

Documenting the parameters of effective SoTL counselling

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ABSTRACT: The Specialized Master in Higher Education Pedagogy (Formasup) organized at the University of Liège (Belgium) aims at the professional development of teachers involved in Higher Education. The training programme gives participants the opportunity to make a full-scale SoTL study (from the implementation of a well-circumscribed course regulation to the assessment of its pedagogical effectiveness by means of the analysis of collected data) of one prominent aspect of their teaching practice. The process of trying out some new pedagogical approach and of discussing its effects on student learning has also to be reported in the form of a scientific paper (including a short review of the relevant pedagogical literature) and presented to a small audience of teacher colleagues. In order to meet the many requirements of such a complex task, each participant benefits from individualized pedagogical counselling. Besides a brief description of the Formasup context, the present contribution proposes brief case studies of three SoTL projects carried out in 2016. The case studies focus mainly on the dynamics of the interaction between teacher and pedagogical counsellor at each constitutive step of the SoTL project with the intention of making out the specificities of counselling applied to first time SoTL experience (time dedicated to and types of counselling activities in relation to the particularities of individual projects). The case studies are then integrated into a bigger picture drawing upon a larger number of counselling experiences over the last four years (from 2013 to 2016). On the basis of the main characteristics of 21 counselling experiences we propose a typology of teacher profiles according to their strategic approach to SoTL and the corresponding input of counselling.

1 FORMASUP AND SOTL

The Specialized Master in Higher Education Pedagogy (Formasup) organized at the University of Liège (Belgium) aims at the professional development of Higher Education teachers. Among other things, the Formasup programme gives teacher-participants the opportunity to conduct a full-scale SoTL research. Choosing SoTL (short for “Scholarship of Teaching and Learning”) as a means of enhancing teaching quality and of developing professionally is meanwhile widely acknowledged: “[SoTL] stimulates you to think about your teaching and what you expect students to gain from it. It enriches both your conceptual thinking about education and your repertoire of skills.” (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011, p. 343)

The SoTL research is embedded in one of the three main Formasup modules, the one called “Regulation of teaching and evaluation practice”. The module amounts to 18 ECTS (out of the 60 ECTS of the whole programme) and takes place in the second half of the academic year, from February to May, with summative evaluation either in June or in August. The span of time dedicated to the SoTL project is rather short, participants have to shoulder a heavy work load. By the way, the time consuming aspect of SoTL often acts as deterrent: “Time constraints are one of the most substantial barriers to faculty engagement in scholarly activities related to teaching and learning (Goldszmidt et al., 2008; McKinney, 2007; Zimbrowski et al., 2008).” (Kenny & Evers, 2010)

In order to initiate their SoTL project participants have to single out an innovating aspect of their teaching practice in relation to one of their courses. The innovative course regulation often consists in trying out some new activities (i.e. problem-based learning, case studies, group work, field work, experiential learning...) in an otherwise routine context, with a view to enhancing student learning and motivation to learn. Participants have been led to reflect on their course regulation before starting the SoTL module.

The SoTL project is an individual project inasmuch as teaching parameters (discipline, context, target group, experience...) vary with each participant. Consequently, the course regulation central to the SoTL research also differ. The element which federates the individual projects lies in the methodology participants have to adopt in order to investigate the effects of their course regulation on student learning and motivation. The imposed methodology is largely inspired by the traditional components of SoTL: “Glassick, Huber, and Maeroff (1997) outline six criteria for scholarship: evidence of clear goals, adequate preparation, appropriate methods, significant results, effective presentation, and reflective critique. Scholarship of teaching and learning is about planning, assessing, and modifying one’s teaching (Boyer, 1990; Sorcinelli, 2002), a cycle which will be recognizable to anyone familiar with action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982) or reflective practice (Schön, 1983). Huber and Hutchings (2005) describe a process of “framing questions, gathering and exploring evidence, trying out and refining new insights in the classroom, and going public...in ways others can build on” (p. 21).” (Simmons, 2008)

The step-by-step methodology imposed to Formasup participants leans on the standard format of a publication in a scientific journal. Thus, participants have to take action and generate information in order to report progress on their SoTL project according to the following items:

