Peer engagement for teaching and learning: competence, autonomy and social solidarity in academic microcultures

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ABSTRACT

University teachers’ engagement in teaching is a crucial aspect for the quality of student learning. In this article, we explore where such engagement comes from. We use a sociocultural perspective to investigate how teachers’ colleagues and leaders, in what we call academic microcultures, influence such engagement. A microculture can be a working group such as a teaching team, an educational programme, a department or the like. It consists of a collegial context functioning over time long enough to allow for traditions, recurrent practices and common, often tacit assumptions to evolve. In such environments, certain ways of teaching and assessing students, ways of talking about teaching and students gradually develop. This article draws upon two previous studies of five strong and four developing microcultures in a research-intensive Scandinavian university. The results show how engagement for teaching and student learning is highly collegial and very contextualised.

Keywords
development, leadership, meso-level, quality, trust

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INTRODUCTION

Research into student learning has established that there is a relation between teachers’ approaches to teaching and the resulting student learning (Biggs, 1999; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Ramsden, 2005). This research shows, in summary, that if teachers adopt a learning-centred approach to teaching, the likelihood increases of students adopting a deep approach to learning (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999), which likely results in high quality learning.

Reeve, Jang, Carell, Jeon and Barch (2004) observed 20 high school teachers’ influence on students’ engagement. They defined engagement as «the behavioral intensity and emotional quality of a person’s active involvement during a task» (p. 147). They draw on self-determination theory, mainly Deci and Ryan (2000), describing engagement as stemming from an experience of being competent, being together with others, and still experiencing autonomy. Autonomy «occupies a unique position in the set of three needs: being able to satisfy the needs for competence and relatedness may be enough for controlled behaviour, but being able to satisfy the need for autonomy is essential for the goal-directed behaviour to be self-determined and for many the optimal outcomes associated with self-determination to accrue» (p. 242). Building on this, Reeve et al. (2004) were able to show that «the more teachers used autonomy-supportive instructional behaviors the more engagement the students showed» (p. 165).

Riddell and Haigh (2015) refer to a large-scale research project (Gallup-Purdue Index Report, 2014), and claim that academic teachers play a crucial role in students’ development even after they leave the university. The research measured the perception of 30 000 college graduates’ experiences from university related to aspects such as employment, workplace engagement, and overall well-being. The report highlights that «if an employed graduate recalls having a professor who cared about them as a person, one who made them feel excited about learning, and having a mentor who encouraged them to pursue their dreams, the graduate’s odds of being engaged at work more than double» (pp. 9, 13). Riddell and Haigh (2015, p. 20) therefore argue that «institutional cultures that value quality teaching and faculty development are essential to positive student learning outcomes». They also claim that «understanding different institutional cultures would illuminate what factors enhance student learning and faculty engagement, and create a sustainable and vibrant ecosystem for teaching and learning» (Riddell & Haigh, 2015, p. 21).
Pursuing the same line of argument, Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh and Whitt (2010) show that 20 higher education institutions with high results on student graduation rates and levels of student engagement (measured by results on the National Survey of Student Engagement) have a «strong focus on undergraduate learning, an institutional openness to new and innovative ideas in the realm of teaching and learning, as well as a faculty commitment to receiving and providing feedback» (p. 47). Clearly, students adapt to variations in teachers’ behaviour and institutional culture by a varying degree of engagement.

In this article, we argue that teachers too adapt to the surrounding context by a varying degree of engagement for teaching. It is the influence from the surrounding context on teachers’ engagement that we explore in this text. Lindblom-Ylänne, Trigwell, Nevgi and Ashwin (2006) show that within a sample of 340 academic teachers, «teachers who experience different contexts may adopt different approaches to teaching in those different contexts» (p. 294). In their study, a teacher could adopt a teaching-centred approach when teaching in one context, whereas when teaching in another context, a more learning-centred approach was adopted. This indicates that, just as with students’ approaches to learning, a teacher’s approach to teaching also is triggered by a specific context.

In the following, we will draw upon previous research where we studied institutional and organisational culture, and its importance for academic development. Thereby this article adds to the understanding of teachers’ engagement for student learning by looking beyond the immediate relationship between teacher and student, into the teachers’ collegial contexts. We argue that local organisational cultures are keys to understanding the forces at play influencing teachers to engage in teaching, in turn leading to student engagement. If we can improve our understanding of how teaching traditions are constructed and developed in local higher education organisational contexts, we can also understand what influences teachers to encourage student engagement and better learning.

INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE AND COLLEGIAL ENGAGEMENT

Culture in an organizational setting can be defined as «the shared rules governing cognitive and affective aspects of membership in an organization, and the means whereby they are shaped and expressed» (Geertz, 1973/93). Following Alvesson (2002), culture constitutes a group and makes it visible in relation to its background; group-specific norms are developed over time. The group can vary in size, but as in all groups, the members share certain ways of communicating, certain ways to act in specific situations or common ways to react to people outside the group. Culture is something that influences individuals towards certain behaviours, but does not control them. Individuals may as knowledgeable agents choose to deviate from what is expected. However, because of the complex reality, individuals normally act according to what is
expected. Thereby they shape the culture simultaneously as they are influ-
enced by it, a process called *structuration* (Giddens, 2004).

Through a framework offered by Hannah and Lester (2009), one can identify three relevant yet different levels in an institution: micro-, meso-, and macro. In short, the micro-level refers to the individual, the meso-level to groups of people working together, and the macro-level to the university leadership. In line with this, it is relevant to say that even though one university might be sig-
ified by a certain culture at the macro-level, for example as being research-
intensive, it is likely to display a number of different cultures, more locally shaped, within the meso-level.

This text focuses on teachers’ collegial contexts influencing them towards engagement in and for teaching. Previous research shows that academic teach-
ers have a few trusted individuals with whom they have serious conversations about teaching and learning (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009; Pataraia, Falconer, Margaryan, Littlejohn, & Fincher, 2014; Pyrölälä, Hirsto, Toom, Myyry, and Lindblom-Ylänä 2014). These conversational partners can be said to consti-
tute the teacher’s *significant network* (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009). During these conversations, the individual teacher constructs and maintains beliefs about and conceptions of teaching and student learning. Arguably, these sig-
nificant networks are vital for understanding how academic teaching cultures display a remarkable degree of resilience towards external pressure (Mårtens-
son, Roxå, & Stensaker, 2014).

Henceforth we will focus on the meso-level. This is where people share day-
to-day experiences with colleagues. They work in formally or informally formed groups. Previous research has demonstrated that such local groups within the meso-level are an important locus when understanding reactions to policy and educational development (Knight & Trowler, 2000; Trowler, 2008; Trowler & Cooper, 2002), the importance of leadership and local culture (Gibbs, Knapper, & Piccinin, 2009; Mårtensson & Roxå, 2015), and even locally formed traditions in relation to assessment practices (Jawitz, 2009).

Elsewhere, we have argued that this multitude of groups can be called *micro-
cultures* (Roxå, 2014; Roxå & Mårtensson, 2014). Micrculture thereby refers to a group of individuals, together shaping their own habits, norms and tradi-
tions over time as described above. We use microculture rather than subcul-
ture, since the latter indicates subordination to something, and as we have shown previously, these work groups consider themselves quite autonomous and self-controlled (Mårtensson, Roxå & Stensaker, 2014). One microculture can be distinguished from another based on inclinations to favour particular teaching and assessment methods, to talk about and relate to students in similar ways, and to base their practice on commonly shared, often implicit assumptions about teaching and learning (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2015). The concept microculture relates to the people who interact on a daily basis. It deals with the knowledgeable agents who more or less collectively construct and main-
tain the culture that stabilises their shared everyday reality within the organi-
ENGAGEMENT IN ACADEMIC MICROCULTURES

This text is set in a research-intensive, comprehensive Scandinavian university. It has about 7,500 employees, and 47,000 students.

The material used originates from one study of strong microcultures (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2011/2013) and one study of microcultures that are in a state of positive development. By returning in this text to the previously collected data, we explore specific signs of engagement within both types of microcultures, something that has not been a particular part of previous publications. The engagement aspect relates mainly to teachers’ engagement, but to some extent also to student engagement, since these two correlate as addressed in the introduction.

Method

The first study set out to explore how strong academic microcultures function in general, but also specifically in relation to teaching and learning. In order to be representative in this particular institutional context, the study focused on microcultures that were strong in both research and teaching. The first step was therefore to identify which microcultures to explore by looking at research and teaching quality evaluations, and by interviewing deans, heads of departments, heads of programme committees, and student representatives. Based on this, five microcultures were selected, representing three different faculties (and thereby different financial conditions and different disciplinary traditions), including between 10–60 group members, and teaching at all educational levels with a variety of methods.

