

# Coming to Grips with Bologna: Change and Student Empowerment in Transforming Classes into an Effective Learning Environment

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## Abstract

With the advent of the Bologna Process to develop higher education in the European Union, university teachers and students have gone through a process of change. This change required an adjustment to the demands of higher education reform governed by European convergence. However, the resulting transformations in pedagogical practice have ostensibly affected not only teacher-student attitudes and relationships but also the academic culture.

Within the new educational paradigm, the shift to a student-centered pedagogy has meant the empowering of individual students providing them with the opportunity to direct their own learning. However, the issue now is how to address and exercise student empowerment in the real-life class. This study is an investigation into the role of teachers to strike a balance between the forces pushing them to adapt to the new pedagogical framework and the need to improve student self-reliance and ownership of learning. It concludes by reaffirming the advantages of applying an empowerment-based approach, already recognized by current research, that enhances teacher and students relations in an effective learning environment.

**Keywords:** Bologna, educational change, empowerment, learning environment, teacher-student

## 1. Introduction

Since the European Convergence in 1999 (Sorbonne Declaration 1998), the common European Higher Education Area was set to harmonize national higher education systems in Europe by 2010 through the Bologna Process. The Bologna Process (Bologna) identified through a European Union ministerial communiqué the concept of ‘student-centered learning’: i.e., an approach to education where learners and their needs are the focus of the whole teaching and learning process.

The Bologna Process has changed teaching methodologies from traditional face-to-face instruction, where the emphasis is on the teacher who delivers the content, to students having to learn, research, and study on their own, towards a more flexible and digitally supporting learning environment. Evaluation also follows along the same lines emphasizing not only knowledge, but also skills and competences that are needed in the workplace. In fact, developing skills and competences becomes crucial in an active learning context where students reflect on actions, experiences, and learn by collaborating in knowledge construction while engaged throughout the set tasks. The main objective is to strengthen the activities and interactions of the student learning process (García-Ruiz, Gonzalez, & Contreras, 2014).

This new arrangement has contributed to revolutionize the teaching environment with new technologies supporting this tremendous change. Formal teaching does not rely exclusively on lecturing but also on students having to take the initiative for their own learning and responsibility for their work and progress. Autonomous learning is considered essential since students have to become independent from the teacher and learn how to organize their learning agendas. Furthermore, they engage in the process of knowledge construction and remain open to alternative forms of study: i.e. blended learning, flipped classrooms, MOOCs, OER. The final aim is to become lifelong learners after leaving a formal educational setting (European Commission, 2018a).

Since the Bologna Declaration, twenty years ago, universities are still striving hard to adapt their degree structures and curricula to the requirements of the European Higher Education Area. Universities do not want to be left behind and all compete for visibility in higher education rankings, at least national rankings. Faculty have seen their workload increase considerably by having to make a personal follow-up of each student more closely than ever before including their level of knowledge and competences. Students find themselves with a heavy workload they have to complete outside lectures and that is measured on a credit-hour basis. What is important for students now is that they feel they have gained more attention and interest from all institutions in such a way that their modes of learning, their views and interests form a valuable part of the educational process, and thus enhances their empowerment.

## 2. Empowerment

Empowerment is a concept frequently linked to economic globalization that involves strengthening people's capacities and full participation in the development, well-being and progress of their societies (Mohanty, 1995, p. 1434). It has been advocated in the political language of international development organizations and in the discourse of radical feminist groups in the 1980s progressing into research and philosophy about the poor and marginalized groups (women, people with disabilities, ethnic groups...). In this spirit, Paulo Freire approach to liberation through developing '*conscientization*' of the oppressed (1970) emphasized 'consciousness raising' to change oppressive structures (social, political and economic) by building individual as well as collective capacities to transform those structures, influence state decisions and ultimately participate in the decision process (Calvés, 2009). The model of empowerment proposed by John Friedmann (1992) was more attuned to people and the environment, focusing more on psychology of individuals besides their social and political views. Empowerment today has evolved to a definition of the term devoid of the main rhetoric of the needs and interests of the oppressed and the dynamics of dominance that marginalize them. It is employed by international development organizations "to legitimize existing top-down policies and programs" (Calvés, 2009, p. 13), rather than to mean a process of transformation from the bottom-up as was defined originally.

Empowerment in education is a multi-faceted concept that has been connected with traditions of critical autonomy between teacher and student. This line of thinking is geared both at teachers gaining control of pedagogy through reflection on their own practices and to provide students with options and choices to take advantage of opportunities in society. Thus, students are in a position to take control over their own lives (Giddens, 1991). Empowerment has also been associated with disciplinary technologies that exercise indirect but strict control over teachers and learners in modern society. This approach is in accord with the system of power advanced by Foucault (1977), which results in self-regulating subjects "whose individuality is harnessed to the ends of government". In fact, "the objectives of individual behavior come to be the same or as close to the objectives of the government" (Lawson, 2011, p. 94). However, such a system of discipline has been criticized by some contemporary researchers who emphasize teacher freedom to operate independently – with a choice – and effectively in everyday practice, engaging themselves in innovative pedagogy that is detached from the disciplinary techniques of modern education (Lawson, 2011, pp. 96-97).

