

Podcast “Lehrblick – Teaching Portal” Episode 3 (10/03/2022)

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Teaching Portrait: Prof. Dr Christoph Brochhausen-Delius
(Dr. Birgit Hawelka in conversation with Prof. Dr Christoph Brochhausen-Delius)

Birgit Hawelka:

Welcome to today’s podcast episode “Lehrblick – Teaching Portraits”. My name is Birgit Hawelka, my guest today completed his doctorate and habilitation in Mainz and has been a Professor for Pathology here at the University of Regensburg since 2018. In the winter semester of 2021, he also took over the office of Academic Dean at the Faculty of Medicine. The UNICUM Foundation selected him in December 2021 for the Professor of the Year award in the category “Natural Sciences and Medicine”. Prof. Brochhausen-Delius, welcome.

Christoph Brochhausen-Delius:

Hello, welcome.

Birgit Hawelka:

As I said in the introduction, you were selected by the UNICUM Foundation this year as Professor of the Year in the category “Natural Sciences and Medicine”. In the justification for this decision, it was emphasised that you have been especially able to communicate accessible foundational knowledge, practical competencies and desirable key qualifications. Furthermore, you have been a trail-blazer for seamless entry into professional life. How should we understand that concretely? What issues are particularly important to you in supporting your students?

Christoph Brochhausen-Delius:

In terms of accessibility, it is extremely important to me that my students become integral parts, or integral players one should say, in my existing research projects. All of my candidates are actively integrated into research projects which are currently running. In that way, I make it possible for them to begin building networks as early as possible. And that already brings us to key qualifications. So, key qualifications in addition to scientific craftsmanship, includes the ability to be successful on the scientific stage and networks are part of that. This includes the ability to make good presentations and to view and discuss one’s

position, including one's results, from a critical perspective. Those are the important key qualifications which I like to provide my students with for their journey. And the last point is extremely important to me, which is the ability to work in a team: I am only as strong as my team, and that means that doctoral candidates or master's students are integrated into my team in such a way that they also feel like they are an integral part, that they take on responsibility early on and can learn from that to stand – scientifically – on their own two feet.

Birgit Hawelka:

Teamwork in particular seems to depend to a large degree on good communication. In the last few semesters, due to the pandemic, this was at least partially made much more difficult. Which new ways have you found, including digital communication, to continue to maintain collaboration?

Christoph Brochhausen-Delius:

Yes, that was absolutely necessary, as you said. Naturally it was possible to meet bilaterally with working groups, members and individual candidates. But that was still only possible in a limited way. For that reason, I opened up new digital pathways. I had much more contact with my candidates over WhatsApp, I organised Zoom meetings and we opened an Instagram channel together with my working group in order to stay digitally connected. But real direct contact is still important to me, which is why a very important medium was the telephone. During that period, we talked a great deal on the telephone.

Birgit Hawelka:

Students have also said that your lectures are very accessible and entertaining. They say that this is a particular strength of your teaching. Can you give us some insight into what a typical lecture with you is like? What are the framework conditions, what is the structure and what exactly makes your presentation so accessible, in your opinion?

Christoph Brochhausen-Delius:

So, my lectures are relatively well planned. From the start, I consider what the aim of each lecture hour should be and that is why there is a take-home message at the end of every lecture. And along the way to this take-home message, I take the students with me by meeting them where they are. That means that during the lecture, I try to find out what the state of their knowledge is, where there are gaps, what I should address, what can be quickly dealt with because there is already much more prior knowledge available. And in order to make the whole thing more interesting, I mix some of my own examples in, current examples from my daily diagnostic work – interesting cases like the ones we work with here in Pathology – so that the students can get an active picture of Pathology. And I

would like to show the students that Pathology is an integral part of clinical care, that we are a clinical field, that we are there for patients. And that's why I enrich each lecture with clinical examples. It's also important for the whole thing to be interactive. That means that no lecture is purely taught from the front, but rather there are always questions and follow-up questions, and I address what the students bring up. It is extremely important that, in the end, what I intend to communicate actually comes across, and that is my excitement about the best subject there is.

Birgit Hawelka:

And if we think of the opposite: What cannot happen, under any circumstances, in a lecture- in your opinion?

Christoph Brochhausen-Delius:

I think that, today, the classic idea of a lecture – which is purely taught from the front – would be unthinkable for me, and I only say that for myself. I would have difficulties because I simply have the need to be in contact with other people and to have their reactions. And that is the reason why I see it as the biggest mistake, because it is impossible to look inside the heads of the people over whom you are sprinkling knowledge. I think we have come a long way since the “Nuremberg funnel”, where knowledge is poured into heads through a funnel. The interaction with the students is very important and you have to have interaction if your aim is to communicate knowledge. That's why, for my part, I think purely teaching from the front is the biggest mistake you can make.

Birgit Hawelka:

That would speak against a certain tendency or discussion about just recording lectures and playing them back. That has been discussed often recently: lots of materials are available now, thanks to four semesters of corona. In your opinion, would that be less than optimal?

