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From people to change – (r)evolutions in teaching in small steps – how empathy and cooperation create a space in which the university learns about itself anew

Summary

The interview with Professor Ewa Szymczak, Vice–Rector for Education at the University of Gdańsk and co–founder of The University of Gdansk Center for the Development of Teaching and Tutoring, explores the evolutionary transformation of academic teaching. Drawing on her experience as a teacher, researcher, and educational leader, she discusses how empathy, sensitivity, and collaboration can shape spaces of collective learning within the university. This transformation unfolds both institutionally and personally – through small, consistent steps, networks of relationships, and grassroots initiatives. The interview reflects on how centres of teaching excellence and academic communities can renew universities from within.

Keywords: academic teaching, university, empathy, collaboration, change, teaching excellence centres, academic teachers' community

Jarosław Jendza [JJ]: Dear Ewa, not so long ago you had the opportunity to co–organise and actively participate in a conference devoted to higher education teaching. I am referring to the event organised by The University of Gdansk Center for the Development of Teaching and Tutoring. The theme of the event was *boundaries*, and one of the elements of the conference was a panel discussion in which you were a guest.

You were invited to this panel because, as an oceanographer and marine geologist, but also with considerable experience as a secondary school geography teacher, you decided one day to focus your interests on academic teaching. At the beginning of our conversation, I would like to ask you how and why this happened.

Ewa Szymczak [ESz]: Jarek, it's very simple and there's nothing magical about it. As you mentioned, I have a very strong teaching background. I am a certified teacher, which few people at the University know about.

For nearly 10 years, in parallel with my work at the University, I worked in a secondary school, where numerous reforms (including those concerning external examinations and key competences in the core curriculum) were introduced much earlier, and certain concepts – such as learning outcomes, educational content and teaching assessment – were not unfamiliar to me.

While studying, I also completed a teaching specialisation, so in the 1990s I had already touched on the theoretical foundations, which are probably largely outdated today, but it was much easier for me when we entered into changes related to the qualifications framework in 2011. The introduction of further adjustments resulting from the implementation of the Bologna system was therefore not a new thing for me. In this sense, I can say that I had a certain advantage over my peers, because I felt like a fish in water and knew perfectly well what the then–implemented solution of a learning outcomes–based approach was all about.

On the other hand, I clearly saw that some academic teachers not only did not understand how the reality of education was changing in organisational terms but were also not properly prepared for teaching. I saw how difficult it was for them, and I also saw a strong need for support so that they could do their daily work as well as possible.

This change – a formal departure from "describing teaching content" in favour of describing learning outcomes – forced a profound rethinking of the structure and logic of education and also involved a change in attitudes, because teaching began to function not only as an individual activity of individual lecturers, but as an area requiring coordination, planning and evaluation at the level of the entire institute, faculty or university.

I began by familiarising myself with the reality at my home faculty, the Faculty of Oceanography and Geography at the University of Gdańsk.

[JJ]: I know a little bit about this story, but what catches my attention, and what you didn't bring to the fore, is your motivation to do something with teaching. After all, there are many people who have knowledge about teaching, but for some reason do not decide to put it at the centre, let alone, decide to take reformative action.

In your statement, I also hear a kind of empathy towards other people working around you. You talk about support, which is, after all, an expression of empathy. Are my intuitions correct?

[ESz]: I think you've read it quite accurately. I would say that I was watching what was going on around me very closely, how my colleagues were reacting to it. What I was almost certainly missing at the time was that, while we focused on scientific topics, formed a research group, and naturally worked scientifically as teams in departments and chairs, we absolutely did not focus on teaching.

Everything started to change when the syllabuses appeared – a practical manifestation of the implementation of the logic of the qualifications framework – because suddenly we had to think about how to fill them, not only with course content, but also with teaching methods and means of assessment.

This was the moment when we had to move from intuitive teaching to conscious design of the teaching process. Often, a subject was taught by several people. These situations naturally forced us to sit down and discuss, to jointly establish certain standards for conducting classes, since the students were to achieve the same learning outcomes.

