

# Frustrating, but fruitful frictions

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## 1 Introduction

Gender Mainstreaming as a political strategy, introduced in 1999 by the Amsterdam Treaty, obligates higher education institutions to promote gender equality systematically as a management task in all their organizational processes and areas of activity. The reduction of social but notably gender inequalities in higher education was also incorporated in the final communiqué of the Berlin conference of higher education ministers in 2003.<sup>1</sup> Taking these developments into account, the mainstreaming of gender equality in teaching and learning is of particular importance. Higher education didactics is a crucial part of this field. By training lecturers in the field of teaching gender competence, higher education didactics may contribute to the promotion of gender equality in teaching and learning settings. Lecturers can learn how to identify and reduce discriminations based on stereotypes etc. In the context of the introduction of competence oriented learning students should also acquire skills concerning gender-awareness and basic theoretical knowledge in Gender Studies. Consequently, teaching has become an important 'tool' for the implementation of Gender Mainstreaming.

In the last years more and more higher education institutions have established courses and programs for gender awareness in the field of didactics. Still, after ten years of the Bologna reform process and 15 years of Gender Mainstreaming, tendencies to stick to accustomed hierarchal gender order can be witnessed in higher education institutions. The known patterns of representation of males and females along all qualification and employment grades persist: As many women as men enroll for higher education studies, but the more advanced the career stage, the number of women decreases. Patterns of gender-specific study preferences do also persist (European Commission 2013). There have been changes, but these occur far too slowly and a single tool for the promotion of gender equality is insufficient. Hence we can conclude the methodical-didactical transfer of gender competence should be regarded as one possible element of gender-equality practices, but there is still a need for structural changes which face the developments in higher education politics.

## 2 Challenges in teaching gender

The transfer of gender competence in higher education didactic seminars for continuous education and seminars for university students brings along a number of challenges - regardless of the target group.

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<sup>1</sup> "Ministers reaffirm the importance of the social dimension of the Bologna Process. The need to increase competitiveness must be balanced with the objective of improving the social characteristics of the European Higher Education Area, aiming at strengthening social cohesion and reducing social and gender inequalities both at national and at European level." (Communiqué of the Conference of Ministers 2003)

1. **Difference dilemma:** Teaching 'gender-competently' implies the integration of knowledge of women's and gender studies into syllabi on the one hand and the transformation of teaching structures and teaching forms (Auferkorte-Michaelis, Wegrzyn 2013). Here it is necessary that lecturers point out the differences concerning gender, in order, e.g. to work out ongoing inequalities and everyday 'doing'/construction of gender. Simultaneously they should not contribute to the reification of hierarchal relations, e.g. by trying to increase awareness on their contingent nature. This problem is known as the dilemma between equality and/or difference and it concerns all persons in- and outside academia who deal with gender (equality) issues - researchers as well as practitioners.
2. **Reduction in complexity:** In recent decades the body of knowledge in women's and gender studies has become differentiated and has reached a high degree of complexity. Making it 'teachable' is another important challenge, no matter what target group you deal with, be it students or lecturers, and it has to deal with the reduction in complexity: After more than 40 years of institutionalized women's and gender studies many different perspectives in feminist or gender theory exist, therefore there are many ways to conceptualize and analyze gender (see Mense 2013). These developments ask for rising requirements regarding the teaching of gender competence: e.g. What perspectives seem to be adequate for a workshop or seminar for an interdisciplinary group of participants?
3. **Participant's prior knowledge and experience gaps:** Participants' different levels of prior knowledge in gender theory is another important challenge in teaching gender competence. The huge variety of possible theoretical perspectives on gender, particularly the constructivist/deconstructivist approaches where any determination or 'truth' of gender is strongly questioned might cause confusion, lack of understanding or the participants may feel cognitively or emotionally overtaxed: It can lead for example to attitudes of defensiveness and a preference of difference oriented perspectives, which disregard contingencies and complexities of gender. It may also lead to the view, that relations and identities based on gender and other social categories are pure individual choices. There might be also participants who seem to 'embrace' the complexity by discussing divergent theoretical perspectives enthusiastically. Some of these might have a sound previous knowledge. All these levels of prior knowledge need to be carefully balanced in order to avoid feelings of being over- or under-challenged.

