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Deep structures of university lecturers and their significance for transformation processes

Abstract

The deep structures of university lecturers influence university transformation processes. This study examined the extent to which different understandings of teaching exist and what role they play in change processes. The analysis is based on 21 guided interviews with teachers from various disciplines within a university. A contrasting case analysis shows that different, sometimes contradictory structures of meaning coexist. One contrast, for example, can be seen in the way physical needs are dealt with: while one interviewee explicitly allows eating and drinking in seminars, another considers such behaviour inappropriate and describes it as 'infantilisation'. Based on the case analyses, it becomes clear how deeply rooted beliefs influence the connectivity of teaching innovations, for example when teachers with diverging teaching cultures are required to teach together.

Keywords

surface and deep structures, teaching and learning culture, implementation, transformation

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Tiefenstrukturen von Hochschullehrenden und ihre Bedeutung für Transformationsprozesse

Zusammenfassung

Die Tiefenstrukturen von Hochschullehrenden beeinflussen hochschulische Transformationsprozesse. In der vorliegenden Studie wurde untersucht, inwieweit differente Lehrverständnisse existieren und welche Rolle diese in Veränderungsprozessen spielen. Die Analyse basiert auf 21 leitfadengestützten Interviews mit Lehrenden verschiedener Fachrichtungen innerhalb einer Hochschule. Eine kontrastierende Fallanalyse zeigt, dass unterschiedliche, teils widersprüchliche Sinnstrukturen nebeneinander bestehen. Ein Kontrast zeigt sich beispielsweise im Umgang mit physischen Bedürfnissen: Während eine interviewte Person ausdrücklich erlaubt, im Seminar zu essen und zu trinken, empfindet die andere solches Verhalten als unangebracht und bezeichnet es als „Infantilisierung“. Auf Basis der Fallanalysen wird deutlich, wie tief verankerte Überzeugungen die Anschlussfähigkeit von Lehrinnovationen beeinflussen, etwa wenn Lehrpersonen mit divergierenden Lehrkulturen gemeinsam Lehre ausbringen wollen.

Schlüsselwörter

Oberflächen- und Tiefenstrukturen, Lehr- und Lernkultur, Implementation, Transformation

1 Introduction

Current social developments challenge established concepts and routines of university teaching. These include the increasing digitization of teaching, the diversification of educational pathways (Hagelskamp, 2020; Ordemann et al., 2023), the use of artificial intelligence (Salden & Leschke, 2024), the upheaval of democratic values (Busse & Möller, 2024), the experience of vulnerability through a pandemic (Engelhardt et al., 2023), and recurring environmental incidents. These developments expose the limitations of familiar practices and require a fundamental rethinking of university pedagogy. Any sustainable transformation of teaching requires not only technological and structural adjustments. It also demands a cultural perspective on academic teaching. As Schein (2010) and Esslinger-Hinz (2023) emphasize, deep-seated assumptions, shared values, and institutional routines play a decisive role in whether innovations are perceived as meaningful and can be successfully implemented.

As part of the outlined developments, the discourse surrounding university policy has increasingly centered on the catchphrase of "future skills" – a term that is less of a clearly outlined concept than a construct regarding competency that reacts to social upheaval, new worlds of work, and global insecurity (Ehlers, 2020). Regardless of time, place, or subject area: Long-term interactions among people always give birth to cultures, and a "transformation problem" is established along with them. So innovations that are accepted need to connect with the existing culture at the place of implementation, because deeply rooted routines and convictions don't change easily and, if not respected, frequently lead to resistance (Reusser, 2009).

Using a study on the role of physicality in university teaching, we explore how teaching and learning cultures differ among university instructors. Although the interviews focused on physicality, the responses also revealed broader perspectives on the meaning of teaching and on attitudes toward academic instruction. These findings can be theoretically situated within the framework presented in section 2. The following analysis draws on cultural theory to reconstruct the pedagogical assumptions and expectations of university teachers.