In neoliberal discourse, empowerment is focused on an individualistic conception rather than on social revolution, putting responsibility on the individuals to take charge of their lives and strive for self-improvement. Empowerment is understood as individual capacity and realization where students are "responsible for their own conduct and learning" (Wardman, 2016, p. 312). This notion of empowerment is today intertwined with current constructivist theories of learning that channel students to become "self-directed participants in the economy and the classroom" (Doxtdator, 2018). Literally, "The self-confidence and skills accumulated in school is supposed to provide the human capital needed to be an entrepreneur in adult life" (Doxtdator, 2018).

Finally, there is another applied development of empowerment used to explain organizational effectiveness in management theory that is defined as a motivational construct, which is internal to the individual, as opposed to empowerment as a relational construct implying the formal authority of managers shared with or delegated to subordinates. This understanding of the concept in motivational terms, proposed by Conger and Kanungo (1988), relies on approaches from organizational management and psychology literatures and it is the concept that will be henceforth referred to in the present paper.

## 3. Empowerment in an Instructional Context

There is not much research done on student empowerment in the classroom (Frymier, Shulman, & Houser, 1996; Houser & Frymier, 2009; Schrodtt, Witt, Myers, Turman, Barton & Jernberg, 2008). Empowerment has been regarded as an "expanded and more inclusive conceptualization of motivation" (Frymier et al., 1996, p. 184), more specifically correlated with intrinsic motivation according to Brooks and Young (2011), and it is greatly focused on its relation to academic success. This has led to various empowering practices implemented in the classroom context to improve the quality of students work (Frymier & Shulman, 1994; Frymier et al., 1996; Houser & Frymier, 2009; Kirk, Lewis, Brown, Karibo, & Park, 2016).

In an academic context, research conducted by Shulman and Luechauer (1991, 1992 & 1993) has shown that empowerment is a philosophy and a practice (Shulman & Luechauer, 1991, p. 8). They propose an empowerment based paradigm in place of the traditional 'bureaucratic' pedagogy that emphasizes the power given to formal authority and hierarchical structures. In contrast, the new paradigm prioritizes trust and respect for students emphasizing their capability and responsibility to take control of their learning. Factors that impede building student confidence and commitment to perform good work should be replaced by others that "promote ownership, self-efficacy and the intrinsic motivation to learn" (Shulman & Luechauer, 1991, p. 7). Thus, positive change can be attained that results in greater student involvement in the teaching-learning process. Subsequent studies have proposed a conception of student empowerment

based on other dimensions such as academic, social and political that are interrelated (McQuillan, 2005). Alternatively, the concept is defined from the perspective of racial/ethnic minority students underlining the importance of contextual factors on empowerment and at the same time developing a tool to measure it (Back, 2014). Yet these aspects involved in the concept of empowerment are beyond the scope of this paper.

The present study is focused on student empowerment in the classroom environment. It is not addressed at understanding the nature and dimensions of this concept in its broadest sense. The study relies on empowerment theory by looking at its psychological aspect as advanced by research that see it as a motivation-based construct (i.e. Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990) and it mainly examines classroom related factors such as teacher-student interactions and power roles.

The objective for the rest of the present paper is to rethink the position of teachers and students in the reconsidered teaching-learning process for the 21st century. Specifically, I want to draw attention to the changes in perspective between the two actors including attitudes, roles and expectations necessary to fulfil defined goals.

Three pivotal aspects will be considered: A) Change in university culture and attitudes; B) change of lecturer-student relationships; and C) change of expectations because of the pedagogical shift experienced by higher education in this millennium. This set of changes requires interaction, intervention and action by both actors to adjust teaching and learning to meet the objectives of the European Higher Education Area introduced twenty years ago. Although the general use of the term empowerment in an instructional context is to enable students to be more aware of their capabilities to construe their own understanding and learning experiences, I would like to argue that this empowering spiral leads to a slippery slope. Mainly the spiral has the unintended consequence of affecting the pedagogical work of teachers. This often results in thwarting their best efforts to shape and prepare students for the challenges of modern life.

In previous studies, I analyzed the impact of changes introduced by the Bologna Process in the context of a university (Kindelan & Martin, 2014; Kindelan, Ayuga-Tález, Martin, & Valiente, 2019) to see how the reforms and their implementation are influencing the perception of faculty. I will now have a closer look at some of the effects Bologna is having on teacher activity, particularly the new role of lecturers in the current teaching-learning system and the notion of student empowerment within this educational context.

