

# **Pedagogical competence development programs: tensions and challenges to meaningful participation**

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## **Abstract**

*Pedagogical competence development programs are gaining traction in the world of higher education teaching. In 2016, the Norwegian government issued a white paper calling for a “culture for quality” in higher education teaching. In line with earlier developments in other Scandinavian countries, the white paper proposes mandatory pedagogical competence development programs for university teachers as a new responsibility for the Norwegian universities – with new challenges for the institutions. In this article we, therefore, explore how participants in one of the new mandatory competence development programs experience tensions that challenge meaningful participation. Based on a qualitative analysis of 9 semi-structured interviews with participants, we identify three tensions: 1) between reflection and application, 2) between research and teaching, and 3) between demands and workloads. The vision of this program is a critically reflective approach to teaching. In the analysis we found that these tensions potentially halt this process. To discuss how this can challenge pedagogical competence development in higher education more generally, we employ the theoretical perspective of critical reflection, integrated with dialogue, praxis, and discourses on teaching.*

*Keywords: pedagogical competence development program, educational development, higher education teaching, critical reflection, transformative learning theory*

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## **Introduction**

Echoing the emphasis on quality in higher education and a call for better teaching, many countries have introduced guidelines and requirements for pedagogical training (Postareff, et al., 2008; Roxå & Mårtensson, 2012; McAleese et al., 2013). In response to these national efforts, universities have established pedagogical development programs and mandatory certification procedures for employees (Charlier & Lambert, 2020; Tight, 2018). Overall, these programs aim to provide employees with a pedagogical foundation and opportunities to develop their own

teaching practices. The argument here is that newly employed faculty members have excellent disciplinary knowledge and research competencies, but oftentimes are less prepared to teach (Robinson & Hope, 2013).

In recent years, the post-graduate certificate in learning and teaching in higher education, structured as a part-time course or program, has become prevalent across northern America, the UK, and northern Europe including Scandinavia (Stewart, 2014). In the United Kingdom (UK), programs were developed around the "UK Professional Standard Framework" and coupled to national initiatives through the Higher Education Academy (Little et al., 2007). In the Nordic countries, Sweden has been at the forefront of demanding pedagogical competence amongst academics and most universities have programs in place to fulfill the national requirement of 400 hours (15 ECTS) of pedagogical training (Ödalen et al., 2018).

Despite the growing number of pedagogical competence development programs, there is limited empirical research on how participants bring what they have learned in these programs back into their own teaching (Charlier & Lambert, 2020). Furthermore, little is known about how existing structures and cultures may counteract working with new perspectives on teaching (Trigwell et al., 2012). With this as our vantage point, we argue that it is important to understand how pedagogical competence development programs can play out in the academic lifeworld, beyond meeting political demands and certification procedures. One particularly interesting area is how participants' expectations shape, and are shaped by, their experiences when entering these programs, as expectations can powerfully influence how we construe experiences (Mezirow, 2008). Considering the diversity in how participants interpret pedagogical competence development (Trowler & Cooper, 2002), it is, furthermore, interesting to explore tensions and challenges across backgrounds. With this in mind, the overarching research question guiding our work is: *What tensions do participants experience, and how do these tensions challenge meaningful program participation?*

To explore the research question, we use a qualitative research design with semi-structured interviews and an abductive analysis grounded in a social constructivist perspective. Based on our findings, we discuss challenging tensions to meaningful participation in the light of critical reflection (Mezirow, 1990), integrated with concepts of dialogue, praxis (Freire, 1993) and teaching discourses (Moore, 2004). By integrating these theoretical perspectives, we will be able to discuss more generally how tensions might challenge, or halt, the dialogic process of engaging with the program and its desired vision of a critically reflective approach to teaching.

## **Research context**

The context for this study is the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). NTNU is an international university with its main profile in natural sciences, engineering, and technology, and also includes the humanities, social sciences, economics, medicine, architecture, and arts (NTNU, n.d.). The pedagogical competence development program at NTNU is called UNIPED (UNIversity PEDagogy). The program is developed, administrated, taught, and evaluated by the Department for Education and Lifelong Learning. It is mandatory for all new employees and a formal requirement when applying for promotion to full professor. Each semester, around 70 to 90 participants start in the program.