- A description of the main characteristics of the implemented course regulation and of the problem which prompted that regulation as well as a justification of its appropriateness by means of references to the relevant pedagogical literature. Such information makes up the introduction of the research article. It ends with the phrasing of a research question and hypotheses focussing on the expected effects of course regulation on student learning and motivation.
- A relatively detailed description of the teaching and learning activities corresponding to the course regulation, a brief characterization of the target group as well as a synopsis of the various moments of data collection make up the methods section of the communication. Concerning data to be collected, links with hypotheses have to be explained and three types of data have to be combined: participation, perception and performance. Instruments of data collection will be appended to the final version of the research article.
- Figures, tables and/or charts make up the results section of the article and present the collected data which will serve either to confirm or to infirm the initial hypotheses of the classroom research. Each figure has to be self-explanatory and clearly named.
- The discussion section has to explain what the results presented in the previous section mean. In other words, results have to shed light on the research question and lead to either confirmation or contradiction of the hypotheses. References to literature can be used to back up the arguments supported by data.
- The communication ends with perspectives which appraise the main effects of the course regulation and – in accordance with the iterative process of regulation – point out to new possibilities of pedagogical improvement.
- A bibliography listing the publications that have been referred to in the previous sections has to complete the final version of the article.

Clearly, that first approach to SoTL research as it is organized within Formasup is strictly delineated and quite prescriptive in regard to methodology. Two occasions for communication are also provided: one to Formasup peers and instructors and another to teacher colleagues not involved in Formasup. The communication format is a poster which synthesizes the contents of the research article. Dissemination is usually regarded as an integral part of SoTL: “Teachers who engage in scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) take what the scholarly teacher does one step further and “go public” with their work – making it available to colleagues in a public forum and accessible to peer review. This one step represents a change in practice that can transform casual observations about student learning into scholarly work that frames the questions, systematically gathers and explores evidence, reflects on and refines new ideas, and crafts the results in a form that is suitable for public presentation.” (Fenton & Szala-Meneok, 2011)

In order to meet the SoTL agenda as described above, the demands in terms of anticipation, organization and formalization are such that clear guidelines are necessary. Besides guidance by means of prescriptive methodology transmitted and richly illustrated during the few collective face-to-face sessions of the SoTL module, participants can count on the individualized support of a pedagogical

counsellor. Counselling is bent on empowering participants to carry out their classroom research and to account for it in the form of a research article. Regular face-to-face or Skype sessions (see the distance version of the programme) with the counsellor enable participants to evolve their project in accordance with the Formasup standards. Resorting to mentorship to facilitate SoTL research is not new: “Situational support for SoTL research in complex academic (institutional, curricula and/or classroom) settings enhances the possibilities for such research in the already busy lives of academics and contextualises theory in meaningful environments, thereby holding more relevance and immediate impact for both mentor and mentee (Hansman, 2001).” (Hubball, Clarke & Poole, 2010)

Counselling dedicated to the SoTL project of Formasup participants is not strictly unidirectional inasmuch as each participant is in control of what happens in his or her classroom (Poole, Taylor & Thompson, 2007). It means that the counsellor has to rely on information delivered by the participant in order to give useful advice. Often enough, mentoring develops into fruitful and mutually stimulating collaboration for the benefit of the research project. If the dynamics of collaboration greatly facilitate progress towards achievement, it complicates the summative evaluation of the research article by blurring the respective contributions of participant and counsellor to its final version. One way to avoid such ‘muddle’ would be to assess also the process leading to the end-of-module production. But it would probably imply revising the modalities of mentoring.

2 CASE STUDIES

The next part of this paper focuses on brief case studies of three SoTL projects carried out in 2016. The aim of the case studies is to highlight the specificities of counselling in relation to the individual profiles of participants, especially regarding their strengths and weaknesses when confronted with SoTL methodology as described above. The studies will then be integrated into a bigger picture drawing upon a larger number of counselling experiences over the last four years (from 2013 to 2016). On the basis of the main characteristics of 21 counselling experiences we propose a typology of teacher profiles according to their strategic approach to SoTL and the corresponding input of counselling. The proposition is mainly empirical but we shall see that it touches on observations shared by literature.

2.1 Case 1

In 2016 a young foreign teacher registered for the distance version of the Formasup programme. At the time she worked at the veterinary department of her university where she was in charge of practical work. She centred her SoTL project on the investigation of the effects of regular formative evaluation on student engagement and performance in relation to bovine semiology. Time dedicated to mentoring her project amounted to 53 hours divided up into eight methodological stages as shown in figure 1 below. The final version of the research article was scored 15/20 by both Formasup lecturers in charge of summative evaluation.