2 Framework of cultural theory

The term "culture" generally describes a structure that provides ideas of meaning (Geertz, 1987). It means "dynamic practices […] in the sense of well-established approaches and regular practices of society" (Hörning & Reuter, 2004, p. 9f) that concern all the values, standards, and behavioral maxims (Dalin, 1986). "Culture" forms a "network of shared significances and activities" (Eagleton, 2017, p. 165). As general and overarching as the definitions of the concept of culture may be, Luhmann's diagnosis (1995) that the concept of culture is too vague for the necessary conciseness of scientific terms must be scrutinized. After all, social scientists agree on the "architecture" of cultures and on the fact that the term "culture" is indispensable, since it designates complex relationships and is both the foundation and result of each change (Wien & Franzke, 2014). For example, Schein (1995) describes company cultures on three interrelated levels; the level of basic assumptions are based on deeply anchored, mostly subconscious convictions that are not actively considered. The basic assumptions suggest the existing values and standards that can be viewed as behavioral standards. A culture's strength lies in the fact that basic assumptions are shared and strengthen each other (Schein & Schein, 2018). For Schein, basic assumptions constitute the essence—the deepest level of culture (Reisyan, 2013). In line with Schein, Hatch (2018) describes the dynamics between artifacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions as a continuous, recursive process of interpretation and enactment. The three-phase model of Kurt Lewin (1947), a model of organizational change, is also based on the idea that existing basic assumptions of a group must be challenged in an initial stage ('unfreeze') before innovations can be introduced. The *competing values framework* (CVF) of Cameron and Quinn (2006) identifies four types of organizational culture – clan, adhocracy, market, and hierarchy – each based on different assumptions and value systems. These cultural models align with the idea that underlying assumptions shape visible behaviors and practices. Esslinger-Hinz (2022) draws on this framework to describe deep structures in educational contexts, understood as shared, often subconscious, assumptions about teaching, performance, and the role of academic knowledge.

They mostly comprise subconscious, shared ideas of meaning that shape the actions in educational organizations, such as expectations of good teaching, performance requirements, or the role of an academic approach (Esslinger-Hinz, 2022). In the approach of culture-sensitive didactics (Esslinger-Hinz, 2020, 2023), the level of instruction is taken into account in that, here as well, it is assumed that teachers and learning are culturally embedded and shaped by ideas of meaning, practices, and routines that are reflected in surface structures.

A comparison of different approaches from various related disciplines shows that different terms are used, such as basic assumption (Schein & Schein, 2018), deep structures (Esslinger-Hinz, 2023), mindset (Geertz, 1987), values (Hofstede et al., 2010), teachers' beliefs (Pajares, 1992), and interpretive patterns (Altmayer, 2004). Despite their disciplinary localization in organization management, pedagogy, sociology, or cultural anthropology, they refer to a common phenomenon: the meaning of implicit, mostly subconscious orientation patterns in professional actions. They share key characteristics: their subconscious nature, their collective effectiveness, their provision of orientation, and their durability compared with short-term changes. In the context of higher education, Trautwein (2013) highlights that such professional concepts are often discussed in terms of their cognitive or affective nature, their implicit or explicit articulation, and their varying degrees of stability or openness to change. This classification aligns with the underlying characteristics described in the broader literature and supports the relevance of deep structures in academic teaching.

This article uses the term *"deep structures"*, understood as collectively shared meaning-making processes or key concepts held by actors. Deep structures have a normative character; they are assumed to be true and valid (Esslinger-Hinz 2023, p. 66). Deep structures may manifest in the surface structures of a culture, that is, in its visible dimensions (Esslinger-Hinz 2023, p. 40). These include spatial and temporal structures, objectivations, behavior, cognition, emotions, and physicality. With this in mind, one of the central issues of the research on implementation is classifiable according to the degree of coordination between the (externally) planned and the implemented innovation (Gräsel & Parchmann, 2004). If this issue is observed from

the standpoint of cultural theory described, the question arises of how much the innovations may deviate so as to not affect the present deep structures. In other words: The deep structures of the actors must be taken into account to enable more comprehensive, long-term implementation. And this could explain the actor's resistance, which is often described in the literature (Dimai et al., 2024; Schrader et al., 2020; van Ackeren-Mindl et al., 2024), and the acceptance and support of the change process (Schiersmann & Thiel, 2018) could be increased or estimated in terms of its realization potential.

