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## **Challenging Frameworks for Understanding Teaching Practices in Higher Education: The End or the Beginning?**

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# Challenging frameworks for understanding teaching practices in higher education: the end or the beginning?

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## Abstract

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Dominant conceptions of teaching in higher education imply that, essentially, there are two types of teaching approaches: the 'content' and the 'student-focused' approach. Against that background, this paper has a dual purpose. On the one hand, it initiates a critique of the contemporary teaching approaches framework. On the other hand, it offers some suggestions as to an appropriate methodology for researching teaching in higher education, given its critique of the teaching approaches framework. The methodology here is built around a detailed description and analysis of the teaching practices of two lecturers from different disciplinary fields in a Spanish university. Building on an observation of the micro-level of their teaching practices and taking into account students' experiences, it is suggested that broad *a priori* categories are always going to be inadequate in capturing teaching practices in higher education.

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**Keywords:** teaching practices, student learning, qualitative study.

This paper has a dual purpose. On the one hand, it offers a critique of a dominant trend in conceptualizing teaching approaches in higher education. In offering this critique, I shall suggest that the micro-character of teaching practices is too complex to be adequately conceptualized through the categories that dominate the teaching and learning literature (mainly the categories referring to the ‘content-focused’ and the ‘student-focused’ approach (Prosser, Trigwell & Taylor, 1994; Trigwell & Prosser, 1996a, 1996b; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Kember & Kwan, 2000; Akerlind, 2003)). On the other hand, I want to make a suggestion as to the methodologies used to understand teaching in higher education, namely to encourage a qualitative study that privileges the investigation of teaching *in situ*. (Below, I describe and analyze in some detail the teaching practices used by two lecturers). These two aspects of this paper – conceptualization and methodology – support each other. The argument requires a particular methodology and the methodology helps to substantiate the argument.

Influential researchers in higher education, particularly from the phenomenographic tradition (Prosser et al., 1994; Trigwell & Prosser, 1996a, 1996b; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Kember & Kwan, 2000; Akerlind, 2003) have mainly distinguished two types of teaching approaches: the teacher or so-called content-centred approach and the often-named student-centred approach. These two concepts do not represent the only positions on the axis that they open up. Between the two of them, additional categories may be found reflecting other positions on that continuum. Some authors (Ramsden, 2003; Parpala & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2007) suggest that the student-centred approach promotes students’ construction of knowledge, so ensuring that appropriate learning takes place, unlike the content-centred approach which conceives the teacher as a source of knowledge and the student as a more or less passive recipient of content or information. At the same time, the notion of teaching approaches has been criticized because it does not take into account the teaching context and it tends to reduce teaching to a ‘technology of behaviour’ (Malcolm & Zukas, 2001, p. 36).

The research here, based on a qualitative research perspective, addresses these issues by offering a detailed analysis of the teaching practices of two university lecturers in different fields of knowledge. Their teaching practices are analysed *in situ* together with the ways in which they tried to promote learning. Deliberately here, attention is paid less to the teachers' conceptions of their teaching approaches – an issue that has been frequently addressed (Postareff, 2007; Lindblom-Ylänne, Trigwell, Nevgi & Ashwin, 2006; Kember & Kwan 2000; Postareff & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2008) - and much more on their actual teaching practices. The research questions were: How precisely do these teachers teach? Which kind of pedagogical resources do they employ? In which ways were they enabling students' learning?

This study attempts to deepen contemporary understandings of teaching practices in universities by means of a methodology that requires a long period of observation in the classroom, involving both a thick description (Geertz, 1973) and analysis of the lessons, and triangulating that data with the students' viewpoints (gained through interviews). This method allows the formation of an understanding of the complexities in the micro-level of practice, a matter that has been hitherto explored largely in a restricted way, characteristically relying on questionnaires and interviews with teachers in order to detect their teaching approaches (Postareff & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2008), to elicit reflection on their teaching practices (McAlpine & Weston, 2000) or to explore their thoughts and beliefs on effective teaching, self-efficacy of teaching and the criteria by which to judge one's own teaching practices (Dunkin, 2002). Despite these many gains, such a reliance on questionnaires and interviews has perhaps not fully revealed the nature of teaching in universities.