Within each microculture, interviews were conducted with local leaders (head of department and/or director of studies), who were invited by e-mail to participate in the study. A next step was to interview senior academics and doctoral students in each microculture. (In the Swedish higher education system, doctoral students are employed by the department, and are considered as members of staff.) These people were selected from a list of microculture-members provided by the local leader. Finally, undergraduate students were interviewed in focus groups. All interviews took place in the microculture’s environment, usually in the interviewee’s office. Twenty-two interviews were made, 4–5 in each microculture, with a total of 45 persons (17 academics and 28 students). All interviews were conducted together by both authors, audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Immediately after each interview, the authors made notes individually. The notes, together with the interview transcripts, and...
observations *in situ*, which were also documented in the authors’ notes, made up the data for thematic analysis. Both authors independently analysed the notes and the interview transcripts, and came up with emerging and recurrent themes. These were then compared between the authors, and scaffolded through returning to the observation notes and interview transcripts.

In a later follow-up study on developing microcultures, the same methods and procedures as above were used, although no students were interviewed. Four developing academic microcultures were explored through interviews with 15 academic leaders and teachers. By «developing» they were identified as «something going on there», and moving in a direction of improving the quality of their teaching and learning. Again, the microcultures were selected on the basis of looking at research and teaching quality evaluations, and by interviewing deans, heads of departments, heads of programme committees, and student representatives.

**Results**

The general results have been reported in other publications (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2011/2013; 2014; 2015). Here we summarise parts of the results to make way for a discussion about how these microcultures nurture teachers’ engagement for teaching.

All groups displayed engagement for the quality of teaching and learning in various ways, at an individual level, between members of the microcultures, and between teachers and students. In general the strong microcultures were all characterised by a strong internal *trust*, intense *interactions* and information sharing, a commitment to the group’s *enterprise* (Wenger 1999), a reliance on the group’s shared *history*, and an interest in *collaboration* and engaging outside the group as long as this was by their own choice (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2011/2013). The developing microcultures were characterised by a shared desire to do something new, and therefore deliberately and systematically creating *new ways of interacting* internally and externally in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning. A visible difference between the strong and the developing microcultures was therefore that the former seemed to have established, almost taken-for-granted ways of securing high quality teaching and teacher engagement, whereas the latter in general were working deliberately to *create and shape* such aspects.

Below we will provide two examples by descriptions of one strong microculture and one developing one. We will highlight the aspects of engagement that were visible in the data, and later in this section provide a summary of signs of engagement in all the nine microcultures studied.
K–A strong microculture

This place has about 15 members of staff; most of them are academics. They are situated within a larger department and they teach within the field of humanities. They share a corridor with offices. The doors are open and people talk across the hall with each other, and walk in and out of the rooms. So, just entering the place gives an impression of engagement. They have a system in which teachers share the responsibility for a course, and even sit in on each other’s lectures, so that “I can know what has been discussed in the previous lecture, what aspects students picked up on” (Academic teacher, K). This microculture has recently launched a new, international master’s program. During the introduction, they organised a full day with various activities in order to make the students feel welcome. It was wrapped up by an evening meal, in the department, where everybody brought specific food from their home countries. The teachers engaged in planning the day as well as the dinner. In line with this, they also brought the master’s students with them to an international conference in a neighbouring country and introduced the students as future colleagues. In the focus group interview, students talk vividly and all at the same time, mirroring the teachers’ behaviour in the corridor of the staff. Some students claim that although they had planned to take just one course here, they have continued since the lecturers “are so engaged and good”. They also describe that there are high requirements and expectations placed on the students, and that this is supported by clear structures and various support mechanisms.

A newly employed PhD student from another discipline has suggested, and been given the responsibility for, a completely new course, which would be an integration between the two disciplinary areas. During the interview, it became obvious that he was proud of being trusted with the responsibility, and he engaged fully in making the course a very good one, in terms of planning for what the students should do and learn from the course. When it was time to assess the students, the director of studies offered to have a look at it (the written examination suggested by the doctoral student), and she gave him collegial feedback. Similarly, when he was about to grade the students’ work, she again offered that they could have a look at it together. This way they engaged collaboratively in a collegial quality assurance process concerning one of the most important aspects of teaching, namely assessing student work.

What we observed here were clear signs of a high level of trust and engagement mutually between colleagues, leader and students within this microculture. Students are treated as future colleagues, or what Wenger (1999) calls legitimate peripheral participants, and met with high expectations as well as supportive structures.

