

Gender and equality sensitive situations in teaching – can we detect and manage them as they happen?

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Abstract—In teaching at university, gender and equality sensitive situations occur. What can be done to support teachers in detecting and managing such situations? By presenting selected cases, we hope to increase awareness about the need for better recognition of and preparedness for such situations. Sharing cases that faculty members can discuss and reflect on can help to decrease the risk of subsequent occurrences and reduce possible negative effects. Lund University's policy for gender equality, equal treatment and diversity can be used as a tool and justification for teacher reactions when such are needed.

Index Terms—teaching, equality, gender sensitive situations

I. INTRODUCTION

TEACHING at university level is focused on learning outcomes and supporting students in their learning. As students are adults and have the right to their own judgment, university teachers mainly refrain from commenting students' behaviour, attitudes or comments in various teaching situations. However, there are occasions when situations get out of hand and the borderlines of what could be considered moral and ethically justified are crossed. Unfortunately, such situations often surprise the teacher. To be effective, reactions should come immediately, but frequently many of us are too shocked and unprepared to handle situations like this. Saying what is right and wrong, and setting borderlines, is widely accepted for teachers in elementary and high schools, but in academia organizational culture tends to not support this, and it is often not considered to be an integral part of university teachers' role. Some of us remain passive and do not know how to react when it would be needed. It might be beneficial to be prepared to react on the spot in situations when things go out of hand, when students or other teachers cross the lines.

In this study, by presenting a couple of cases where teachers have experienced gender or equality sensitive situations, we hope to prepare other teachers for better recognition and understanding of similar events. Our intention is to support the detection and management of such situations, in order to decrease their possible negative effects, increase awareness on the issue and thus reduce the risk of subsequent occurrences.

II. ANALYZING THE PROBLEM

University teachers sometimes realize only in hindsight that encountered situations were gender and equality sensitive, without being able to grasp it immediately in a way that allows them to react on it. The problem with weak or vague ability to timely and accurately identify the relevant situations might be remedied by developing perceptive and cognitive skills.

A. What is required for people to react swiftly in relevant situations?

A requirement for intelligent behavior is the ability to discern relevant aspects in the situation one is facing [1]. The first time one encounters something, it requires attention and deliberate, conscious analysis, which is a relatively slow and effortful aspect of human cognition. As encounters with the same thing accumulate, the human cognitive processing encompassing perception of and reaction to it transforms, through a gradual automation [2]. This means that what first requires knowledge-level treatment gradually forms experience-grounded behavioral rules and skill-based behavioral programs, which later can be combined and used to effectively manage novel situations [3]. Applied to university teachers' ability to manage 'gender and equality sensitive situations', this would mean that building up experience of such situations will allow easier recognition of them, and possibly enable immediate and timely action.

B. How can the required experience be gained?

One option is to just let time pass, and hope that spontaneous encounters with the relevant class of situations occur. However, that approach has some obvious shortcomings. In lack of actual situations, virtual ones might substitute; accounts of actual situations experienced by others might help teachers to develop some familiarity and automation beneficial for capability development. Therefore, we here present three brief cases that might be used in training. By reading them, reflecting upon them, and perhaps discussing them, we hope that university teachers can develop and refine their abilities to detect and manage 'gender and equality sensitive situations'. Narrative inquiry (as the cases here) has been recognized as a good way to gain insights and share experience in perceived discrimination and marginality events [4].

III. METHOD

We have interviewed Lund University teachers about their experiences of gender and equality sensitive situations, focusing of specific instances. Here we present three cases. The descriptions have been edited to fit the format of this paper.

IV. THE CASES

Case 1

Female teacher. A day of presentations of the completed projects at the end of the course. Somewhere towards the end of the day, a female student presents her project. The presentation was brilliant, well prepared, with clear structure, aims, results and conclusions. When questions are asked after the presentation, she proves a very good understanding of the subject and uses relevant arguments. In short, one of the best completed projects and presentations during that day. After her, it is time for the last presentation of the day. A male student starts his presentation with a remark: "Great presentation... but I guess only women can put so much effort into preparing a presentation. I have not spent that much time on it, but I think it will be good as well". A short laughter from some of the students... I (teacher) am shocked... By the time I manage to say anything, the student has already started to present his project. Shall I stop him now, when he already started his presentation? Maybe it is better to wait until the end of the presentation and discussions afterwards? How to go back to it? Which arguments would be the best? His presentation is really weak, he has not prepared much at all. The presentations took longer than planned, the time is up and students leave the room in a hurry... Too late to get back to what happened at the beginning of his presentation...