To sum up, the main challenge concerns bridging the gap between theory formation on gender and its possible practical applications, between everyday knowledge and between diverse disciplinary perspectives and discourses on gender. This should not imply a hierarchy between the knowledge of everyday life and academia: Inconsistencies in the supposed 'truth' of gender in everyday life are the source of theory formation. These tensions apply not only to teaching and learning but also to gender research and gender equality practice (see Lüdke et al. 2005; Riegraf, Plöger 2009, Mense 2013).

Planning a course which bridges the issues named before, implies, due to the complex body of gender concepts, a reflection of one's own theoretical and disciplinary background. According to Blickhäuser & von Barga (2006) we define gender competence as the ability and motivation to recognize and to question social categorizations relating to gender. This ability to reflect comprises the knowledge on how today's gender relations have emerged and how they affect power relations in society. In addition, the concept refers to the ability to apply this knowledge in such a way as to make one's own actions able to contribute to the reduction of inequalities. Gender competence therefore consists of the elements of intention, knowledge and ability (Budde & Venth, 2010, S. 23). As mentioned above, the grown and growing theoretical complexity in the field of gender studies makes it difficult to teach and to acquire gender issues. We therefore advocate, according to Sandra Smykalla, a transdisciplinary understanding of gender competence, which grasps the paradoxes of gender in theory and practice: Consequently gender competence can be regarded as a competence to deal with ambivalences and paradoxes concerning gender as a phenomenon and not as a competence to see and discuss presumed differences. In a nutshell: The indecisiveness and open-endedness of gender and related theory formation should be stressed. What makes Smykalla's understanding of gender competence an inspiring one is that she sees ambivalence as productive and not as an obstacle. This may lead to a productive starting point for professional action (Smykalla 2010: 266; Baumann 2006, completed and updated by Abdul-Hussain 2014).

These are our preliminary theoretical considerations. How can these be transferred to the practice of teaching gender competence? We will present key results of our teaching experiences in Gender Studies and as trainers for higher education didactics. The analysis is based on a documentary analysis of teaching evaluations and student outputs. First of all we will briefly sketch our teaching concepts, then we will present the main results of our findings and finally we will discuss potentials and challenges of teaching gender issues.

### **3 Teaching conception**

The higher education didactics workshop for lecturers and seminars for students have both similarities and differences with regard to conceptualization, content and time scope. Both contain a methodical mix of interactive input, individual and group work. In the seminar students additionally have to write essays, hold presentations and design the sessions.

#### **3.1 Target groups**

##### **3.1.1 Lecturers**

The workshop "Gender and Didactics" is a part of the program "ProDiversity" which has been established in 2012. The course on gender oriented didactics is a one-day-workshop and addresses lecturers.<sup>2</sup> On the average, 10 lecturers attend the workshop, mostly pre-docs and postdocs. The groups are rather heterogeneous, there is a mix of persons from the

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<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive overview, see Auferkorte-Michaelis & Wegrzyn 2013.

humanities, natural sciences and engineering. The gender ratio is relatively balanced.<sup>3</sup> The workshops have been developed according to the suggestions concerning quality principles in gender trainings made by Kaschuba (2004: 120) and according to the theoretical and methodological premises gender trainings should be based on postulated by Frey et al. 2006. Our learning objectives are:

- reflecting of one's own teaching practices from a critical gender perspective
- building up a basic knowledge of various theoretical concepts of gender and the interaction of gender with further social categories (intersectional understanding of gender)
- reflecting the gendered structures in higher education institutions based on empirical studies
- trying out methods for mainstreaming gender equality in teaching