This situation – combining temporary confusion with great commitment – showed me that there is potential at the university to create a community that will focus on teaching topics, and today I know that the key to success, if I can call it like that, were the people who wanted to enter this process, understand it and co-create it. A teaching community does not create itself – it requires relationships, regular meetings and sharing of practices.

It was then that I noticed the first barriers blocking change. These barriers were not physical obstacles, but beliefs and patterns of thinking that can block change just as effectively as regulations. It was then that I realised how important it is to transcend one's own boundaries – internal, personal ones. This involved not only working on my own openness, but also overcoming reluctance, explaining the rationale behind the actions taken and encouraging others to look at education from a new perspective.

It was both work on myself and work with others – a process requiring attentiveness, patience and consistency. I had some ideas, and fortunately they fell on fertile ground, meaning that I met people who we often refer to today as ambassadors of change. These were probably the most difficult barriers to overcome, but of course there were also formal barriers related to regulations, their interpretation, but also overinterpretation, lack of flexibility and the difficulty of applying them creatively within the organisation.

[JJ]: If you don't mind, I would like to follow these two lines of thought. I am, of course, fully aware that an organisation, especially a large institution, cannot function without legal instruments and a certain amount of bureaucracy and documentation. Nevertheless, I would like us to focus now on the first type of boundaries you mentioned, which could be called internal boundaries relating to attitudes and mindsets.

As someone with extensive experience in working with these boundaries, I would like to ask you how to work with the beliefs and attitudes that underlie our teaching practices?

[ESz]: Are you asking me for a recipe?

[JJ]: I don't know if it's a recipe. I certainly don't expect you to come up with a ready-made formula here, but I have no doubt – judging by your many successes in this area – that you probably have some tried and tested strategies and practices.

[ESz]: You're setting the bar high, but I'll try [laughter]. I think that first of all, it's important to show that a particular change makes sense and that we are not alone in this change. In order for colleagues to want to do something – to change or to push their boundaries, they must have a sense of meaning and purpose. It is also important to be aware of the potential effects and fruits of such work for the specific people who are involved in something new.

For me, looking for new solutions in teaching is simply a form of development and, at the same time, an interesting alternative in my academic career path.

Let us also remember that, in addition to the knowledge and skills that our students acquire, we can contribute to building their openness, critical view of the world, and specific attitudes – because, after all, we are still “shaping” them, even though they are adults, but still young people.

The next generations of our students are, after all, the future intellectual elite who are going out into the world and becoming ambassadors for our departments and our university, and we simply have a huge influence on them. That is probably the most important thing for me.

[JJ]: What you are talking about now, that is – this very meaning of teaching, can probably be summed up in a term that is very fashionable today, namely “social impact”. Through the education of its students, the university simply has a very significant social impact.

[ESz]: I completely agree.

[JJ]: Agreeing with you on this point, I would like to invite you to a certain debate. One of my mentors, Professor Tomasz Szkudlarek, once wrote that the university is a hybrid of various functions, sometimes contradictory ones. I am saying this now because I share the opinion that teaching has a profound meaning, because indeed we are educating future generations of elites, but on the other hand, scientific productivity is the mantra of the modern university.

These two functions, as you know very well, are often at odds with each other. This is clearly a limitation. How can we deal with this difficult situation? How can we balance the production of scientific knowledge with the education and upbringing of the younger generation? How do you see it today, from the perspective of the Vice–Rector for Education?

[ESz:] It is very difficult, especially since many academics have a natural tendency to be good at everything. This leads to frustration, and yet another area of our activity is organisational work, and we have to perform well in all three fields. These are not easy choices.

Fortunately, today we can choose an academic career path. A window of opportunity has opened for those who want to focus their activities on teaching. Nevertheless, most people are actually suspended in research and teaching activities, which are supposed to combine these worlds. I think that micro habits, described in the literature¹, can be helpful here. If we are indeed facing challenges, then perhaps, with our characteristic enthusiasm, we should not rush into everything at once.

