



Curricular Anchoring of Key Competencies – how the University of Bielefeld (Germany) intends to get there

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Consequences of the Bologna Process in Germany

As a part of the creation of a common higher education landscape within Europe, the former German degrees Diplom and Magister are currently being replaced by B.A. and M.A. degrees. One of the crucial differences between the former structure and the new is abbreviating the duration of studies. A further characteristic significant for our present context is that, for the first time, key qualifications which were formerly an implicit content of teaching must be explicitly included in the curricula for the first time.

Teaching Key Competencies as an Explicit Goal of Universities

As the German educational system is organised according to 16 Federal States, the new task of teaching key competencies is being implemented in different ways. The Higher Education Legislation of the Federal State of North-Rhine Westphalia, which applies to the University of Bielefeld, leaves extensive liberties for its institutions mentioning key competencies as goals only in the context of doctoral studies.

The accreditation process for any new program of study, however, now requires an explicit plan for **how** key competencies will be taught within that specific program. It allows for free choice only in regard to basic structure: whether key competencies shall be taught in an integrated way within regular courses, or whether they shall be taught additionally in separate courses. The University of Bielefeld has opted for integration into regular courses.

Academic Key Competencies – the Bielefeld Approach

The University of Bielefeld attempts to establish a linkage between the requirement for its new programs of study to explicitly integrate the teaching of key competencies with its concurrent effort at realising a more comprehensive reform of studies: We invite faculties to modify/enrich their teaching by designing their courses, modules and curricula according to the learning outcomes and to the competencies students are meant to acquire. The basic idea is to tie the learning of key competences in with the learning of the methods of the respective discipline and their stock of knowledge by providing support to students developing strategies for their own work, and for cooperation.

For that purpose, the University of Bielefeld has established a "Teaching Service" facility offering support to curriculum developers, teachers, and tutors of all disciplines who are involved in reorganising their teaching to meet student's requirements for the latter's learning how to cope reflectively with the academic mode of work.

Anchoring Key Competencies – Cooperation and Collaboration

Like the library, the "Teaching Service" is a central facility of Bielefeld University which serves all of its departments. With regard to the teaching and learning of academic key competencies, the library and the Teaching Service collaborate in finding strategies and starting points to initiate curricular teaching activities which explicitly make academic key competencies like information literacy available to students. As can be seen on the transparency, we have to deal with a large number of requirements of the various disciplines. Key competencies in physics will differ from those in literature, but there are common features: all students must organize their learning, all students must research and read, all students must write, discuss, and most students must learn to work in groups. Information literacy is one

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of the most important key competencies for academics, and as librarians are experts in this, the university relies on their competencies in collaborating with university teachers who develop didactical methods for imparting information literacy to their students. As information literacy is closely linked to other academic key competencies like writing, the teaching service, especially the writing experts in the teaching service collaborate with the librarians in developing learning concepts for e.g. writing intensive courses.

Key Competencies in Libraries

Librarians traditionally are experts in teaching one special key competence: information literacy. By the turn of the millennium, most libraries were offering sophisticated menus of training sessions on every part of their library's supply of information resources.

Yet, in spite of extensive advertising, a frustratingly low number of students attended these trainings. A famous German study (the so-called STEFI-Study) on how competent students are in using electronic information on a subject, came up with a finding that should cause librarians to prick up their ears: Students definitely lacked information literacy in this field, claiming as one reason a lack of training facilities.

In my opinion, this finding indicates a crucial psychological barrier that we have to deal with daily in teaching information literacy: Confronted with a flood of information issuing from all kinds of media, today's students seem to fear an excess of literature after having been taught to search effectively.

Librarians – at least German librarians - contributed to the students' misunderstanding by concentrating for too long on teaching how to handle information resources to get the best results out of them. In times of Google, where everybody can easily obtain thousands of results on any topic, students do rarely need help in finding information, their problem is rather how to select the relevant from the flood of information they are afraid of drowning in.

Shifting Focus in Teaching

This lies at the core of the key theme of competence in higher education: Since it has become ever more evident that an established stock of knowledge will no longer suffice for a lifetime of professional work (if it ever did), the logical conclusion was to supplement the knowledge gained in higher education by enabling students to continuously participate in the professional process of communication – by cooperating and communicating with peers, by writing, managing projects, presenting papers and giving talks, and – as a ground layer to all that – by following the relevant innovations in their respective field by using effective strategies in scanning and selecting information reaching them from all kinds of media.

Cooperation with Faculties – Analogous Aims

While approaches of the Library and the Teaching Service differ slightly (we'll come to that point later), we strive for analogous aims: Both are looking for opportunities to provide advice and counselling to faculties, and to curriculum-developers, on how to include opportunities to practise, reflect, and document academic key competencies (information literacy) into curricula. Both try to raise awareness in all parties involved that it is essential to include the dimension of key competencies in regular university teaching. Considering key competencies as something rather down-to-earth in academic practices, we have been successful in enlisting the progressive among the research-oriented university teachers for developing new concepts for teaching and learning. As it is our intention, however, that key competencies become an integral part of regular teaching, we need to be rather inventive in finding ways to make this crucial component visible to observers from outside. Our idea to make the dimension of key competencies visible is to mark all those courses within the curriculum which offer opportunities for practising, reflecting, and documenting course-work in the university calendar by a symbol, thus

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highlighting all cases where the dimension of key competencies is being explicitly integrated into teaching and learning.

