

# How to operationalise holistic academic development – The case of a Danish center for teaching and learning

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## THEMATIC ARTICLE

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## ABSTRACT

Centers for Teaching and Learning (CTLs) are at the forefront of many quality enhancement activities aimed at teaching and learning at universities and do not solely focus on supporting individual teacher in conducting quality teaching but are also playing a strategic role in the university. CTLs provide in other words holistic academic development. This article provides examples of how a CTL at the University of Southern Denmark has operationalised holistic academic development using Holt et al.'s points of leverage as a starting point. The leverage points are combined and exemplified to suggest a model for enhancing teaching quality which entails five levels; definitions, descriptions, documentation, evaluation and recognition of quality in teaching.

## KEYWORDS

higher education, scholarship of teaching and learning, staff development, teaching quality

## INTRODUCTION

Activities intended to enhance quality in teaching can be classified using at least three approaches; institutional, cultural and personal (Frost & Teodorescu, 2001) and thus

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requires engagement at many levels in the university organisation (Brown, 2012; Little, 2015). Having enhancement of teaching quality as their primary *raison d'être* many Centers for Teaching and Learning (CTLs) also need to work at many levels in the organisation. This multi-level focus is a rather new endeavor for CTLs having gradually over the past decades changed from focusing solely on supporting individual teacher in conducting quality teaching to also playing a strategic role in the university as a whole by creating, supporting and recognizing structures and internal teaching quality frameworks (Gibbs, 2013; Knapper, 2016; Sugrue, Englund, Solbrekke, & Fosslund, 2017). Sutherland describes the sum of work for CTLs (and academic developers) to entail both the whole of the academic role, the whole institution and the whole person, in other words to provide “holistic academic development” (2018).

But what does it mean to provide holistic academic development as a CTL? How can a CTL operationalise the vision of playing a strategic role in institutional efforts to enhance teaching quality? Over the years this question has been answered both by analyzing the identity of academic developers employed in the CTLs (Broscheid, 2019; Green & Little, 2016; Kensington-Miller, Renc-Roe, & Morón-García, 2015) and by describing the current status of CTLs on a national level (Fernández & Márquez, 2017; Gosling, 1996, 2001; Solomonides, 2016). Another way to answer the question on how to operationalise holistic academic development is to focus on points of leverage where CTLs can and should be actively contributing in organisational change as suggested by Holt, Palmer, and Challis (2011). Holt et al. (2011) conducted an explorative study consisting of interviews, a survey and focus groups among educational developers and leaders of CTLs at 38 Australian universities. By analysing the data they presented ten points of leverage as being indicative of the types of action that could be taken in an organisation to create and sustain longer-term value in teaching, learning and the student experience. The ten points of leverage were:

1. New visions/new plans
2. Preparation of new continuing academic staff
3. Compulsory casual teaching development program
4. Just-in-time professional development
5. Communities of practice
6. Strategic funding for development
7. Supporting teaching excellence through awards and fellowships
8. Disseminating exemplary practices online
9. Recognition and use of education “experts”
10. Renewing leadership

However, as noticed by Holt et al. the points of leverage would not all be relevant at particular points in time for every institution and were best mobilized in appropriate combinations according to the specific context.

The author of this article is the Head of The Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of Southern Denmark (SDU) and to formulate and visualize a CTL's position up, down and across the organisation and to operationalise holistic academic development (Sutherland, 2018) in a local context, the aim with this article is to consider how the actual and possible actions of a CTL can be described using Holt et al.'s points of leverage as the starting point.



## CONTEXT

The Center for Teaching and Learning at SDU is an academic development unit with 15 employees, most of them being consultants and only few with research obligations. The CTL has existed in its current form since 2013 but has a longer history structured and positioned slightly different. The mission of the CTL is to collaborate with all faculties and relevant units at SDU to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, including e-learning and e-assessment. Converted to actual actions this means that the CTL supports teachers (of which there are approximately 1,200 at the university) on teaching, supports Heads of study on curriculum development, and advises top management in strategic questions.

Using this CTL as a case I will try not only to map the actions of an academic development unit in the landscape of Holt and colleagues' points of leverage being areas where small, well-focused actions can make a relatively larger impact (Senge, 1990) but also to consider combinations of the leverage points to make them meaningful in the specific context.