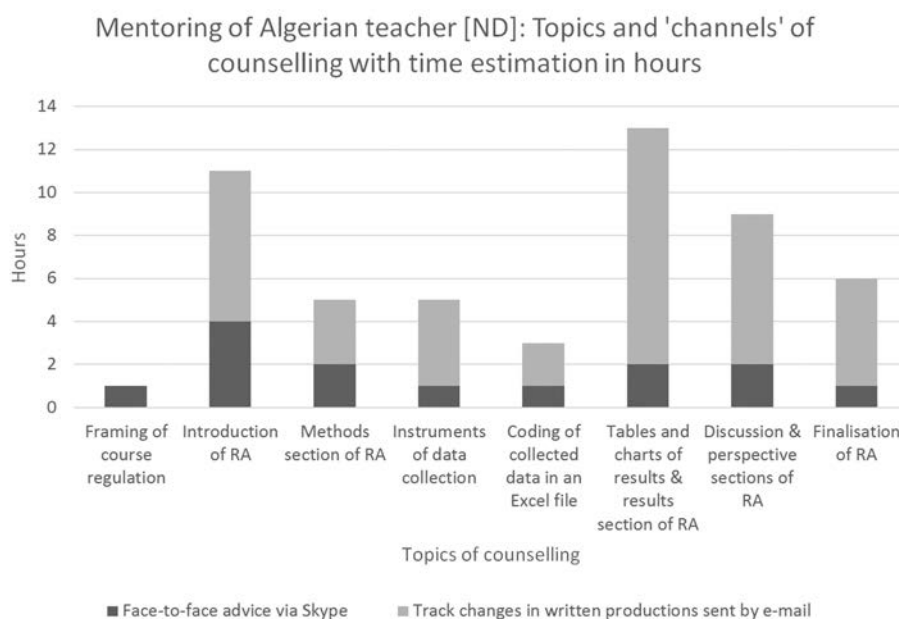


Fig. 1. Mentoring of foreign teacher [ND]

2.2 Case 2

Among the Belgian teachers who registered in 2015-2016 for the face-to-face version of the Formasup programme was a young female assistant working at the veterinary department of the University of Liège. She centred her SoTL project on the investigation of the effects of group work on student engagement and performance in relation to autopsy practical work. Time dedicated to mentoring her project amounted to 35 hours divided up into eight methodological stages as shown in figure 2 below. The final version of the research article was scored 16/20 by both Formasup lecturers in charge of summative evaluation.

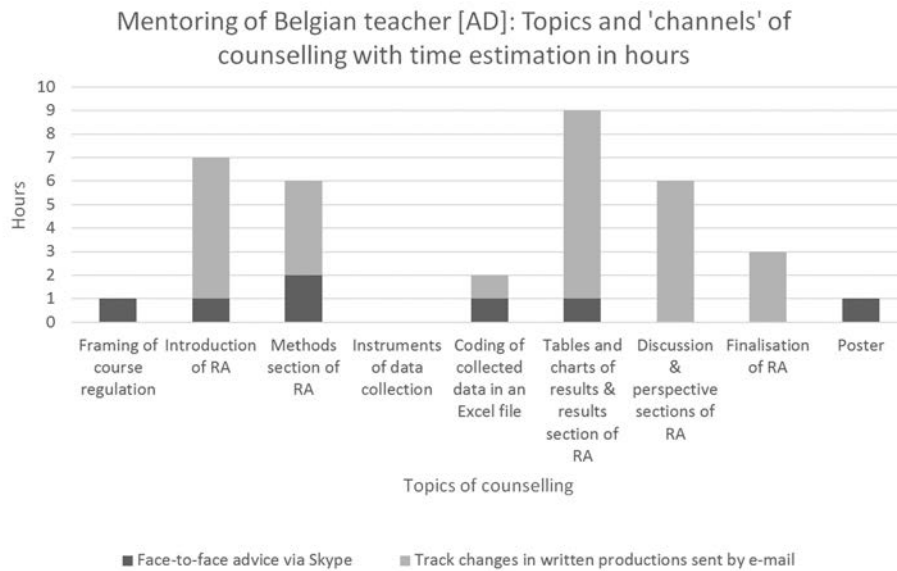


Fig. 2. Mentoring of Belgian teacher [AD]

2.3 Case 3

One Belgian participant who enrolled last year in the distance version of Formasup taught in the geriatrics section of an academic institution located in Namur. She centred her SoTL project on the investigation of the effects of group work on developing the competence of situated inquiry. Time dedicated to mentoring her project amounted to 46 hours divided up into eight methodological stages as shown in figure 3 below. The final version of the research article was scored 17/20 by both Formasup lecturers in charge of summative evaluation.

