SOCIALIZATION, APPROPRIATION AND ADAPTATION OF OUTSTANDING TEACHING COMPETENCIES AS AN ENHANCEMENT OF CURRICULAR IMPROVEMENT: THE CREATION OF A CENTER FOR INNOVATION IN EDUCATION

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Abstract

The substantive functions of the University –teaching, research, and academic extension–, are the starting point and the essence of the development of a Center for Innovation in Education (CIE), which has the aim of enhancing teaching talent through a strengths-based educational model. The process of identifying outstanding teaching competencies in college professors and then, socializing, appropriating and adapting them to the style and class interaction of other members of the faculty is the main purpose of this space created by teachers for teachers. Curricular enhancement support and the creation and recreation of the teaching practice are made evident in the specific tasks of Universidad Panamericana’s (UP) Center for Innovation in Education.

Keywords: curricular improvement, outstanding competencies, teaching, innovation.

1 INTRODUCTION

New educational paradigms, such as what the UNESCO identifies as “the dynamic networks and work spaces for the discussion, creation, diffusion and socialization of knowledge, integrating development strategies that enhance innovation in higher education” [1], force us, as a college, to start looking in different directions. The world in which we operate is looking forward to the creation of interdisciplinary curricular programs and the transformation of academic organizations, under the notion that professors should rethink their role –traditionally though of as lecturers and knowledge holders–, and recreate their teaching practice through personal and collegiate work, aligned with the academic training (mastery of their discipline) and pedagogical and didactic education (didactic instrumentation and curricular design) that all teachers need.

Set in this scenario and as a response to the challenges that these paradigms entail, Universidad Panamericana (UP) has set the goal of developing interdisciplinary learning environments that encourage the development of professors and college students through dialogue and reflection, in order to achieve a solid academic formation.

This is the reason why more than two years ago, the University firmly got interested in creating a space where its professors’ talent could be enhanced, a space that contributed to the improvement of the teaching and learning process and the promotion of innovative learning environments through academic and cross-disciplinary collaboration. This concern materialized since the 2010 Fall term as the Center for Innovation in Education (CIE), whose utmost goal is to enhance teaching talent through the innovation of learning environments, in order to have a positive effect on the students’ integral learning.

The following paper aims to present the center’s efforts regarding curricular work and program development as a teaching practice, tasks in which educational innovation has been promoted, having as a foundation each professor’s outstanding teaching competencies and strengths, that is, their “best qualities.” [2]

To set the grounds of our research, we address in the first place the innovation practice and its relation with college teachers’ strengths. With this background, we can introduce then the purposes, goals and tasks of the CIE.
Only after this conceptualization, do we fathom the process of strengthening the educational intervention, highlighting the significance of the socialization, appropriation and adaptation of competencies to the personal teaching style of the professor.

Finally, as a conclusion we emphasize how the experience of the CIE translates to the substantive functions of every higher education institution: teaching, research, and academic extension.

In these two years of operation, the CIE has become a learning community and a space where each and every professor, committed to improve, can find the necessary tools to enhance their talent for professional development and the learning of each of their students. All these efforts seek to return to the essence of the University as a promoter of constant curricular innovation and teaching improvement, which we believe is a necessary condition to make possible its educational purpose.

2 INNOVATION AND TEACHER STRENGTHS

Nowadays, we live in a context where accelerated change and scientific and technological development prevail, as well as an economic environment characterized by globalization of knowledge. As Edgar Morin [3] points out, we now speak of the human being as a “planetary citizen”, which makes us rethink the education of the future, in order to achieve a common identity and a global humanity.

Transformation is exponential and complex. The adaptation to this new reality brings about the need to offer actions that seek curricular innovation.

The Mexican Observatory of Innovation in Higher Education [OMIES] defines innovation as “a creative, originative, deliberate, intentional, and planned action that does not occur spontaneously. […] It is the process of specialized change and multidimensional instauration of new sociotechnical developments that include the creation, transformation, validation and root of new knowledge and practices in organizations.” [1] The teachers are the creators of their own educational intervention and practice in the class. They perform their teaching thanks to a creative process of construction and reconstruction.

Innovation, which is a “fundamentally social” process [1], requires collaborative work, a necessary element to enhance the teaching and learning process and, hence, to elevate educational quality. In fact, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has emphasized the need to innovate, appealing to the direct relation that there is between "the commitment with teaching and the quality of learning results." [4] If teaching and learning are correlated, then innovative teaching can certainly promote a better learning process in the students.

