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Higher Education in Russia and Beyond



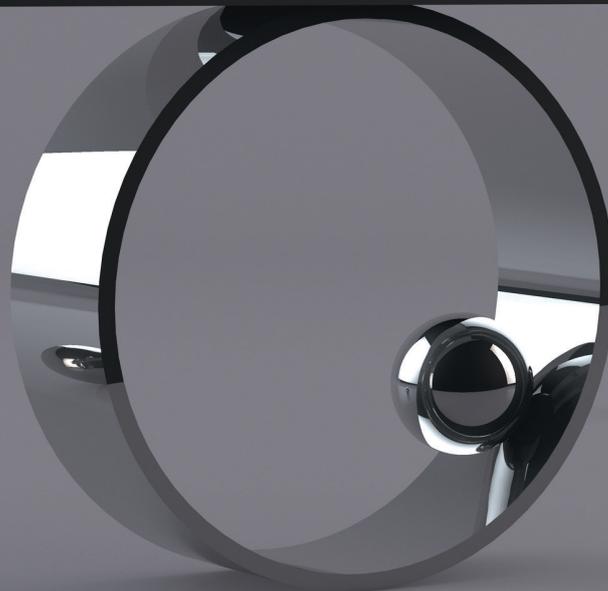
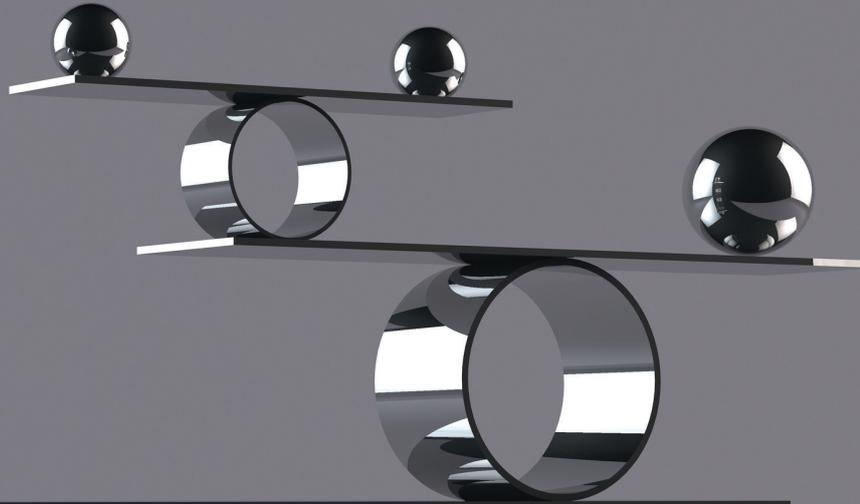
Teaching and Learning: in Search for Balance

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First, the idea of teacher exchange and staff mobility has to be re-conceptualized. Instead of seeing a teacher's visit only in terms of delivering particular academic content to the students of the host university, it should be viewed as a dialogical space for developing innovative approaches to teaching via the cross-fertilization and critical evaluation of different pedagogical traditions and cultures.

Second, universities should do more to encourage teachers to participate in staff exchange programs. In practice, this can be done, for instance, by organizing knowledge-sharing events on departmental and faculty levels, concentrating on good practices, making visit reports available for the teaching staff within universities, recognizing the importance of teacher exchange visits for their pedagogical development and performance.

Third, in order to maximize the benefits of the visit, it is crucial that the visiting teacher does their homework before the visit. This involves being familiar with the programs and profiles of the target university in terms of both teaching and research. It is important to examine the syllabi and curricula to find out whether there is interesting content or courses the visiting teacher would like to bring back to the home university. Attention should also be paid to what kind of pedagogical and methodological expertise exists at the target university. For instance, if the teacher is interested in developing on-line teaching skills, it naturally makes sense to visit a department that has strong expertise in that particular area. In our department, all visitors are contacted prior to their visit by the teachers responsible for the courses the visiting teacher will be teaching. This allows the visiting teacher to plan their classes as well as the pedagogical approach beforehand, to make sure that her teaching will meet the goals and contribute to the learning outcomes of the course.

Fourth, it is crucial to have opportunities for sharing ideas and experiences, discussing the methodological implications of different teaching philosophies. In order to facilitate the exchange of ideas and dialogue between colleagues, one can use various forms of interaction and collaboration, including the observation of teaching sessions, participating in departmental meetings and so forth. By observing teaching sessions at the host university, the visitor can get new ideas for developing her teaching at different levels, including the structure of lessons, the use of various tools, the use of technology, forms of interaction, types of assignments, classroom design, forms of group work and so forth. In our experience, informal discussions with teachers before and after teaching sessions have also been very constructive. Interaction and collaboration between the visitor and members of the teaching staff at the host university is likely to translate into the improved quality of teaching.

Notes:

[1] I would like to thank Dr Judit Hahn (University Lecturer of English) and Alexei Lobski (University Teacher of Russian Language and Culture) for their input.