Between 2019 and 2021, the program was revised in response to the white paper *Quality Culture in Higher Education (Meld. St. 16 [2016-2017])*, which emphasizes the importance and value of pedagogical competence for academics. The overall vision for the UNIPED program is to inspire a critical reflective approach to teaching and education. Towards this vision, the program intends to stimulate and support participants to develop a mindset and motivation that include: 1) the desire and confidence to try and explore opportunities within teaching and supervision; 2) the willingness and ability to support students and colleagues; and 3) the curiosity to see and learn more about teaching and supervision from different perspectives.

From a practical perspective, the program runs over one year. The first semester comprises a series of seminars (60 hours) with a focus on basic university pedagogy and didactic principles, collegial coaching (30 hours) and an education development project (30 hours). In the second semester, participants can choose between different modules (4x 20 hours) to delve deeper into topics related to their own teaching and development (NTNU, 2019). It is stipulated that the program will take around 200 hours for participants to complete including reading, preparation, participation, and reflection.

## **Theoretical points of entry**

At the core of this study stands the empirical material from the interviews with participants in the UNIPED program. From a theoretical perspective, we build on Freire's ideas of critical pedagogy, Mezirow and Brookfield's notion of reflection, Jarvis' concept of non-learning, and Moore's different discourses around the role of teachers.

Meaningful participation as a central concept in this work is understood as a dialogue where participants can engage with the program by considering their own contexts through critical reflection (Mezirow, 1990). Viewing dialogue as more than having conversations, UNIPED's described vision is to mediate a process

where the participant not only enters dialogues with other participants, but can enter a dialectical process through a critically reflective dialogue with themselves. Furthermore, Freire's (1993) notion of dialogue orients towards understanding one's role within societal and cultural structures, critical reflection and forming a *praxis* on how to act based on new understanding and knowledge.

With this understanding of dialogue, Jarvis' (2012) three differentiated, but interrelated categories of *non-learning* can be seen as a breakdown of the dialogic space. The first is 'presumption', which means that the participant presumes to already know, or understand, what is being taught or said, and therefore overlooks new learning possibilities. 'Non-consideration' entails the participant being aware of such possibilities, but not considering them, due to a lack of time or hesitancy regarding potential consequences. The third category, 'rejection' means that the participant does not want to learn something new in the respective field.

To counteract non-learning, it is important for participants to be able to create meaning by interpreting their experiences and, through this interpretation, guide their decisions and actions. The ability to create meaning can be viewed as a fundamentally human need (Mezirow, 1990), and a lack of opportunities to create meaning risks the system fulfilling only its own needs, as systemic *activism*, an emphasis on action to the detriment of reflection, or *verbalism*, a negation of practice for the sake of theory (Freire, 1993). Connected to this process of meaning-making stands critical reflection around *frames of reference* (or 'meaning perspectives') (Mezirow, 2002). These are composed of two dimensions: habits of mind and points of view. *Habits of mind* are habitual ways of thinking and acting influenced by assumptions that constitute a set of codes. These become articulated in a *point of view*: a constellation of belief, attitude, and feeling that shapes interpretation. In our analysis we have approached participants' points of view in relation to program experience.

To discuss expressed points of view in the empirical material, we address and connect them to discourses on teacher education more broadly. Moore (2004) describes three, sometimes interrelated, discourses of the *charismatic subject*, the *competent craftsperson*, and the *reflective practitioner*. The charismatic teacher is endowed with talent essentially through their personality, while the competent teacher masters discrete practical skills and techniques. The reflective teacher emphasizes the skills needed to critically reflect on experiences for improving their practice. UNIPED does not prescribe specific methods for teaching but holds a normative stance towards teaching as a critically reflective practice. Participants are given Brookfield's (1995) four lenses to use in their project work, to engage with their own frames of references regarding teaching as reflective practitioners (Moore, 2004). It is through evidential or dialogical reasoning that frames of reference can change, and critical reflection can trigger transformative learning (Mezirow, 1990).

## **Methodology**

The present study is part of a larger ongoing longitudinal research project that explores how, and in what ways, pedagogical competence development programs can contribute to better understanding and development of teaching in higher education. Using a qualitative research design grounded in a social constructivist perspective, we focus on participants' experiences, reflections, and points of view (Mezirow, 1998) concerning their program participation, through three interviews at different points in time (during, after and long after). With critical reflection (Mezirow, 1990) as our theoretical entry point, the longitudinal design may also help to reveal how these points of view can change dynamically over time (Tjora, 2021).