#### **4. Change in University Culture and Attitudes**

Writing about changed academic relationships between professors and students at a German university, Christen Hairston (2015) states that, in the past, responsibility in higher education was with the student but now it lies more on the teacher. I agree with Hairston that before Bologna students were responsible for organizing their own studying agenda and their research work. Now, lecturers have to organize students learning through: activities and tasks; build up and teach research skills; and finally guide students to assess their own work, showing them the way to improve outcomes. Hairston affirms that Bologna has placed more responsibility on lecturers than on students, shifting the culture from a learning paradigm to a teaching paradigm (Hairston, 2015, p. 888). This is precisely the opposite of the emphasis placed by Bologna on the learner and learning, thus concurring with Hairston.

Learning in the present context is structured into small units (or 'bite-sized chunks'. Lemke, 2010) and tested immediately to check student progress. Although limited and manageable objectives may motivate learners in the short term to pass a subject, this type of assessment has been called into question by various educationalists who hold that there is no in-depth learning (Teelken & Wihlborg, 2010). Four-month semesters in our academic system and heavy workloads for many subjects overwhelm students causing anxiety and a lack of solid and sound knowledge of a subject. There is a tendency for 'Modularization' (i.e. dividing the syllabus into modules after which a test, exam or assignment is set) that makes it more difficult for students to synthesize knowledge (Hairston, 2015 p. 889).

Although it is true that students want to pass and get their qualification and hopefully work as experts in their field, the focus on measurable and achievable goals to gain a good grade has betrayed a change in attitude regarding their study approach. This, in turn, has broken the established teaching modes of lecturers and their interaction with students. Some lecturers see the new proposal as spoon-feeding students: Everything is scheduled and lecturers have to constantly 'feed' students through guidance, explicit requirements, and assessment to meet their needs and thus calm their anxiety. This practice may deprive students from actually developing skills to face difficulties that exist in the real world, for example opacity, unclear directions, lack of appropriate information. Consequently, students become smarter as they cope with obstacles in the learning process that demand more active involvement with the material they have to study (Norman, 2015).

Rubio and Alvarez (2010) are correct when they suggest that before Bologna students learnt by themselves to build their autonomy, as they became adult learners in their management of time, learning capacity, and use of resources during the years of their studies. Now, since Bologna, lecturers see themselves forced to 'intrude' into the students' educational path

on the grounds of having to help them achieve that desired autonomy. This is an area of concern for many lecturers who attest to the scarce commitment of learners to their own long-term planning of subjects: "A detailed planning of what students should do inside and outside classrooms and the deadline in which it is to be completed can erode their autonomy" (Rubio & Alvarez, 2010, p. 216).

In reality, students do not seem to know how to become independent, as Dr. Owen argued when researching on learning how to learn in higher education: "...a growing proportion of students are 'puzzled' by the idea of independent learning" (Cunnane, 2011). Discovering that one in three first-year undergraduates struggle to learn independently, he said: "They are not taking control of their learning in the way we would want them to because they still want to be trained like they were at school" (Cunnane, 2011).

Baloo, Evans, Hughes, Zhu and Winstone (2018), however, argued that a case should be made for student responsibility within assessments and the need to be explicit about assessment criteria to promote student autonomy. They distinguish between a transactional and a transformative conception of learning within a specific context. Transactional learning implies an external regulation of learning and more explicit guidance on the part of the teacher, which can result in spoon-feeding. Transformative learning requires students to learn independently by enhancing self-assessment and self-regulation of their capacity to learn. This presupposes an atmosphere of mutual and shared understanding of assessment requirements that needs to be nurtured throughout the process.

The question here is whether applying a transformative approach to learning is viable for large classes. In the collection of papers edited by Hornsby, Osman and De Matos-Ala (2013) on large-class teaching are present practical approaches taken by lecturers to transform traditional lecture methods, including current technology tools, into effective learning environments within a large-class setting. The main issue discussed is that quality teaching and learning can be achieved in a large class by promoting active student engagement and by placing more responsibility on the learner, thus developing their autonomy.

Ramirez, Kindelan & Escolano (2017) writing about a university engineering course also showed that a large class is not an impediment to improve student academic performance and responsibility in the learning process. This included students who need more attention and regular feedback on their level of achievement. In the 2017 study, around 50% of students objected to the continuous assessments and called into question the value of this method. The truth is that they perceive the system as too demanding, time-consuming and sometimes unfair if they fail to complete the assigned work. The authors of the study, therefore, proposed some alternatives to transform this method into an effective tool. For example, a 'virtual podium' that required students finishing their study objectives before they can join: This promoted motivation and a 'healthy' rivalry among them. Then again, the virtual platform, Moodle, had a "progress bar" showing the student how many course activities were completed and thus motivates them to finish the course.