### **Theoretical framework**

There is a kind of consensus on the components of effective teaching in higher education. According to Knight (2002), a mission of higher education is to promote complex learning or, as in Biggs' (1999) words, a deep learning. Good teaching practices at university are related to deep learning approaches that favor the construction of meaning (Borko

& Livingston, 1989) so relegating approaches that saturate the student with information in order to pass an exam and which in turn encourage a surface learning approach (Bain, 2006; Knight, 2002).

The literature has also identified approaches to teaching in practice over the last thirty years (Akerlind, 2003; Dall’Allba, 1991; Kember, 1997; Kember & Kwan, 2000; Prosser et al., 1994; Postareff & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2008; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Samuelowicz & Bain, 2001; Trigwell & Prosser, 1996a, 1996b). Much of this work has observed a “continuum between transmissive and facilitative conceptions” (Fanghanel, 2009, p. 15), so observing a distinction between content-centred approaches on the one hand and student-centred approaches on the other. In the first approach, the teacher’s focus is on explaining concepts, and enacting routines for students to follow. Conversely, in the student-centred approach, the teacher acts as a facilitator and mediator of learning. In this way, students’ roles and participation are active while learning. Some authors also say that a larger repertoire of pedagogical resources is usually deployed in this latter approach (Coffey & Gibbs, 2002).

Nevertheless, these analyses of teaching do not seem to capture entirely the character of teaching since they describe conceptions of teaching from a strong cognitive/psychological point of view and insufficiently take into account the social context of teaching practices (Ashwin & McLean, 2005). It has also been said that these conceptions of teaching reduce teaching to a “performative, individualized and psychologised task” (Fanghanel, 2009, p. 17). These studies usually use surveys or interviews with teachers (Postareff & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2008) and seldom take into account students’ points of view. Accordingly, the study here privileges a method which attempts to offer a different angle in exploring the character of teaching in the classroom and the felt experience of students, and so begins to illuminate the richness and complexity of teaching in higher education.

### **Method**

This study has been carried out using a qualitative approach that conceives teaching practices as contextual in nature (Clandinin, 1992).

Such practices are restricted to a particular time and space and interpretable in a specific way in particular contexts. Specifically, the methodological approach of this study was carried out through a case study in a Spanish university. By ‘case’ here is meant a unit of analysis occurring in a defined context and in a specific time and place that has an identity with an individual, a small group, an organization, a community or an episode or event that has taken place (Huberman & Miles, 1994; Creswell, 1998; Yin, 2003). In order to carry out an inquiry characterized by a comprehensive, systematic, detailed and careful examination of lectures’ teaching practices in the classroom (Stake, 2005) it was decided that only two cases would be involved in this study – a matter that is explained in the following section.

## **Participants**

Using an ‘intentional sample’ (Patton, 1990), two lecturers were selected taking into account the following criteria: their academic identities were located in different fields of knowledge (science/humanities); they differed in the kind of subject taught (theoretical/practical; compulsory/not compulsory modules; during the first/last years of the degree); they had some years of teaching experience; their consent to participate in the study and their willingness to be observed in the classroom.

A brief description of the two subjects, named here Olivia and Clare to preserve their anonymity, follows:

-“Olivia” is an Associate Professor of Dentistry with four years of teaching experience. She teaches a core subject in the last year of the Dentistry degree. Her lessons were based on an analysis of clinical cases (making a diagnosis and proposing a treatment for a patient). This analysis was built around three main teaching moments: case presentation, students working in small groups in the assigned tasks and a final closure with the whole class.

-“Clare” is an Associate Professor of Catalan Philology with five years of teaching experience. She teaches two optional subjects open to undergraduate and post-graduate students across the university. Her teaching approach is based on practical exercises and grammatical structures.

Selecting only two university teachers for this study provided an opportunity to study these two unique cases in depth (Bryman, 2008) through several sources and techniques of data collection over a relative long period of time (19 sessions with Olivia and 31 sessions with Clare, across a period of one academic semester).

### **Data collection**

Studies conducted of teaching approaches have often used interviews (Kember & Kwan 2000; Lindblom-Ylänne, Trigwell, Nevgi & Ashwin, 2006; Postareff, 2007; Postareff & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2008). Nevertheless, for this study, it was considered necessary to observe teaching practices *in situ* because it is possible that an individual's espoused rationale as a teacher does not necessarily match his or her actual action in practice (Argyris & Schön, 1978). In an interview, a teacher might declare that s/he prefers to promote an active learning approach among students but, in the classroom, s/he might use an approach that tends to close students' learning experiences.