B–A developing microculture

This microculture is somewhat bigger, with about 30 staff members. They organise a professional research-oriented programme, which is based largely
on different disciplines teaching various courses in the programme. Several interviewees describe it as up until recently quite compartmentalised. All the teachers are also researchers and a large proportion of the courses are taught within the various research groups, in their respective labs. A programme director had worked for some time in solitude with the quality aspects of the programme, before an additional leader was appointed. During the interviews with them, it was apparent that these two individuals were not only different, but that they also complemented each other effectively. The programme director was enthusiastic, driven by a vision, and able to inspire others. The new leader had logistic, structural and administrative talents and worked to change and improve the internal communication in this specific microculture.

Working together, they introduced changes that positively affected the teachers’ engagement within the microculture. First, they initiated a general discussion, including teachers and student representatives, about how to make the first year of the programme more strongly oriented towards this particular programme. The first year had hitherto been taught in a different faculty, towards which the rest of the programme was organised, and students had provided feedback that they were not satisfied with this. The programme also had a high drop-out rate during the first year. In response to this, one interviewee explained: «We have worked hard to help students develop an identity, and a sense of belonging here» (programme director, B). The two programme leaders support students to get in touch with alumni, and to arrange an inspirational day in order to strengthen their sense of identity. Secondly, they have introduced so-called quality teams including all academics teaching in the programme. These are formed around common areas of expertise, which are also content modules in the programme. The quality teams meet regularly two to three times every semester across research group boundaries, and discuss quality of teaching and suggest improvements. The results are reported back to one of the programme leaders, who only participates in the group meetings if the groups want her to. She, and other interviewees testified that this has quickly created a more visible and collegial engagement for teaching and learning. One interviewee said: «We used to just individually teach students in our labs, and now we can suddenly share our experiences among us. All it took was someone, in this case the new leader, who introduced this structure» (academic teacher, B). In this way, an engagement for teaching quality and improvement is fostered across hitherto compartmentalised subjects. Finally, members of the microculture work deliberately within their faculty to gain access to a part of a building where the students can have a shared space for studying and for engaging with each other socially. They thereby support the fostering of a stronger sense of a programme identity within the group of students. Some teachers also choose, when possible, to have tutorials in this building rather than in their labs, in order to engage with and strengthen the identity building of the students.

What seems to signify the engagement in this developing microculture was the construction of quality groups, where teachers shared experiences across pre-
viously compartmentalised subject areas, and thereby developed a deeper sense of being part of a whole, while simultaneously introducing activities for student to strengthen their sense of identity and belonging.

**Traits of engagement in other microcultures**

Above we have shared insights into two of the microcultures. However, there were signs of engagement in all the studied microcultures, whether they were strong or developing. Generally, there was a high level of mutual trust among colleagues, leaders and students. Colleagues trusted leaders to make decisions beneficial to the whole group, and trusted each other enough to open up their own teaching practice for discussion and scrutiny. Here it is exemplified by sitting in on each other’s lectures; other examples include programme development through a systematic use of critical friends (Handal, 1999), internal mentor-systems and joint seminars with a focus on developing teaching. Members of microcultures engaged willingly in internal quality processes concerning teaching and learning. Leaders in developing microcultures had a more explicit strategy to increase the internal interactions and engagement for teaching and learning. Furthermore, students in the microcultures evidence the various forms of trust and engagement: teachers know students by names; teachers explicitly set high demands and at the same time provide structured support for learning; students are included and engaged during processes of developing teaching quality; student work is displayed in the building, and students are treated as future colleagues by, for instance, letting them have study offices directly connected to the academics’ lunch room.

**DISCUSSION**

In the following, we relate the material from the two studies to engagement for teaching. Therefore we return to the approach on engagement suggested by Reeve et al. (2004), presented in the introduction, that engagement can be observed as a behavioural intensity linked to emotional qualities while performing a task. Furthermore, we follow Deci and Ryan (2000) in that the behaviour is anchored in background experiences of being competent, being among others, but also being autonomous, and that the latter plays a crucial part. Our aim is to show that teachers’ engagement for teaching is indeed linked to the local work groups in which they are situated. In the result section above, we have provided signifiers in our empirical data that show how, in different microcultures, aspects of teaching and learning relate to all these aspects: being competent, being among others and being autonomous. The fact that microcultures foster engagement for teaching in various ways should be seen as positive. Elsewhere, we have argued that this type of variation evolves due to specific and varied challenges in the different microcultures (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2014).
The strong engagement for teaching, as defined in the introduction by Reeve et al. (2004) is evident in all interviews with teachers, leaders, and students. In the original report, we link this to personal mastery (Senge 2006), referring to a process where a person’s ability to perform a task increases continuously. For the interviewees, personal mastery is an identity-driven urge to constantly improve the result of what one is doing. All interviewees display this, both when talking about what the microculture demands, as well as when talking about themselves as individuals. «One simply wants to be the best» (senior academic); «To not be prepared for teaching is just unthinkable» (junior academic) (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2011/13, p. 38).