In effect, the measures taken by lecturers were built into a learning environment where digital learning platforms and electronic devices (smartphones, tablets, and laptops) serve the purpose of adapting instruction to very concrete targets that students can meet. But most importantly, this technological component integrated within continuous assessment involves self and peer assessment that make students reflect on their learning, take more responsibility for it and gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

This poses a fundamental issue: Although the new culture emphasizes the learner and learning, it all comes down to how teachers interpret the new teaching-learning context. Teachers may take this as an occasion to take the lead and organize student learning in and outside the classroom through constant guidance and assessment. Alternatively, they make just give up control and risk providing students with self-regulation and assessment tools to become autonomous in their own learning.

Along the same lines as Ramirez et al. (2017), experiences reported by the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities [EADTU] in the action program "EMPOWER" (Note 1) are vivid examples of new teaching and learning modes at European higher education institutions showing innovative pedagogies and learner-focused practices (see Henderikx & Jansen, 2018; Ubachs, 2020). Hence, teacher attitudes and their will to apply them are just a matter of conviction, motivation and choice. Actually, in tackling the European Education Area in the twenty first century challenges, the Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport – Mr. Tibor Navracsics – confirms this issue:

How successfully we make this project a reality depends notably on one factor: teachers, their training, their motivation and their self-perception. Without motivated and confident teachers, the European Education Area will not have the impact we all expect from it (European Commission, 2019, p. 3).

Moreover, referring to some key findings revealed to policy makers in the annual report "Education and training monitor 2019", he adds:

...they highlight an obvious yet sometimes forgotten fact: teachers are the cornerstones of our education systems

(European Commission, 2019, p. 3).

Therefore, the attitude taken by teachers will be transferred to their class and will be part of the culture existing in the workplace. Such a culture will establish the identities and roles of each actor including their relationships. The concept of learning (see Balloo et al. above) or teaching style adopted within a specific context will act as a catalyst to ensure the important balance of power to exercise the roles of teacher and learner.

### 5. Change of Lecturer-Student Relationship and Roles

Due to the shift in the educational paradigm and the new teaching-learning culture in the knowledge society, teacher-learner relations have changed radically. There is a more direct – and more frequent – relationship between teacher-learner with the use of new technologies (e.g. educational platforms) that offer more opportunities to engage in personal communication, hopefully helping students be more confident.

“A relationship of mutual assertiveness between students and teachers” is thus established (Attard, Lorio, Geven, & Santa, 2010, p. 5), but not a traditional ‘authoritarian’ partnership between superior and subordinate as in the past. Bibace, Dillon and Dowds (1999) defined this partnership as “the expert’s position of privilege with respect to knowledge and power” (Bibace et al., 1999, p. 287). The idea of power that previously concentrated on the teacher is suddenly threatened, since power is now shared between students and teachers. The concept of student empowerment is now handled as an integral component of the student-centered learning pedagogy (Attard et al., 2010, p. 4) that enhances student involvement and control over their educational process and their representation in university governance.

In particular, we need to consider in what ways students are empowered as a result of this new pedagogy. Starting with the Bologna agreements that recognize student-centered learning in defining higher education priorities (Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Ministerial Communiqué 2009, p. 3), empowering learners involves:

- Heightened responsibility of students regarding their participation and influence on curricular design (Attard et al., 2010, p. 66).
- Increased sense of autonomy in the learner (Attard et al., 2010, p. 2).
- A more active role in designing their own learning path (Todorovski, Nordal, & Isoski, 2015, p. 5).
- Their voices are heard in the decision-making process and feedback mechanisms (Todorovski et al., 2015, p. 1).

In fact, an initiative to apply such an approach is the research done by an educational innovative group of lecturers at the Technical University of Madrid in a civil engineering course and presented at the Media and Learning conference in Brussels (Ramirez, Kindelan & Escolano, 2014). They created an in-house video platform – called ‘mytube’ – to manage access to course content by students without barriers that were present in other online video-sharing platforms.

The authors reported that this video tool enabled lecturers to manage fully their teaching videos, but at the same time helped students improve their learning when making their own videos.

In effect, students obtained higher grades when using videos in different stages of the classroom and incorporating their contents (previously discussed in class) in midterm and final exams including Moodle quiz questions. Student achievement, therefore, improved compared to test results obtained in traditional instruction in past years. Actually, in 2011/2012 academic year, students from a group of 400 individuals, who used videos as well as other resources to prepare a final exam in the subject of “Construction machinery” as part of their continuous assessment, got the minimum passing grade ‘C’. In contrast, some students from this group, who were not following the continuous assessment process, took this same exam without using videos and most of them did not pass (Figure 1).