For this reason, the data were gathered using non participant observations of the lessons taught by the lecturers during an academic semester, paying specific attention to the way in which each lecturer taught. To do so, a descriptive method was used (Evertson & Green, 1989) during the observations. This consists of using thick descriptions of the observed phenomena (Geertz, 1973) without predetermined categories and where the meaning is seen as context specific. These detailed descriptions of what was happening in the classroom explaining the ongoing processes and identifying generic principles and patterns of specific situations were placed in the context of the teaching and pedagogical resources deployed by the two lecturers. The field notes of the observations were transcribed and read on repeated occasions, and the transcriptions were sent to and validated by both participants.

Additionally, two group interviews were conducted with the students of the Dentistry teacher at the end of the semester. The students who participated in these interviews were randomly selected (8 students in each interview). In relation to the students of the Catalan teacher, three interviews were conducted when the semester ended (it was not possible

to conduct group interviews with them because their class schedules overlapped). Again, the recordings were transcribed. Finally, the two teachers were interviewed to explore their perceptions about their teaching practices and the institutional context in which they work. However, these interviews are analysed in another paper.

All procedures were carried out according to the research policies of the university in which the research was conducted.

### **Data analysis**

The analysis was carried out by the author who analyzed all the observations of the teaching activities, and who conducted the focus groups and interviews with students. Specifically, the analysis of information was carried out using an inductive-deductive analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) by means of the software Atlas-ti. This permitted, initially, an identification of codes grounded in the data or first-order concepts (Van Maanen, 1982) for each case: Olivia with 1131 codes and Clare with 1314 codes. After that, these codes were put into groups of categories of a higher level of abstraction and interpretation so going beyond the initial descriptive categories (Punch, 1998) as shown in the following section.

### **Results**

The following broad categories emerging from the data were identified: ‘Pedagogical Method for Collective Learning’ (PMCL) in the case of Olivia (the Dentistry teacher) and ‘Pedagogical Method for Content Teaching’ (PMCT) in the case of Clare (the Catalan Philology teacher) so indicating that the two lecturers adopted different teaching styles. In addition, the category ‘learning facilitation’ was identified within both of the two cases since the two lecturers shared several pedagogical resources which facilitated students’ learning. In other words, there was overlap between their teaching styles.



Table 1  
*Observed teaching styles*

<p><b>O L I V I A</b></p>	<p><b>Pedagogical Method for Collective Learning (PMCL)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working on clinical cases</li> <li>• Promotion of active students' participation</li> <li>• Teacher as a facilitator</li> <li>• Importance of interaction and support between students</li> <li>• Importance of the contents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supporting students' learning</li> <li>• Reorientation of the mistakes made by the students</li> <li>• Linking prior to new knowledge</li> <li>• Constructive questions</li> <li>• Giving clues to solve a task</li> <li>• Didactic interrogation</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Pedagogical tactics for facilitating students' learning (both lecturers)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Response modelling</li> <li>• Anchorage of knowledge</li> <li>• Focusing on main ideas</li> <li>• Handing out of complementary material to solve tasks</li> <li>• Using of verbal and non-verbal language to express disagreement</li> <li>• Inviting the student to modify/improve an answer</li> <li>• Answering students' questions</li> <li>• Collective solving of tasks</li> <li>• Individualized teaching when necessary</li> </ul>	
<p><b>C L A R E</b></p>	<p><b>Pedagogical Method for Content Teaching (PMCT)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working on practical grammar exercises to teach grammar contents</li> <li>• Action initiated by the teacher and followed by the students</li> <li>• Teaching from simple to more complex grammar structures thorough exercises adding theory</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Response modelling</li> <li>• Anchorage of knowledge</li> <li>• Focusing on main ideas</li> <li>• Handing out of complementary material to solve tasks</li> <li>• Using of verbal and non-verbal language to express disagreement</li> <li>• Inviting the student to modify/improve an answer</li> <li>• Answering students' questions</li> <li>• Collective solving of tasks</li> <li>• Individualized teaching when necessary</li> </ul>