In this article, we draw on the findings from the first of three interview rounds with participants from the pilot phase of the program (2019-2021). All participants, except one (2019/2020) are from its 2020/2021 iteration. The interviews were conducted during the first semester of the program (December 2020) or shortly after (January and February 2021), except one (May 2021). In addition to the interviews, we draw on observations from and experiences with the program, as well as ten respondents to a short, qualitative questionnaire from the 2021/2022 iteration. As a part of compulsory work during doctoral studies, the first author has been a participant in the program himself, as well as facilitated several collegial coaching groups, and taught one of the seminars. The second author led the revision of the program between 2019 and 2021, as well as taught within the program. Thus, we focus on empirical critique, as distinct from criticism, of the program, both as an awareness of our own positions, and with further discussion and development in mind. As such, this article can be seen as a part of a contribution to the UNIPED program's systemic critical self-reflection (Mezirow, 1998).

With NTNU being an international university of considerable academic heterogeneity, the informants were recruited with the intent of representing, and being open to, alterity and different perspectives. Special attention was paid to recruit participants from various disciplines and departments, to balance between female and male participants, as well as include participants with international and Norwegian backgrounds. Ten participants were contacted directly to ensure variation and enable a potential conversation across the data material (Cousin, 2009). Out of these ten, nine participants across eight different departments, representing natural science, engineering, medicine, social science, and technology, gave their informed consent to participate.

Using a semi-structured interview design (Cousin, 2009), the first round of in-depth interviews revolved around participants' motivations, expectations, and ongoing experiences with the program, and their experiences with, and perspectives on higher education teaching. The latter category was included to be better able to understand what different experiential and perspectival backdrops and habits of

mind (Mezirow, 1998) might inform their points of view, and add to possible horizons of meaning (Cousin, 2009). Three reflective questions were sent by mail before the interview, to spark preliminary reflections among the participants, help them to think about their preconceptions and prepare them to talk about their teaching approaches. Depending on the participants' preferences, these reflective questions were either answered in writing, discussed in the interview, or both.

The interviews were conducted either in English or Norwegian over Zoom (due to the covid-19 pandemic) and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Only the sections presented here were translated into English, where necessary, and all participants are given pseudonyms.

After transcription, the material was pooled together and approached through an open process of 'naive reading' (Lindseth & Nordberg, 2004). Subsequently, an iterative and abductive (Tjora, 2021) process was used to construct units of meaning in the material, which eventually were combined into larger categories. The findings were continually discussed between the authors, as well as with colleagues and research group members, that acted as critical friends and helped raise awareness of, and balance, the authors' positionalities (Cousin, 2009). Alternating between reading the material and reading literature connected to the categories, the analysis process led to three salient themes that shed light on what can be understood as tensions to meaningful participation in the UNIPED program: 1) tensions between reflection and application; 2) tensions between research and teaching; and 3) tensions between demands and workloads.

## **Results**

### *Tensions between reflection and application*

The first tension that became apparent from the analysis is between reflection and application in the program. While participants mentioned disciplinary differences, there appeared a shared desire from many for what can be called a 'best practice' oriented program. Several participants conceptualized teaching as practices comprised of distinctive skills that can be mastered separately from underlying conceptions of learning and knowledge. They expressed the clear wish for someone to demonstrate how-to-do good teaching:

I had some different expectations for the program I must be honest. The expectations were how to become a better teacher in terms of some, let's say, technical things. I mean how to present, how to build the lecture, how to make the presentations, how to make the lectures, how to build the relationships with students, how to behave, how to talk and things like that... As of right now, it's more about the reflections and our thinking

system, how we think about the students and what the students think. It's good to reflect on it and have the overview but it doesn't really give the point how to do it. (Manfred)

The quote illustrates how some participants want to see best practices that they can be readily applied to their own teaching. This perspective on learning illustrates an underlying understanding of learning as transfer of knowledge, where the participants expect a transmission of knowledge on how-to-do better teaching. In this understanding, efficiency becomes a guiding principle instead of creating an opportunity space to dwell on approaches. As one participant pointed out when talking about one of the seminars, things could be done in a radically more efficient way:

Very useful, very informative, but to be honest the points I take away, okay, sure, I never thought about color blind people when I make slides. You know, just this list of 5-6 things, good points, but you could have given me the list and do the work in 30 seconds and not give hours. (Andrew)

The same participant later elaborated that he does not think that the program is 'completely useless,' but that from his point of view the starting point of the program was to fulfill the requirement of 200 hours, and not how much time is needed in relation to the content:

It's not completely useless, but yeah, as I said, it feels a bit like a lot of talking about things. I mean I understand that you have to design it and I also have to understand that its formally 200 hours, that it's something your department decided, and that is something that we have to do, and I can see that you end up with something like this, the best you can with trying to fill up these 200 hours. (Andrew)

This statement points towards low initial expectations to the program, as well as a perceived lack of practicality. Furthermore, the program is positioned as something 'your department decided' and designed to fulfill the 200-hour requirement, more than a program designed and implemented locally to build pedagogical competence and facilitate educational development.