Cooperation with Faculties – Some Difficulties we have in Common

The reform is still recent at the University of Bielefeld, having begun in the winter term of 2002/2003. We began working as consultant in the summer term of 2004.

- Since then, we have been very busy cooperating with university teachers, and developing new concepts of teaching together with them. It would be pretentious, however, to claim that things have changed in a systematical way, and frequently our efforts are not visible enough for those who are not directly involved. I think our colleagues of the library have this problem in common with us.
- For German university teachers, it is very novel, and yet very unfamiliar, to communicate about questions of teaching with others who are not even colleagues belonging to their own discipline. For us, it is still a challenge to establish recognized professional authority in our own field of teaching and learning. One of the reasons for this difficulty may be that "teaching at university" has hitherto never been an object of formal apprenticeship, studies, or training in Germany. University teachers predominantly like to consider themselves as researchers.
- In our work, we must rely on systematic efforts by faculties to define levels of competencies, because it is their obligation to determine what their students should learn at the various levels of their studies. We offer suggestions (just as the library uses the ALA-standards as a suggestion), but there still is much work to be done to initiate a university-wide discourse on this requirement.
- A crucial issue is how to assess competencies. It is necessary to find methods for examining at processes and efforts, instead of the final products only, as we have done until now.
- Specific for Bielefeld University is the problem we have with credit points. In Bielefeld, it is only the faculties who are authorized to award credit points to students for their achievements. Hence, courses taken at the library will not yield any credit points, and this places them at the fringe of regular studies.
- Further, one of the major problems the German "mass universities" are faced with is that at the bachelor level, particularly, universities have to cope with huge groups of students. This is a real problem, because personal feedback and comments on student's efforts are particularly important when the question of competencies is at stake. Until now, however, no personal resources were allocated to this important requirement. .

Cooperation with Faculties – the Teaching Service's Approach

To enhance the knowledge and experience of university teachers about how to organise their own teaching, arranging it with the perspective of students in mind who desire to learn how to do things professionally, we (the teaching service) embark on the following strategies:

- We offer workshops and training seminars on teaching strategies to faculty members
- We develop new teaching concepts by team-teaching with university teachers in different subjects
- We cooperate as consultants with university teachers who are developing courses with attention to key competencies
- We train student tutors
- We offer comprehensive further training for PhD-candidates and teaching assistants with various foci (teaching how to write, how to conceive courses, etc.)
- **We will not, however,** offer a substantial course program for students. If we did that, faculty members might consider us responsible for teaching key competencies, and continue to shun that task.

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Cooperation with Faculties – the Library's approach

The internal problems that had to be reflected first, the major topics being how to shift the library's own focus from teaching how to obtain (a maximum of) information to selecting (the relevant) information, and developing ideas how to organize quality library teaching for students – resulted in a rather prudent approach. Instead of trying to anchor library training in every newly designed course program from the start, the subject librarians were assigned to approach each department separately, trying to figure out which of the curricular modules already included (or were suitable to include) key competencies, contact the teaching staff concerned with these modules and then design – if possible in cooperation with the respective faculty - a library training offer to fit these teaching modules.

As a next step, these library trainings will be put to the test across one semester, or two. Two information literacy coordinators were nominated to coordinate the process of designing, testing and improving, and to keep in touch with the university administration in general. After the library training has been accepted by a faculty as a beneficial addition to their syllabus in practice, faculty bodies deciding over changes of curricula will be contacted.

How the Library and the Teaching Service Cooperate

The cooperation between the two service units consists mainly in communication: On the practical side, we share contacts and promote our respective work, all the while looking out for opportunities to cooperate on specific projects.

On a more reflective level we share ideas and information on teaching key competencies and discovered that our concepts for our work evolve around the same crucial point of teaching to reflect and plan on one's own actions to precisely formulate goals and planning actions accordingly – whether it is searching for literature or writing a thesis.

To implement this in our own work, we plan on conducting a workshop with all teaching librarians and Teaching Service staff where we share the experiences in teaching information literacy in writing papers with our respective colleagues – to make them/us more aware of the goals of our clients, the students and staff of the University.

A First Example for a Joint Project

The complexity of the process of implementing key competencies shall be illustrated by one example of a joint project:

When in Spring 2005 the library liaison of the Department of Literature and Linguistics requested the subject librarian to provide library training for the course "German as foreign language", this might have remained an isolated event, as many earlier cooperations between subject librarians and faculty did.

Instead, the subject librarian contacted the library's information coordinator, as the two were intent on complying with the university's strategy concerning the key competencies represented by the Teaching Service. The library intended to profit from this cooperation as from a pilot cooperation on anchoring. Since Teaching Service coordinates all teaching activities regarding key competencies, the intention was to include them in the planning of the library's activities from the very outset.

After several meetings and exchanging a number of drafts, letters and e-mails, three library trainings with increasing level of demand were designed for teaching modules, and integrated into these. The trainings were implemented and approved during the summer semester of 2006. The next step will be to contact the curriculum board with the proposal to integrate these trainings into the curriculum.

If this proposal is successfully accepted, this will be a further step to anchor key competencies in the teaching activities of the University of Bielefeld.

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