### 3.1.2 Students

The introductory seminars are part of the extracurricular and interdisciplinary study program for undergraduates at the University of Duisburg-Essen. Most of the participants study at bachelor level. We have designed one as a blended learning course which comprises 15 hours of classroom teaching and 45 hours of online-based self-tuition<sup>4</sup>. Here the number of participants is limited to 50. The other course is designed as a four-day block seminar (30 hours of classroom teaching; a minimum of 30 hours self-tuition). The number of participants is limited to 35. Most of the students come from the humanities and social sciences; a small amount comes from engineering and the natural sciences. The prior knowledge of the students is quite heterogeneous; it ranges from no or little knowledge of gender theory to profound knowledge.

Another introductory seminar with the subject title "Managing Gender and Diversity" addresses students at master level in adult education. It is a mandatory course in the first or second semester of the study program. The seminar takes place once a week.

Students at the University themselves derive from heterogenic background concerning their social or national background. More than half of the students are first generation students, 16% are international students and nearly 25% have a migration background (Stammen 2010). The participants of our seminars represent this diversity, although women have a share of over 75 %. The share of women at the UDE is around 50%.

The learning objectives for all courses are:

- building up a basic knowledge of various theoretical concepts and issues of gender studies
- developing a basic academic understanding of gender

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<sup>3</sup> The analysis will comprise two workshops carried out in team teaching (2013 and 2014), a workshop led by Wegrzyn for a research group in biology (2013) and a workshop led by Mense for members of an institute for graduate studies in the field of humanities (2014).

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.uni-due.de/genderportal/lehre\\_e-learning\\_genderstudies.shtml](https://www.uni-due.de/genderportal/lehre_e-learning_genderstudies.shtml)

- recognizing the connections to various academic disciplines

Due to the higher amount of time (average: 60 teaching units) one can teach profoundly and provide for a more differentiated knowledge whereas in the one-day workshop for lecturers (8 teaching units) the focus is on the practice and the transfer of gender issues to concrete teaching situations. However, also the content for the student seminar has to be reduced and therefore selected. Both for the didactics workshop and the introductory seminar constructivist theories and perspectives dominate. Gender is conceptualized as an indecisive and open-ended category and not as a phenomenon of mutual exclusive parts (femininity/masculinity). Although we regard gender as a social construction, we also emphasize the empirical-political and physical power of gender categories: Gender can be observed as an identity category most people live more or less consciously.

## 3.2 Methodical issues

### 3.2.1 Higher education didactics workshops

The one-day workshop is divided into three parts: A biography-oriented introductory exercise, which is often used in gender- and diversity trainings. It allows a first encounter with the topic and may lead to a first reflection of one's own stereotypes. Furthermore it points to the inconsistencies, continuities and breaks of gender in the everyday life and knowledge of gender. This biographic knowledge about the indecisiveness of one's own gender (self) concept can be regarded as a good starting point for the next unit, an interactive theoretical input. Here we emphasize the plurality of gender theories and that no 'final truth' or 'right' perspective on gender exists. Due to the limited time (one day), comparative historical aspects on gender relations are just roughly sketched, not elaborated, whereas in the student seminars these aspects are strongly emphasized. The theoretical input is followed by the presentation of various empirical studies of gender in teaching and learning in higher education in Germany (Münst 2009; Derboven, Winker 2010). These studies, generated in the context of institutional research, point to the relevance of gender as a category in teaching. After this section the participants learn the basic principles of gender reflected higher education didactics, based on Gindl, Hefler (2010: 71). Furthermore it is necessary to integrate an intersectional perspective in order to get a deeper understanding for the interplay of gender with other categories of difference (see Czollek, Perko 2008).

