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RETHINKING TEACHING COMPETENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: TOWARD HUMILITY, HUMANITY, AND PEDAGOGICAL RISK-TAKING

REPENSAR A COMPETÊNCIA DOCENTE NO ENSINO SUPERIOR: RUMO À HUMILDADE, À HUMANIDADE E À ASSUNÇÃO DE RISCOS PEDAGÓGICOS

REPENSANDO LA COMPETENCIA DOCENTE EN LA EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR: HACIA LA HUMILDAD, LA HUMANIDAD Y LA ASUNCIÓN DE RIESGOS PEDAGÓGICOS

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Abstract

The aim of the study is to explore how established competency frameworks in teacher education – particularly the model proposed by Dervenis, Fitsilis and Iatrellis (2022) – intersect with the lived realities, challenges, and tensions experienced by a higher education teacher educator. Using critical reflection as the methodological approach, personal teaching experiences, classroom interactions, and professional dilemmas in light of six key competency dimensions: personality, professionalism, educational practice, scientificity, communication, and digitality are analyzed and exemplified. This process reveals several central findings: the difficulty of defining and measuring teaching competence; the influence of student perceptions on learning outcomes; the overlapping and context-dependent nature of competency dimensions; and the need for educators to balance expertise with vulnerability, emotional regulation, and adaptability. The analysis further highlights the importance of creativity, authenticity, and activist pedagogical stances in contemporary higher education. Overall, the study argues for a more human-centered, reflective, and dynamic understanding of teaching competence – one that acknowledges complexity, embraces uncertainty, and positions educators as humble facilitators of learning rather than static experts.

Keywords: teacher education, teaching competencies, dimensions of teaching competence, pre-service teachers

Resumo

O objetivo do estudo é explorar de que forma os referenciais de competências estabelecidos na formação de professores, em particular o modelo proposto por Dervenis, Fitsilis e Iatrellis (2022), se cruzam com as realidades vividas, os desafios e as tensões experienciadas no trabalho de um formador de professores no ensino superior. Recorre-se à reflexão crítica como abordagem metodológica para analisar e ilustrar experiências pessoais de ensino, interações em sala de aula e dilemas profissionais, à luz de seis dimensões-chave da competência: personalidade, profissionalismo, prática educativa, cientificidade, comunicação e digitalidade. Este processo evidencia vários resultados centrais: a dificuldade em definir e avaliar a competência docente; a influência das perceções dos estudantes nos resultados de aprendizagem; a natureza sobreposta e dependente do contexto das dimensões competenciais; e a necessidade de os docentes equilibrarem a perícia com a vulnerabilidade, a autorregulação emocional e a adaptabilidade. A análise sublinha ainda a importância da criatividade, da autenticidade e de posicionamentos pedagógicos de carácter ativista no ensino superior contemporâneo. No seu conjunto, o estudo defende uma compreensão mais humana, reflexiva e dinâmica da competência docente, que reconheça a complexidade, aceite a incerteza e coloque os educadores como facilitadores humildes da aprendizagem, em vez de especialistas estáticos.

Palabras-chave: formação de professores, competências docentes, dimensões da competência docente, docentes em formação inicial

Resumen

El objetivo del estudio es explorar cómo los marcos de competencias establecidos en la formación del profesorado —en particular, el modelo propuesto por Dervenis, Fitsilis e Iatrellis (2022)— se intersectan con las realidades vividas, los desafíos y las tensiones experimentadas en la labor de un formador de docentes en educación superior. Utilizando la reflexión crítica como enfoque metodológico, se analizan y ejemplifican experiencias personales de enseñanza, interacciones en el aula y dilemas profesionales a la luz de seis dimensiones clave de competencia: personalidad, profesionalismo, práctica educativa, cientificidad, comunicación y digitalidad. Este proceso revela varios hallazgos centrales: la dificultad de definir y medir la competencia docente; la influencia de las percepciones estudiantiles en los resultados de aprendizaje; la naturaleza superpuesta y dependiente del contexto de las dimensiones competenciales; y la necesidad de que los educadores equilibren la pericia con la vulnerabilidad, la autorregulación emocional y la adaptabilidad. El análisis también destaca la importancia de la creatividad, la autenticidad y las posturas pedagógicas de carácter activista en la educación superior contemporánea. En conjunto, el estudio aboga por una comprensión más humana, reflexiva y dinámica de la competencia docente, que reconozca la complejidad, acepte la incertidumbre y sitúe a los educadores como facilitadores humildes del aprendizaje en lugar de expertos estáticos.

