE

This project set out to investigate whether license requests from colleagues could serve as an indicator for the existence of different microcultures. The thick descriptions shown above have not yet been thoroughly analysed, but preliminary analyses according to the three dimensions enterprise, trust, and shared responsibility (Roxå and Mårtensson, 2015) indicate that the three microcultures investigated are different and that X and Y cannot be described as *a commons* (Fig. 2).

	No	Yes	Don't know
Shared enterprise	XY	Z	
Mutual trust		XZ	Y
Shared responsibility	XY	Z	

Fig. 2. The three microcultures categorised along the three dimensions central in the model. The “don't know” column have been used if no clear result are found.

Hence, there is reason to believe that the method of using license requests from colleagues can actually point us to different kinds of microcultures. This method has several strengths; it is resource efficient in the way that only requires cross-tabulations of participant lists against e-mail texts and no time consuming interviews with several groups of people. It is also a method relying on identification on the grounds of the practice of the microculture itself. The microculture gives away itself by the traces from license requests after a colleague's participation in a course which included a license offer. A drawback of this method is of course that it requires the colleague to attend a course in the first place. Last, an important strength of this method is its ability to identify not only the strong microcultures with strong ties between the members who trust each other highly to reach a common goal but also to identify cultures that do not experience a shared sense of enterprise or responsibility. To conclude that this method is successful in identifying microcultures is dependent of the descriptions and analyses of the microcultures. In that sense a more detailed description of each microculture based on more interviews would have strengthened our argument. This calls for further investigations into the nature and practice of each of the above described microcultures. Another reservation regarding the method is to assume a causal relationship between non-requests from colleagues and a non-dialogical microculture. The difference in microcultures described here shows that there is a possible relationship between non-requests and non-dialogical cultures, but non-requests do not necessarily lead to non-dialogical cultures.

Requests for educational software licenses have in our case shown to be a way of identifying microcultures. This is not to claim that requests for licenses are the only way of detecting microcultures but merely as an inspiration to look for other traces of microcultures in the interaction between teachers and staff developers. In order to find other indicators of microcultural status, one might investigate possible patterns in teachers' requests for support on teaching techniques or cross-checking lists of participant from courses over a period of time.

The results point to that by using the requests for educational software licenses as an indicator for microcultural status we are able to learn more about different types of microcultures and thereby obtain a more nuanced knowledge of the contexts in which the scholarship of teaching and learning is to act in and upon.

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