Let us make micro changes systematically. Even if we are dedicated researchers, even if scientific activity consumes us, we can still improve our teaching activities by taking small steps but doing so systematically. And it can be done.

Knowledge and practice are all around us – you can read an interesting article, listen to a webinar, or visit our centre² for a four–hour “in a nutshell” training course. Interesting skills can also be acquired in other places – by participating in conferences and the “University Quality Days”, which are becoming more and more common at universities.

¹ Clear, J., (2018). *Atomic habits: Tiny changes, remarkable results*. Penguin Publishing Group; Lewis, R. E., Landry A., (2024). *MicroSkills: Small Actions, Big Impact*, Harper Collins Publ. USA.

² The University of Gdansk Center for the Development of Teaching and Tutoring.

In this way, we can not only learn new teaching methods and find inspiration for conducting classes, but also learn about the changing generations of students, which may influence our attitude towards communication and contribute to placing emphasis on other activities during classes. Such small changes can have a very big impact.

[JJ]: That's an interesting idea. That's the recipe! Revolution through small steps. [laughter!]

[ESz]: And it works, Jarek! Look how long it took our joint efforts to change something, because I wasn't alone in crossing those boundaries. There was a team of people, which you were also part of almost from the beginning, and it took us nearly a decade.

You could say that these were small steps that turned out to be a milestone. However, we made a change, we crossed boundaries, although it's probably not what we want yet. We're moving on, but I guess that's the recipe [laughter!]

[JJ]: Yes, it's a beautiful story, as you well know, and a personal one for me too, but if I could invite you to continue this story, I would like to ask you what benefits we can derive from crossing boundaries in teaching, or from practising what we would call engaging teaching?

[ESz]: The most important benefit is community. These are people who enjoy teaching, working with students and being part of this community. It is an opportunity to exchange experiences, to acquire new skills and knowledge in a friendly way. This is what creates a university, regardless of the building or the faculty where you work.

I keep referring to our experiences here. Remember when we met at various meetings with people from all over the university as tutors, we immediately started open discussions because we knew each other. For me, that's the benefit, I feel great at the university because I know someone at every faculty.

Teaching goes beyond the boundaries of a single department and creates a university community. It also shows that this community can be strong. This is something new, something we didn't know before. Everything revolved around science, and together we built a forum for exchanging experiences and learning from each other, because that's the coolest way to gain knowledge. Another thing is that observing changes in teaching also means observing how our reality is changing, how different the generations that come to us are, and this causes us to learn naturally.

Besides, teaching allows us to function well outside a single academic discipline, and getting to know another academic world means getting to know the University in depth. Note that during our various meetings, certain issues overlap significantly, but they are not detached from the content or areas we deal with, or the fields of study we work in.

We speak our own languages, but we also create a common language – it's a slightly different code of communication, isn't it? Teaching is simply a platform for interdisciplinary communication.

[JJ]: Thank you for saying that, especially since I had the feeling that sometimes we weave threads in different places at the University, but in our mission to work on teaching, we create a web that, when created together, becomes resilient and resistant to various things, especially when we encounter setbacks and difficult moments.

[ESz]: I like this comparison to a spider web, because, on the one hand, it may seem that everything is so delicate and uncertain, but on the other hand we are creating a certain permanent structure, and that is beautiful.

I think that the mechanics of creating a spider's web also contribute to the success of our activities, because these are largely grassroots initiatives in which we know that we need someone on the other side, someone who will notice it, see its value, and realise that the community sees the point in it.

So, let's create a space for people in education and science to function by removing barriers, and let's be supportive, because without that, many things could not happen.

[JJ]: Indeed, historically speaking, it was a grassroots change, but it quickly turned into what I would describe as a *centrifugal change*. I am thinking specifically of the Centre that we are creating, which is institutionally established, has its own structure, its own budget, and its own legal and formal framework.

At the same time, it is a place that is so unique and constantly being created by specific people. So, it is a centrifugal change and not just a grassroots one?

[ESz]: Now it is. I think that today this issue is no longer a problem, because teaching is recognised and treated as an integral part of the changes taking place in higher education. In 2019, the Ministry launched the "Masters of Didactics" programme³, which significantly contributed to the creation and consolidation of a community focused on teaching at the national level.

