

ASPECTS

OF GOOD
TEACHING

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UNIVERSITÄT MAINZ

ASPECTS OF GOOD TEACHING AT JOHANNES GUTENBERG UNIVERSITY MAINZ

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PRELIMINARY REMARKS

Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz is constantly striving to implement the principles developed in its mission statement as part of its strategy development process. For its strategic goal of improving the quality of teaching and learning conditions, quality standards for good teaching are to be developed in all faculties, an analysis of strengths and weaknesses is to be conducted, and an action plan based on these findings is to be drafted. In this context, the JGU Center for Quality Assurance and Development was instructed to develop aspects of good teaching based on recommendations issued by the German Council of Science and Humanities.

The recommendations made in this paper are not to be seen as instructions, but rather as an orientation framework to support the subjects and faculties in their internal discussions about learning and teaching on the one hand, and to provide an indication of the dimensions that should be included as part of evaluations on the other hand. In doing so, the following recommendations are intentionally confined to issues related to the quality of teaching and learning conditions; details for the evaluation of teaching are intentionally not dealt with in this paper.

The overall intention is that the following aspects of good teaching be contemplated by the individual subjects and faculties, and that they will contribute to continuous monitoring, bearing in mind the efficient use of resources. However, this paper expressly does not represent a list of criteria regarding issues of performance grading in accordance with the German Federal Civil Service Remuneration Act.

The following aspects of good teaching refer to the subject or faculty level as the deciding units for setting goals and criteria for learning and teaching. They are based on a quality concept that focuses on the compatibility of objectives and practical teaching.

The quality of teaching is thus seen as a measure of the compatibility of teaching objectives and teaching practice resulting in an alignment of interim objectives or superior and subordinate goals.

The alignment of these objectives at various levels is also essential for the overarching goals of the university. Such interim objectives may be brought into agreement by setting priorities or determining individual objectives, for example.

MULTI-DIMENSIONAL PERFORMANCE

TEACHING SHOULD BE SEEN AS A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL PERFORMANCE WHICH SIMULTANEOUSLY HAS TO SATISFY VARIOUS DIFFERENT, EVEN POTENTIALLY CONTRADICTIONARY REQUIREMENTS. GOOD TEACHING STRIVES FOR AN APPROPRIATE AND BALANCED TREATMENT OF THESE REQUIREMENTS.

The subjects and faculties are confronted with the task of satisfying partially contradictory demands. They shall contribute to scientific excellence as they shall provide practical and professional training. They shall teach both general skills also called soft skills as well as specialized skills. They shall demonstrate a high level of research and include students and young scientists in their research processes, while simultaneously satisfying the needs of those students who are not primarily pursuing a scientific career. Communicating these various requirements at subject level is a difficult and ongoing task that requires the development of a common subject definition and an agreement on common objectives.

SUBJECT DEFINITIONS

GOOD TEACHING IS BASED ON COMMON SUBJECT DEFINITIONS WHICH HAVE BEEN AGREED UPON BY THE SUBJECTS' TEACHERS. ON THE BASIS OF THESE SUBJECT DEFINITIONS, LEARNING OBJECTIVES CAN BE FORMULATED – FOR THE COURSE AS A WHOLE, FOR THE VARIOUS PHASES OF ONE'S STUDIES, AND FOR INDIVIDUAL CLASSES. SETTING SUBJECT DEFINITIONS AND LEARNING OBJECTIVES AS WELL AS THEIR CONSTANT ADAPTATION TO CHANGING FRAMEWORK CONDITIONS IS THE CENTRAL TASK OF THE SUBJECT REPRESENTATIVES.

Learning objectives can be sensibly defined only with a common understanding of the subject. The individual subject definition is to be derived not only from agreements on scientific standards but also from factors such as character building aspects, the specific profile of the subject at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz and its associated possible focuses as well as aspects of differentiation from other subjects and possible interdepartmental cooperation. In other words, the question needs to be answered as to what a subject is able to provide under the existing conditions.

The subject definition should be translated into the description of medium-term and short-term objectives, which in the daily practice of teaching can then be translated into the students' learning objectives. In terms of curricular provisions, this includes in particular the definition of objectives for the entire course of studies, for the various phases of one's studies, and finally for individual classes.

A common subject definition, however, is expressly not to be confused with detailed regulations, which hinder necessary innovations in research and teaching. Thus, the objective is not reaching an equivalence of subject definitions but rather communicating the differences – always taking into account the freedom of research and teaching.