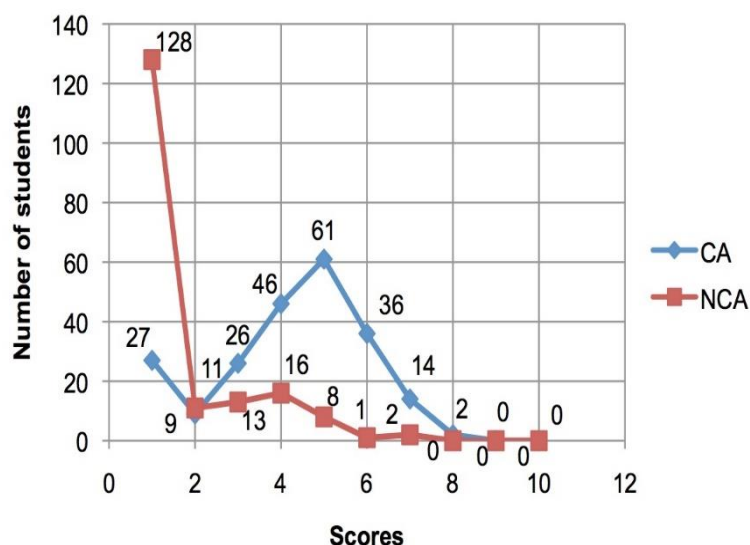


Figure 1. Students improving exam grades by opting to produce a video for an exam

Comparative analysis of grades given on the same test to students in the continuous assessment process (i.e. students who made a video) as opposed to students not following continuous assessment (CA= continuous assessment; NAC= non continuous assessment)

Students enhanced their knowledge of the subject when a video was used for teaching or as a tool to help them learn specific lessons or concepts. In addition, favorable learning outcomes were achieved, when compared to grades obtained for traditional classroom lectures and text-based instruction.

At the same period, Greene (2014) reported similar positive results in a study of university students who were asked to prepare video projects for their Direct Marketing class. Although the study was limited to a small population (18 students), nevertheless, Greene demonstrated that their learning can be enhanced by using video production as a learning activity. In fact, by creating content videos – he says – “students review theoretical concepts and then reformulate the concepts into their own perspectives” (Greene, 2014, p. 476). Therefore, they take an active role in developing their own solutions and in communicating the results to peers, which encourages their understanding of the topic. Greene concludes that these video projects are ‘empowering’: “Students take a larger portion of control and responsibility for their education” (Greene, 2014, p. 476).

Such practical experiences reveal how the role of students has changed. Students took on greater responsibility to deal with the course material, enabling them to process, analyze and synthesize information to produce their own videos rather than being told by the lecturers how to proceed with them. It is this idea of ‘enabling’ learners to have more control over their own learning that constitutes the crux of this educational approach today. In fact, student-centered learning takes this idea of ‘enabling’ as one of the principles underlying this method (Todorovski et al., 2015, p. 7), which I will refer to again later on.

On an instructional level, these pedagogical initiatives show a gradual evolution to a paradigm that emphasizes student empowerment where they feel actively engaged in the teaching-learning process rather than being controlled by the teacher.

Undoubtedly, student-centeredness has increased their empowerment by providing students with the tools, especially new technologies, to challenge common conceptions of teaching and learning of the past. This challenge is done by taking advantage of collaborative work, developing their critical thinking ability, and ultimately deciding for themselves. The report by the European Commission on “Youth: Supporting youth actions in Europe” (European Commission, 2018b) highlights this notion in the definition of empowerment: “Empowerment of young people means encouraging them to take charge of their own lives”.

However, though the student-centered learning approach is envisaged as an ideal concept and an instrument to apply in classrooms to make students active and participant, the truth about ‘empowered and autonomous’ is that: “All of these [aspirations] are desired but do not fully exist in current higher education systems” (Attard et al., 2010, p. 66). There is a tacit acknowledgement of the difficulty to implement these proposals that does not come from teachers alone, but also

from academic institutions, policy makers and external stakeholders (Hains & Smith, 2012, pp. 359-61; Klemenčič, 2019, pp. 2-3).

As already hinted in the present paper, the new teaching and learning modes at the course level are mainly promoted by volunteering teachers in specific courses or in small teams. However, it is felt that these practices should be extended to the curriculum level by institutional policies and strategies (Henderikx & Jansen, 2018, p. 26). In the Trends 2010 report, it is recognized that a student-centered approach requires new ways of teaching. This implies extra hours of work to develop innovative methods, as well as financial support to change the present infrastructures into cooperative environments (Sursock & Smidt, 2010, pp. 48-49). Indeed, one powerful argument given by teachers against the uptake of new modes of teaching (e.g. online and blended courses) is that these demand more investment of time and a higher workload on their part. In addition, students themselves report that teachers sometimes lack digital competence, which could be a barrier for innovation. Hence, support structures and the training of staff are a key element for the success of innovative approaches, as confirmed by research conducted in specific academic contexts (Henderikx & Jansen, 2018, pp. 41-43).

