

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 this intervention study was to design and test a course co-ordination model which integrates the various/sub-course elements and thereby ideally strengthens the possibility of deep learning and high performance. Both qualitative and quantitative data provide indications of the positive impact of relational coordination in course planning. Qualitative data indicate overall satisfaction with the intervention among lecturers and students, and the quantitative data show that the students perform better in their final exam compared with previous years.

Keywords: 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, an improvement in the quality of the teaching element is not in itself sufficient; a connecting thread throughout the teaching program should also be established. A subject often consists of several elements with various professionals involved, such as internal and external lecturers, teaching assistants and external examiners, working more or less independently of each other. To deal with this challenge, a course coordinator who is an assigned lecturer is designated and assumes overall responsibility 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 managing 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 involving 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 the ultimate task for the academic coordinator, in which

relational coordination might serve as a facilitator. The current study is based primarily 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 compared with previous years.

1.1 Overview of the coordinator role

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

4. 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,
5. Determining the curriculum in collaboration with the lecturers,
6. Recruiting instructors in charge of the related case-based classroom teaching with smaller groups of students,
7. Start-up meeting with emphasis on relational and course coordination, exemplified by a short written introduction and reading guidelines (Rienecher & Troelsen, 2012) for each lecture, a common lecture framework, including a case for reflection (Him & Hippe, 2007) a.o.
8. and supporting the instructors in fulfilling their task by e.g. ongoing group supervision (Andersen, 2005; Elbeshausen et al., 2013)
9. ongoing contact, alignment and support to lecturers prior to and following their lectures (Gitell, 2010)
10. Drawing up the examination papers, which round off the course (Ramsden, 2003, Smith 2008),
11. Visiting the classes and placing special emphasis on preparation for the examination (Smith, 2008)
12. Evaluating and rating the students’ examination answers in cooperation with external examiners (Smith, 2008)
13. Finally, the full subject/course should be evaluated by students, instructors, lecturers and examiners in order to leverage the learning and experience gained 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 whom are part-time lecturers), 7 instructors and 3 examiners. The individual lecturer delivers one or two lectures, related to his or her specific field of knowledge, and as such there is a risk that lecturers do not draw attention to the broader didactic context he or she is actually 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 exists a substantial risk that the students experience a fragmented course, which might lead to limited deep learning and relatively lower final rating/grades, as an examination requirement is to illustrate the ability to integrate and discuss theories that might apply to the case presented (Bachelor Program in Psychology, 2011-Curriculum). Moreover, the students’ engagement and interest in the subject of Work and Organizational Psychology, 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 achieving the final goal: high student performance, an intervention research design study, with multiple interventions (Rothman, 1994), was conducted. The purpose of the study was to design and test a course co-ordination model, which would integrate the various course elements and thereby ideally strengthen the possibility of deep learning occurring in students (Ramsden, 2003). 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 was based mainly 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 the introductory meeting, introductory and follow-up conversations with the lecturers, 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, the study drew on relevant data from the Department of Psychology's final evaluation of work and organizational psychology.

2.2 Respondents and limitations

Not all of the involved lecturers and instructors participated in the meetings, or responded to mails. Thus, data is limited to the individuals who showed visible commitment in relation to the coordination activities. In addition, students' statements represent only those who either made contact, by mail or through their instructor, or who engaged in dialogue when I as coordinator visited the classes. As such the statements might only represent this sample, and one should be careful about making generalizations.

2.3 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 marks over a four-year period.

3. Results

In the following section, excerpts from informants' statements are grouped into four themes: 1. commitment, 2. sense of coherence, 3. examination results and 4. the workload dimension in the coordination approach.

3.1 Engagement

Explicit feedback from lecturers and instructors shows a high level of engagement, which can be explained in part 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 opportunity to participate in each*

other's lectures and exchange of PPTs (Lecturer)

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

... I have been only 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)

Contrary to the above, it should also be pointed out that there were several 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, and to forward lecture descriptions and reading guides, etc.

3.2 Sense of coherence

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

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

Your efforts to coordinate the lecture series has definitely 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 expressed frustration regarding the lack of overview:

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 become clearer (Student)

Nice, with a clearly-defined framework and process (Student)

3.2.1 Supervision as relational coordination

In the context of relational coordination, efficiency is increased and quality and job satisfaction enhanced when employees learn to respect each other's jobs and work together towards a common goal (Gittell, 2009; Gittell, Seidner & Wimbush, 2010). Along those lines, instructors continuously emphasized the learning and developmental aspects of participating in team supervision which 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)

(coordinator's) presence with professional sparring at the initial and ongoing meetings...you showed openness to new ways and ideas and provided academic support when needed (Instructor)

3.3 Examination results

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

Instructors and several students reported that a visit from the course coordinator was important and positive and enhanced the focus on 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 reflected a higher level of taxonomy compared with previous years. A comparison of average grades over the past four years, (from 7,5 to 8,6 on a 12 point grading scale) supports this positive trend.

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 Workload

As mentioned above, it was not all teachers who engaged in the joint activities. And finding time seems to be the issue here:

I can barely find time to attend 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 financial in character, an extended engagement beyond the current two-hour initial meeting may conflict with 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 solely to engage lecturers and instructors who are interested in and willing to participate in coordination activities and work according to the agreed cooperative parameters.

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

4. Conclusion

Both qualitative and quantitative data provide indications of the positive impact of relational coordination in course planning. Qualitative data indicate overall satisfaction with the intervention among lecturers and students, and the quantitative data show that the students perform better in their final exam compared with the performance of students in the years prior to the intervention.

The intervention can be regarded as a pilot study, harvesting experience from a structured and targeted course coordination model, and this experience can ideally be applied to other subjects that involve course coordination within the Department. Focusing on subject coordination as a tool to promote enhanced alignment could contribute to further professional development of the study. Thus, for example, it could form the basis for academic, teaching-related and didactic discussions between course coordinators and lecturers at the Department.

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