Between these inputs the participants are encouraged to develop a first draft of one of their own seminars where gender aspects are integrated in the content and the interactions during the course. Most of them reflect on upcoming seminars or lectures. They can work on their own or in groups, having the opportunity of peer counselling. This exercise allows participants to bring in their own teaching experiences and know-how to deal with various situations in seminars.

### **3.2.2 Introductory courses for students**

Whereas in the workshop on didactics the historical aspects of gender relations are broadly sketched, these issues take a large part in the introductory seminar. Learning how gender relations and the perspectives on femininity and masculinity have changed over time e.g. due to political upheavals or cultural changes (vgl. Frey u.a. 2006) helps students understand the meaning of gender as an indecisive category. This perspective shows the interaction of gender with other categories of difference. Norms of femininity and masculinity differed along the boundaries of social class: Rules for women of the gentry had and have little in common with the everyday life e.g. with peasant women. Showing similarities as well as differences within the genus groups points to the complexity of gender and enables students to see that there are no 'real prototypes' of women and men. The historical comparison is a good starting point for the theoretical part of the seminar where they learn the basic implication of constructivist feminist theory. In the last part of the seminar, students get in touch with various empirical studies.

### **3.3 Reflection of the workshops and seminars**

The attainment of gender competence and knowledge are the main learning objectives in our workshops and seminars. Did the students and participants achieve these aims? Did we succeed in our efforts to clarify the link between the importance of the gender category in higher education and society and the necessity of denying the overall importance of gender? Furthermore is it possible to overcome defensive attitudes of students and lecturers regarding gender? To answer these questions we have analysed our seminar and workshop evaluations as well as student output. The evaluations of the student seminars and workshops have been carried out separately because of the different teaching formats. We are aware that the evaluation forms, in particular the quantitative proportions of the questionnaires, only permit limited interpretations of meaning. But we think they still provide good preliminary evidence for our aim in this paper. In addition, we have also resorted to the manual prepared materials of the students in the gender studies seminars. They can show to which extent students have acquired an understanding of the complex and diverse meanings of gender.

#### **3.3.1 Workshops**

The workshop-offers regarding gender and didactics at the University of Duisburg-Essen are widely accepted. The numbers of participants and also the diversity of the represented subjects show that there is a growing demand in this field. The prior knowledge in terms of both educational issues as well as in terms of knowledge of gender studies is also very heterogeneous. Participation is voluntary; therefore the participants usually come with certain openness on behalf of the topic. Insofar they can be considered as potential multipliers for gender-equality.

The overall feedback is positive. The mix of methods, e.g. reflection exercise, instructed teamwork, dialogue-oriented input and a practice phase is positively assessed by the

majority of the participants. We start with a biography oriented exercise, which is perceived as useful and helpful, as these supports the reflection on one's own construction-processes of gender, without being put under evaluation.

The lectures on gender theories and empirical findings on gender are viewed differently. In particular the complexity, diversity and incompleteness of the potential interpretations of gender are seen as a great challenge. The temporal proportion between the educational presentation on gender theories and the practical self-work was evaluated differently. All in all the participants are predominantly aware that they need profound knowledge of gender studies as a prerequisite for the design of gender-reflective teaching. It is also an accepted fact that this can't possibly be achieved in a one-day workshop. The evaluation shows, that the practical components and concrete recommendations of implementing gender issues in teaching are highly valued. Many participants even wished for a stronger focus on this part. Due to time restrictions of a one-day workshop and the heterogeneous prior knowledge it is obvious, that we cannot satisfy all the needs of the participants alike. Some would prefer more theoretical input, others more time for concrete practical exercises. Both parts are fundamental in behalf of designing seminars and courses: the gender-theoretical foundation as well as practicing on the spot. This reflects the weakness of one-day workshops in which the time-complexity dilemma needs to be renegotiated constantly.