## **The Observed Teaching Practices**

The teaching practices of Olivia (PMCL) were built around the study of clinical cases. However, the way Olivia taught her subject suggested that she wanted to promote an active participation among the students in the resolution of the cases presented. Students were led to make connections between any prior knowledge acquired on their degree programme (or elsewhere) and the knowledge required in the immediate classroom situation. In turn, in order to answer the questions being put about the diagnosis and treatment plan, they were led towards integrating their total experience and applying their composite schemas of understanding. The teacher here had a facilitating role, as a mediator of learning. Olivia, who had disciplinary and professional experience as a dentist and as an orthodontist, led the class by giving clues and additional clinical information to the students for them in turn to search for key information that could contribute to the collective resolution of the given problem. Additionally, the atmosphere in the classroom was both task centered and relaxed – typical features of a student-centered approach (Jones, 2007) – an observation that was confirmed by the students who participated in the group:

I think that Olivia taught in a very different way. She used to moderate the students' debate about the clinical cases in order to guide us to reach a proper solution. She used to say 'perhaps it would be better if...or why don't you consider this information?' That way, when we were working in groups, we discussed several options for the case but, then, Olivia used to suggest and guide the discussion.

In the end, everybody used to give his/her opinion about the case...everybody used to participate in the debate because they felt implicated and motivated.

An image that could represent this pedagogical approach is a puzzle with the students fitting the pieces little by little with the help and mediation of Olivia. In this way, one could say that she was progressively giving clues or hints to the students so as to enable them

to fit the pieces together in an integrated and meaningful pattern. This set of learning achievements is represented and summarized in figure 1:

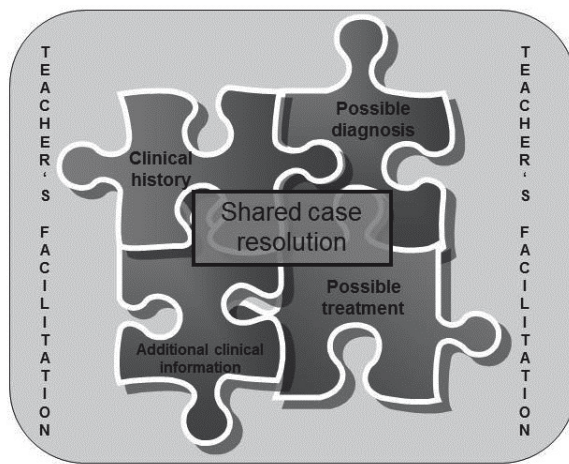


Figure 1. Olivia's teaching

In the second case, the teaching style of Clare (PMCT) centered on the formal contents of the Catalan language, around which the teacher structured the lessons presenting a series of exercises in order for the students both to understand them and to apply them to daily situations. In analyzing Clare's teaching approach, a key distinction can be made. On the one hand, her selection of material was focused on formal aspects of language (mainly based on the acquisition of grammatical rules and competences such as the use of verbs, prepositions and so on). On the other hand, this material was taught in a non-traditional way because her lessons did not consist in the presentation of a series of formal rules and routines to be applied by students in subsequent exercises, but rather the opposite: numerous exercises and examples were followed by a series of explanations of a theoretical kind with a strong focus on the content grammar. She tried to promote a more accessible teaching of Catalan rather than a mere memorizing of grammar or orthographic rules.

In figure 2, it can be seen that Clare's way of teaching is similar to a spiral building on the formal contents. As it elevates, a more complex engagement with the contents appears, supported by the intervention and constant help of the teacher. A kind of horizontal dialectical relationship arises. The theory and the grammatical rules on the one hand and their application on the other hand mutually interact and influence each other in the student's mind through practical grammar exercises set by the teacher, which in turn promoted individual participation.