Being a new employee in the program also affects how participants position themselves and what they experience that they can contribute. Reflecting on collegial coaching, William explains that he thinks it is valuable, but also describes it as challenging as he lacks experience. From this position, he thinks he has little to contribute and is in no position to give feedback to others:

I think it's fine, even though there's a big danger here if you ask me. I cannot provide feedback to other people about their way of teaching because I have no idea about teaching, I have just started. If I were like 1000 years old, and like a magician, and I knew everything I could give some advice, maybe. (William)

At the same time, there are other voices in the program that value the program's focus on critical reflection, as one participant mentioned working with the pedagogical project paved way for his pedagogical development. He makes a point that the program cannot persuade everyone, but that most participants are open to learn something new and reflect on their approaches:

For me it was beneficial and gave me a few new things and directions. It forced me to put things into words, which was very beneficial. I also liked that it, like motivated me to develop that pedagogical project, that I really wanted to do, so it had very positive effect for me, but I think, maybe people who are not as reflected might benefit even more if they open up for it. I mean of course you will always have people who just say 'oh this hippie bullcrap stuff', I can't relate to that, I guess you will have a hard time persuading these people that its worth their time and effort and yeah, and you really can't force them to reconsider. But there's also a big mainstream of people who just never had the time or the tools or the occasion to engage in that and I think for them it will be very beneficial. (Edward)

While Edward points out that it might be difficult to convince those who would be most critical towards the program, he is certain that many participants experience the program as an important arena to critically reflect on their teaching. From the empirical material, it appears that many participants lack an arena in their disciplinary environments to discuss teaching.

Another tension that emerges from the analysis of the interviews relates to educational theory. As pointed out before, it appears that many participants viewed experiences, skills, and the theoretical underlying concepts not as intertwined, but decoupled from each other, which affects how they approach participation. Several participants pointed out that it is difficult to relate to theories and that they expected teachers in the program to break up theories in small chunks and relate them directly to practice. They pointed out that they are not used to reading and working with educational theory which makes it difficult for them to get something productive out of it:

I find the content of the course so far, a bit on the theoretical side. You see, for you guys or they guys who teach the program, it's easy because that is what you know and that's what you work with, but from our point of view



I think it could be interesting if you're able to somehow digest or process this theory before giving it to us.... I think it would be much better just having the same sessions, same titles, same everything, but a bit more applied if that would work, applied or a bit more, how to say, adequate for the audience you have, okay. (William)

Interestingly, the program intends to do this, and not overload the seminars with theory. At the same time, theories and concepts are part of pedagogical competence and intertwined with practice and skills. However, another participant pointed to a gap in expectations concerning the relationship between reflection, and the practical art of teaching:

I'm a little bit allergic to just talking about something, you have to practice to learn, right, and teaching is something you have to do. And a little bit, of course you know, for instance, you know, this coaching thing where you do something and others give feedback, I think that is a perfect way to improve. All these lectures and articles we have to read and write, it feels a little bit like, you know, I'm forced to take piano lessons and show up and then the guy just wants to talk about it. He does not really know how to play the piano either, but we just sit down and discuss it. (Andrew)

Unsurprisingly, systemic demands and incentives play a crucial role for program participation. From the interviews, it is apparent that the overall main motivation to participate was to fulfill the requirements with respect to the promotion and hiring process. We also see that many participants do have experience with teaching before they take the program. As one participant explained, she likes to find pedagogical resources herself, but thinks that others might need the program more:

I think for quite a lot of participants, one of the core motivators is that you have to do it (laughter), it's quite unfortunate, but to become a full professor you have to do it. Beforehand that was my main motivator, I don't know if I would have done it if it wasn't mandatory, but I think it's also, diverse like in our group, I'm studying psychology, but I think if you're studying like, quantum mechanics, I don't think that teaching is something that you do. I think when you study psychology it's something that already helps you in developing your teaching. So, I think even without the course I would be inclined to look for sources myself to make it interactive myself, so yeah, depending on your background you need such a program more or less. (Barbara)

From Barbara's perspective, the UNIPED program is more important for participants from "hard sciences" as they would know less about teaching and how to find pedagogical resources. This quote illustrates how participants can use their disciplinary background to position and understand themselves in relation to other participants. Comparing this to William's earlier statement, about how the program should relate more adequately to its audience, this statement also relates to how participants understand themselves, and their co-participants.