One interviewee was asked about the origin of this ambition for teaching. He failed to answer, despite multiple tries. «They were almost without exception very good lecturers, so… there is a kind of… there is absolutely no expectation about … or, like you have to be as good as… uh, because it is difficult, but … uh, they are putting up … like a standard for how it should be …» (junior teacher) (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2011/13, p. 27).

We argue that this teacher, early in his career, has been influenced by expectations within his microculture. He has internalised the level of ambition as being the norm in this specific microculture. His difficulty in expressing the origin of this ambition is in itself an argument for cultural influence (Alvesson, 2002; Trowler, 2008). Following Deci and Ryan (2000) we see that microcultures can influence individual teachers to become ambitious in teaching, to engage and to develop their ability to teach. This represents the relatedness aspect as well as the competence aspect in their perspective. However, they underline that these two aspects might lead only to controlled or instrumental behaviour. The third aspect, autonomy, they claim, is crucial for the type of engagement we are looking for. Translated to our research, and apparent in our findings, it means that the academic teacher must experience relatedness to colleagues as well as competence, a sense of being good at what he or she does. Furthermore, s/he has to experience autonomy, that is, a liberty to act in ways required by the specificities of the situation at hand. This in turn can be related to the aspect of academic freedom, as argued by Åkerlind and Kayrooz (2003), perceivable as a balance between individual freedom to act and a loyalty to one’s organisation.

In our empirical data, autonomy is secured by the strong element of trust in all microcultures studied. This was the most prominent feature of the climate in all microcultures, expressed and shown by academics, leaders and students. This element, however, which indeed offers the individuals a space of action useful in the constantly varying situations of teaching, is not an element of isolation or solitude. In fact, it is not the absence of problems that signifies a strong academic microculture; it is the level of trust in combination with «the degree of concern and the actions taken constantly to secure trust» (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2011/13, p. 30). The members are trusted to act autonomously, but the element of relatedness makes it possible to take action immediately once
problems occur that potentially endanger the intense level of trust that permeates the microcultures. In the second example above, the developing microculture, the action to create internal quality groups is an explicit step to initiate and secure relatedness in balance to autonomy.

Problems described in interviews concerned interpersonal collaborations that did not work, individuals who lacked inspiration to maintain teaching quality, individuals who disagreed with the direction of events, or concrete things like student evaluations showing that a high ambition in teaching did not get across to students. All these are everyday problems that any work group may face. The striking observation here was the ambition to explicitly and quickly deal with them, all in order to secure the level of trust and engagement among the members, but also externally with an interest in the performance of the microculture.

To summarise, students benefit from being engaged while studying and there is an established link to teaching as addressed in the introduction. Teachers can teach to a varying degree to support student engagement. Students are influenced by cultural elements within the higher education contexts where they study (Kuh et al., 2010). Therefore, whether students are engaged or not is not only linked to individual teachers’ ways of teaching but also to the microcultures constructed by groups of academic teachers working together. The research presented in this text displays the relevance of the microculture’s influence on teachers’ engagement for teaching, and thereby students’ engagement for learning. In this text, we have therefore argued that these microcultures deserve attention. We consider this exploration of academic microcultures, both strong and developing ones, as an addition to previous research by focusing on the social and professional context in which academic teachers live their daily lives. It is an approach that includes more than one individual teacher and his/her students, and at the same time a more nuanced picture than one would get looking at a general institutional culture. As we have shown, teachers may teach in different ways, influencing students towards various quality of learning. Moreover, the microcultures where individual teachers are active influence the teachers towards various degrees of engagement for teaching and student learning. Therefore, the variation of microcultures in higher education organisations needs to be taken into account in any attempt to influence the quality of academic teaching and student learning. Following Riddell and Haigh (2015, p. 21) and their claim that “understanding different institutional cultures would illuminate what factors enhance student learning and faculty engagement, and create a sustainable and vibrant ecosystem for teaching and learning” we offer microcultures as a way forward.

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