Case 2

Male teacher, about 20 students, at master's level. International composition, with people from various parts of the world.

The episode concerns a teaching activity aiming at developing a critical and creative approach to the use of questionnaires. In behavioural sciences, gender has traditionally been used as a category variable. The teacher's intention in preparing the session was only to point out the issue, stressing the need for awareness of choices around how to construct gender items in questionnaires. There was no intention to point out or promote any specific positions in the matter. During discussions regarding the use of (binary) categories for gender, one student pointed out the relevance to ask by whom and for what purpose the data will be used, and who has the right to define someone's gender. This initiated an unplanned discussion, in which some students stated that there ought to be an "other" category when questionnaires are asking about gender.

The discussion intensified, with many students voicing various opinions about genders and sexuality, and what should be considered appropriate or not. The teacher, who is not an expert in gender aspects, felt out of control, and

describe it as that tensions were growing and that the debate got heated. This continued for about ten minutes, before the teacher chose to quench the unplanned and unprepared debate by concluding that it is an important discussion, but that it was time to move on.

The structure of the course/module did not allow for bringing up the issue again, since teaching was organized as daylong teaching labs and not as a series of lectures, which meant that most teachers only met the student group once.

About a month later, when looking at course evaluation data, the teacher noticed a comment that "the teacher had killed the discussion (about gender issues)". The whole experience has made the teacher more aware of preparing for possible unforeseen turns in teaching situations.

Case 3

Male teacher. A half-day course for a group of co-workers from a Scandinavian country. Question from my side, the organiser, "We have not established it earlier, in which language we should give the course; English or Swedish? Is there anyone who does not understand Swedish?" Two young females in the back: "English would be needed, we do not understand..." Interruption and louder answers from front rows: "We all understand Swedish, no problem, we take it in Swedish, it is easier for everyone". Me (organiser): "You decide, for me it does not make any difference whatever you feel more comfortable with". Chorus from majority of the group "We take it in Swedish; it will be better, definitely Swedish". Me (organiser) "If this is ok for everyone then Swedish it will be." Intense course, many activities, discussions... The course has finished. Only afterwards concerns cross my mind: Have these two females understood anything? What happened with my leadership skills, why did I agree to carry on in Swedish if there were individuals who said that they do not understand?

V. DISCUSSION

In this paper, by presenting the cases and describing the potential of their use to develop the abilities to detect and manage 'gender and equality sensitive situations' in teaching, we hope to increase awareness and preparedness for such situations. Further work could look deeper into the theoretical underpinnings of how such training might be arranged to reach its goals, and gather more case descriptions. We hope that the use – either individually or in collective activities – of such case descriptions can contribute to developing necessary abilities.

A weakness of the method of using case descriptions rather than actual, first-hand experience as a way to develop conceptual understanding and discernment capability is that the resulting knowledge becomes knowledge by description rather than knowledge by acquaintance [5], which might entail slightly simplified situational perception. However, these indirect, language-mediated experiences might be the only ones available.

Preventing 'gender and equality sensitive situations' in teaching and in cases when they occur minimizing their negative effects, is an objective of the university's organization. Framed as a problem of reliability, this means that the organization, through individual staff members (i.e., teachers) needs continuous, mindful monitoring and training,

aimed at detecting and managing any sensitive situations. This can help to keep the unwanted from happening [6]. Creating training, workshops, and sharing experience through encountered cases could be beneficial for this purpose.

In practice, we suggest using LU's policy for gender equality, equal treatment and diversity [7] as a tool and justification for our reactions and comments if these are needed. By being prepared and reacting when needed (i.e., when things are happening), can make a difference for many individuals and can help creating the LU culture that we all strive for and which is described in LU's policies.

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