Even so, lecturers realize they no longer hold all the power in the teaching-learning process, because they have to share this power with students. But the role of teachers is still paramount for designing an effective learning environment.

## 6. Teachers in the Center of the Empowering Process

After examining the new roles and relationship between teacher and students as projected by the European guidelines in higher education, the important question is: How can the concept of empowerment be addressed and actually exercised by teachers from their own point of view?

As mentioned earlier in the introduction, empowerment as defined in management literature will now be used to answer this question, since it links with the present paper on the power play existing within an organization such as the university.

The importance of empowerment is supported by authors on management practices and effectiveness within an organization. Conger and Kanungo (1988) reported that "...the total productive forms of organizational power and effectiveness grow with superiors' sharing of power and control with subordinates" (Conger & Kanungo, 1988, p. 471). In a managerial context, this concept is defined as a relational construct where those who hold the power in organizations share and delegate their power and authority with subordinates. However, these two authors go beyond the traditional notions of power and control from which empowerment interpretation is derived and propose an understanding of empowerment as a motivational construct meaning 'to enable'. This implies creating the conditions to increase motivation through the process of enhancing self-efficacy feelings among organizational members by means of various techniques (Conger & Kanungo, 1988, p. 474), which ties up with Bandura's notion of personal self-efficacy (1986).

Empowering means enabling, and it implies raising subordinates' convictions in their own effectiveness (successfully executing desired behavior) rather than raising subordinates' hopes for favorable performance outcomes. Even under conditions of failure to gain desired outcomes, individuals may feel empowered if their efficacy belief is reinforced by their leader's recognition of their performance (i.e., "We may have lost to competition, but I'm proud of your performance. We will do better next time.") (Conger & Kanungo, 1988, p. 476).

I agree with the argument by Conger and Kanungo and hold that student empowerment should be seen as 'enabling'. That is, enhancing feelings of their self-efficacy so that through the recognition and encouragement by teachers, we raise the belief of students in their own effectiveness.

Actually, Luechauer and Shulman (1992) had already argued for the need to create empowered students in a dynamic learning context, by giving as an example a Business School. In their study, empowerment is defined as: "...adherence to certain values... and implementation of certain pedagogical practices...designed to facilitate student learning, self-efficacy, commitment and motivation" (Luechauer & Shulman, 1992, p. 5). These authors concentrate on the core values of those lecturers they call 'empowering faculty' whose authority relies on cooperation with students and highlight in them: "They seek to educate and energize rather than to dictate and suffocate their students" (Luechauer & Shulman, 1992, p. 7).

In effect, *what is real, and not simply 'desirable'*, is the power of teachers to help students believe in their personal self-efficacy, which is gradually reinforced through their emotional and academic support to improve learner performance and achieve learning goals. Luechauer and Shulman (1992) emphasize the importance of "creating conditions that promote student readiness and willingness", of "valuing emotion in the learning process" and of "encouraging self-expression" (Luechauer & Shulman, 1992, p. 6).

Further studies have confirmed the relevance of teacher intervention and use of power as determining factors that

contribute to learner empowerment. Frymier et al. (1996) held that teacher behavior and communication impacted student perceptions of their empowerment (p. 184). For example, teacher immediacy, i.e. perceptions of physical and/or psychological closeness, and efforts to make content relevant are regarded as empowering behaviors. Houser and Frymier (2009) concluded that not only teacher behavior is important but also individual characteristics of students (learner orientation) account for student empowerment. Schrodtt and Finn (2011) emphasized student's perceptions of instructor understanding as critical to the formation of positive student relationships. Actually, perceived confirming behaviors from teachers were found to be strong predictors of perceived understanding in students, for example, showing respect and acknowledgement for students' questions and comments in class. Hence, instructors that "confirm that they understand their students' messages are likely not only to invite further interaction from their students, but to facilitate higher levels of learning" (p. 251). Similarly, Kirk et al. (2016) held that teacher-student relationships resulted in empowering students when based on equitable use of power by teachers, positive interactions between them, and having a sense of community in the classroom.

All these variables make evident the crucial role of the teacher in creating a classroom environment that supports receptivity, affirmation and recognition of learners, thereby increasing their empowerment and opportunities for academic success.

A real example of empowerment is our approach to the Coronavirus crisis at the Technical University of Madrid since March 2020. On March 14th, the Spanish Government decreed a state of emergency to stop the spread of the Coronavirus COVID-19 (Note 2). Teachers and students were under emotional stress and rather demoralized when listening to the news of so many people infected and dying.