### **3.3.2 Seminars**

The interdisciplinary seminars are introductory seminars in gender studies. Students' interests in these gender seminars are high as they are in good demand which is shown by registrations numbers who are above the numbers we can accommodate for. As the teaching format is designed as block seminars or a blended learning format it is likely that this is one reason for the wide demand. Again, as these seminars can be freely selected from a range of different courses, this may lead to a more open attitude of the students towards the topic.

The evaluation shows an overall positive feedback: e.g. the varied design of the seminar, the method mix between lecture and group work, the time and opportunity to discuss the topic critically, which is perceived as a break from the everyday teaching in their own subjects, as well as the opportunity to exchange views with students from "other" disciplines.

The historical background of the topic has been viewed as a good starting point, which should be accompanied by a broader international comparative perspective in further seminars. The interdisciplinary composition of the students as well as their different prior knowledge in gender studies poses a particular challenge for the lecturer and the students themselves and can cause frustration among the participants. While some students want to deepen their existing knowledge about gender, others need a basic introduction to the topic. The latter, especially when they come from "non intensive-reading and writing" disciplines often report difficulties with text production, since many writings in gender studies are demanding and very dense. This is reflected in the feedback from the students, who often complain about the editing of texts as they were "too many, too long and too theoretical".

These critical statements, however, are not only due to lack of knowledge, but also to the fact of a general heavy workload of students as well as a certain "theory skepticism" on the part of many students, which is in our opinion partly due to the skills- and labour market orientation of the Bologna process implementation. In general, however, we are able to mitigate this theory skepticism over the course of the seminar.

The students gave very positive feedback to the biography oriented exercises because they allowed them a significant personal approach to the subject and made their own gender identity-fractures and contradictions visible. Those experiences enabled them to scrutinize their everyday knowledge about gender. At the same time it was also possible to discuss and meet in an open atmosphere. Students became aware of their own differences and similarities both in terms of gender but also in terms of other social categories such as ethnicity, social origin or as the culture of the own discipline. Hence the heterogeneity of the students proves to have a great potential when approaching gender theories and this potential should not be underestimated.

Unlike the mentioned workshop and seminar the course on adult education is a mandatory seminar, which the master students must undertake. Women are represented as a whole in the educational sciences with a share of 80% in the seminar. The main learning objective of this seminar is acquiring gender- and diversity-competence. In this seminar there is a noticeably greater defensive attitude regarding gender issues. This defensiveness is expressed openly, which makes it easier to deal with. Especially in these circumstances the biography oriented exercises had a positive impact on these attitudes and reinforced the willingness to constructively deal with gender issues (see also Justen, Schlüter, 2010). In addition, the integration of gender and diversity also gave the students the opportunity to "de-dramatize" gender as a category. The student evaluation of this seminar is much more contradictory and more critical than the feedback to the interdisciplinary seminar. While some feedback emphasizes the practical relevance of the seminar, others criticize the lack of practical relevance. This contradiction also applies to the style of discussion; some students highlight the atmosphere of trust and openness while others complain about ideologically colored discussions.

Dramatizations and a de-dramatization of Gender takes place in both types of seminars: On one hand, reference is made on stereotyped gender attributes that reproduce a dualistic gender-order. We found such a "flight to gender-difference" in seminar discussions with repeated allusions to what women or men typically are and do as well as in written work, whether essays or term papers. This is particularly true for students with no prior knowledge in gender studies. On the other hand these assumptions were disputed by other students and they voiced discomfort with these statements. These statements sometimes culminated then in a very negative attitude towards the notions and meanings of gender, on the note "it is a personal matter anyway..."

In this context, students expect that the lecturers will tell them the "real truth" about gender. The reference to the incompleteness and to the paradoxes of gender and thus far-reaching epistemological implications can further the trends described above. This friction should be, however, tolerated in our opinion, and it should be explained that this

observation is true for all research areas in general and that it is not a special case of gender studies.

