

An Exploration of the Internal Pathways for Enhancing the Teaching Competence of Young University Lecturers

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Abstract: Young university lecturers constitute the vanguard of higher education development, with their teaching competence directly influencing the quality of talent cultivation. Against the backdrop of increasingly robust external training support systems, exploring the endogenous drivers and pathways for enhancing their capabilities has become particularly crucial. This paper, grounded in reflective practice theory and considering the career development characteristics of young university lecturers, systematically explores intrinsic pathways for enhancing their teaching competencies. The research posits that the essence of teaching competency enhancement lies in a continuous, self-directed process of professional growth, with the core intrinsic pathway being the deepening of reflective practice. Specifically, this can be achieved through: - Fostering metacognition about teaching practices via systematic teaching journaling; - Realising the creative integration of teaching theory and personal practice through sustained action research; - Expanding professional horizons through dialogue and observation within reflective learning communities; - Ultimately attaining autonomous and sustainable teaching competence by developing personal practice theories. This research provides theoretical reference and practical guidance for young university lecturers to overcome professional development bottlenecks and achieve endogenous growth.

Keywords: Young University Lecturers, Teaching Competence, Internal Pathway, Reflective Practice, Professional Development.

1. Introduction

The intrinsic development of higher education imposes unprecedented demands on teaching quality. As the most dynamic and promising cohort within university teaching staff, the calibre of young lecturers' teaching competence directly impacts institutional educational outcomes and long-term competitiveness [1]. Currently, most universities have established external support systems encompassing pre-service training, workshops, and teaching competitions. These measures play a vital role in disseminating pedagogical standards and imparting fundamental skills. However, a common phenomenon observed in practice is the 'enthusiastic during training, inactive upon return' pattern. The externally imposed model struggles to fully engage with the complex teaching contexts and intrinsic cognitive structures of individual teachers, often resulting in limited substantive and sustainable improvement in teaching competence.

This predicament underscores the necessity of shifting from external drivers to intrinsic growth. Teaching competence is not merely "filled" by external knowledge but is constructed through continuous perception, reflection, decision-making, and self-evaluation within concrete teaching practices [2]. This practice-based, endogenous development constitutes the fundamental root for teaching competence to take hold and flourish. Consequently, this study focuses on the 'intrinsic pathway,' aiming to address a core question: How can young university teachers achieve autonomous, profound, and sustained enhancement of their teaching competencies by stimulating and harnessing their intrinsic motivation and resources? Drawing upon reflective practice theory, this paper systematically explores this intrinsic pathway, seeking to provide theoretical insights and practical guidance for the professional self-directed development of young teachers.

2. Theoretical Foundation: The Intrinsic Link Between Reflective Practice and Teaching Competence Development

Exploring the intrinsic pathway necessitates first understanding the essence of teaching competence development. American educator John Dewey pioneered systematic discourse on 'reflection,' defining it as 'the active, sustained, and deliberate consideration of any form of knowledge, belief, or assumption, based on its underlying foundations and the conclusions further derived from it' [3]. This definition elevates reflection beyond mere 'review' to a rigorous cognitive activity, emphasising its proactiveness, continuity, and inquisitive nature. Dewey's thinking laid the foundation for understanding how teachers learn through experience.

Building upon this, contemporary scholar Donald Schön developed the influential theory of the 'reflective practitioner.' Schön observed that when confronting complex, uncertain, and unique 'swamp-like' practical problems, professional practitioners cannot simply apply pre-existing theories or techniques. Instead, they must rely on 'knowledge-in-action' generated during practice, adjusting their behaviour through 'reflection-in-action' and 'reflection-on-action' to form new practical wisdom. This theory profoundly reveals the intrinsic mechanism of professional competence development, particularly in teaching: it is not a linear process of applying external knowledge, but a cyclical process of engaging in dialogue with the context through practice, continually reconstructing one's cognition and behaviour.