In addition, there are competitions related to teaching excellence at universities, which is why universities, even without these grassroots initiatives, are creating teaching units within their structures. I hope that there are few places where you still have to fight for teaching, because it is part of the DNA of a university.

Our path has been a little longer, but today I think that this is even better, because we are more strongly and thoroughly established. We give our changes a specific direction and maintain it.

We also have the freedom to decide how we want to do it, because we created this structure ourselves. Specific people created and developed the concept of activities, which is constantly being redefined. Other teaching centres at universities probably function a little differently when they are established from above and people with specific competences are invited to join them.

Our model of creation is unique because we invited ourselves and wanted to create a team together. I have no doubt that the foundation is the people who make up a specific team, people who have a common goal, even though they are very different, because they produce different paths to achieve that goal, and they also understand that goal differently – but for me, such diversity is the basis for the team's success.

³ Thanks to cooperation with leading foreign universities and the implementation of a tutoring model, the "Masters of Didactics" project has built a solid foundation for the professionalisation of the teaching process and made teaching quality a strategic priority for academic institutions.

Naturally, the leader's role is to have a vision, but the key is to have a team with very different skills. In this sense, we as a university have been and continue to be in a fortunate position. Because our university is a classic university, we have the advantage of being able to collaborate with people from very different disciplines. I think it may be more difficult at technical universities, because the humanities and social sciences are less prominent there.

At our Centre, we strive for this balance. We speak different languages, we have slightly different needs, we are scientifically trained in different ways, and our research facilities are different. The whole potential, and at the same time the art, lies in finding a balance between these different "centres of gravity" when planning directions for development.

In our case, when looking for people to work with, I had an easier path because we all knew each other well and knew a lot about each other when we created the Centre. When creating such a team, you need to have a good understanding of the environment, and we must be able to easily select people who will be committed to the goal, although discussions about the vision and horizon are always necessary.

Inviting people to the centre must involve a conversation about what that person can and would like to contribute, how they would like to support the team and how much they can get involved. In many situations today, this works differently. Some centres have dedicated positions that deal exclusively with activities in these units, but in our case, we combine our work in the departments with work at the centre, which is actually an additional activity.

In my understanding, building a centre team must be based on an assessment of the strengths of colleagues. This helps us to jointly define the directions for the development of the unit based on the potential of these people.

On the one hand, it is about making wise use of people's potential and commitment, but on the other hand, it is equally important to create conditions in which the centre's colleagues will derive energy and satisfaction from their work. This cannot be a relationship based solely on "taking" or treating people as resources. Centres should actively respond to the needs of those who contribute to them.

But there is another aspect – most of the people who make up our centre actively work with students. Look at how quickly changes are taking place in learning methods, educational expectations, working styles, motivation and the dynamics of the relationship between academics and students.

With each new generation, we are faced with different needs, different habits and a different way of perceiving the world. That is why our team, remaining in constant contact with teaching staff, experiences these changes on an ongoing basis – and can quickly recognise them, respond to them and translate them into practice and support for the entire university.

Imagine that we were removed from this environment and experience and teachers came to us at the centre in five years' time. We might not be able to connect with them, we might cease to be credible, we might start to feel less confident because teaching would no longer be part of our everyday life. However, I think that the great advantage is that we are embedded in two worlds. We conduct training for teachers, but we do not lose contact with students. If we were only at the centre, I don't know if it would work so well.

[JJ]: This is a very interesting and probably not very common concept of creating teaching centres at universities, but I would like us to return to formal boundaries for a moment.

Your achievements and your career path show that you are very successful in crossing institutional, geographical and disciplinary boundaries. I would like to ask you how to cross institutional boundaries?

[ESz]: Today, it is easy, especially in a geographical context. Today we operate in the European higher education area and today there is nothing unusual about creating alliances of European universities⁴, which are a lively field for various activities and for establishing cooperation, not only on a scientific level, but also on a didactic level (e.g. joint study programmes).