Palabras-clave: formación del profesorado, competencias docentes, dimensiones de la competencia docente, docentes en formación inicial

1 INTRODUCTION

The field of teaching competencies in higher education has become increasingly complex and multilayered and is shaped by many factors including student demographics and behavior, institutional expectations, and rapidly changing societal and technological landscapes (cf. Biggs, et al. 2022; Cheng, et al. 2024; Voinea, 2019). Teaching competences, or skills, cannot be reduced to isolated skills (being a good speaker) or static professional attributes (being kind); instead, they are dynamic and interrelated (c.f. Nevado-Luna, 2025). Thus, it is almost impossible to say which combinations affect student learning outcomes because both the lecturer and the student are living, breathing, changing people in complex environments.

At the same time, higher education systems increasingly emphasize accountability, evidence-based teaching, and defining measurable indicators of effectiveness (cf. Cochran-Smith, 2021; Loughlin, et. al, 2021; Sanchez & Moreira 2921) which is a difficult task given the dynamic nature of humans and knowledge. Student perceptions, engagement, behavior, and estimated learning experiences complicate the factors involved din defining teaching competencies. This shows that teaching effectiveness is shaped not only by the knowledge and skills of educators but also by the relational, affective and sociocultural contexts within which teaching occurs.

With these points in mind, the present text critically analyses the competencies commonly associated with effective teaching in higher education and situates them within a reflexive framework (Dervenis, Fitsilis and Iatrellis' 2022 meta-analysis). Rather than positioning educators as authoritative experts or as purely technical deliverers of content, this analysis suggests the inherently human dimensions of higher education teaching—vulnerability, uncertainty, emotional labour, and the negotiation of professional identity. Like this, teaching competence is conceptualised not as a fixed state but as an ongoing developmental process that is shaped by continuous inquiry, adaptive decision-making, and interaction with learners and colleagues.

2 METHODOLOGY

This contribution draws on a critical self-reflective and analytical methodology. The approach aims to bridge lived academic practice with established theoretical frameworks on teaching competence in higher education and is adapted from the original keynote address entitled "Teaching Competencies in Higher Education: Stepping down from our Pedestals" (Buechel, 2025).

Critical self-reflection serves as the primary methodological lens. As a first step, this entails the systematic examination of one's own pedagogical assumptions, emotional responses, and professional behaviours, not as subjective anecdotes but as data for conceptual analysis. Over twenty five years worth of personal teaching experiences, student evaluations and interactions with students and colleagues act as artefacts to outline broader structural issues within higher education, such as assessment cultures, institutional norms, and the complexities of

student- lecturer dynamics. To mitigate the limitations of such subjectivity, reflective observations were interpreted through research on teacher professionalism, pedagogical content knowledge, communication competencies, and digital literacy which allows for such individual experiences to be understood more generally.

This design includes a close reading of current research in the field, with particular attention to the multidimensional competency framework proposed by Dervenis et al. (2022). Additional sources addressing constructive alignment, digital pedagogy, affective dimensions of teaching, and professional identity formation in higher education informed the interpretive process. Given that reflective analysis may involve implicit references to student behaviour, professional interactions, or institutional contexts, anonymity has been maintained throughout and there are no identifiable cases. The intention of this article is not self promotion but the use of lived experiences as prompts for understanding and discussion and improvement and is aimed at the teacher educator wanting to reflect on their practice.

3 RESULTS: A CRITICAL REFLECTION ON TEACHING COMPETENCIES

From a critical self-reflective perspective, the following discussion examines why defining, evaluating, and evidencing teaching competencies in higher education remains so difficult despite a body of literature dedicated to the topic.