For young university lecturers, teaching constitutes a highly complex, contextualised professional practice fraught with 'uncertainty'. Applying reflective practice theory to teaching competence development implies that pedagogical

growth stems from the teacher's sustained, systematic examination, questioning, and reconstruction of their teaching actions and the underlying assumptions and values they embody. This process is internal and self-driven, propelling educators from 'technically proficient practitioners' towards becoming 'reflective practitioners'. Thus, reflective practice constitutes the theoretical core of the central intrinsic pathway for enhancing teaching competence. The following sections will elaborate on three operational sub-pathways centred upon this core.

3. Core Intrinsic Pathway One: Deepening Personal Reflective Practice through Systematic Teaching Logs

Maintaining teaching logs represents the most fundamental and effective personal tool for teachers to engage in systematic 'reflection-in-action'. It transcends routine, fragmented teaching reviews by requiring teachers to structurally document and analyse teaching processes, student responses, personal decision-making, and emotional states through written reflection.

3.1. Levels of Reflection in Teaching Logs

Effective teaching logs should strive to achieve a progressive shift from 'description' to "analysis" and ultimately to 'planning'. The primary level involves descriptive recording, objectively documenting classroom occurrences. A deeper level involves analytical reflection, interpreting events through educational theory. For example: 'Today's group discussions proved ineffective because the questions I posed were overly closed-ended (description). This may validate Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development" theory, which emphasises the need for appropriately challenging tasks (analysis). I failed to provide sufficient scaffolding.' The highest level constitutes planning-oriented foresight, proposing future action plans based on reflection: "Next time, I shall design open-ended questions with potential for debate and prepare a list of guiding questions in advance to offer support when student discussions reach an impasse."

3.2. The Log as a "Metacognitive" Tool

The ongoing practice of maintaining a teaching log inherently cultivates metacognitive teaching abilities. It compels educators to observe their own pedagogical thought processes, monitor their instructional decisions, and evaluate their effectiveness [4]. Through this sustained self-dialogue, novice teachers gradually make explicit the tacit knowledge underlying previously "automatic" and "silent" teaching behaviours, thereby gaining clearer control over their practice and identifying avenues for improvement. For instance, one teacher discovered through long-term logging that he consistently introduced core content only in the final ten minutes of class, resulting in poor student retention. Recognising this pattern prompted him to redesign his lesson pacing, moving key content to the beginning.

4. Core Internal Pathway Two: Integrating Theory and Personal Practice Through Sustained Action Research

Action research offers young teachers an advanced form of

institutionalising and systematising reflective practice. It involves teachers undertaking a spiral-shaped inquiry process—systematically planning, acting, observing, and reflecting—based on authentic problems encountered in their teaching contexts [5]. This process perfectly embodies the integration of 'reflection in action' and 'reflection on action'.

4.1. From 'Problem' to 'Research Topic'

The starting point of action research lies in recurring genuine dilemmas identified by teachers in their journals, such as: 'Why do my students exhibit polarised classroom engagement?' or 'How can project-based learning be effectively implemented in my theory-heavy course?' Transforming these everyday "problems" into researchable 'topics' constitutes a crucial step in enhancing intrinsic capabilities. It signifies a shift from passively reacting to problems to actively investigating them.

4.2. Theoretical Intervention and Practical Innovation

Throughout action research, teachers must proactively seek guidance from relevant educational theories (e.g., cooperative learning theory, constructivism), design intervention plans (action), collect evidence such as student assignments, interviews, and observation records (observation), and analyse the impact of interventions (reflection). This process is not the mechanical application of theory, but rather the creative integration of theory with the teacher's specific practical context. For instance, to enhance engagement, one teacher introduced the 'peer teaching method' (theoretical intervention). However, considering her class's large size and subject characteristics, she innovatively combined online voting tools with offline group debates (practical creation). Through several cycles, she not only resolved the issue but also generated her own contextualised, practical knowledge on 'how to facilitate effective interaction in large classes'. This knowledge, due to its strong personal relevance and practical efficacy, significantly enhances teaching competence far beyond mere theoretical study.