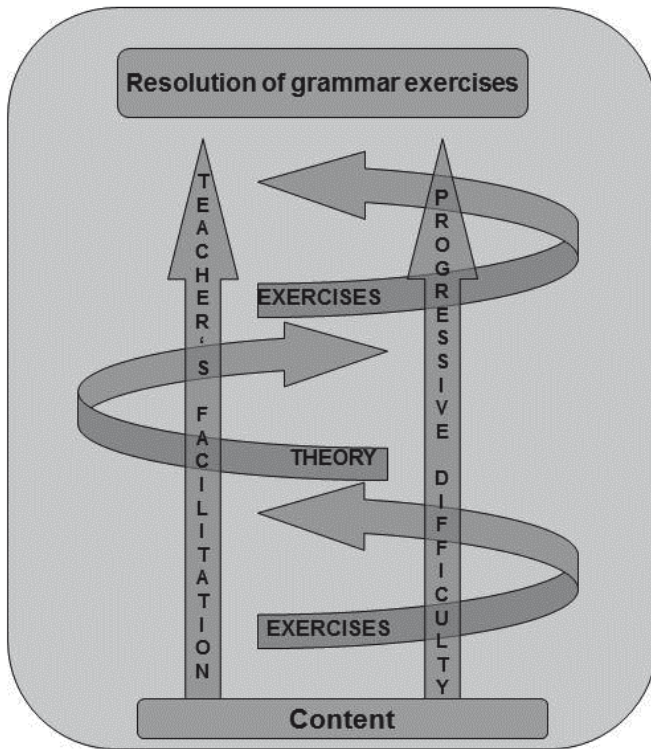


Figure 2. Clare's teaching

During an interview, one of Clare's students commented:

The truth is that I learnt lots from her. She teaches in a way that...by doing lots of exercises and repeating again and again and by giving lots of examples... very good... "And she was teaching grammar... but she chose the proper exercises to teach it and her explanations were very good as well.

On the other hand, it was evident during the observations of Clare that the communicative interactions between teacher and students were initiated by her, and mainly in interactions with individual students. In other words, students did not participate in a self-initiated way but only when the teacher required their participation. Related to this issue was the atmosphere in the classroom: students characteristically remained quiet and focused on the teacher's explanations. The following quotation shows that students' participation depended on the teacher since the class was organized around the contents and the routines she used – a typical feature of a teacher-centered approach (Prosser et al., 1994; Trigwell & Prosser, 1996a, 1996b; Kember, 1997; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Samuelowicz & Bain, 2001; Kember & Kwan, 2000; Akerlind, 2003; Postareff & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2008):

(A student's comment): Sometimes it is difficult to participate unless she asks for participation in an explicit way... some people are shyer or they are not motivated or they don't want to make mistakes... perhaps after insisting more on participation, students would feel more relaxed and would participate in a more spontaneous way.

To sum up these observations, in the case of Olivia, teaching can be conceived as having a strong focus on the student's collective participation in order to solve a clinical case (in dentistry). She focused on stimulating the students' efforts in drawing on their previous knowledge and, in this way, she motivated them to build a shared understanding of the clinical case in a relaxed atmosphere. On the other hand, in the case of Clare, the teacher was focused on the linguistic contents she wanted to convey. The structure of the knowledge that she

was conveying and the way she was teaching the students through exercises were at the core of her teaching approach. In this way, she promoted a progressive understanding of complex contents by the students, mainly by explicitly inviting students to participate as individuals.

### **Facilitating learning among students**

At one level, we are presented here with two differing styles in the teaching of two different subjects: one approach built around students' collective participation and shared knowledge and understanding in tackling clinical cases and one style built around students, as individuals, tackling linguistic and grammar exercises. However, there were significant common elements between the teaching styles of Olivia and Clare, in particular in the support that the two teachers gave to the students and a concern on the part of both teachers for their respective discipline. This means that while focusing on their subject, the teachers gave to their students not only direct and deliberate assistance in the resolution of a given task, but also structured those elements so as to allow students to learn at a deep and personal level either by solving an exercise in an individual way (Clare) or in proposing a collective diagnosis or treatment for a case (Olivia). In this way, both teachers used a wide repertoire of pedagogical resources and gave clues for the learning needed to accomplish the resolution of a task. So they gently guided the students' learning and solutions and, in the process, they triggered meta-cognitive processes appropriate to the discipline in question.