3.1 Critical Reflecton on the Complexity of Defining Teaching Competencies

First of all, defining teaching competencies in higher education is an inherently complex undertaking. Simply claiming that something is "effective" in teaching is almost impossible to substantiate. Students might look back fondly on their experiences in a course because they felt good, but perhaps in reality they learned very little. Others might dislike the lecturer intensely, yet still learn a great deal. The number of factors influencing student learning is enormous. This raises a fundamental question: how can anyone genuinely demonstrate that what is being taught is actually being applied, integrated, or producing an impact on student achievement, or, in this author's case, on practices in public schools?

This complexity is further amplified at the institutional level. Higher education institutions are often expected to "produce" highly qualified graduates, yet in state-governed teacher training systems there is limited competition. Public institutes cannot aim for prestige branding or claim that all graduates enter from institutions comparable to ivy league universities; such a comparison is irrelevant in the Central European context where teacher education is more uniform and publicly regulated. Thus, demonstrating institutional excellence becomes far more difficult and cannot rely on competitive framing.

Another challenge lies in the heterogeneity of teaching contexts. Competencies required for blended learning may differ significantly from those needed in live, in-person teaching. While this author's focus is primarily on live teaching as that is her general context, many of the studies (e.g. Ramsey, 2024 or Chaharbashloo, 2024) blend both modalities - though none of them rely exclusively on online teaching..

Furthermore, a related problem is that the literature on "teaching competencies" often blurs levels of education. Many studies combine primary, secondary, and higher education professionals(e.g. Nevado Luna 2024 or Cheng, 2024 or Tatto, 2021), which raises the question of whether there is anything unique about higher education teaching at all. For the rest of this paper, the studies engaged with either combine levels or focus solely on higher education, but this inconsistency illustrates the difficulty of defining competencies that genuinely belong to the higher education sector.

Even when individual competencies such as "professionalism" or "digital literacy" are identified, the question remains as to how these are actually measured. Countless inventories, scales (e.g. Swank et al, 2021) or frameworks (e.g. Professional Standards Framework 2023) exist that list characteristics such as subject knowledge or teaching ability, and reflecting on these is always worthwhile. Yet none of these characteristics are absolute. They overlap, they vary across models, and countless scholars propose competing definitions. These competencies are dynamic and can be perceived differently by different students. A learner with very limited digital skills may think your one-time use of

Kahoot is revolutionary, whereas a digitally savvy student may consider it trivial. Cultural context further shapes perceptions of competence.

Moreover, isolating a single competency is nearly impossible because student learning is influenced by complex combinations of factors. Perhaps this author's students learn because she embodies a perfectly balanced mix of attributes. Or perhaps they learn because they find value in her AI-related tips while simultaneously disliking her personality. It is simply impossible to know. Teaching does not operate through clean cause-and-effect relationships.

On top of this, students themselves – future teachers in this case – are at very different stages of their personal and professional journeys. Their perceptions of their lecturer and their lecturer's teaching may or may not reflect their perceptions of the institution as a whole. Some may begin their studies without much seriousness, some may have gaps in earlier learning, and some may struggle to pay attention once graduation or the final exam becomes their primary focus (or may pay more attention at those points). Their sense of what constitutes a "competent" teacher or a "competent" institution therefore changes over time.

Finally, some of the complexity stems from oversimplification in the discourse. Reading statements such "A teacher is, in a way, like a coach who is as good as a parent" (Dervenis et al., 2022, p. 204), can be irritating. Children sometimes develop well despite parental influence; sometimes problematic parents have wonderful children and vice versa. The analogy simply does not hold for university lecturers, who are responsible for individuals and whole groups simultaneously, and whose objectives differ fundamentally from those of parents. Similarly, talk of "constructive alignment" (e.g. Newby & Cornelissen, 2025) can be maddening. Yes, lecturers should teach A+B, be transparent about teaching A+B, and measure A+B – but education is a creative field. Educationalists often reach students through unpredictable means, and sometimes we achieve valuable learning outcomes we never explicitly planned. Sometimes our original aims were not even optimal. For instance, this author once aimed to teach students how to generate text-based questions using categories such as gist, detail, and inference. Through the task and examples, we collectively realised that these categories were perhaps not as stable as assumed and that teaching learners to formulate their own questions might be more meaningful than insisting on strict frameworks. Some research acknowledges this tension by balancing constructive alignment with both SMART goals and broader educational aspirations.