## MAPPING THE LANDSCAPE OF LEVERAGE POINTS UNTO A CTL

### Leverage point 1 – new visions/new plans

Quality policies need to be clearly formulated and developed in collaboration with relevant stakeholders – students, teachers, Heads of study, administrative staff and the CTL. In the Policy of Quality at SDU, it is especially sub-policy 4 on University Teaching and Learning and Teaching Staff Development (SDU, 2013) that contains visions on teaching and learning. Here it is stated that “teaching staff have knowledge, skills and competences on teaching and learning which they continually develop” (SDU, 2013; 14). The sub-policy refers furthermore to the underlying principles for education at SDU which is Active teaching and learning (SDU, 2016). The CTL has been engaged in both the development of the underlying principles and the formulation of the sub-policy. The present involvement of the CTL at the level of quality definition relates to an obligation to offer educational development activities aiming at active teaching and learning and an annual follow-up report on the number of participants in the offered educational development activities.

### Leverage point 2, 3 and 4 – preparation of new academic staff, compulsory casual teaching development program, and just-in-time professional development

The CTL at SDU offers a range of courses for new academic staff; for teaching assistants, for PhD students with no former experience in teaching, and for part-time teachers. For assistant professors the Lecturer Training Programme is offered. The programme is a year-long, compulsory programme and consists of five modules. As part of one of the modules the participants have to complete a development project. In their projects, participants must account for the teaching and learning activities they have designed and completed, the underlying pedagogic considerations, and also their own and the students' evaluations of the activities. The project must be presented at a local departmental seminar, at the institutional Teaching for Active Learning conference (see below), at a national conference or in a publication.

Just-in-time professional development is a large part of the CTL's work. Employees from the university can at any time request workshops, tailor-made courses or consultancy help from the CTL both as individuals and groups. As a basis for all the academic teaching capacity building a



pedagogical competence profile has been formulated (SDU, 2018) describing different teaching competences for different groups of employees. As an example, part of the profile is shown below (Fig 1):

Competence element	Level D (conducts teaching planned by others)	Level C (is responsible for course elements)	Level B (is responsible for courses)	Level A	
				Level A.1 (scholarship of teaching and learning (Trigwell, 2012))	Level A.2 (is responsible for programmes and courses that involve multiple lecturers)
Planning, conducting and evaluating of teaching	<p>Knows about the intended learning outcome and the student cohort.</p> <p>Conducts teaching in accordance with SDU's underlying principles.</p> <p>Uses the necessary teaching technology.</p>	<p>Knows about planning, conducting and providing feedback on course elements.</p> <p>Selects and conducts teaching and learning activities adjusted to the intended learning outcome and student cohort in accordance with SDU's underlying principles.</p> <p>Chooses and uses the relevant teaching technology.</p>	<p>Knows about planning, conducting and assessing courses.</p> <p>Selects and conducts teaching, learning and assessment activities in alignment with the intended learning outcome and SDU's underlying principles.</p> <p>Cooperates with colleagues on reaching the overall goal of the programme.</p> <p>Stays updated on the latest teaching technology.</p>	<p>Plans, conducts and critically evaluates one's own and other people's teaching, based on research-based knowledge of university pedagogical theory and methodology.</p>	<p>Plans, conducts and evaluates courses and programmes based on university pedagogical models.</p> <p>Describes and designs programmes, using general curriculum models.</p> <p>Formulates and implements an assessment strategy in accordance with the competence profile of the programme.</p>
Planning, conducting and evaluating of supervision	[...]				
[...]					

Fig. 1. Pedagogical competence profile at SDU (partly)



### Leverage point 5, 6 and 8 – communities of practice, strategic funding for development and disseminating exemplary practices online

From experience and from research (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009) we know that teachers often develop their teaching through significant networks. Hence, the CTL not only provides courses and workshops for teachers as described above but facilitates also communities of practice (CoP) in the form of networks among teachers with specific topics (Labwork teaching and Virtual Reality in teaching). The CTL also administrates the E-learning Project Fund, which allocates small funding to e-learning development projects. The main contribution to creating CoPs is, however, the Teaching for Active Learning conference. The purpose of the yearly practitioners' conference is to give teachers at SDU the opportunity to share, document, demonstrate, substantiate and analyse their own examples of active teaching and learning. Both conferences and e-learning projects are disseminated on the CTL's website to document the work done in the significant networks and to inspire others.

### Leverage point 7 and 9 – supporting teaching excellence through awards and fellowships and recognition and use of education “experts”

It is important to recognise – both internally in the organisation and externally – the achievements of quality teaching in a way that creates parity of esteem with conventional research activity. At SDU an annual teaching award is given on the grounds of nominations from students. As for now, the CTL is not involved in setting up criteria for or evaluating the nominations, or in any other formal forms of recognition of competences.

## COMBINING LEVERAGE POINTS AND TEACHING QUALITY

Mapping the actual actions of the CTL unto the landscape of Holt et al.'s leverage points makes it very clear that while the CTL has been involved in formulating and developing many policies and practices on teaching development, there is still work to be done in considering how to develop more (and better) ways of recognising teaching excellence and using education experts.