Thus, after a student made a mistake in the resolution of an exercise, Clare (Catalan language) could frequently be observed to give the student clues in order to orient his/her thinking and so identify the right answer. Through this strategy, besides enabling the student to realize the mistake made, and in what way it had occurred, Clare invited the student to try again through a new approach to the problem/exercise. So she made sure of getting a full understanding of the matter in hand as can be seen through the following quotation that comes from one of the classroom observations:

Clare writes on the board the first person of the verbs :`reure, seure, beure, attendre´ (they are similar in conjugation.) Now she asks the student who made a mistake. Clare writes down the verb on the board and writes in brackets the ending that corresponds to the pronoun. Now the student answers correctly, Clare says `good´ and writes down the conjugation on the board.

A student commented on this during the interview: `When you make mistakes she insists on giving several examples in order to give the correct answer. And then, when one tries again, it is much easier...´

Also, when either teacher saw that the solution or answer given by students was wrong or incomplete, each asked the students in question to verbalize as to how they had come by that result. They looked to students to explain their own reasoning by beginning at the starting point of their mental processes, and, as they described this process, both teachers supported and facilitated the student in reaching the desired end-point, as can be seen in the following observations:

Observing Olivia (dentistry): `Now Olivia goes back to the group and she asks how they got to explain the issue about the medium line. She asks the students to draw the explanation and to explain to her. The students do it, hesitatingly. Now Olivia goes to another group and resumes the idea of the medium line. One male student explains in more detail. Olivia says he is right, but she gives suggestions for the group to calculate it in a more precise way.´

Observing Clare (Catalan language): `A male student answers correctly. Clare asks him why he did it that way, using an apostrophe. He starts explaining, he begins well, but then he gets confused with the explanation. Clare is helping him and giving him clues so as to know when to use an apostrophe or not´

This kind of pedagogical questioning is closely related to what Medina Moya (2007) calls `constructive questions´. Such questions, apart from promoting students´ participation and cognitive elaboration, also encourage them to relate their prior knowledge

and experiences, and to establish connections with topics through a dialogue between the teacher and the students. The teacher initiates the learning in the desired way. At the same time, the students were tacitly being encouraged to construct their own internal maps of their knowledge. This construction is both individual and shared as the questions are answered by the teachers through their action and by the students through their answers.

The lecturers made frequent use of questions. Questions that are linked and related to a particular topic have also been designated by Medina Moya (op.cit.) as ‘didactic interrogation’. This kind of questioning was frequent and useful in eliciting students’ motivation and engagement with the task. The teachers were not looking to prompt large debates or reflections. On the contrary, the questions engendered a concentration and motivation for learning and were the basis for the construction of more complex understandings

There were other resources that both of the two teachers shared during their lessons in order to assist their students’ learning, for example response modeling (students’ replication of a response given by the lecturers); anchorage of knowledge (establishing connections between prior knowledge and new concepts or ideas); explicitly identifying key concepts or ideas (scaffolding); handing out complementary material to solve a task; and using verbal and non-verbal language to express disagreement and inviting a student to modify/improve an answer. Some of these pedagogical resources are reflected in Table 2:



Table 2

*Pedagogical Resources used by both teachers*

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<p><i>Pedagogical resource:</i> Knowledge anchorage (encouraging students to recall content seen in the lesson or previously)</p>	
<p><i>‘Olivia reminds the students about the topic of ethiopatogenic and its diagnosis; and does this by asking the students about previous sessions’</i></p>	<p><i>‘Now Clare asks the students to open their books. She reviews what they saw yesterday. She asks X to recall the recommendations to travel that a student had made. She also says that anyone can participate. Clare continues by asking the students to remember and to review the structures “cal” and “has de”’</i></p>
<p><i>Pedagogical resource:</i> Summary, repetition/reiteration and focalization of ideas, concepts or key ideas (of the subject and its contents) and making sure that everyone has understood the main ideas</p>	
<p><i>‘Olivia is developing the formula and explains how they are going to do a calculation (cephalometry). She asks if they follow her; She continues developing the formula. She explains if the value is normal or not. She asks the students to interrupt her if they do not get it, because she did not like it when they cannot understand.’</i></p>	<p><i>‘Clare says that to finish the class they will do a review exercise using pronouns “hi” and “de”. She explains the instructions. She makes a summary about when to use “hi” and “de”. She gives examples that the students must solve, then she explains again.’</i></p>

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Another important element was the ability of both teachers to answer the students' questions. There were just a few occasions when a topic related to the subject was not fully explained. When this happened, both teachers promised to find further information before the next class. In the case of Olivia, she sought advice from other colleagues or let them take part during the lesson in order to give the students a satisfactory explanation.