3 Methodological approach

The study is based on 21 semi-structured narrative interviews with tenured university lecturers from a German university. Participants were selected to reflect disciplinary diversity (natural sciences, social sciences, health sciences, special education, arts, education) and academic positions (10 professors, 11 research staff). The interviews, lasting on average 1 hour and 19 minutes, were conducted in person or online. The interview format combined open prompts (e.g., "I notice my body in teaching when…") with an associative approach to explore perceptions of physicality in higher education teaching (Döring & Bortz, 2016), allowing for the elicitation of implicit knowledge and routines.

For analysis, *MAXQDA 2024* was used. Categories were developed inductively following content analysis principles (Mayring, 2022). To identify variation in cultural perspectives on teaching, reconstructed deep structures were contrasted and illustrative "crucial cases" selected (Kelle, 2010, p. 43).

4 Analysis: Contrasting understandings of teaching

4.1 Comparison of cases

The data are analyzed in four stages. First, the interviews are categorized along reported surface structures using empirically secured and theoretically embedded categories according to Esslinger-Hinz (2023) (spatial-temporal structures, cognitions, behavior, physicality, emotions, objectivations).

In a second stage, validated through communicative exchange with an independent researcher, deep structures are reconstructed and a key concept reflecting fundamental assumptions about university learning processes is identified. The coherence of the surface structures is examined.

Third, cases are contrasted based on the acceptance or rejection of the same attitudes or practices, with external validation by three researchers.

In a fourth step, deep structures are compared, and two particularly divergent cases are selected. These cases do not claim representativeness but illustrate the potential impact of conflicting deep structures on teaching cultures and innovation processes.

Table 1 provides a structured comparison of the two cases along the empirically derived categories:

4.2 Reconstructing the deep structures

Surface structure	Case 1	Case 2
Behavior	"Also because we (on the faculty) then naturally go to see a play together, or to a performance of the musicians, or to something here by the art students, or something similar."	"We're happy because something is set apart – out of the field of observation and out of the line of fire. I'm much happier not to have to see many of my ... many of the [name of the college] colleagues or many from the atmospheric operation." "So I'm not really a social type at all. I feel that socializing in collegial relationships is normally dreadful and depressing."
Contrast	Interact	Separate
Physicality	"For example, I have a method that I practice – It's this walk and talk. I don't know if you're familiar with this: that, for example, with a subject or a specialist subject that you send off to small groups, they've read an article because of me or were dealing with something and they then split into groups of	"And I would make a pedagogical distinction between pre-college and university instructors and say 'scholastic'. And I see that as one of the problems or things about [name of the college] that are just stupid. That they don't make this distinction clear enough and treat the students like children, so to speak, by structuring college teaching like secondary teaching to some extent." "Yes, I'm probably pretty wired as a rule, and I move around during the seminar: run around, set on a table,

	two. They also move sometimes.”	write something on the board. Movement is obviously part of it to an extent. But it would bother me if the seminar participants moved freely around the room to the same extent.”
Contrast	Movement for everyone	Movement as the teacher’s privilege
Objectivations	“I find the chairs suboptimal. But everything’s old here anyway. So it’s really lame. And I think many would say, yes, if the [building name] comes, it still needs easily ten years.” “With me, instruction is always given in a circle of chairs. So we don’t sit like we do in a theater – everyone should see each other.”	“I would prefer plain work rooms. So I believe the types of cosmetics and the anthroposophy, etc., might make sense for an elementary school, but they’re unnecessary when dealing with adults and they focus on the wrong thing.” “Yes, so pictures and so forth don’t belong in a seminar.”
Contrast	Space as part of didactics	Space as a functional framework
Spatio-temporal structures	“As we’ve just said in advance, before the [online] meeting, we provide drinks, go into a room where it’s calm, where you can close the door, because we do many exercises, we’re also louder. […] that you hang a sign on the door, please	“Naturally, the planning and implementation of an hour in a college [...] is freer, more open, and more abstract than in a secondary classroom. In a secondary school class period, I tick off the hours, more or less. In college, that isn’t the case in the same way.”