That is why the Center for Innovation in Education has focused on searching and enhancing innovation, taking always as a foundation Universidad Panamericana’s professors' best qualities. Our basis is a strengths-based education, considering that a strength is “the ability to provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity.” [5]

“Strengths-based educational models represent a return to basic educational principles that emphasize the positive aspects of student effort and achievement, as well as human strengths” [2]. By taking individual assets as a foundation, we presume that it will take less time to perfect performance than trying to correct weaknesses that could be modified, but with a greater difficulty and investment of time. In this same line, a person whose talents are recognized and empowered will be highly motivated and productive. Indeed, “individuals gain more when they build on their talents, than when they make comparable efforts to improve their areas of weakness.” [5]

Following the identification of outstanding competencies, the socialization of these strengths among the academic body allows the appropriation of that competency by another college teacher—a competency that they will adapt to their very own teaching style, curricular work and daily experience of the teaching and learning process.

In other words, we start by getting to know each and every one of the professors while doing their job so we can identify their strengths. This leads to propose and work collaboratively in different projects that increasingly enhance their personal teaching and learning styles, and that become a platform for sharing the competencies to the rest of the faculty members.
3 PURPOSES, GOALS, AND TASKS OF THE CENTER FOR INNOVATION IN EDUCATION

Universidad Panamericana’s Center for Innovation in Education was constituted as an academic and interdisciplinary space, whose main purpose is that of promoting educational innovation for the creation of formative learning environments that will help improve teaching practice and that will impact the students’ integral learning.

With this as a reference, the CIE’s ultimate goal is captured in its mission statement: “To enhance teaching talent by innovating the learning environment”. Furthermore, on its vision, the CIE seeks “to become a national reference on research, educational models, teaching and learning environments and techniques for the didactic and disciplinary formation of college teachers”.

The specific tasks that the CIE develops are the following:

1. **Teaching practice exploration:** The CIE wants to offer college teachers the necessary tools so that they can explore and enhance their teaching style. The center supports them in curricular design, teaching methods and resources. Exploring teaching practice begins by identifying a professor’s outstanding competencies and promoting their improvement.

2. **Research support:** The CIE promotes higher education research, by encouraging interdisciplinary practice and supporting specialized teacher projects.

3. **Academic collaboration space:** The CIE is open to all Faculties, Schools, and Departments of the University, and it aims to create spaces in which collegiate work is supported and an academic collaboration among teachers is achieved. Our website (http://cie.up.edu.mx) and our newsletter, in which teachers’ and academic advisors’ best practices are shared, have become a space where such a collaboration begins.

4. **Academic Advising support:** At Universidad Panamericana, academic advising is defined as a service in which there is an accompaniment of the academic, personal and professional formation of the college student. Academic advising has the purposes of integrating the students to the dynamics of University, helping them with their studies and academic load, supporting them in the development of an ethical behavior, and making them aware of the support areas that the University offers. It is a key service at Universidad Panamericana, constituting an institutional axis, and a unique task that is supported by the CIE, by offering tools for academic advisors and integrating innovation to this process.

These four tasks are aligned to the substantive functions of every University: teaching, research, and academic extension.

4 STRENGTHENING THE TEACHING PRACTICE

It is common in teacher training to start programs from the bottom of the pyramid, including all the academic body and identifying certain teachers with significant needs in academic, pedagogical and didactic formation. The teachers with important opportunity areas receive greater attention than those exceptional professors at the top of the pyramid. The CIE’s work started the opposite way: we mobilized a learning process in which the University was first devoted to learning from its teachers and their best practices in the classroom and only then, did it aim to favor the socialization of the identified competencies.

The “intellectual work” [6] and the motivation to know how the best professors at UP promote and achieve extraordinary learning outcomes in their students led the CIE to its first project which was repeated for four continuous semesters and that resulted in the observation of twenty six teachers. Each term, professors from different faculties and schools of the University were chosen to work with the Center.