Olivia (Dentistry) was particularly keen to promote groupwork among the students, who were encouraged to work on the clinical cases in small groups, seeking collective resolutions. In their groups, the students helped each other by, for example, analyzing different viewpoints and giving suggestions about the case, correcting each others' mistakes, giving ideas, and expressing doubts to each other. If they could not solve each other's difficulties, they asked the teacher for help. During this groupwork, the students tried to solve the clinical case as if it was a puzzle; it was similar to an investigation process in which the students did their best to gather clues of the case focusing their attention on relevant aspects, debating suggestions and forecasting results.

Olivia's students commented on this during the group interview: 'When we are working in groups it happens that somebody always knows more about the topic than oneself and that is good. It is an input for everybody' 'Or sometimes oneself is focused on an issue and your classmate says "why don't we take this into account ..."; and that helps you lots because you can see new things and perspectives on the case.'

On the other hand, both teachers supplied answers only as a last resort. There were also several episodes when both Olivia and Clare realized that a student had dropped behind or could not thoroughly understand a procedure; then they would stop to pay exclusive attention to the student's difficulties. Sometimes, the students themselves asked explicitly for the teacher to guide them, to solve doubts or to confirm information.

A comment by a student of Clare during the interview: “I really liked it because, in that way, you can see why you are failing, and she gives you information, she helps you when she realizes you cannot do it by yourself”

In other words, both teachers shared a strong interest in their discipline and their command over their discipline and a teaching approach strongly informed/influenced by a care for their students.

It will be recalled that the two teachers belonged to different disciplines, each discipline having a particular epistemological position and concerns. One was a modern languages teacher with concerns both for the language in question and for the practical acquisition and development of basic abilities in the learning of the language. It is possible to say that she had a more content focused style of teaching but was centered on organizing it in order to promote individual learning. The other teacher, from dentistry, was oriented to the integration of formal propositional knowledge and the development of practical knowledge; she was more student-oriented. Neither of the teacher’s lessons were based in the transmission of contents in a direct way, but were more oriented towards helping their students to find by themselves the solution of a given problem (whether in a collective or in an individual way) and, in that way, to deepen their own personal understanding of the subject.

### **Discussion**

Both of the teachers in this study appeared to be highly motivated towards their students and were striving to be effective in their teaching, trying to help all of their students to advance their learning. However, the two teachers had each developed their own way of teaching, utilizing a specific blend of pedagogical resources so as to promote deep personal meaning and understanding among their students. One lecturer did this through the resolution of clinical cases, involving an active and collective participation of the students working in groups; the second lecturer focused mainly on imparting knowledge and growing students’ understandings through their undertaking and solving practical exercises in an individual way.

If the data collected in this study were to be analyzed using the teaching approaches framework proposed by the literature (Akerlind, 2003; Kember, 1997; Kember & Kwan, 2000; Prosser et al., 1994; Postareff & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2008; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Samuelowicz & Bain, 2001; Trigwell & Prosser, 1996a, 1996b), it would be plausible to say that the two lecturers occupy separate positions in a spectrum of teaching approaches. The Dentistry teacher had developed an approach that was relatively student-centred, her teaching being more focused on interaction, students' participation and collective learning. Such a categorization of the approach here – as relatively student-centred – however, fails to do justice to the signal presence of the complex field of dentistry, at once intellectual and professional, that served as the pivot of the pedagogical process. The field provided a crucial third element, additional to the teacher and the students.

On the other hand, the Catalan teacher had developed a more content-centred teaching method, her teaching practices being built around and focused on understanding the rules of a language. The latter does not mean that the student's role was passive; on the contrary, the teacher organized the contents in a way so as to facilitate learning. Her role and interventions were key. Despite using an apparently more content-centered approach, the teaching was structured so as to promote an active learning among students. Again, the presence of the intellectual and practice field, here of Catalan, provided the ground on which the complex pedagogical interactions were enacted.