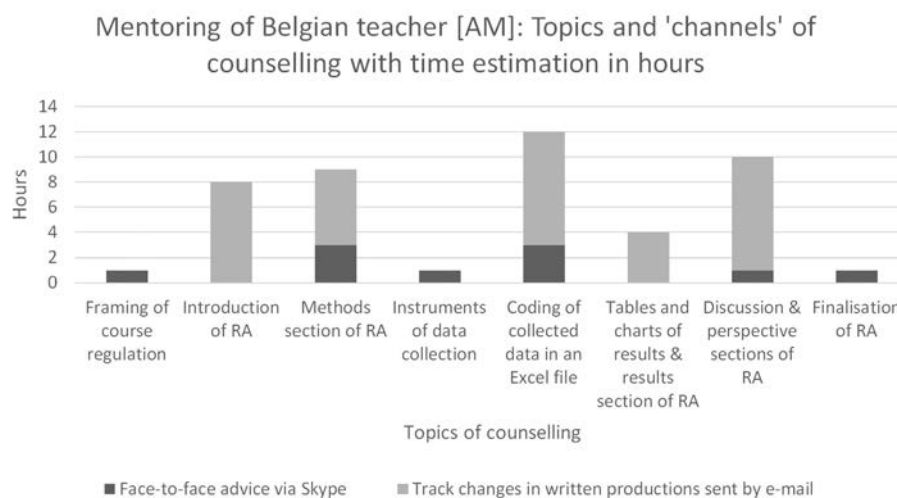


Fig. 3. Mentoring of Belgian teacher [AM]

Despite interpersonal differences in terms of teaching practice and project orientation, the counselling tasks are nearly similar for the three participants. The similarities can be explained by the strong methodological emphasis of counselling. However, the total amount of time dedicated to counselling varies quite significantly. Distance participation requires more one-to-one interaction to make up for the

absence of collective sessions. Otherwise, time fluctuations mainly depend on individual characteristics such as self-confidence, quick understanding, autonomy, foreknowledge... Interestingly, the portion of counselling dedicated to 'hands-on' feedback consisting in annotating written productions is much bigger for all three participants than more generic advice on the next step to take. The strong collaborative aspect of SoTL mentoring is probably one distinguishing feature of Formasup. It can be accounted for by the demands of the agenda. Moreover, much attention is paid to the fact that participants should have the opportunity to experience SoTL from beginning to end instead of getting stuck in the middle of it. Interpersonal variations in terms of methodological support focuses can also be observed, depending on individual affinities with one or another methodological aspect of SoTL research. Surprisingly enough, the creation of tables and charts on the basis of data encoded in an Excel file represents a challenge for two teachers (cases 1 and 2), whereas the main difficulty encountered by the third one (case 3) lies in encoding data in the Excel file. One would actually expect that the ability to handle Excel is something that can be taken for granted.

Let us now compare our observations about individualized follow-up with other experiences of SoTL mentoring. According to Hubball, Clarke & Poole (2010), "data suggest that SoTL mentors [perform] three critical and iterative roles to assist faculty members to conduct SoTL research." The three roles identified by the authors are:

1. Modelling SoTL practice:
"Questioning skills and critical feedback [...] were applied in a positive, specific, timely and constructive manner in order to prompt an action plan for further development." (Hubball, Clarke & Poole, 2010)
2. Facilitating SoTL research:
"Essentially mentors assisted faculty members to set and pursue SoTL goals; to stimulate discussion and critically reflect upon processes and outcomes of SoTL research. [...] Mentors continuously monitored individual progress toward SoTL project completion (ranging from a comprehensive SoTL research proposal to a submitted manuscript or abstract to a peer-reviewed academic conference or journal), though gradually phased out their involvement while remaining available and providing intermittent encouragement and constructive feedback." (Hubball, Clarke & Poole, 2010)
3. Enabling SoTL networking:
"Drawing upon previous roles, SoTL mentors were able to 'open doors' in the academic community by introducing faculty to key people who shared similar SoTL interests and/or academic units and SoTL networks that can help 'make things happen' (e.g., collaborative projects leading to publication, potential grant funding opportunities, enrolment in the UBC Institute for the scholarship of teaching and learning, conferences, seminars)." (Hubball, Clarke & Poole, 2010)

Clearly, SoTL counselling such as practised within Formasup mainly consists in modelling and facilitating SoTL research while networking is replaced by two opportunities of communication: one in the presence of Formasup peers and another in the presence of teacher colleagues. However, it sometimes happens that participants present their SoTL research at a conference on higher education.