With each college teacher, an initial interview in which we explored their teaching experience was held. This was our first approach to their personal style and strengths. Afterwards, several observations and video recordings of their classes were made. A profound analysis helped us develop a “Teaching Practice Report” for each one of the professors, in which their outstanding and complementary competencies were highlighted, along with their definitions and the specific way in which the teacher integrates them into his/her own personal experience and style. Along with the report, a video was edited showing the precise moment in which those competencies were observed.
The final phase of the project consisted in writing articles and developing complementary resources for the CIE webpage (http://cie.up.edu.mx), in order to share these professors’ best experiences with the rest of the academic community.

This is how we started to identify our teachers’ strengths or outstanding competencies, which constituted the foundation for curricular and student learning enhancement. The ultimate goal was to identify the competencies that characterized teachers according to different knowledge areas and, with the educational project of the University as a basis, to train professors from each Faculty and School.

In this very enriching collegiate work experience, it was rather significant to see that teachers who knew very little about didactics, started identifying, naming and clarifying the strengths that were observed in them, and they could note them themselves in the video recording of their classes.

The results obtained from the work we made with each professor were diverse, highlighting that each one of them has a unique teaching style, consistent with the academic life and environment. We detected and differentiated the application of several competencies with a cognitive, a relational, or an intellectual or manual skills origin, as seen in Fig. 1.

Some of these competencies were more frequent than others (Table 1); that is, two or more of the teachers we observed presented them.

### Table 1. Most frequent teaching competencies observed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Origin of competencies</th>
<th>Competency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>- Promotes argumentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Builds questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Demonstrates a logical order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Creates cognitive conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational</td>
<td>- Guides learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Promotes participation and gives feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Interacts with the group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills</td>
<td>- Communicates non-verbally effectively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Communicates verbally effectively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Handles didactic resources</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For instance, the teachers we observed sustain their speech in scientific concepts, that present a logical and methodological order, and they promote critical analysis. In their classes, they construct concepts, create relations among them, and they communicate them effectively. The professors ask questions and elaborate examples, as well as look for their students’ reflection, while using different thinking approaches and a high intellectual rigor.

The teachers that we observed also excel in inviting their students to participate, empowering them, and presenting them with challenges that lead them to construct a meaningful learning experience. They understand that a class is not complete with their own action, so they transform the students into the protagonists of their educational process. Likewise, they are characterized by their ethical sense,
which is reflected in the promotion of respect inside and outside of the classroom, and in the way they structure thinking with a foundation in truth. They treat students personally with patience and kindness, and they assume the role of a guide.

Finally, we emphasize that the teachers at Universidad Panamericana have a committed vocation, manifested in their passion for teaching and their eagerness for learning. Passionate teachers recognize that “teaching is more than just a job, an intellectual challenge or a control task; for whom vocation and commitment are essential characteristics of their profession. […] Teachers that are concerned, throughout their work, for education in a broader sense, that recognize that the emotional participation and assistance [of their students] are essential for a good teaching, that are committed to serving and that are, have been, and want to be all again, passionate.” [7]

The competencies that we observed and analyzed in teachers from each Faculty, School, and Department of the University are shown below in Tables 2, 3 and 4.