TEACHING OBJECTIVES

GOOD TEACHING IS CHARACTERIZED BY THE FACT THAT THE TEACHING STAFF IS FAMILIAR WITH THE TEACHING OBJECTIVES, THAT THESE ARE A SUBJECT OF DISCUSSION, AND THAT THEY ARE COMMUNICATED TO THE STUDENTS. IT IS THUS VITAL TO ASSURE THE TRANSPARENCY AND SIGNIFICANCE OF TEACHING OBJECTIVES, REQUIREMENTS, AND EVALUATION CRITERIA AT COURSE LEVEL AND IN TERMS OF INDIVIDUAL CLASSES.

Defining learning objectives alone is no sufficient criterion for good teaching. The objectives need to be steadily communicated. This is attributable to the fact that learning objectives need to be generally applicable and thus relatively abstract in their formulation, so that they can still integrate various approaches and interpretations. Moreover, in addition to their formal rules in the study and examination regulations, learning objectives also have a high level of informal "rules," which are always associated with the actual staff and their specific interpretation of these learning objectives. Keeping in mind the high staff turnover typical at universities, the continuous exchange among the teaching staff is thus an important prerequisite for the specification and update of learning objectives.

It is no less important to communicate the learning objectives along with the subject definition to the students. Experience shows that in many subjects the impact of the information provided is overestimated. The one-off communication of course structures, performance requirements, and evaluation criteria is generally not enough. The results of higher educational research suggest that there is only little agreement between information output and information intake, i.e. information that seems obvious to instructors is often completely foreign and unknown to many students. This is due to the varying perceptions of the subject, which are reflected in the partially contradictory everyday perception of teaching and learning on the part of teachers and students.

Another essential factor is the instructors' agreement on performance requirements and evaluation criteria. There are partially significant differences to be observed when it comes to the requirements for oral exams or grade recognition. Being aware of the fact that a complete standardization is not suitable for the character of teaching at university level, there should still be transparency for the students as well as for the teaching staff.

CONNECTIVITY

GOOD TEACHING IS CHARACTERIZED BY CONNECTIVITY. THIS MEANS THAT LECTURES AND COURSES AND STUDY PHASES BUILD ON AND REASONABLY COMPLEMENT ONE ANOTHER, AND ARE DESIGNED, THOUGH NOT EXCLUSIVELY, TO MEET EXAM REQUIREMENTS. CONNECTIVITY ALSO MEANS THAT THE COURSE OF STUDY IS DESIGNED TO MEET EXPECTED REQUIREMENTS OF THE JOB MARKET.

The results of an evaluation of learning and teaching show that a considerable part of university classes and courses are unconnected with one another. Although the structure of the courses is formally assured through the relevant curricula and partially through course sequence plans, in many cases this does not correspond to the contents. The exchange among teachers regarding classes, the coordination of the syllabus, and performance and examination requirements tend to be the exception rather than the rule. This also means that performance requirements are not transparent and heterogeneous, which creates insecurity on the part of the students and may thus delay their entry into the examination phase.

The differentiation of science requires an enormous amount of coordination and cooperation in both research and teaching in order to assure connectivity as defined above. In order to establish connectivity beyond the realm of the university, teachers may need additional information about their students, e.g. on the scope of knowledge they have attained in high school and potential future professional careers. The currently missing connectivity between schools and university courses is increasingly becoming a problem for university education.

SUPPORTING

GOOD TEACHING IMPLIES SUPPORTING THE STUDENT BODY WITH EARLY AND APPROPRIATE PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK AS WELL AS A DISCUSSION OF THEIR STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, AND DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES.

GOOD TEACHING FOSTERS STUDENT POTENTIAL WHILE SIMULTANEOUSLY CONTRIBUTING TO PERFORMANCE DIFFERENTIATION. GOOD COUNSELING IN THE SENSE OF SCHOLARLY EXCHANGE IS THE BASIS FOR MUTUAL RESPECT AND TRUST, WHICH IS A VITAL REQUIREMENT FOR SUCCESSFUL TEACHING AND LEARNING.

In the realm of institutions of higher education, the concept of advising and counseling is being used rather unspecifically. While the associated connotation of supporting students is widely supported, the idea of differentiation is found only rarely. Good counseling, however, is also characterized by providing students with early evaluations of their performance potential, thus providing them with appropriate orientation assistance. This is an argument for communicating the individual subject standards very early on and for providing correspondingly detailed performance feedback.