Perspectives on teaching in higher education are important, considering academic developers' expectations of motivation and engagement in a pedagogical competence development program. One participant wondered if teaching should be more of a designated responsibility:

And I sometime also wonder, because not every researcher is a good lecturer, but you have to be both. And I think that sometimes, yeah, not present at everybody, I also think I'm better at research than at teaching. Sometimes I think, like, should it be combined, or should it be splitted up, so we have researchers at the university, and then we have teachers. I think this will make more smooth, also some lecturers don't have the interest or the capacity to be a good lecturer, but in that way they can contribute to the content of it, but they don't have to give it. Cause less time for them also.  
(Barbara)

This implies that not all academics should engage with pedagogical competence development, to have more time for research. Overall, the participants clearly articulated a tension between the perceived relationship of reflection and application in the program.

#### *Tensions between research and teaching*

The second tension revolves around the dual professional roles of research and teaching. Most participants in the program have combined positions, with around 50% teaching and departmental obligations and 50% research. From the empirical material, however, it is apparent that teaching and research are not necessarily seen as entangled or even adjacent activities. Despite local and national efforts, many participants still see teaching as less prestigious and less valued in the promotion process. From our position, this view on teaching value significantly shapes how participants approach the pedagogical competence development program. Especially with critical reflection as the crux of the program, this can paradoxically limit the necessary motivation to critically engage with one's own practice through the program.

One participant explained that in her field, the strong focus on external funding and publications represses efforts to see education and teaching as equally important and an integrated part of the university. In her view, the desire to develop

pedagogical competence still relies on a passion for teaching and is not driven by incentives:

Education has a little lower status in a way, mostly because there's so much focus on external project funding and publications, when you apply for a job or promotion to professor, but education is something that one gets covered. It has changed a bit now, one has more paths in the professor promotion process, but it still feels a bit like that those who focus on education do so because they are passionate about it. Not something you do because of the incentives. That's okay, but it becomes a systemic turn towards, not only research, but the kind of research that produces a lot of project funding and publications. And even though one says that one doesn't focus much on that when hiring, I do see that, when I'm sitting in committees, it happens, nevertheless. (Linda)

This implied academic zeitgeist was also expressed by another participant who pointed out that teaching experience is important, but not worth much without publication 'Even if you have a lot of teaching experience, if there is no publication, (...) then it's difficult for you to get [a position at the university]' (Richard).

Interestingly, several participants positioned teaching as something that comes in addition to their research work. The lack of incentives was echoed by several participants. Barbara expanded on this and argued that teaching, in contrast to research, does not produce visible output or measurable impact and thus does not get recognized: 'When you do research, you see your articles, and get citations and things like that, you see the output, but when you teach you don't really see that output, it's difficult to get recognition for it' (Barbara). This is an interesting statement, as teaching is hardly devoid of measurable output if we think of assignments and grades as insight into teaching value. However, it shows a perspective on academic career advancement for faculty as directly tied to research, and not their students' development.

On the other hand, systemic indicators of student satisfaction can potentially limit participants in evolving their teaching. As another participant mentioned, critical reflection and student responsibility is meaningful, but he was afraid that grades and student satisfaction will go down:

So, I think if I include this responsibility and critical thinking in my courses, I will be much happier, but grades will go down and I will probably lose my job here. Or at least I will get a warning, this is not the way we do things here. And that's fine. It's just the way you do it, I can deal with that. (William)

In this quote, the participant directly connects students' grades and satisfaction to his own employment. Despite the perceived lack of incentives, there appears not to be a lack of perceived and imagined punishments. This shows how perception of departmental culture can shape faculty's views on teaching and illustrates how systemic measurements can dominate how participants view their main responsibilities of teaching and research.

Across the empirical material, there appears to be what can be interpreted as a mismatch between how academics experience their work mediated through local culture and what rules and guidelines say. Teaching and research are not seen as inherently linked in participants' academic practices. Instead, teaching can feel like a time-consuming activity without much merit and not at the core of the university system.