The education authorities in Spain agreed to extend the academic year by a couple of weeks without yet knowing the tremendous reach of this disease. But lecturers took the lead from the start by keeping in touch with students. We had to assure our students with a sense of confidence under these extreme circumstances. We assured them that their academic studies would not be affected since we were going to transfer our teaching to an online environment. Even those students who were low performers and were not immediately taking part in the interactions through learning platforms had to be kept involved. We aimed to enhance their feeling of competence and recognition of their abilities so that no-one was left behind and joined the effort to: participate and respond to the questions posed in the fora, offer video recorded presentations of degree-related themes, keep dialogue alive with peers and lecturers, increased online feedback and comments on performance, etc. Briefly, encourage a commitment by students to get involved.

Finally, student readiness to move forward and finish the course proved to be their increased confidence and decision to succeed. Therefore, the conviction of students of their own self-efficacy and their assertiveness was an empowering experience.

Lecturer authority translates into an ability to influence the class environment and in general to develop a common awareness of success as well as shared responsibility in teaching and learning. Therefore, in accordance with present-day research, I argue that an effective empowerment pedagogy relies upon a tandem between power and confidence in the teacher-student relationship that goes along with a positive atmosphere of mutual understanding. Yet there is no doubt that it is the teacher who takes the lead of this process, as the Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport claimed (see p. 46).

## 7. Change of Expectations

In general, European higher education policies (actions and measures) have paved the way for creating new expectations in terms of achievement and professional career projections (European Commission, 2019, p. 65). In the Education and Training Monitor (2020), the Commission reaffirms this claim: "Employment rates tend to be linked to education level as well as labor market relevance of particular programs" (European Commission, 2020).

The emphasis on employability is remarkably visible in all higher education discourse (Froment, 2006, pp. 2-5; Sin, 2015, p. 328). The need to professionalize university studies has emerged as a demand from higher education managers under the auspices of the Bologna Process. The aim is a general competitive Higher Education Area that lays the foundations for economic development and innovation in European countries, placing universities as the nerve center of the knowledge society in which key actors are trained to achieve their entrepreneurial mission. Teaching and learning basically consist in "providing knowledge and professional skills increasingly required by employers and by students themselves" (Ramos et al., 2015, p. 71), subordinating them to market needs and employability.

Global competitiveness and marketization of higher education pervade European policy, an issue that is increasingly apparent in European Commission documents since the Treaty of Lisbon 2009 (Bahia, Freire, Estrela, Amaral, & Espírito Santo, 2017, p. 469). Concepts like quality, accountability, and excellence prevail in all organizational and pedagogical changes at universities due to the Bologna implementation process. This market orientation of universities



has been criticized by various researchers on the grounds that it promotes a notion of higher education merely as a commodity where the student is seen as consumer and learning has an instrumental value: “they [students] want to have a degree, in order to secure a ‘professional’ job. Their desire for a 2:1 is framed primarily by its subsequent bargaining power in the job market. They mostly do not want to be a learner or scholar of their chosen subject (see Kewell and Beeby 2003; Waghid 2006)” (Molesworth et al., 2009, p. 279).

However, these new concepts are not always understood and supported by higher education teachers. In fact, there are different levels of consensus within the academic community towards the acceptance of the Bologna principles and applying them in their academic work (Barrett, 2017, pp. 198-9 & 208). Some researchers have shown a negative perception for the top-down reforms that have affected their academic freedom and interfere with their efforts to adapt to the new educational paradigm (Gaebel & Zhang, 2018, p. 54). This critical perspective sustained by a great deal of teachers towards the changes introduced by the Bologna Process has also been shown in the study by Diaz, Santaolalla and Gonzalez (2010) and higher education institutions in other countries (Veiga & Neave, 2015). Also patent from the start are the negative reaction of students against government tendency to see higher education as an agent of economic development; they claim that academic values have to be preserved at the core of education (Galán Palomares, Pietkiewicz, Driscoll, Frohlich, & Gehrke, 2015, pp. 86-7). The frustration of their newly raised expectations is also another reason underlying their complaints and dissatisfaction with the Bologna implementation. For example, they complain about the little or no effect on the subject of changes to student involvement in university decision-making bodies (Galán Palomares et al., 2015, p.15; Sundberg, Heerens, & Koppel, 2018, pp. 6-7).

At a national level, the implementation of the Bologna Process has been subject to the political agenda of each country and the impact of the 2007 financial downturn (Salmi, 2015, p. 808). This resulted in rapid measures to adjust education systems to the reform and, above all, to the restrictive cuts imposed on university budgets. Lecturers found themselves caught in the midst of radical structural changes affecting their teaching methods and stability while being required to comply with new quality and evaluation standards. Actually, this dilemma among national governments in having to implement these reforms and the unease lecturers feel about the perceived threats of the Bologna Process resulted in an ambivalent attitude of accepting their duties but still feel cautious about the process. This situation is still unresolved to date (Viðarsdóttir, 2018; Kindelan et al., 2019).