Appropriate counseling is characterized by meeting the students' counseling requirements, which tend to be very different. There are students who require close personal counseling, and there are those who retrieve essential information from fellow students or written information. In a broader sense, good counseling is characterized by various forms and phases of information, advising, and feedback as well as the formation of mutual respect and trust.

RESEARCH PERFORMANCE

GOOD TEACHING IS DEPENDENT ON
THE SUBJECT'S RESEARCH PERFORMANCE.
CONTINUOUS HIGH-LEVEL RESEARCH IS A BASIC REQUIREMENT
FOR TEACHING AT A HIGH LEVEL.

Results of higher educational research have shown that good teaching needs good research performance. Good teaching is generally done where advanced research is performed. However, this does not rule out the fact that time slots available for research and for teaching compete with one another, particularly in the schedule of young scientists during their qualification phase.

The linking of teaching to research beyond mere course content means that students should be enabled and allowed to participate in research as much as possible. At the very least, the students need to be given insight into the most recent research in their field of study.

CONTINUOUS TRAINING

SKILLS OF GOOD TEACHING CAN BE ACQUIRED. WITH REGARD TO INDIVIDUAL TEACHING PERFORMANCE, CONTINUOUS TRAINING IN ISSUES RELATED TO LEARNING AND TEACHING IS NECESSARY, NOT LEAST IN VIEW OF NEW AND MEDIA-ORIENTED TEACHING AND LEARNING METHODS. AT THE SAME TIME, CONVEYING THE IDEA OF GOOD TEACHING HAS ITS LIMITATIONS IN THE RESPECTIVE TEACHING PERSONALITY AND PERSONAL INTERPRETATIONS OF TEACHING METHODS.

The acquisition of teaching skills is still done primarily autodidactically in many subjects. Even though teacher training instruction has its limits in the individual teacher's personality, it proves still important and instrumental to refine and communicate various teaching methods and systematic experience. Possibilities include methods such as the introduction of electronic media in teaching, the temporal structure of classes, knowing about the participants' performance capabilities, their preferred learning forms, and feedback possibilities. In doing so, the focus is in no way placed exclusively on teaching in its narrowest sense but also on factors such as counseling, conducting examinations, class planning, and forms of performance feedback.

The various facets of teaching mentioned above do require structured and organized forms of continuing education. It is thus recommended that subjects and faculties – in cooperation with the coordination staff responsible for supporting young scientists – formulate their criteria and needs for continuing academic education of their young researchers and support corresponding initiatives.

DEFINITIONS OF GOOD TEACHING

THE DEFINITION OF GOOD TEACHING DIFFERS AMONG INDIVIDUAL SUBJECTS, DEPARTMENTAL GROUPS, AND COURSES OF STUDY. THE RESPECTIVE DEFINITION MAY WEIGH THE CRITERIA MEASURING TEACHING SUCCESS IN A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT WAY.

Teaching – just like research – is subject to very different departmental cultures. The requirements placed on students and forms of teaching, which vary between lectured and interactive classes, are named only as examples. Furthermore, it can be observed that the validity criteria for successful teaching also depend on the profiles of the various course programs and the students' subsequent possibilities in the job market. Thus, courses of study ending with an official state examination are usually associated with a clearly defined professional field and the professional opportunities are thus closely related to the final degree. This means that the curricula of these courses of study generally offer less room for interpretation than other courses of study.

On the other hand, Magister degree courses aim at far less clearly defined professional fields, so that the course of study is generally used to provide professional orientation. Doing student internships or student jobs in the desired future profession may be of great importance to further professional careers, even if they work to the detriment of short study periods. While in some courses of study the relatively clearly defined professional field means that the specialized period of study is a vital criteria, i.e. in fields such as medicine, pharmaceuticals, and teacher training, this cannot be applied automatically to all the other courses of study. To what extent the introduction of Bachelor's and Master's degree programs with their intentionally strong ties to the professional environment may lead to a homogenization of these departmental cultures is yet to be seen.