	don't disturb. So, uh, because many people have made something in the kitchen of their shared apartment and someone constantly ran around or the cat came or something, and then we've also just said the videos are on, so we've communicated something from the start, so to speak, about how the collaboration should take place.	"Seminars are a place for conversation and interaction that can't tolerate so much fluctuation and arbitrariness."
Contrast	Providing structure	Open structure
Behavior	"Eat and drink whenever you want if it's not bothering anyone. I always say that. I have enough breaks where they can eat, but they can always drink. And eat. Okay – If it's a package of chips, and I hold it and it rustles, then that's disturbing. But to take a bite of bread of whatever. That's always okay."	"Well, I have a problem with both eating and drinking. If someone's stuffing themselves during the seminar, I think that's completely inappropriate. And then to ask me where they think they are? But I wouldn't discipline that—if you're hungry, please step outside the door. But I would obviously think it. So, those are all forms of infantilization and barbarism that have no place in a working relationship under any circumstances.
Contrast	Acceptance of physical needs	Rejection of physical needs

Table 1 Contrasting of cases along the surface structures

4.3 Reconstructing the deep structures

If you consolidate the surface structures described, and if the statements freely relate to the underlying deep structures in a verifying way, the following image results:

Case 1: Needs-based teaching design

Where surface structures are concerned, the interviewee establishes free spaces where students needs are considered. Free spaces are created in terms of the exploration of the actors: through methods such as "walk and talk," for example, in which students discuss lessons while being able to move around physically. Eating isn't punished, but is accepted as part of self-regulation that isn't disturbing. In addition, the configuration of the learning space is considered critically, especially the equipment (seating, for example), and geared to the needs of the students—through a seating chart in the circle of chairs, for example, instead of the conventional rows of chairs, to enable participation and visibility. In addition, visits to events with colleagues show that teachers move in spaces in which students are also present, thereby creating closeness to students' spheres of life and experience. And in digital settings, a certain amount of attention is paid to a particular configuration—by promoting undisturbed learning environments, turning cameras off, and announcing common rules in advance, for example. This makes it clear that the teacher also values presence, concentration, and a protected framework in media-transmitted formats.

In that context, the students' needs for movement, food, spatial configuration, and social proximity are taken into account and integrated into the didactic design of the learning situation.

As a deep structure, it can be reconstructed as:

> "(Good) teaching must include the needs of the students".

Case 2: Fact-based teaching design

Case 2 focuses on a difference between the pedagogy of college and pre-college teaching. The interviewee repeatedly emphasizes the necessity of a clear boundary between pre-college and college teaching. College teachers shouldn't act like pre-

college teachers; such a convergence is criticized as “stupid.” From the standpoint of the surface structure, this can be seen in the rejection of objectivations such as “pictures” or atmospheric design elements that are designated “cosmetic” and, according the interviewee, belong in secondary school. And social closeness or communal activities in college are seen critically – If, for example, a person states that they’re happy to not have to see much about “atmospheric operations”. An overly strong inclusion of students’ needs, such as eating and drinking in the seminar, is also rejected and described with terms like “infantilization” and “barbarism”. The learning setting should be “plain”, the teaching functionally directed toward the subject. At the same time, college teaching is described as more open and flexible than pre-college instruction: Content can be developed according to the situation, discussions taken up and adapted. The lecture is more strongly geared toward an intellectual exchange of information than a fixed course.

As a deep structure, it can be reconstructed as:

> “(Good) teaching constitutes a fact-based, academically challenging examination of the matter that is deliberately set apart from (pre-college) didactics and relies on concentrated and reliable participation”.

A comparison shows: The two concepts are clearly different, especially when it comes to whether and how students’ needs should be included in the teaching style. Whereas the consideration of such needs is seen as a fundamental part of good teaching in the first case, the emphasis in the second case is on objective debate.