3.2 Where is There Agreement in Defining Teaching Competencies?

Despite the difficulties in simply defining teaching competencies, there is some agreement about the attibutes and there are perhaps some concrete steps to be taken to make teaching more sustainable. There have been multiple attempts over the years to put this together (e.g. Zhang & Tian, 2025 or Maricato & Aquino, 2024). The framework selected for this paper is the Dervenis, Fitsilis and Iatrellis (2022) meta-analysis of initially 102 other papers. From these papers, a framework of characteristics for a multi-dimensional approach of teacher competencies in higher education was developed and was chosen as it best captures the core themes reflected in the author's critical self-reflection and other studies.

These competency dimensions defined by Dervenis, Fitsilis and Iartrellis (2022) are shown in Table 1 (with some examples of characteristics for each one) and are listed in these authors' found order of importance. The other columns are this author's subjective view of what is important in her teaching, and then 142 audience (Wooclap quiz for university lecturers during the Porto Pedagogical Innovation Conference on July 17, 2025) members' rankings before being presented with the Dervenis, Fitsilis and Iartrellis results.

There is some general agreement in that personality seems to be the most important factor and digitality is a "nice to have". Interestingly, communication seems to be more important to university lecturers than was actually measured in the study or from this author's opinion. The terms 'scientificity' and 'educational' perhaps have less of a common understanding which is why they are rated differently by the three cases. While the Dervenis, Fitsilis and Iartrellis (2022) research synthesizes much research in the field and is therefore valuable, what might be problematic is that it is based on frequencies – so personality was a frequent subject to research, but just because it was researched a lot doesn't mean that it's the biggest factor even though the researchers did try to control for impact – but this is not a regression of predictor values – which of course would be difficult to do. What is also a bit difficult is the overlap –

communication overlaps with personality; educational dimensions might overlap with digital and communication dimensions. Nonetheless, it's an overview based on relevant research and it is definitely grounds for universities to use as a tool or a prompt in different functions, for example hiring (and perhaps considering firing), for student evaluations, and most importantly, for the individual lecturer to reflect upon where they might develop.

Table 1

Dimensions of competencies in teacher education in order ranked by Dervenis, Fitsilis, & Iatrellis (2022).

Dimension	Selected attributes	Author's ranking	Conference particpant ranking
1. Personality	energy, helpfulness, personal integrity and reliability, multiculturalism, morality	1	1
2. Professionalism	theoretical knowledge, practical knowledge, experience, discipline, creativity	4	2
3. Educational	transmissibility, studiousness, planning, adaptability, coaching, inventiveness	2	4
4. Scientificity	resourcefulness, innovativeness, imagination, diligence, persistence, effectiveness	3	5
5. Communicatio	listening, persuasion, empathy, presentation, collaboration	6	3
6. Digitality	digital literacy, digital pedagogy, digital communication and cooperation, creating digital content, safety, basic troubleshooting	5	6

4. APPLICATION: WHAT COULD THESE DIMENSIONS MEAN IN THE PRACTICE

In the following, each dimension identified by Dervenis, Fitsilis and Iartrellis (2022) will be briefly expanded upon and connected to other research that was not part of their meta-analysis. Each dimension will provide some questions that can serve for reflection or discussion. This is followed by a consolidation, some tips for the practice which can also be used for reflection.

4.1 Questions for Critical Self Reflection

In relation to personality, this research identifies energy, helpfulness, personal integrity, reliability, multicultural awareness, and moral orientation as frequently cited attributes. Other scholars (e.g., Ramsey, 2024; Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia et al., 2016) additionally highlight qualities such as agreeableness, conscientiousness, open-mindedness, and the presence of a growth mindset or growth orientation. Somewhat unexpectedly, these findings resonate with earlier work suggesting that learners benefit when lecturers position themselves as co-learners alongside their students. When students witness lecturers critically evaluating their own knowledge, learner performance increases- a finding similarly observed in English language classrooms in Switzerland almost a decade ago (Loder Buechel, 2016). Demonstrating a willingness to learn and signalling that the lecturer is not always the sole expert can therefore be understood as an indicator of effective teaching.