INDICATORS



THE IMPACT OF GOOD TEACHING WITH REGARD TO THE RELEVANT SUBJECT DEFINITION AND ASSOCIATED OBJECTIVES CAN BE MEASURED. CORRESPONDING INDICATORS THUS REQUIRE AN INTERPRETATION WITHIN THE SUBJECT UNDER DISCUSSION. ESSENTIAL CRITERIA FOR GOOD TEACHING ARE THE SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION OF DEGREE PROGRAMS AND THE STUDENTS' SUBSEQUENT SUCCESSFUL ENTRY INTO PROFESSIONAL LIFE. THE MOST IMPORTANT CONTRIBUTING ASPECTS – SUCH AS A SHORT DURATION OF STUDY OR A WORK-STUDY INTRODUCTION TO THE PROFESSION – VARY FROM DISCIPLINE TO DISCIPLINE. THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUCH SUBJECT-SPECIFIC CRITERIA REGARDING SUCCESSFUL TEACHING AND REPEATED DISCUSSIONS WITHIN THE INDIVIDUAL SUBJECTS ARE SIGNIFICANT ASPECTS OF GOOD TEACHING IN THE SENSE THAT THEY STAND FOR A THOUGHTFUL HANDLING OF CORRESPONDING ISSUES.

The evaluation of good teaching based on measurable and quantifiable criteria is initially done to receive sensible orientation benchmarks regarding the teaching performance in a subject. The duration of the course of study, data about the course progress, and examination results provide an overview of the effects of teaching and learning. However, such data has to be interpreted with regard to its relevance for the transition to a profession and needs to take into consideration intervening variables. Central intervening variables outside the responsibility of the individual subjects are the students' performance capability and the situation of the job market.

One central goal is to define subject-specific success criteria, which – when compared over time – provide insight into the teaching performance of the individual subjects.

When evaluating good teaching, the views of the students should be included.

SUMMARY



THE PREVIOUSLY DESCRIBED ASPECT OF GOOD TEACHING CAN BE SUMMARIZED AS FOLLOWS:

- Conscientious and appropriate treatment of ambivalent requirements
- Development and continuous communication of the subject definition
- Definition of learning objectives
- Transparency of learning objectives
- Connectivity of classes, course contents, and study phases as well as in the transition from studying to professional activity
- Counseling for the purpose of performance enhancement and performance differentiation and as a basis for mutual respect and trust
- High-performance research as the basis for good teaching
- Systematic continuing education of young scientists
- Development of subject-specific criteria and indicators of good teaching

Associated with this is a catalog of exemplary central questions addressing the further subject-specific development of learning and teaching, formulated in accordance with the recommendations issued by the German Council of Science and Humanities. The core issues listed below are expressly not to be seen as extensive guidelines but shall rather serve as an impetus for future initiatives to optimize teaching.

CORE ISSUES

1. What general objectives and conceptual focuses have been placed on the courses of studies in the subject?
2. What skills should the course of study teach? What should the graduates be able to do (professional competence, methodological competence, social competence)?
3. How are these objectives reflected in the course of study?
4. What focuses in terms of teaching contents have been identified?
5. Do these focuses relate to the subject-specific research focuses?
How is current research included in the courses?
How are students involved in running research programs?
6. Which thematic criteria have been defined for thesis papers?
Do thesis papers relate to the existent study and research focuses?
7. Which job descriptions are used as the basis for teaching and training?
8. Is there an active exchange between teachers, students, graduates, and representatives of the profession?
9. Which forms of continuous exchange on issues of learning and teaching are taking place on the subject level or within the faculty? Is there a teaching conference where issues regarding the coordination of classes and the definition of teaching requirements can be discussed?
10. Are there any forums for the systematic exchange of experience in the area of learning and teaching or on study results? How is such experience communicated?
11. In which manner is the long-term efficiency of the use of teaching resources evaluated?
12. What is the subject's preferred form of performance feedback?
Are there special forms of support for students? How is performance differentiated?
13. Are there any efforts to use information and communication technologies in teaching?
What are they and what are the long-term and medium-term prospects associated with them?
14. What kind of introduction is made for young scientists to issues regarding learning and teaching? Are there recommendations for participating in continuing education courses? Do young scientists take advantage of them? What are the opportunities for interaction among young scientists regarding these issues?
15. What are the relevant benchmarks the individual subject has used for evaluating teaching performance?
16. In view of this orientation framework, how does the subject rate its own teaching performance and organization of teaching on a scale of "could be better" to "exceptional"?

THE GUTENBERG SPIRIT:
MOVING MINDS – CROSSING BOUNDARIES.

Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz remains true to its namesake:
furthering and implementing innovative ideas, using knowledge to improve
the living conditions of people and their access to education and science,
and encouraging people to overcome anticipated as well as
actual boundaries wherever possible.

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