Christoph Brochhausen-Delius:

Not optimal, especially when it is the only medium with which you come into contact with the students. Discussions about online lectures have been around since before corona. There are pros and cons, and there has also been varying experience with this. The experience I had now during corona has been that I was missing something, and not it wasn't just me. The students were also missing something when they only had recorded lectures. There is something binding that is cut, something like an umbilical cord. The connection to the students isn't there anymore. If I have a recorded lecture, then the teacher has no idea what sticks with the students. He or she can't find out where the students are at the moment and, by the same token, the students have no opportunity to ask questions and follow up and let the teacher know where there might be some need for more explanation. Even so, I believe that the current evaluations have shown that such formats

are useful as a medium to listen to again after the lecture in order to recall things to mind again. In that respect, I am still a fan of digital lectures, but not as the sole means of communication, but rather as enrichment. That can, I believe, also be perceived as a real enrichment by the students as well.

Birgit Hawelka:

It sounds like you invest a lot of yourself in your teaching. If we may, perhaps we could get to know you a bit better. Often, research, teaching and self-management, especially in medicine where clinical operations are also a factor, are perceived as an insurmountable act of doing the splits, and usually teaching ends up pushed to the periphery. What motivates you as a teacher to continue teaching, despite your many obligations?

Christoph Brochhausen-Delius:

For one, it's my love of my subject. Pathology is just a small field within medicine. It's a misunderstood field and is simply the best thing in the world. We get to see where disease begins and how disease works. And this excitement that I was able to experience in my studies is what I want to pass on to my students. And the second aspect is contact to young people. I very much want to open up new horizons to students. It is a wonderful phase in which they can experiment, a phase for many, many new experiences. And I would like to meet them there and go with them on a journey where they realise that doing the splits like this, that is, research and caring for patients and maybe also teaching, is something wonderful. And when you put it like that, when you use the image of doing the splits, then I would like to take that up. Doing the splits requires training in ballet. Ballet dancers practice for a very long time and it is possible to do the splits. Just like a good ballet dancers manages it, we can, too. What we need is excitement and enthusiasm for what we are doing, the will to train and a mission. And I mean the mission that I have: I want to show young people that Pathology is a wonderful field in which scientific ambitions can be optimally combined with caring for patients.

Birgit Hawelka:

Since last semester, your mission has expanded again with your added roll as Academic Dean. That means that, according to your office, you are now taking a wider view of teaching beyond your own courses and subject area. What special challenges do you anticipate over the coming semesters now that we are returning from a pandemic emergency or back-up situation, in some way or another, to future-oriented instruction?

Christoph Brochhausen-Delius:

Basically, we have two big challenges, especially in medicine. You have already mentioned the first challenge, which is the return to a sort of normal operation. I believe it is important that we don't forget the pandemic, the pandemic period. A great deal came into being, including a great deal of dynamism, during this time, there was a huge amount of inventiveness on both sides, both the students and the instructors. And I believe that we should learn from that and we should keep things which we noticed were good for us. We shouldn't just fall back into the time before the pandemic. And that, I believe, is a challenge. And the second challenge that we have in medicine is the new regulations on licensing doctors. A new Germany-wide learning objective catalogue was just developed which has to flow into new regulations on licensing doctors, and every faculty is faced with that challenge. And yes, I now have the first semester as Academic Dean behind me, so to speak. It is a great challenge, but it is a great joy to see that the staff in the Academic Dean's office, the instructors and the students are all working together enthusiastically and want to work on this. That will be with us for a while. So those are the challenges that I see.

Birgit Hawelka:

First, you said that a great deal of creativity arose from necessity and that many new things were developed, of which the best should be kept going forward. In your opinion, what creative ideas should be carried forward after the pandemic? What do you see as especially worth continuing?

Christoph Brochhausen-Delius:

I think that in the pandemic we were forced to further develop a concept called blended learning, that is, instruction consisting of both in-person and digital elements. I believe that we can take a great deal of that with us and learn from it. We were forced to engage with various digital modes of access to our students. We were forced to work with various digital tools. And at the end of the pandemic, we see that it was not only something forced, but a powerful dynamic also developed from it. It is now the case, for example, that a small group recently formed in our faculty that wants to grapple with the further development of digital formats. And I believe that this dynamic is something that we should definitely maintain. And if we have learned anything from the pandemic, it may be that we can't rely on following well-worn paths but always have to open up new horizons for ourselves. And I feel that, in teaching, we have felt that and accepted it and are now moving in that direction. I believe that this enthusiasm and dynamic is something we should absolutely keep. And the thing I am most excited about, if you can say such a thing about such a terrible time, is that we have learned something. And that is that digitalisation is important, but it can't replace in-person instruction. And I am especially happy that this was

something experienced by both sides, both by students and teachers. It forced us into a sort of estrangement because we could no longer see one another directly and both sides yearned to return to in-person classes. And I believe that that is an important and decisive insight – that we can take digitalisation as an aid, but not as a replacement for in-person instruction. Finding the right balance is something we can continue to work on when the pandemic is over.

Birgit Hawelka:

I would like to thank you, Prof. Brochhausen-Delius, for taking the time to speak with us, for the interesting insights into your teaching and the look forward to future developments.

Christoph Brochhausen-Delius:

Thank you.