The data described and analyzed in this study, nevertheless, is so rich and complex that it seems not wise to analyze it only through the teaching approach framework. In other words, when analyzing teaching practices *in situ*, the richness of the interactions in the classroom, as they have been described in this paper, is key. An appraisal of the deep structure of the teaching practices studied here reveals a complex set of interactions between the teacher and the students, and between the students themselves. Through these interactions (described in the section 'facilitating learning among students'), learning was facilitated in an active and collective way that allowed the construction of meanings (Mercer, 2000) or a shared knowledge (Piaget, 1934, quoted in Carretero 2004; Vigotsky, 2000). Students actively participated and

were helped by their peers and the teachers - even though they have somewhat different teaching styles - in order to promote both an individual and a social construction of knowledge.

There is here, too, a complex of interactions between the curriculum and the pedagogy: the curriculum may point to a limited pedagogy but the fine structure of the pedagogy - the way in which a lesson is organized, the classroom processes, the students' responses, the teachers' interventions and the interactions between all the members of the classroom situation in a continuous dialogical communication (Bakhtin, 1981) – are all open to infinite possibilities. The curriculum, too, has its own context, that of the intellectual and practical field, with its significance for the teacher in the pedagogical processes.

There were, though, some framing boundaries to these pedagogical situations. The teaching practices of both lecturers were strongly influenced by a care for their students and their learning, matters that were recognized by their students. It appears that both sets of pedagogical structures can lead to effective learning if they are accompanied by a strong concern for students' learning and, thereby, an active concern to promote each student's 'will to learn' (Barnett, 2007).

The students in both cases were encouraged to be authentic in a number of ways, for example, by the teachers giving relevant clues for the resolution of a task or exercise; by response modelling or in their providing an anchorage between the students' prior and new knowledge; when they summed up and reiterated key ideas; when they used didactic interrogation; when they supported the students both individually or in groups in order to favor the solving of problems/tasks. All such techniques helped in the promotion of the students' meta-cognitive processes guided by the teachers, so that the student by him/herself individually or in groups were enabled to reflect on their own learning achievements and could begin to understand how and why s/he answered in the way s/he did (Vigotsky, 2000; Werstch, 1988). Encouraging the students' learning at such a micro-level also promoted the students' construction of the students' own knowledge and understanding; the student's knowledge became authentically their own.

## Conclusions

Teaching entails a complex set of tasks, interactions, values and abilities, some of which may be hidden from practitioners themselves. A teacher's self-declared beliefs and conceptions of teaching are not necessarily reflected in their daily teaching practices. It follows that while the teaching approaches framework can give us insights into conceptions of or beliefs about teaching, it should be treated with caution in understanding the complexity of the actual practices and interactions in classrooms and, thereby, the actual character of the student experience. Accordingly, the study of teaching practices in action needs a framework that captures these dialogues, these interactions and their fluidity in the university. Perhaps a new beginning is possible for research into teaching in higher education.

In turn, a methodology is called for that incorporates prolonged and intensive fieldwork and the use of particular techniques to collect the data *in situ*. This way, it is possible to reveal the idiosyncrasy of teaching practices in very specific circumstances and so also explore the dialogical dimension in pedagogical enactments. The teacher is unlikely to be an effective teacher – especially at the level of higher education – without complex interactions both between the teacher and the students and between the students. It has long been held that the concept of teaching necessarily entails learning; what is beginning to become evident is that, in practice, the work of the teacher in higher education cannot be satisfactorily understood without a grasp of its related structures of dialogue and communication. Skilled teaching calls for the most intricate of communicative interactions if learning is going to be fully encouraged and promoted.

These conclusions lead to two sets of challenges for future work. Firstly, this way of understanding teaching practices calls for research methodologies that are going to be more adept than hitherto in revealing the subtle interplays in practice – *in situ* in the classroom – between an intellectual and professional field, and its meaning for teachers and their pedagogical resources in helping their students to gain their own authentic appropriations of a field. Such research methodologies will need to eschew large categories – ‘student-centred’/ ‘teacher-focused’/

content-focused' – and instead open themselves to the multiplicities in the pedagogical situation.

Secondly, these embryonic insights could have a profound impact on programmes of academic development for lecturers, because such programmes would have to focus more on the complexities of teaching situations by, for example, requiring lecturers to become much more sensitive to and critical of the micro-structure of the interactions and dialogue – between teachers and their students and across all the students – in their classrooms.

## Notes

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