A different take on the polarization of teaching and research that is apparent from the interviews is to conceptualize teaching as a way to recruit students. As one participant pointed out, he does not want to stop teaching, because he sees it as a long-term investment to ensure that he gets 'good' Ph.D. students that make him more productive:

Not so much because of some evangelical drive, but more because I know that we have good students, and you want the best, and...it's a long-term thing, right. I want good master students because those are most likely to be interested in staying for a Ph.D. And my Ph.D. students are part of what's going to define whether my work is a success or not, without Ph.D. students you cannot do a lot of research. The better they are, the more productive I will be. (Andrew)

In this perspective, the value of teaching is reduced to supporting teachers' long-term research output. Overall, there is a clear tension between time for research and pedagogical competence development, as research and teaching are seen as separate from each other rather than integrated. This affects how participants experience the pedagogical competence development program and, in many cases, appears to limit meaningful participation.

#### *Tensions between demands and workloads*

The final tension that emerged from the analysis of the empirical material is between demands and overall workload. The UNIPED program is stipulated to take 200 hours and the guidelines say that managers should adjust employees' overall workload in a way that they can participate in the program. From course surveys, however, we know that 50% of the participants do not get adjustments from their leaders, 25% to some extent and only 25% experience that they get the time that they need to participate. This leads to frustration amongst the participants as they do not know how to manage all the different demands. In this way the program

becomes yet another thing to do, which influences the dynamic of the program and risks that it becomes a “tick-box” even for participants that want to engage:

It should be communicated much more clearly to department heads that it actually takes 200 hours, and the 200 hours must be taken from a place. And it cannot be up to each individual employee to negotiate individually to have time for it, it must be much more standardized then. I think that could have changed the whole dynamic a lot, there are so many who sat there and just (sulking) "What's the point of this"? Sounds very childish, but it comes from frustration, that you have so many work tasks you do not get to do properly, and meanwhile you are somewhere else and shall be doing other things. Having said that, I think this is incredibly important, but I notice that, [I] have done a lot of slack work on the assignments and so on, which is sad. (Linda)

One important element to consider is that participants of UNIPED normally are newly employed academics, as it is compulsory for permanent employees to complete the program within two years. While perceived as important, Linda pointed out that as a new employee you have numerous demands and obligations to manage simultaneously:

I think that most agree that this is very important, but when starting out there's a lot of things you have to go through, the first couple of years, that can become a bit steep for many, I think. (Linda)

Another participant further emphasized how the overall workload that he is facing impacts his ability to participate in meaningful ways:

All of us who are on the program are struggling because of everything that we have to do. We are all heaped with tasks. It's not like the department helps us and facilitates that we have time to participate in the program. After all, it is not less research or teaching, it is alas the same, only that this comes in addition. (Jason)

This quote reflects a generally expressed challenge for participants: they are not sufficiently relieved of their research and teaching obligations for program participation. The effects of the demanding workload participants are facing are, however, not limited to participating in the program, but appear to also influence the ability to work with pedagogical development more broadly. From the interviews, it is clear that these activities are easily down-prioritized in a hectic and strict everyday schedule:

I think the highest concern for most lecturers is just time. I think they are quite involved with research and deadlines, and sometimes teaching is just something that you do on the side, and when you have to do it under pressure, it's difficult, you don't want to look at alternatives, you just stay with how you did it last year and that's it. (Barbara)

This illustrates how the precedence of research and deadlines over teaching can block the necessary time needed to critically reflect on teaching and education, also outside of the program. Notions of time are not only affected by the actual number of hours, but also the perceived value of the time spent, and how these activities are framed within an academic work context. The dichotomy where research trumps teaching is supported in another way by Andrew expressing that some academics would simply prefer to be relieved of their teaching obligations:

I mean in high school it's a little bit different, because then you have people in front of you that were trained, and secondly, they chose to be a teacher, and that makes a big difference, I think. In university you quite often have people who have to teach and don't want to. And the more you can feel that the worse it is per definition. We all have experiences with people who clearly do not want to be there. I also understand where it comes from 'cause these people want to do research and have absolutely no talent for teaching, and yeah what can you do about that, you know? (Andrew)

This illustrates that some academics choose to work at the university to do research, despite the teaching obligations. Furthermore, having some talent, or charisma (Moore, 2004), for teaching is seen as a necessity for being a good teacher. This ties in with Linda's comment about teachers' development usually being driven by passion, despite systemic incentives. The rhetorical question, 'what can you do about that, you know?' touches on a fundamental question for UNIPED or any other similar program, when the dialogue meets challenging discursive counterplay. From the combined empirical material, it is apparent that systemic demands and experiences with, and perspectives on, teaching play an important role in participants' approaches and perspectives on teaching and education.