However, the above mapping and combination of leverage point can also be regarded as an illustration of how a CTL can contribute to the process toward recognition of teaching excellence. First, it takes a *definition of what is meant by good teaching* (leverage point 1). If the visions for teaching and learning are to be implemented in the organisation it is crucial that *teachers possess the competences to do so* (leverage points 2, 3 and 4). Documenting your teaching practice is related to reflecting your practice and a reflective practitioner is important to realisation of the vision of teaching and learning. Hence *documentation and sharing of teaching competences* (leverage points 5,6 and 8) is a vital step toward recognition of teaching excellence. In order to *recognise excellence and quality in teaching and learning* (leverage points 7 and 9), the competences need to be assessed and evaluated. Here, the leverage points from Holt et al. does not specify CTL-actions. The CTL at SDU is, however, involved in evaluating teaching competence in at least two ways. First, all applicants for associate and full professorships at Danish universities are required to include a teaching portfolio in their application and this is of course also the case for SDU. The involvement of the CTL is in this regard related to the staff development of colleagues at SDU to engage in portfolio assessments. As part of the Lecturer



Training Programme, a portfolio interview is conducted. Partners in this portfolio interview are the participant, an educational consultant and a colleague (associate/full professors) from SDU and the group discusses strengths and weaknesses in the portfolio of the participant as a finalisation of the programme. 80–100 assistant professors participate in the programme per year and thereby annually approximately 80 colleagues from SDU are given the opportunity to experience how you talk about and evaluate a portfolio. It is an indirect and unsystematic staff development of colleagues in evaluating teaching competences, but so far it is the CTLs sole involvement in the evaluation of competences at this level. Second, teaching competences are also evaluated through the Performance and Development Review (PDR) conducted by the Head of Department. The purpose of the annual PDR is to follow up on the employee's work tasks and working life from the previous year and formulate future development plans both regarding research and teaching. The CTL has been involved in formulating a guide to the teaching part of the PDR but future work lies in enhancing staff development of Heads of Departments as to how teaching and learning competences can be formative evaluated and how future plans for development of teaching competences can be formulated.

Summing up, the combination of leverage point visualises the processes by which recognition of teaching can be enhanced by the actions of a CTL (Fig 2).

Leverage points from Holt et al.	CTL involvement	Supporting teaching quality
<b>New plans/new visions</b>	Engaging in the (re)formulation of institutional policies on teaching, learning and assessment	<b>Definitions of good teaching –</b> Formulate visions for teaching and learning as part of the quality assurance and quality enhancement policy
<b>Preparation of new staff, Compulsory teaching development program, Just-in-time professional development</b>	Engaging in the (re)formulation of competence profile for teachers Providing courses, workshops and individual coaching for teachers	<b>Description and developing of competences in teaching –</b> Competence profile for different groups of employees
<b>Communities of practice, Strategic funding for development Disseminating exemplary practices online</b>	Facilitating communities of practices. Documenting best practices through web-based resources and conferences	<b>Documentation and sharing of competences –</b> SoTL: “Making it transparent how learning has been made possible” (Trigwell 2012)
	Supporting the use of teaching portfolios by e.g. guides to Performance and Development Review for Heads of departments and guides to assessment committees	<b>Evaluation of competences –</b> Getting feedback on your abilities and development as a teacher
<b>Supporting teaching excellence through awards and fellowships Recognition and use of education “experts”</b>	Engaging in the (re)formulation of criteria for institutional awards	<b>Recognition of competences –</b> Valuing teaching in ways that creates parity of esteem with research activity

Fig. 2. Five levels of CTL involvement in supporting teaching quality



As Holt et al. also points out, the renewal of educational leadership (leverage point 10) is of great importance. Quality enhancement of teaching and learning is not only about enhancing the quality of teaching competences among teachers. It also requires enhancement of quality of educational leadership among Heads of study, Pro-deans of education and very many others with educational leadership responsibility. The definition, description, documentation, evaluation and recognition of educational leadership competences is of equal importance in the enhancement for teaching quality as the process from defining to recognition of teaching competences. And in the same way that scholarship of teaching and learning is one way of creating the parity to research, we might start formulating a Scholarship of Educational Leadership to make this aspect of teaching quality enhancement significant and clear.

## CONCLUSION

The findings above are examples of how teaching quality can be divided in five levels of involvement and how an educational development unit is involved in the operationalisation of the strategies. From this paper you might get ideas as how to analyse your own organisation and its teaching quality enhancement processes. The analysis might lead to a clearer overview of where and how your CTL can contribute to development and sustainability in terms of maximising the teaching quality.

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