Our seminar experiences in the field of gender studies show, that students deal - in spite of prevailing prejudices against gender issues –with these highly complex questions of gender studies in a very constructive way. In our view it is important to remain open to the critical voices of the students besides the use of the described biography-oriented approach and other didactic instruments and methods when teaching gender issues.

#### **4 Teaching gender issues: Opportunities and Frictions –**

Against the background of our above described experiences in teaching gender studies and as advisers in higher education trainings we finally discuss the opportunities and frictions in teaching gender issues. We have shown that we used the everyday knowledge and experiences of our participants, students and teachers alike, about gender as a starting point for self-reflection, because everyday knowledge of gender itself is contradictory and fragile. The participants learned that the notions and meanings of gender differ between themselves and regardless of their own gender.

Based on these experiences made by the students and participants the theoretical positions concerning the inconsistency of gender became more accessible to them, especially to participants with less gender knowledge. Thus we hope to overcome the dilemma of gender difference, i.e. the permanent reification of gender stereotypes in teaching gender issues. Thereby we are only too aware that we walk on a fine line in pointing out the empirically observable and socially effective gender differences in higher education on the one hand and the non-thematization of gender on the other hand. The above mentioned dilemma of gender difference is a very challenging dilemma, which not only represents an unsolved teaching problem but also an unsolved problem of gender theory (see Göttert, Rose 2008). The aim is to view gender as something that can be thought of only in contexts: be it historical, cultural or institutional.

At the same time we do not consider the so-called scientific knowledge or a certain theory as the “one truth”, because this would indeed contradict the postulate of embeddedness in a context. Above all for us as lecturers it is important that our participants get the opportunity to address these scientific gender-findings and theories from their standpoint of experiences and knowledge, without giving way for an “anything goes attitude”. We are also aware that we as lecturers provide an implicit knowledge system, both in the seminar and workshop context as well as in the selection of the presented theories and the structuring of the practice units (see Schlüter, Berkel 2012: 430). Therefore we build our lectures and workshops on a reciprocal way of exchanging knowledge and gender expertise. In our lectures we also focus on a particular gender-based inequality in higher education as well as in society, therefore our claim to teaching gender issues has an emancipatory agenda. In this way we hope that the participants and students will serve as multipliers, which will contribute to enhance (gender)-equality.

Especially in the context of didactic seminars this a challenging undertaking. First of all didactic seminars have a – what we call – “time-complexity dilemma” which is due to the abundance of gender theories and knowledge on the one hand and the time restrictions of one-day seminars on the other. Participants may feel overwhelmed by too much information on gender in theory and researching results. As the feedback shows students and participants alike often complain about too much input e.g. theory. We share these concerns and positions but we also observed that the participants seem to have taken the bait especially when they discuss controversial topics. Therefore we can safely state that thinking about gender in a complex and open-minded way, opens up new insights on the topic for the participants as well as for us. Teaching gender issues provides room for a necessary debate, although the complex meanings of gender and its translation into practice can only be touched upon. Another question concerning trainings and teaching therefore is: How far-reaching are workshops in strengthening gender competence, especially when it is a “coached gender competence” as Schlüter and Berkel mentioned (2012: 439)?

Gender reflective teaching requires continuous self-reflection of lecturers as well as a permanent involvement with didactic and gender theory. In addition it needs the consideration of social hierarchy relationships and mechanisms of exclusion in education. To achieve gender equality in higher education it is not sufficient to address gender in higher education didactics or in individual gender studies seminars alone.

Not only gender-reflective teaching, but overall good quality teaching requires institutional and structural conditions, most of which are very precarious in the higher education system in Germany, especially for lectures on mid-level academic qualification positions. Lecturers are burdened with high teaching loads and examination duties due to large groups of students, which make it difficult for them to meet the necessary and required reflection on their own teaching.

Furthermore, teaching gender issues is a highly sophisticated field of research that cannot be conveyed as part of a university didactic training only. To this end it is necessary to promote and institutionalize gender studies at the university.

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