

Relational and course coordination at the university - Can the principles of relational coordination incorporated into the course coordinator role strengthen constructive alignment?

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Abstract High quality and research based teaching in order to assure student commitment and performance in the final exam is high on the university agenda. The purpose of the intervention study is to design and test a course co-ordination model, which integrates the various/sub course elements and thereby ideally strengthen the possibility of deep learning and high performance. Both qualitative and quantitative data provides positive indications of relational coordination in course planning. While qualitative data, overall points at satisfaction among lecturers and students, quantitative data show that the students perform better in their final exam as compared to previous years.

Key words. Performance, deep learning, mixed method, intervention study.

1. Introduction

High quality and research based teaching in order to assure student commitment and performance in the final examination is high on the university agenda (e.g. Faculty of Social science, 2012). However, the teaching element in itself doesn't make the whole difference, a connecting thread throughout the teaching program should also be obtained. A subject often consists of several elements with various professionals involved, such as internal and external lectures, teaching assistants and external examiners, working more or less independently from each other. To deal with this challenge a course coordinator being an assigned lecturer, is designated and becomes overall responsible for the subject. As a course coordinator is a person whose job it is to organize a series of professional activities involving others, such as manage teaching activities where other teachers are involved, introducing relational coordination as a concept becomes relevant. Relational coordination is coordination – the management of task interdependencies -carried out in the contexts of relationships with other group members, and involves communicating and relating for the purpose of task integration – and is as such a powerful driver of performance when work is interdependent, uncertain and time constrained (Gittell, 2001). In teaching literature, the concept of constructive alignment is characterized by coherence between assessment, teaching strategies and intended learning outcomes in an educational program. (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Constructive alignment is a principle used for devising teaching and learning activities, and assessment tasks, that directly address the learning outcomes intended in a way not typically achieved in traditional lectures, tutorial classes and examinations (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Aiming at deep learning which is characterized by a true preference for and ability to work conceptually rather than with isolated detailed knowledge (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Ramsden, 2003), ensuring constructive alignment can

thus be regarded as a the ultimate task for the academic coordinator, in which relational coordination might serve as a facilitator. The current study is primarily based on experiences from coordination and collaboration on the subject “Work and Organizational Psychology” at BA level, collected among the participating 210 students and 18 professionals, during the spring semester 2013. Further the grades for the last three years are compared in order to assess whether the students perform better in their final exam during a term with strong emphasis on course and relational coordination as compared to previous years.

1.1 Overview of the coordinator role

Formally, the coordinator role is generally defined, which leaves opportunities for determining and filling the role as coordinator. One approach is - based on the principles of constructive alignment - to planning the full flow of activities:

1. Based on the description and aim for the subject defined in the study program, planning the series of 14 lectures, including agreement with internal and external lecturers,
2. Determining the curriculum in collaboration with the lectures,
3. Recruiting instructors in charge of the related case-based classroom teaching with smaller groups of students,
4. Start-up meeting with emphasis on relational and course coordination, exemplified by a short written introduction and reading guidelines (Rienecher & Troelsen, 2012) to each lecture, a common lecture frame, including case for reflection (Him & Hippe, 2007) a.o.
5. and supporting the instructors fulfilling their task by e.g. ongoing group supervision (Andersen, 2005; Elbeshausen et al., 2013)
6. ongoing contact, alignment and support to lecturers prior and following their lectures (Gitell, 2010)
7. Formulating the examination papers, which rounds off the course (Ramsden, 2003, Smith 2008),
8. Visiting the classes with special emphasis on preparation for the examination (Smith, 2008)
9. Evaluating and rating the students examination answers in cooperation with external examiners (Smith, 2008)
10. Finally, the full subject/course should be evaluated by students, instructors, lectures and examiners in order to use the obtained experience and learning constructively for the future (Smith, 2008).

Looking at stakeholders involved, the full scale Work & Organizational Psychology semester program, involves 210 students, 10 lecturers (half of which are part-time lecturers), 7 instructors and 3 examiners. The individual lecturer provides one or two lectures, related to his or her specific knowledge area, and as such there is a risk of lectures not bringing attention to the broader didactic context he or she is actually taking part of. Also the instructors could in principle prepare and work independently, as each one of them is allocated to and responsible for only one class. As such, seen from the students perspective, there exist a substantial risk that the students experience a fragmented course, which might lead to limited deep learning and relatively lower final rating/grade, as a required aim of the examination is to be able to integrate and discuss theories that might apply to the case presented (Bachelor Program in Psychology, 2011-Curriculum). Further the students engagement and interest in the work and organizational psychology subject, including looking for job opportunities within this

area might be low. The urgency of this matter is discussed widely, both politically and at faculty level (Akkrediteringsrådet, 2013; Dansk Psykologforening, 2014; Faculty of Social Science, 2014).

2. Methods

In order to strengthen the constructive alignment element which is seen as a precondition for obtaining the final goal: high student performance, an intervention research design study, with multiple interventions (Rothman, 1994), is conducted. The purpose of the study is to design and test a course co-ordination model, which integrates the various course elements and thereby ideally strengthen the possibility of deep learning (Ramsden, 2003) occurring in students. The coordination model is based on Biggs and Tang's theory of constructive alignment (2011), and is furthermore inspired by the principles of relational coordination (Gittell, 2001).

2.1 Data collection

The study is mainly based on qualitative data, in the form of statements from the following groups of informants; students, instructors, lecturers and examiners. Data collection was carried out continuously over the semester, partly through specific feedback on introductory meeting, introductory and follow-up conversations with the lectures, supervision meetings with instructors, meetings with students in the classes, as well as through e-mail correspondence, telephone conversations and in personal communication during lectures. In addition relevant data from the Department of Psychology's final evaluation of work- and organizational psychology is involved.