The fact is that teachers were expected to adopt the new paradigm tenets in their own teaching conceptions, attitudes, and behavior at a blink of an eye. However, although official degrees and regulations to achieve the Bologna Process were followed to the set deadlines, teachers were not given the chance to address their concerns (Bahia et al., 2017, pp. 473-4) and to reflect on the new teaching-learning procedures or get ready to perform their new duties. There might be exceptions to the rules regarding interpretation and implementation of the Bologna Process within every country (Sin, 2012). But different perceptions of Bologna and reactions by academics follow distinct university systems, traditions, and existing standards in their country, which influence the success or failure in achieving the Bologna principles.

In a nutshell, expectations of teachers to fulfil their mission to educate students, preserving academic values and the essential human factor intrinsic to the university foundations, are subject to more tangible market expectations. These past two decades faculty have been gradually adjusting psychologically and behaviorally to achieve goals of quality and work effectiveness in the profession. This change of perspective has made teachers question their abilities, prove their competence, and show their efficiency to implement intended changes. Nevertheless, the new perspective has also contributed to creating a sense of efficiency and effectiveness leading to a gradual confidence in the success of the present reforms.

Precisely it is at this point that Conger and Kanungo's (1988) notion of empowerment resonates again, when addressing major changes in organizations, with the current situation faced by universities today and particularly at the faculty level.

Drawing on the need to heighten the sense of self-efficacy of employees in these situations, they contend it plays a crucial role in the process of change, especially in a period of great transition: “Major organizational changes may seriously challenge employees' sense of control and competence as they deal with the uncertainty of change and accept new responsibilities, skills, and guidelines for action and behavior” (Conger & Kanungo, 1988, p. 477). At this time of structural and pedagogical changes, faculty feel their beliefs of self-efficacy are threatened rather than reinforced by institutional managers and leaders. In order to cope with new demands, they need time, support and recognition of their performance to nurture in them the sense of power and trust they felt before. Conger and Kanungo propose organizational managers to focus on management practices that contribute to augment self-efficacy beliefs in employees and ultimately to apply empowerment techniques and strategies that “provide emotional support for subordinates and that create a supportive and trusting group atmosphere (Neilsen, 1986)” (Conger & Kanungo, 1988, p. 479).

This statement can only be equated with the situation teachers are going through these days. The Bologna Process has

challenged the inner most concepts of teaching and learning, work practices and habits, professional status, and, above all, the goals and expectations of teachers. Uncertainty has made us all stumble! Although there are no human formulas to solve dilemmas posed by policies, health, and economic crises, we still need emotional support from the relevant authorities to create this ‘supporting and trusting atmosphere’ to make sense of this critical moment. In turn, we are expected to do the same with students and their concerns.

Just as “parents provide emotional support and a predictable, consistent and safe environment” to children so that they “become more self-reliant and are able to take risks” (Pianta & Hamre, 2009, p. 113), teachers can help students be more confident, engaged and responsive to academic goals.

## 8. Conclusion

To sum up, the benefits of an empowerment-based approach are likely to translate into a range of benefits in the classroom. Empowering teachers bring an attitude of trust, cooperation, and power sharing to the class, which may transform the existing culture of an institution, many times anchored on a traditional ‘bureaucratic’ regime. To this effect, faculty enables positive change by:

- Recognizing the capability and competence of students to take responsibility for their learning.
- Promoting their self-efficacy beliefs to develop a sense of personal effectiveness.
- Improving student motivation and autonomy to control their education process.
- Making them participant in the decision making process.

These practices, which coincide with the characteristics of empowerment recognized by European authorities, will define the classroom learning environment where the identities and roles of teacher-students are grounded on an equitable basis (Kirk et al., 2016, p. 590) that ensures a power balance between both actors. The fruits to be reaped are summarized as follows: “Obviously, a combination of empowerment and affirmation can result in a classroom environment or culture that might be characterized as motivating and where students are allowed to become autonomous and creative learners, while instilling in them a sense of personal value and worth” (Nichols, 2006, p. 159).

Thus, a change of attitudes and culture, power roles as well as expectations in an instructional context does not lie in the technical decisions of management hierarchies or institutional leaders or even educational policies. It lies in the ability to make us experience that shaping force of believing in oneself and in creating the conditions that make this change take place.

As the European Commission itself acknowledges, teachers have the power to lead this experience and provide the support needed to strengthen attitudes and beliefs in personal efficacy as well as enhance student capabilities to overcome any significant barriers to their personal and academic growth.

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## Notes

Note 1. EMPOWER was founded in 2014 as a partnership of leading European Universities in blended and online education. It reached 19 universities in 2019. Retrieved from <https://empower.eadtu.eu/>

Note 2. Moncloa Palace, Madrid, Saturday 14 March 2020: Retrieved from <https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/lang/en/gobierno/councilministers/Paginas/2020/20200314council-extr.aspx>

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