Furthermore, studies note that lecturers who present themselves in ways that are "less formal or conventional" tend to be more memorable—both as individuals and in terms of the content they teach. These considerations raise the following questions that can be used for self-reflection:

- How do students perceive my personality, including moments where they may find aspects of it surprising, shocking or unexpected?
- How can students be made aware that I am also still learning and open to having my ideas, interpretations, and content questioned?:

In this category of professionalism, there are any number of fields we could go into any level of depth, especially under creativity! Again, what the The Dervenis et al (2022) research identify are the categories of theoretical knowledge, practical knowledge, experience, discipline, creativity and to get more precise, the Moroccan researcher Chetouani (2022) has over twenty items defining professionalism on their inventory which include points such as adaptability and resilience to different teaching situations – and resilience really struck a chord because how many times have we had student behavior (gaming during class? Asking you for information that is clearly written on some document?). They also mention integrity and creativity and other points such as adopting a positive attitude, controlling emotions so to avoid provocation, being transparent and telling the truth (this also implies that the truth is that we sometimes just don't know), stating our values; being enthusiastic and energetic; and being altruistic and interested in the students.

These lead to further reflective questions:

- How do I maintain a positive attitude and emotional control when faced with challenging student behaviors or stressful teaching situations?
- How can I keep my values transparent and be truthful while still keeping the good of the students and the knowledge of the subject I'm teaching at the forefront?
- How do I demonstrate enthusiasm, determination and energy especially when I'm personally fatiqued or overworked?

Within the educational dimension, relevant competencies include the ability to explain concepts clearly and in ways adapted to different target groups, as well as the ability to guide discussion and pose meaningful questions. While the underlying concepts may remain constant, explaining them to kindergarten teachers versus secondary teachers requires different strategies, as does facilitating discussion. Educators must be perceived as "studious," yet without appearing overbearing. A recurring difficulty here lies in balancing the simultaneous visibility of the lecturer as both learner and expert –a tension that is further complicated by gendered expectations in teaching contexts.

The role of coaching also is important here – as educators, learning does not happen through presentations only but through our cheerleading, our feedback to our students, through our interactions in pair work and discussion (do I just "watch them talk" or do I meander around and provide insights and impulses?). And finally, am I creative in how I am presenting my content and getting my students to work with it? How do I manage the setting I am teaching in? Such questions can be summarized as:

- How do I continuously engage in learning and creative innovation to enrich my teaching practice?
- How do I ensure I provide timely, constructive, and targeted feedback?

Under "scientificty", the focus turns to elements that are related to pedagogical content knowledge and content knowledge. This point is relatively straight forward and the following questions help us become reflective practicioners:

- How am I keeping up with new research? How am I integrating new research into my lessons?
- How am I being diligent and reflective in my teaching? Am I changing my presentations and my instructional methods?

In terms of communication, being a good communicator involves active listening, collaboration, cultural competence, emotional intelligence, empathy, engaging learners, feedback, being inspiring, listening and so much more. This gives rise to the following questions:

- How am I an active communicator – how well do I listen and watch and respond to the individual and the group?

- How do I strategically provide feedback and facilitate communication channels – including self-assessment and peer interaction – to not only assess learning but also empower students, foster students' self-efficacy and autonomy, and build a collaborative learning community?

With respect to digitality, educators – beyond their primary roles – serve as role models for the next generation. Yet digitality poses ongoing tensions. As some school systems in Sweden and Finland increasingly restrict screen use, many educators question whether reliance on PowerPoint, Canva, or weekly AI-related inputs remains appropriate, or whether more emphasis should be placed on dialogue, shared reflection, and collective documentation without technology. Perhaps the key lies in making deliberate choices and communicating to students why certain technologies are used – or intentionally not used – after thoughtful consideration. That aside, assuming digitality is valued, in the old days, lecturers would have lost credibility when there were calculators and they were still working with an abacus. And lecturers would keep their credibility if they could use both, perhaps one better than the other ...but still used.