With the program encompassing all faculty, there are clear tensions between practices, prior knowledge, and experiences. This results in that most participants do not experience everything in the program as useful and applicable, as the program needs to accommodate various participants:

Yeah, so I will say 50/50 - 50% is useful to me... I think this depends on the discipline of the participants... But at the moment, I can't see how I'm going to apply everything in my teaching... maybe in the future? It cannot be

100% useful for everybody, I guess. That's not possible. A good program is a good program. But it cannot be, like, good for everybody. (Richard)

Overall, it appears from the analysis that tensions emerging from the mandatory nature of the program, the perceived gap between reflection and application, and the already high workload that academics face, with the lack of allocated time for participation, both coalesce and appear independently, as challenging tensions for meaningful participation. This shows that there remains work to be done when it comes to viewing pedagogical competence development, and the program, as important for academic praxis across the university in more general terms.

## **Discussion**

As illustrated in the analysis, there appears to be different tensions that challenge meaningful participation in the pedagogical competence program, namely 1) tensions between reflection and application; 2) tensions between research and teaching; and 3) tensions between demands and workloads. Drawing on ideas grounded in critical pedagogy and the work of Freire (1993), we understand meaningful participation as a critical reflective dialogue, where participants can engage and reconsider their own frames of references (Mezirow, 1990) and become reflective practitioners (Moore, 2004).

From the empirical material, it is apparent that some participants hold more technical perspectives on pedagogical competence development centered around notions of “best practices”, as Manfred for example points out, ‘how to become a better teacher in terms of technical things’. This perspective challenges the program’s holistic vision to teaching and can be understood as a challenging tension that hinders participants to engage with a critically self-reflective dialogue on teaching. It limits teaching to be a technical skill, rather than a deeply human activity of intrinsic value (Shor & Freire, 1987) that should be reflected on, as the program proposes. We further argue that the program here breaks directly with ideas of instrumentalizing teaching towards production dominant in neoliberal ideology<sup>1</sup> (Maisuria & Helmes, 2020), which appears to be potentially challenging for participants, as it requires them to reconsider their frames of reference.

To some extent, participants expect more of a transfer approach (Freire, 1993) of ‘what works’ with an efficient focus on skills and competencies. This

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<sup>1</sup> The Norwegian academic landscape is far from as dark as the contextual maps drawn out by Moosa (2018), Maisuria and Helmes (2020), or Fleming (2021). Still, our findings show tensions between research publications and teaching engagement.

conception of learning stresses transmission of content, and is teacher- rather than student-centered (Kugel, 1993, as cited in Trowler & Cooper, 2002). UNIPED's conception of teaching breaks with this conceptualization of teachers and students, where the former "owns" the knowledge and through methods and skills "transfers" it into students. However, these expectations relate to teaching being a set of technical skills, ignoring underlying pedagogical conceptions and values (Quinn, 2012; Deaker et al., 2016). Instead, UNIPED views teaching as part of academic praxis, with praxis being the process of simultaneously reflecting and acting on the world as it unfolds continuously (Freire, 1993).

Interestingly, Barbara's quote on academics from "hard sciences" as generally more in need of reflecting on teaching development, shows how already seeing oneself as a reflective practitioner (Moore, 2004) can resemble an endpoint for critical reflection. This, we argue, is a contradiction in terms, and can be seen as an undesirable outcome related to an interpretation of the program's vision (Kreber & Brook, 2001). Interestingly, the described openness to pedagogical competence development can instead challenge meaningful participation by *presuming* to already know, or even *reject*, what the program offers (Jarvis, 2012).

A crucial element here is time or the perceived lack of time. Participants, such as Barbara and Jason, described a lack of time and insufficient time allocation for program participation as important because time is an essential precondition for critical reflection (Brookfield, 1995). A perceived lack can subsequently contribute to participants, not necessarily rejecting the entire program, but not considering (Jarvis, 2012) an engagement towards what could be more meaningful participation in the program. Rather, they retreat to the notion of efficiency, exemplified through Andrew's quote, where he finds the seminar content very informative, but 'you could have given me the list and do the work in 30 seconds and not give hours'.

From the analysis, it is clear that participants' expectations stand in contrast, and potentially in conflict, to the symmetrical dialogue that the program tries to establish by focusing on everybody's previous experiences and authentic, collegial, relationships. With Andrew's quote of the piano metaphor in mind, where the program is seen as 'just talking', the focus on critical reflection in the program risks being experienced as *verbalism* (Freire, 1993), not aiding the development of becoming a more competent teacher (Moore, 2004). This may in turn lead to the program being viewed as partly ignoring its classroom authority (Brookfield, 1995), and not being seen as a competent dialogic partner, but as an external demand and incentive of little intrinsic value. From this perspective, the politically mandatory approach to pedagogical competence development programs risks devolving into systemic activism (Freire, 1993), where participation becomes mainly about institutional outcomes and structures (Edwards, 1998, as cited in Quinn, 2012).