Let us return for a moment to the "Masters of Didactics". This was our first important experience, the moment when we could see how teaching is conducted in other places. It can be said that we gained a solid foundation, but above all, this project gave us the courage to do things differently. For the first time, we saw that the professionalisation of teaching could be a joint, nationwide project, and not just a local initiative of individuals. It also reassured us that we were not in a bad place at all – that the direction we had intuitively taken was the right one, even if we did not yet have much preparation at the time. Today, we have well-trained teachers and we know that we have done a great job.

Allow me to digress for a moment: I was preparing a summary of our centre activities in the last academic year. In the last semester, 600 participants took part in training courses organised by us. Of course, this number does not mean 600 different people, as some people attend several training courses, but this number represents one third of our staff. This shows that a large group of people are really interested and feel the need to introduce changes and improvements.

Functioning within an alliance of European universities naturally initiates cooperation in the area of education and teaching, especially when short forms of education (BIPs⁵, summer schools) or joint study programmes appear. In such situations, we need to talk not only about what we are going to teach, but also about how to do it. You have experienced this yourself when preparing and conducting co-teaching training courses for international teams. This is a new way of thinking about crossing borders, because teaching together, taking into account different cultural contexts, requires completely different skills. In order to implement such forms of education, one must be able to communicate with academics from different centres, agree on how to conduct classes, ensure their consistency, quality and attractiveness – regardless of who conducts them and where. Above all, it is necessary to ensure that students receive an equivalent "dose" of knowledge, skills and competences, so that ultimately everyone achieves the same learning outcomes.

We are seeing increasing internationalisation in our study programmes, with foreign students coming to us. And we know very well how diverse they are – in terms of their experiences, habits and learning styles. Student diversity requires flexibility – the same content can no longer be taught in the same way to everyone. This diversity opens up new perspectives and creates opportunities to develop

⁴ The University of Gdańsk belongs to the European University of the Seas alliance (<https://sea-eu.org/>)

⁵ BIP – Blended Intensive Programme.

teaching in completely new directions, seeking solutions that will support everyone, regardless of their educational or cultural background.

Here, my topic undoubtedly shifts towards our joint project, which we are currently implementing, and which concerns peer tutoring⁶. This initiative is based on our international experience and cooperation with various universities in the field of teaching.

The teaching grants I mentioned earlier are proof that teaching is seen as an important part of how universities work. At the same time, working with different kinds of boundaries – both individual ones related to attitudes and beliefs, and organisational or inter-institutional ones – always requires sensitivity and empathy.

I am convinced that good education cannot do without sensitivity. That is why today, also from the perspective of my position, I see a certain boundary that we face as an academic community – it concerns the idea of lifelong learning and the readiness to implement it in practice. The university can no longer be a place exclusively for people aged 19-23 – it must become a learning space for the whole of society. We must be sensitive to the needs of more than just traditional students. Our educational partners are no longer exclusively young people. In my opinion, we should be much more open, also because demographics and social changes will lead to a decline in the number of "classic" students, i.e. those just entering adulthood.

Civilisational progress and a changing environment require us to acquire new competences, to continuously improve ourselves and to be able to respond to the changes that universities will increasingly be subject to. This is another boundary that we, as an academic community, must cross – and it will not be an easy task.

Take micro-credentials, for example, which are a particularly relevant example today. They can be seen as a formalised way of quickly acquiring selected skills – for example, programming skills in a specific language. The university then certifies the acquisition of a specific skill. This is a response to the need to react quickly to the changing labour market and short cycles of technological change. Such certificates cannot replace full-time studies, but they are a valuable supplement and a real response to market needs. That is why we should be prepared to create and implement such short forms of education, addressed to audiences from different generations. This is another example of a frontier that still lies ahead of us.

[JJ]: Thank you for this conversation and for the line of thought that points us towards the future and invites us to another conversation.

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⁶Transformation of Competencies at the University: Peer-Tutoring as a Key Element of Student Development Support (Peer-EDU), <https://peer.ug.edu.pl/>