4.2 Tips and Suggestions for the Pre-Service Teacher Educator

This critical reflection has evolved into an in-depth inquiry into teaching that can be useful for all lecturers to stop and think but which can be fine-tuned for teacher educators. The author has personally identified a tendency toward "generalization bias" where she gets mad at maybe 2 students per class for being so lazy and entitled and overgeneralizes this onto the whole class, most who are NOT lazy and entitled and deserve empathy (which paralells student teacher experiences in the public school classroom). Thus, this research has allowed her to stop and think about this point. Furthermore, this research has, for the author, emphasized the importance of balance – she can relax a little bit about being overly research based in her presentations and work a bit more on letting her personality shine through. The fruit of this critical reflection and analysis has led to the development of the questions in section 4.1 which are rather general, and the tips below can be more specifically used for discussion and reflection in teacher education.

- *Acknowledge the role of student perceptions.* Keep in mind that students' perceptions of you will influence how and what they learn and take with them regardless of how scientific, how digitally literate, how professional you are. This same statement can be made about children's relationships to their teachers in public school education.
- *Define your unique value.* Why should students bother coming to class? If the students can find the information online, there's no point in coming. Your work with students needs to allow for modelling, acting, dicussing and even arguing. While we cannot count on our students having read the assigned texts, we can, even if the come unprepared, stimulate their curiousity, make them unsure and thus want to learn more, and become more deeply engaged.
- *Hang out with young people, old people, those from other fields (Burgess, 2012) and communities.* This helps you to reenvision school yourself and with your students so you don't get stuck with your head in your field and helps you to keep a broader view. This will flow back to your classroom, your own learning. Keep in mind that your students are younger than you are (mostly) so keeping a foot in their lives helps you to keep an eye on the future of your field. So in the public schools, how can we teach if we don't know the people we are going to be teaching?
- *Experiment with digital tools – even if you hate them.* Try out and embrace new technologies even if you don't master them – your attitude towards trying acts as a model and is what students will notice and appreciate.
- *Seek immediate feedback.* Try out the general triad with your workmates on a regular basis – one observes, one teaches, one coaches – and get feedback straight away. Ask your students for feedback, not at the end of the semester but throughout your course. A culture of continuous feedback fosters real-time adjustments and meaningful change.
- *Be edutaining, unconventional and an activist.* While you don't have to be a comedian, being edutaining, thought-provoking or slightly unconventional can help students remember both the you and the content. When done deliberately, even humorous moments can reinforce core topics and being authentic and demonstrating some intellectual playfulness invites students to stay open and engaged. Standing up for

issues and being a "cheerleader" for relevant causes can furthermore help your learners remember your content (even if they disagree) and you as a person.

- *Embrace uncertainty*. Model learning and learner behaviors and don't be afraid to state when you are unsure. Be aware that we can learn from our students as much as they can learn from us.
- *Foster high expectations and reciprocal questioning*. Encouraging students to question ideas, critique readings, and come prepared with reflections sets a clear expectation for academic engagement. When these expectations are followed up with meaningful use of student contributions (which means not summarizing for them but calling on them to share), learners see the value of preparation and recognise that intellectual rigour is shared across the classroom community.

5. CONCLUSION

The truth of the matter is that students can get knowledge online – knowledge is power and if wanted, then it is only a click away. Highly motivated learners can acquire subject knowledge independently, without direct reliance on their lecturers. In certain disciplines, this model may even be appropriate; for example, individuals aiming to become chemists may spend extended periods working autonomously in laboratory settings, and digital resources can supplement much of their theoretical preparation. However, in the field of teacher education, the situation is markedly different. The development of educators extends far beyond the acquisition of factual knowledge. It requires interaction, modelling, guided reflection, and the cultivation of professional dispositions – elements that continue to depend on physical presence within classrooms. Our personalities, our charisma, our motivation, our willingness to experiment and try out new things, to admit when we are not sure, are models for how we want our future teachers to behave in their future classrooms. Our ability to "lead horses to water and force them to drink" is what is needed and the reason we are in the classroom together.

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