Concerning the general positive impetus of SoTL counselling, we fully agree with Hubball, Clarke & Poole (2010): "Essentially, mentoring encouraged SoTL researchers to think systematically in realistic settings about meaningful insights and improvements they could make to relevant aspects of their academic practice. Furthermore, mentoring was personally and professionally fulfilling through critical discussion, collaboration, and the transfer of ideas."

3 TYPOLOGY OF PROFILES OF TEACHERS ENGAGED IN SOTL RESEARCH

In four years we helped 21 Formasup participants to conduct their SOTL research, only one teacher did not achieve it. Those experiences of individualized counselling enabled us to distinguish several profiles of teachers engaged in SoTL and to develop adequate support. The profiles are empirically based. The following information regarding personal involvement in the SoTL project was taken into consideration: the teaching background of participants, the number of times they initiate interaction with the counsellor, the number of times they react productively to feedback from the counsellor, the frequency with which the counsellor intervenes in written productions and the score obtained for the final version of the research article.

Here are the five profiles we have encountered up to now:

Autonomous participants (4 out of 21):

Main features:

- They have a solid teaching experience (they are capable of elaborating convincing teaching and learning environments)
- They have research experience in their field (they can use literature and conduct scientific research)
- They communicate easily (oral and written expression)
- They easily conform to the specificities of SoTL research
- They engage with definite success in their SoTL project

Support: The counsellor explains the specificities of SoTL and validates the implementation of methodology by means of occasional advice and proofreading.

Resourceful participants (3 out of 21):

Main features:

- They are willing to question their teaching practice in order to improve it
- They take initiatives and they react quickly to advice and feedback
- They appropriate quickly the new methodology and develop autonomy
- They engage with definite success in their SoTL project

Support: The counsellor guides the implementation of methodology step by step by means of regular advice and proofreading.

Novice participants (6 out of 21):

Main features:

- They are willing to question their teaching practice in order to improve it
- They do not take initiatives but they react to advice and feedback
- They appropriate step by step the new methodology without much trace of autonomy
- They engage with enough success in their SoTL project

Support: The counsellor guides the implementation of methodology step by step by means of regular advice and in-depth proofreading.

Chaotic participants (7 out of 21):

Main features:

- Their motivation to improve their teaching practice is equivocal (mixed interest for teaching activities and career prospects)
- They take initiatives and they react to advice and feedback at irregular intervals (depending on morale or pressure of work)
- They appropriate spasmodically the new methodology and often gain more confidence at the end of the process
- They eventually manage to complete their SoTL project with enough success

Support: The counsellor sends follow-up messages, encourages to go on and guides the implementation of methodology by means of advice and in-depth proofreading each time participants call for support.

Abdicating participants (1 out of 21):

Main features:

- Their motivation to improve their teaching practice is difficult to see through
- They do not frankly engage in their project and they hardly react to advice and feedback
- They do not really appropriate the new methodology
- They do not complete their project

Support: The counsellor sends follow-up messages, encourages to go on and guides the implementation of methodology by means of advice each time the occasion arises.

4 CONCLUSION

Our main insights into the workings of pedagogical counselling related to SoTL are: the demanding character of SoTL within the framework of pedagogical training (time investment and task engagement), the prominence of methodological concerns, evidence for two generic types of counselling input (modelling and facilitating SoTL research), variation of methodological challenges according to individual strengths and weaknesses, the pitfalls of written communication about the SoTL experience (proofreading is often necessary) and the open question of SoTL as learning experience within Formasup. The rewarding aspect of the experimentation with SoTL are the expressions of pride and gratitude from the teachers who took up the challenge of making their teaching practice an object of study.

This counsellors' SoTL work on SoTL's work by participants is an exploratory work. Case studies and profiles are not meant to be generalized but to serve as an initial blueprint to examine a broader range of pedagogical counselling cases and test the robustness of this first analysis.

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