The mandatory part, however, is not necessarily a problem, as some participants' highlight the necessity of the program being mandatory to help contribute to a culture for quality teaching in higher education. However, mere



completion rates are not enough to understand how participants are able to engage with teaching through the program. The underlying problems become visible in Linda's quote about her experience with committee work and seeing research publications as having more importance in the hiring process. Kreber's (2002) question of whether the current reward structure in higher education supports teaching development appears to remain relevant, even taking into consideration all policy changes. With this in mind, we argue that the environment surrounding pedagogical competence development programs play an important role with respect to meaningful participation, in a similar way as Quinn (2012) argues that research and teaching should have equal merit.

A program like UNIPED also exists within differing perceptions of local cultures. When discussing including more student responsibility and critical thinking in his courses, William shows how habits of mind (Mezirow, 1998) and culture influence the motivation to engage with professional learning (King, 2022): '...I will get a warning, this is not the way we do things here. And that's fine.'

As such, this can also get foothold as a hegemonic perspective (Brookfield, 1995) and shows how academics can adjust to a new culture, even with underlying values intact (Trowler & Cooper, 2002). This is especially important since the program is positioned as an important part of the hiring and promotion process.

With Barbara's and Andrew's thoughts on how some academics simply are not apt for good teaching, the empirical material also shows that some view teaching not only as a separated practice focused on skills and methods but also as a practice in need of innate ability. This can be viewed through Moore's discourse of the charismatic subject (2004), where some people essentially are not suited for teaching, threatening to render pedagogical competence development moot. Perhaps, like Richard says, 'a good program cannot be good for everybody'. This relates to the compatibility of what Trowler and Cooper (2002) call *teaching and learning regimes* between participant and program. This shows the challenging task of designing a mandatory program that feels meaningful to all participants across local and disciplinary contexts (Storstad & Smepllass, 2022). While Lueddeke (2003, as cited in Quinn, 2012) argues that there are significant differences in teaching between "hard" and "soft" sciences (see Barbara's quote on academics from "hard sciences"), a transdisciplinary program can provide a community of teaching practice that is hard to find in many departments (Quinn, 2012).

The described tensions challenge the dialogue that UNIPED intends to establish on a critically reflective approach to teaching. We see that many participants expect more evidential, instead of dialogical, reasoning (Mezirow, 1998). With the program being mandatory, coupled with the vision of critically reflective approach to teaching, it is being challenged by the apparent risk of being reduced into a tool for systemic activism and expectations of qualifying competence.

## **Outlook**

With this article, we want to acknowledge the need for discussing challenging tensions between participatory expectations and experiences, systemic demands and incentives, as well as approaches to, and perspectives on, higher education teaching. We argue that these tensions are important to consider if we want pedagogical competence development to be viewed, and experienced, as an integral part of academia.

Exploring what participants bring up as challenging tensions, we argue, is a more productive starting point for discussion than what is immediately successful. Importantly, these challenges emerge for pedagogical competence development also outside of the program. To understand how we can approach the nested context in which participants find themselves in, it is important for any pedagogical competence development program to not assume the position of a dominant discourse (see ‘dead letter’ in Moore, 2004, p. 88), or as a prescriptive standard, but something that can, in turn, be reflected upon (Lacan, 1977, as cited in Moore, 2004, p. 88). While some participants express a clear desire for the program to be more focused on how to be competent teachers, it is important to recognize that from our perspective, no program can meet this desire. Becoming a competent teacher is a process that participants need to own; it is impossible for any program to simply transfer how-to-do good teaching to all participants. Furthermore, this implies that the UNIPED program must reflect on its own discourse of critically reflective teaching, and how this balance is experienced by its participants. There is no one model of good teaching, and therein lies the challenge, and beauty, of the contingent and idiosyncratic aspects of teaching (Moore, 2004).

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*Patric Wallin* is a Professor in University Pedagogy. In his research, he uses critical pedagogy as an entry point to explore how to create educational spaces in higher education that enable students to make meaningful contributions to research and society, and how traditional student teacher positions can be challenged through partnership. By re-considering the relationship between undergraduate teaching and academic research, he wants to re-establish the university as a place for collaboration between students and academics with the common purpose to co-create knowledge and meaning.

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