**KEY:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outstanding competencies</th>
<th>Complementary competencies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Table 2. Schools of Law, Business and Hospitality teaching competencies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty, School or Department</th>
<th>Law</th>
<th>Business</th>
<th>Hospitality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Competencies with a cognitive origin | - Creates analogy  
- Juxtaposes concepts  
- Builds concepts  
- Promotes differential analysis | - Directs practical knowledge  
- Establishes an inductive - deductive order  
- Builds questions | - Links with previous knowledge  
- Demonstrates a logical order |
| Competencies with a relational origin | - Seeks learning transference  
- Creates cognitive conflict  
- Creates context  
- Promotes metacognition  
- Uses a diachronical - synchronical order | - Formulates examples | - Promotes argumentation  
- Builds questions  
- Sets a didactic structure |
| Competencies with a skills origin | - Handles didactic resources | - Demonstrates empathy  
- Guides learning | - Communicates verbally and non-verbally effectively  
- Controls the rhythm of learning  
- Shares teaching experience  
- Handles didactic resources |
Table 3. Schools of Philosophy and Social Sciences, Engineering and Medicine teaching competencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty, School or Department</th>
<th>Philosophy and Social Sciences</th>
<th>Engineering</th>
<th>Medicine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competencies with a cognitive origin</td>
<td>- Analyzes and synthetizes - Builds relationships within the speech - Builds student judgment - Promotes critical thinking</td>
<td>- Makes inferences - Promotes metacognition - Builds relationships within speech</td>
<td>- Promotes argumentation - Demonstrates a logical order - Works with systematic thinking - Handles antecedents and consequences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competencies with a relational origin</td>
<td>- Formulates examples - Seeks learning transference</td>
<td>- Analyzes and synthetizes - Builds questions - Organizes teaching practices procedurally</td>
<td>- Makes comparisons - Creates context - Makes inferences - Creates cognitive conflict - Uses scientific vocabulary - Promotes ethical reflection - Uses case method teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competencies with a skills origin</td>
<td>- Promotes respect among students - Interacts with the group</td>
<td>- Promotes student attention</td>
<td>- Guides learning - Achieves good classroom management</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Departments of Humanities and Languages, and High School teaching competencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty, School or Department</th>
<th>Humanities</th>
<th>Languages</th>
<th>High School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competencies with a cognitive origin</td>
<td>- Creates cognitive conflict</td>
<td>- Creates cognitive conflict</td>
<td>- Uses a diachronical-synchronical order - Abstracts ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competencies with a relational origin</td>
<td>- Builds questions - Builds student judgment</td>
<td>- Creates context</td>
<td>- Promotes argumentation - Demonstrates a logical order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competencies with a skills origin</td>
<td>- Handles didactic resources</td>
<td>- Communicates non-verbally effectively</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All these teaching competencies, which were identified as our professors’ strengths, have undisputed repercussions in the students’ significant learning, constituting the foundation of our research for the improvement of curricular interventions.

By the end of the semester, teachers that have participated in the CIE know who they are as college professors and are able to acknowledge their personal teaching style. With this as a foundation, they can teach from their strengths, designing classes based on the interaction with students, personal advising, and the evaluation and feedback of the learning process. This is the reason why it is our
objective to offer our teachers a space where they can develop reflective thinking and practice collegiate work, with the aim of improving their pedagogical interventions.

5 THE CENTER FOR INNOVATION IN EDUCATION’S PROJECTS

The observation and analysis of the twenty-six college teachers led, as a consequence, to the dissemination of the best teaching practices to the rest of the academic community. This was achieved thanks to the CIE’s webpage (http://cie.up.edu.mx), to which all faculty members are also invited to subscribe their own innovative educational projects.

Teachers are permanently invited to:

1. Document their good teaching or academic advising practices, and socialize them to the entire academic community by the means of the webpage, so other teachers can appropriate and adapt them to their own practice.
2. Use technology with the CIE’s support.
3. Get pedagogical and didactic consulting, in order to enhance their teaching strengths.
4. Design new didactic strategies for their course’s curriculum.
5. Record their best classes and upload them to iTunesU.

Once the teachers have sent their application, the CIE reviews each form in detail and meets with the professor afterwards, to determine the work plan that is going to be followed throughout the semester. Moreover, when the projects are completed, the CIE is in charge of spreading them to the rest of the faculty through papers, reports, videos, resources, training programs, or some other tool in which the work and results obtained from the projects can be reflected.

For instance, college teachers that participated from 2010 to 2012, have developed projects as varied as their own teaching styles: we have had from discussion forums on the Moodle platform, and a course on infographic design and video editing for teachers and students, to the publication of classes in iTunesU, and the edition of animated video capsules.

6 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

All the work that the CIE has done in two years of operation, has allowed us to institutionalize teaching practice into the three substantive functions of every university: teaching, research, and academic extension.

As to what the teaching function refers, the CIE pretends to be a space committed with each and every one of the professors that make possible the educational work at the University. The outstanding teaching competencies we featured were our first approximation to developing a reflective thinking and a collegiate work as an incident and ongoing educational action in the curricular design of the University, and in the design of programs for the teaching task.

The constant and personal work with the teachers that are interested in the current and future challenges of higher education leads us, each semester, to the conformation of a systematic process of teaching and research support, the second substantive function, in which the capital task is collegiate work and teaching initiative to lead change processes that are necessary for the benefit of all the academic community.

Through all its efforts, the CIE wants to position itself among the faculty as an aspirational space and a learning community, in which teachers wish to participate and find in their commitment as university professors the privilege of having the necessary tools to enhance their talent in favor of their own professional development and of each and every one of their students’ learning. In the third substantive function of the University, the CIE is a guide and counselor in the use of technology and resources for the academic advising practice.
REFERENCES