In so doing, a certain distancing from everyday needs is deliberately maintained. These various deep structures are not completely incompatible, but are nearly mutually exclusive in their respective logic. For the further development of college pedagogy, therefore, the question arises of how such differences can be addressed, regarding the education of teaching skills and the development of shared quality expectations, for example.

Although the case portraits draw on statements made by individual lecturers, they do not describe personal character traits. In Esslinger-Hinz’s framework, deep structures are “meaning, justification and value relations” (Esslinger-Hinz, 2021, p. 41)

that guide teaching and refer to professional orientations rather than psychological personality. She emphasizes that "the habitat influences the actor and, conversely, the actor influences the habitat" (Esslinger-Hinz, 2021, p. 99), which shows that personality and culture interact without being identical. The portraits therefore reconstruct "deep structures of teaching as relations of meaning, justification and value" (Esslinger-Hinz, 2021, p. 41) and not the lecturers' personal traits or individual teaching styles. Their purpose is to make visible implicit pedagogical logics rather than psychological character descriptions.

5 Surface structures and deep structures as part of transformation processes

If the two case studies described were to appear together in a university transformation process, or to deploy shared teaching, the different deep structures would be reflected in their surface structures and both people would face the problem that the characteristic of the other person's teaching would be hard to integrate into their preferred culture. In this case, uncovering and identifying the individual deep structures (and the associated teaching and learning formats realized in university pedagogy) could bring self-assurance. If the deep structures lie closer to each other and are identified, actors can discuss them and either come to a consensus or make their dissent comprehensible and acceptable.

Considering this, an analysis of deep structures is significant, because shedding light on existing basic assumptions and routines allows transformations to be configured that can be connected with. Qualitative accesses, such as interviews on the surface structures, can help to grasp and understand the players' underlying ideas of meaning. The impetus for such analyses could come from existing survey instruments such as the *Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument – School Culture* (OCAI-SK) (Müthing, 2013), which is based on the *Competing Values Framework* (Cameron & Quinn, 2006) and frequently used to capture organizational cultural profiles. An identification of shared deep structures without a direct pressure to change can

also be helpful in identifying and excluding unsuitable and undesired supposedly innovative ideas quickly and without losing resources. And the effective configuration of the surface structures proves significant, since it reproduces the deep structure. If, for example, new spatial concepts or pedagogical routines are successfully established and collectively experienced as meaningful, they can stabilize the new culture. And herein lies an important leverage for sustainably changing teaching and learning cultures.

The analysis shows that various diverging deep structures about teaching and learning coexist with university instructors. If you systemically look at college teaching, it also involves cellular, isolated structures that permit each teacher to provide and establish their own seminar culture individually. In light of the freedom of research and teaching, there is a chance to make different teaching and learning cultures productive. So we can assume that certain students identify with a body- and space-oriented concept (as in Case 1), and others might do better with clearly structured, formalized learning settings (as in Case 2).

This study gathered self-reports from teachers. Of interest here would be a field study that took the seminar culture into account. And a systematic consideration of disciplinary differences and an expansion of the perspectives toward students would be important.

The analysis shows that a productive examination with difference should be used, with its recognition as a normal case of the other, and that a descriptive concept of culture would be helpful. The acknowledgement of other "normal cases" could also help scrutinize, adjust, and stabilize one's own imagination of teaching and learning cultures. To that end, an exchange of information on deep structures would be important, as well as occasions (such as teaching cooperation and teams in module responsibility) that make such an exchange necessary.

If a college searches for its "core brand" or its deep structures through its teachers and researchers, this would be hardly realizable in light of the differences between teachers structurally anchored in collegiate structure. Despite the heterogeneity of the deep structures, there is a need for a basic deep structure for the entire instruction

of a university. These should relate to the challenges named at the beginning and be reflected in shared deep structures of teachers. These particularly include basic assumptions about democracy and sustainability. Here as well, an examination of the level of common features regarding deep structures could be meaningful, because a teaching and learning culture (a democratic one, for example) can appear only if it's anchored in a deep structure.

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