Writing and Thinking: Analog Methods in the Digital Era

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Digital meets analog

One of the most frequent words in discussions of modern education in Russia is “digitalization”. The process of introducing of new digital technologies into the educational system is ongoing and inevitable. Does this mean that old-fashioned approaches and methods like writing, class discussions and different forms of offline group work are obsolete and just waiting to be replaced by brand-new on-line technologies?

The usual problem with digitalization is that it looks quite clear in industry and management (including educational management) but less so in the classroom. Introducing a learning management system, such as Blackboard, Moodle or Sakai into universities is important and it can dramatically change content delivery, assessment, and the management of individual educational trajectories etc. However, it changes less at the very core of the learning process.

When we use computers and networks for educational purposes extremely complex digital processes and technologies are involved. This does not automatically render the process of education ‘digital’. If that were the case, we could already report that digitalization of universities and schools is fully complete because all of them are equipped with computers and connected to the Internet.

One of the declared goals of the digital transformation of education is to create a learning environment where everything is connected. It claims to build better collaborative, interactive and personalized learning experiences. It requires not only total network connection and fast access to the Internet but also a completely redesigned curriculum. This is the place where digital meets analog because the very process of learning remains inescapably non-digital, depending on the cognitive faculties of the human brain and on face-to-face interaction between human beings.

The main challenge is to keep the balance between introducing new digital technologies and boosting the methods and approaches that effectively develop soft skills such as critical thinking, creativity, communication and, most important, lifelong learning.

Writing to Learn

One of the approaches that helps to resolve this problem is writing to learn (W2L). This approach was developed in American universities as a part of a “writing across the curriculum” strategy, aiming to develop writing and critical thinking skills. W2L introduces students to practices and opportunities to write as part of their learning. It is important that the mode of writing is active, not passive as in taking notes during lectures. There are not actually many lectures in a collaborative, interactive and personalized educational environment.

Note also an important difference between writing to learn or writing and thinking programs on the one hand, and academic writing or writing academic papers on the other. The compulsory writing seminars at modern universities worldwide start from the very first days when academic interests might not be clear for most students. It is not so easy to write an academic paper without well-defined academic interests and a background in some particular area. These seminars show how to use writing for learning purposes rather than to train students in writing papers.

That is why writing requirements exist in many American universities. These requirements can vary from one writing seminar in the first year to a series of intensive writing classes during the whole period of studying. For example, at Princeton (#1 university in US, #1 Best Undergraduate Teaching in US in 2019) all undergraduate students, including those who study at the School of Engineering and Applied Science, must fulfill the university writing requirements by taking a writing seminar in the freshman year.

Williams College (#1 liberal arts college in US in 2019) requires that all students take two writing skills courses, one by the end of the sophomore year, and one by the end of the junior year. Again, these are not specially designed “academic writing” courses but courses in disciplines marked as “WS” (writing skills) that include multiple drafts, peer review, and conferences or class discussions, all designed to improve writing skills. The course catalog at Williams notes that “a course with a single long paper due at the end of the semester, but with no required or structured means of addressing writing issues, would not be considered a writing skills course”.

W2L in Russia

Writing-intensive seminars, a few years ago being a relatively rare phenomenon in the Russian system of higher education, are gaining popularity. In some cases, these are variations of the signature program “Language and thinking”, which has been developed over the last 40 years at Bard College, New York, one of the leaders in American education in the “classroom experience” category.

One of the examples of building a W2L curriculum is the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences (Smolny College) of St. Petersburg State University. For the past 10 years, at the beginning of the fall semester, first-year students spend 60 hours in a three-week intensive “Writing and think-

ing” workshop, practicing different informal writing techniques. They read texts in small groups, discuss them, and learn how to write about texts. This is how a community of readers and writers is created.

Similar workshops were launched recently at Perm National Research University and Tyumen State University (School of Advanced Studies). Some engineering schools, such as MEPhi and ITMO, have also taken steps in this direction. In 2018, the Institute of Lasers and Plasma Technologies at MePhi introduced a course called “Critical Thinking and Academic Writing: Human and Technologies” where students read texts of different genres (from poems to academic papers) in small groups, write about texts and discuss writing. The first experience was positive so the institute is going to continue this course.

Despite the fact that the idea of a liberal education is still considered dubious in most Russian universities, some parts of it, like the opportunities for students to choose an individual educational trajectory or a writing-intensive education, have started to grow rapidly in very different parts of the country and at very different universities. This growth cannot bear fruit without a well-considered system of faculty training, and changes in infrastructure. Digital education is impossible without computers, networks and programmers. W2L goals cannot be achieved without trained educators, and without a space at the university for small group discussions and face to face peer-review sessions.

It cannot be done in one year but the interest in different kinds of W2L practices in progressive Russian universities shows that after first steps and trials these practices have a long-term future.



A Glimpse on Teaching Awards

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There has been a long debate on the promotion of teaching excellence in the Teaching and Learning world. The First Educational Development Symposium was held at Warwick University in the fall of 1994 and “focused on the details of promotion practices which could be adopted