5. Core Internal Pathway Three: Expanding Professional Horizons through Reflective Learning Communities

Internal pathways do not imply solitary endeavour. Stimulating reflection through dialogue and collaboration is crucial for transcending individual limitations and accelerating professional growth. Establishing or participating in a 'reflective learning community' provides mirroring, challenge, and support for personal introspection.

5.1. Professional Communities Transcending Administrative Structures

Reflective learning communities differ from conventional departmental activities, with their core objective being equal, inquiry-based professional dialogue among members centred on teaching improvement [6]. Activities may include shared reading, lesson case studies, or tackling teaching challenges. Crucially, a psychologically safe environment must be fostered, enabling members to openly share failures and uncertainties while offering evidence-based critique and suggestions.

5.2. Key Activity: Collaborative Reflection Based on Classroom Observation

'Peer lesson observation' ranks among the most productive activities within communities, yet it requires shifting from traditional 'evaluative observation' towards 'developmental lesson study'. Prior to observation, the teaching staff and observers jointly agree on focal points (e.g., 'the levels of questioning employed by the teacher'). During the lesson, observers record factual observations rather than judgements based on these focal points. Following the lesson, both parties engage in an equal dialogue based on the records, jointly analysing the decision-making logic behind teaching behaviours and exploring alternative approaches [7]. This process of 'colleagues serving as mirrors' helps teachers identify their own 'blind spots,' breaking through the inertia and closed-mindedness of individual thinking while drawing inspiration from peers' practices.

6. Integration and Sublimation of the Internal Path: Forming Personal Theory of Practice

The three pathways—systematic journaling, action research, and learning communities—are not isolated but mutually reinforcing and spirally ascending. Their sustained practice ultimately leads to a higher stage of teaching competence development: the formation of a personal theory of practice.

A personal theory of practice constitutes a teacher's internally held, interconnected set of beliefs, assumptions, and principles concerning teaching, learning, students, and the subject matter, which governs their daily instructional decisions [8]. When a young teacher, through sustained reflective practice, continually clarifies, tests, and refines their understanding of core questions such as 'what constitutes good teaching' and 'how should students learn this subject?', they are actively constructing their personal theory of practice. This theory crystallises the fusion of public educational theory, the exemplary experiences of others, and their own unique practical wisdom.

Teachers possessing a clear and evolving personal theory of practice demonstrate teaching characterised by high levels of autonomy, consistency, and creativity. When confronted with novel teaching scenarios or challenges, they no longer merely imitate techniques or await instructions. Instead, they can make flexible judgements and innovative designs based on their theoretical core. At this stage, the enhancement of teaching competence undergoes a fundamental shift from external dependency to endogenous motivation, entering a sustainable trajectory of self-renewal and autonomous development.

7. Conclusion

The enhancement of teaching competence among young university lecturers is a process rooted in daily teaching practice, emerging from within. While external support systems remain vital, the key to breakthrough lies in igniting intrinsic motivation and mastering endogenous methodologies. The intrinsic pathway system proposed herein—centred on reflective practice—outlines a viable direction for young lecturers' autonomous professional development. This involves: cultivating metacognitive habits through systematic teaching journals; facilitating creative dialogue between theory and personal practice via action research; and transcending individual limitations through collaborative reflection within learning communities.

The ultimate aim of these three pathways is to assist educators in evolving from "knowledge consumers" to "knowledge producers", transforming from "teaching technicians" into "reflective practitioners", and ultimately developing distinctive, vibrant personal theories of practice. While providing institutional safeguards, higher education institutions and managers of young faculty should prioritise cultivating a cultural environment that encourages reflection, embraces exploration, and supports collaboration. This enables the intrinsic growth potential of every young teacher to flourish fully, collectively driving profound transformation in the quality of higher education teaching.

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