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Multidisciplinary Peer Observation as a strategy to promote a curriculum development awareness among lecturers in Higher Education (HE)

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From a macroscopic point of view, trends that shape European Higher Education policies in recent years are: the importance of attracting more students (European Commission, 2013); the idea that HE must be accountable to society (Nóvoa, 2011) and the clear awareness that there is no university without science (and research) (European Commission 2010) . Never before it was so required that HE institutions train "students to think what others are not able to think; train students to say what others cannot say and train them to do what others have failed, before" (Nóvoa, 2011).

This is a challenge to HE curricula, as well as to HE teachers' training, that emphasizes the importance of pedagogical issues, and promote a dialog with other epistemic cultures to develop HE curricula in a close relationship with knowledge society aims (Nowotny, et al, 2001).

The broad awareness of the changing nature of HE purposes is viewed as an institutional quality factor that could be sustained by new ways of teachers' training. In the present proposal it is argued that multidisciplinary peer observation could be both an effective way of teachers' training and an opportunity to improve their knowledge of curriculum development.

Encompassing this idea, this paper stresses the importance of the collaborative work between teachers coming from different epistemic cultures. This is also important to challenge the conventional roles of teachers as they are perceived in the knowledge society.

The importance of peer observation as a collaborative training practice is associated with this change in the pedagogical paradigm and its key issues: "the focus on learning, the strengthening of the teacher-student and student-student interactions, the inclusion of collaborative work strategies and learning based on autonomy and reflection" (Fernandes et al, 2013), and the changing nature of teaching in HE.

It is also associated with an improved lecturers' awareness of curriculum development. In the present study, this is understood as the ability to organize lectures in order to promote learning in a coherent way, meaningful to students, and clearly oriented to a final profile of graduate.

There is a large set of research regarding peer observation, focusing different aims and purposes of the complex world of teaching: evaluation, professional development and peer review (Gosling, 2002; Chism, 2007). The first two are mainly related with unidirectional processes and are asymmetric in the relationship between observer and observed. The third is based in a more balanced and reciprocal relationship and usually allows a mutual benefit for both observer and observed (Bell, 2008).

However there is some reluctance to participate in peer observation activities as it exposes teachers to criticism, namely centered on specific knowledge domain (O'Keefe et al, 2009). Therefore, multidisciplinary peer observation could overcome this problem as peer observation will be focused on teaching and learning and not on lecturers' knowledge. Moreover, it could provide an external look on the coherence of the process of curriculum development leaded by the observed lecturer.

The University of Porto (Portugal) has been undertaking, since 2009, a program of MPO, among some of its Faculties. The program was launched to provide opportunities for feedback on teaching and constitute a voluntary lecturers' training model. (Mouraz et al, 2013) After

four years, the program is still running and its main advantages are related with the close relationships established between lecturers from different Faculties and the sense of “belonging” it arose. However, the study of pedagogical changes made by lecturers after participating in the multidisciplinary peer observation experience was not performed, neither a further reflection on effects of multidisciplinary approach in teaching roles (namely at networked collaborative learning among lecturers concerning curriculum development).

Methodology, Methods, Research Instruments or Sources Used

The study was intended to find out to what extent multidisciplinary peer observation could contribute to perform pedagogical changes made by lecturers in a more comprehensive way.

Specifically, this study had the following objectives:

- i) To describe the trends of discourse that HE lecturers give to justify Multidisciplinary Peer Observation MPO use in defining teaching practices.
- ii) To identify and discuss the use of MPOS in the lecturers’ professional awareness of curriculum development processes.

The research design was a combination of a program of MPO in HE promoted at the University of Porto and an empirical study through the fulfillment of observation forms.

The program of classroom peer observation was based on quartets of observers and observed lecturers. Lecturers were enrolled in the program after an invitation to do so during a training seminar. The peer observation model proposed has the fundamental structure of a quartet of observers / observed composed of two duets of lecturers from different Faculties. The observations were made by two observers (one belonging to the same Faculty of the observed and the second belonging to other Faculty).

The process of classroom peer observation was operationalized in three different meetings between observers and observed: BEFORE, DURING and AFTER the observed classes. Before the observed class, the lecturer conveyed the information necessary to contextualize the observation (course unit details, integration in the curriculum, class features, etc...) to his/her observers (via email or in person). During the observation, observers filled an observation form, focused in five areas of teaching and learning: structure, organization, class climate, content, lecturers’ attitudes. After the observed class (immediately following, for example), observed and observers lecturers would meet to assess the class features, proposing improvements and promoting the exchange of experiences. To finish this phase, the observation form was filled and posted in a specific online form in order to get information on peer observation practices.

Data from these observation forms is being collected and analyzed both in a quantitative and in a qualitative way.

Conclusions, Expected Outcomes or Findings

The study is still ongoing. Therefore it is expected its contribution to highlight how multidisciplinary peer observation could improve lecturers' professional development and pedagogical concerns and awareness in HE institutions.

As Gosling (2002) argues, in the peer-review model as it is adopted in the present study, the reciprocal and collegial character has more potential to contribute to effective lecturers' professional development as well as to Faculty development as it enlarges the curriculum perspective. In fact, the aim and innovative character of the present study relies in two issues that foster peer observation practices. First, as it is to be developed among peers from different scientific backgrounds it is expected that MPO will be focused in teaching and learning rather than in content issues. At the same time, it opens a forward look into curriculum development as it is allowed by a multidisciplinary approach. Looking from another perspective, the timeliness of the study lies in its multidisciplinary character, as it challenges Universities to shift from their traditional disciplinary structure (Sá, 2008), and it is part of a worldwide approach to innovation which aims to promote interdisciplinary practices in Higher Education (Franks et al., 2007).

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