2.2 Respondents and limitations

Not everyone involved among lecturers and instructors have participated in the meetings, respectively answered mails. Thus, data is limited to the individuals that has shown visible commitment in relation to the coordination activities. In addition, students' statements represent only the ones who either have made contact, by mail or through instructor respectively or engaged in dialogue when I as coordinator visited the classes. As such the statements might only represent this sample, and one should be careful drawing generalizations.

2.1 Data analysis

A mixed method approach (Creswell & Clark, 2011) provides the basis for qualitative thematic data analysis on collected feed-back from stakeholders (students, lecturers, teaching assistants and examiners) and quantitative data analysis by a simple comparison of average mark over a 4 year period.

3. Results

In the following section takes on informants' statements are grouped into four themes; 1. commitment, 2. sense of coherence, 3. Examination results and 4. the work load dimension in the coordination approach.

3.1 Engagement

Explicit feedback from lectures and instructors show a high level of engagement partly explained by constructive alignment and aspects of relational coordination:

It has been a pleasure to participate in the lecture series (Lecturer)

...very positive about coordination between lecturers, the possibility for participation in each other's lectures and exchange of ppt. 's (Lecturer)

It was really nice that you called the week before I was to lecture (Lecturer)

... I have only been happy to teach the class. In particular, the team of instructors worked well - you really have supported and backed us up – it has been great

(Instructor).

The students seemed excited and pleased working with cases and participated actively in discussions (Instructor)

In contrary to the above, it should also be pointed out, that there were more examples of behavior that could be construed as limited involvement of teachers in contributing to the "new relational framework". Some did not participate in the initial meeting, some were slow to respond to emails, forwarding lecture descriptions and reading guides, etc.

3.2 Sense of coherence

Statements indicate that teachers, lecturers and instructors who have experience from previous courses, have appreciated the coordination and reporting that this has helped to explicate context:

The start-up meeting was a good opportunity to understand the context in which we took part, and opened up for the possibility to think ones lecture into the larger framework, creating explicit links to other lectures and curriculum (Lecturer)

your efforts to coordinate lecture series has surely been an advantage (Lecturer)

...experienced that it was important to signal coordination and overview (Lecturer)

Further, the students who at the beginning of the semester communicated frustration regarding lack of oversight:

We are aware of the overall aims of the profession, but we definitely lack a deeper theoretical understanding of the different theoretical orientations (Student)

...had in June a different coherent experience of the subject:

It has continuously been more clear (Student)

Nice with a clearly defined framework and process (Student)

3.2.1 Supervision as relational coordination

In the context of relational coordination, increased efficiency and quality and job satisfaction is enhanced when employees learn to respect each other's jobs and work together for a common goal (Gittell, 2009; Gittell, Seidner & Wimbush, 2010). Along this line, instructors have continuously emphasized the learning and developing aspects in participating in team supervision which have strengthened their relational and teaching coordination, teaching skills and ability to reflect on issues related to the instructor role.

... development and support through relevant and usable supervision (Instructor)

(coordinators) presence with professional sparring on the initial and ongoing

meetings...you showed openness to new ways and ideas and has supported academically when needed (Instructor)

3.3 Examination results

In line with the literature (Biggs, 2011; Gittell, 2001) and from the informants' descriptions of their experience, it could be concluded that constructive alignment and relational coordination affects student learning positively.

Instructors and several students reported that it was important and positive with a visit from the course coordinator, in order to enhance the focus around the imminent exam. *It was valuable and reassuring with regard to the exam that you visited the class (Student)*

Further, the examiners reported that the examination papers did hold a higher taxonomic level, as compared to previous years. Comparing the average grades, during the last four years, supports this positive tendency.

To further research this possible correlation, it would be appropriate to evaluate constructive alignment activities and student learning (surface and deep learning) with validated tools such as SPQ (Biggs, 1987), R-SPQ-2F (Biggs, Kember & Leungog, 2001) and CEQ (Ramsden, 1991) in the future.

3.4 Work load

As earlier described it was not all teachers who engaged in the common activities. And the time dimension seems to come into play here

I can hardly take time to a pre-meeting every year, but I think the idea is good (Lecturer)

Since the motivation to contribute as an external lecturer is probably not due to economic reasons, the extended engagement beyond the 2 hours "stage time" may interfere relative to other high-priority tasks. Therefore, it seems like a significant challenge to engage and retain lecturers, who in addition to their significant professional contributions, will give priority to entering into a coordinated relationship.

Gittell (2009) states that it is appropriate to involve employees who are willing to engage in teamwork, from the beginning. Based on experience from this pilot study, with varying degrees of participation, a possible consequence could therefore be to solely to engaging lecturers and instructors who are interested in and willing to participate in coordination activities and work according to the agreed cooperative parameters.

From the course coordinators perspective, the aligned and coordinated approach has undoubtedly added to the work load, but the question is whether one could argue against this additional effort from a professional perspective?

4. Conclusion

Both qualitative and quantitative data provides positive indications of relational coordination in course planning. While qualitative data, overall points at satisfaction among lecturers and students, quantitative data show that the students within the intervention study perform better in their final exam as compared to students from previous years before the intervention. The intervention can be seen as a pilot study, harvesting experience from a structured and targeted course coordination model, and the experiences can ideally be applied to other subjects that includes course coordination within the Department. Focusing on the subject coordination as a tool to include enhanced alignment, might overall contribute to further professional development of the study. Thus, for example, form the basis of academic, teaching-related and didactic discussions between course coordinators respectively lecturers at the Department.

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