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From teaching to learning: Challenges for Academic Staff Development

Abstract

In this paper, I aim to open a wider discussion about the nature of academic practice in contemporary universities, presenting a brief summary of some of the important research in teaching and learning, which has become the accepted picture of educational development in many countries. In particular, I will discuss research on student approaches to learning, highlighting some recent developments. Attention will be paid to the issue of how best to facilitate the transition from the Instructional/teaching paradigm to that of the learning paradigm (Barr & Tagg, 1995) and what, in particular, is challenging about the role of academic developers. I will also try to situate such issues in the wider context of institutional leadership and the role of higher education in society.

1. Introduction – academic practice in the 21st century

The abiding public image of the academic is perhaps best summed up in Holbein's painting of the distinguished scholar Erasmus: pen in hand, with a studied gaze towards the fresh paper and the wealth of knowledge and wisdom upon his shoulders, signalled by his academic cap. In more recent times, such a stereotype has been used as a weapon in the hands of those who castigate universities for being elitist, "other-worldly" and not responsive enough to the needs of a modern capitalist economy. Much of government attention, in the form of higher education reform, has focussed on employability, transferable skills, lifelong learning, intellectual property, "spin-offs" and links with industry. There appears, often, not much opportunity to regale the virtues of scholarly activity for its own sake, of personal enlightenment rather than of vocational training.

However, internally and through the frameworks established by funding regimes, the situation is a little more complex. Yes, these goals of economic relevance and collaboration are stressed, but progress is often conditional on commitment to research (and in some cases, consultancy) activity rather than on teaching. Ironically, teaching becomes reduced to an obligation, something in which expressed interest is seen as almost distasteful or at any rate the sign of a weak researcher. We seem to have drifted from the concept of the intellectual as

a rounded individual, capable of a scholarly approach both to their own particular research interests and the teaching of students. Furthermore, the notion that such intellectuals should engage in the public sphere in terms of discussing, debating and challenging the key moral, political, cultural and scientific issues of the day is also increasingly alien to the pervading managerial culture within modern institutions of higher education.

For the individual academic staff member caught in the crossfire of conflicting demands and more vocal constituencies, what is a sensible and legitimate profile for this century? Is it more effective to acknowledge that teaching and research require very different skill sets, perspectives and attitudes? Are students better off learning from those whose primary work is teaching and who have detached from any pretence at being research active, or is a superior learning experience to be gained from interaction with those at the forefront of developing new knowledge and understanding?

What is the potential civic role of higher education? Is it sufficient to discharge such responsibility through the provision of adult education classes or does it require more? What about the Dearing Report's (NCIHE, 1997) oft neglected comment on universities as being the "critic and conscience of society?"

To be fair, many of these issues have been discussed and debated over the last 10–15 years in a variety of fora. For example, Boyer (1990) in the seminal work "Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate" attempted a reconceptualisation of academic work as being comprised of four distinct but linked forms of "scholarship:"

- Scholarship of discovery
- Scholarship of integration
- Scholarship of application
- Scholarship of teaching (and learning)

In addition, the fields of psychology and organisational development have also considered the nature of "professional" work and developed models which have gained recognition within the academic staff development community, Schön's concept of the "reflective practitioner" being chief among these and which establishes a useful framework for future discussion (albeit that some of the details are contested, see e.g. Moon, 1999). In particular, the distinction between "espoused theories" and "theories in action" resonating strongly with work on *approaches to teaching* (by for example Prosser & Trigwell, 1999) and student learning. Is there a clear point at which we move from being holders of technical knowledge about a particular academic domain (and pedagogy) to demonstrating "artistry" in our practice as either researchers or teachers?

Lave & Wenger's work (1990) on situated learning and Wenger's (1999) subsequent development of "communities of practice" as a model for the explo-

ration of the cultural and social dynamic context of our work are also important and, again, often championed in academic staff development circles. In addition, there has been a huge growth in the number of papers, books, conference proceedings and monographs on educational research, teaching and learning innovation, and academic quality. New structures for staff development, such as the UK's Professional Standards Framework (HEA, 2006), accredited programmes in teaching and learning, Quality Assurance processes and the rapid uptake of a plethora of new, networked technologies in our classrooms are all testimony to a period of significant change.

However, despite much of this positive work, the current literature on higher education highlights attention on a disturbingly large number of issues and "problems" such as: plagiarism; attendance; poor progression/retention; lack of student "engagement"; study skills; low levels of satisfaction; decline of wider civic participation of students (and staff); financial and employment related issues.

Clearly, then the period of "massification" of higher education, as experienced in many countries worldwide and its resulting widening diversity of students from a broader range of educational, social, cultural and ethnic backgrounds has provided a real challenge to universities. Indeed, it has often been commented that the current generation of students lead complex lifestyles in which studying at university is only one of many activities jostling for attention in their schedules, whether it be competing with work, social engagements or other commitments.

In addition, of course, there have been considerable financial and "political" pressures on universities over this time period, with increasing government pressure to justify "accountability" for public expenditure, reformed funding methods, implementation of quality assurance programmes, changing governance structures – all of which has driven substantial growth in bureaucracy and administration and what critics term "managerialism."

2. Teaching & Learning

Of course, our ultimate concern in this paper is teaching and learning and therefore it is worthwhile focusing on what our current level of research understanding of these issues is by reviewing some of the key work. In this regard, the conclusions of reviews are not very encouraging. Some quotes from key writers in the field shed light on the situation. Ramsden (2003), for example, concludes that:

"...research indicates that, at least for a short period, students retain vast quantities of information. On the other hand, many of them soon seem to

forget much of it, and they appear not to make good use of what they do remember. They experience many superficial changes – acquiring the jargon of disciplines, for example – but they still tend to operate with naïve and erroneous conceptions. Moreover, many students do not know what they do not know: they have not developed self-critical awareness in their subjects.”

Howard Gardner (1996) also states that:

“[What] an extensive research literature now documents is that an ordinary degree of understanding is routinely missing in many, perhaps most, students. It is reasonable to expect a college student to be able to apply in new context a law of physics, or a proof in geometry, or the concept in history that she has just demonstrated acceptable mastery in class. If, when the circumstances of testing are slightly altered, the sought-after competence can no longer be documented, then understanding – in any reasonable sense of the term – has simply not been achieved.”

Barr and Tagg (1995) in their key paper in *Change* magazine, draw a picture of the irony of universities’ approaches to tackling some of these issues:

“...if students are not learning to solve problems or think critically, the old logic says we must teach a class in thinking – and make it a general education requirement. The logic is all too circular: What students are not learning in the classroom doesn’t address their needs or ours; therefore we must bring them back into another classroom and instruct them some more.”

Russell Edgerton’s (1997) white paper on higher education for the Pew Charitable Trusts concludes that the core issue is “the mode of teaching and learning that is practised” and that “We need new pedagogies of engagement that will turn out the kinds of resourceful, engaged workers and citizens that America now requires.”

If we focus on the research that has led to these gloomy diagnoses, one particularly strong strand has been the work of Martin, Saljo, Entwistle, Tait and others (for reviews see Ramsden, 2003). Originating from Gothenburg and then in the UK these groups have examined “student approaches to learning” through a variety of means, including phenomenographic interviews and survey instruments. Relatively quickly they were able to identify a small number of distinct approaches in any class of students that essentially separated those with an intention to reproduce from those with an intention to understand. Three par-

ticular approaches have been designated as “surface”, “deep” and “strategic”, with surface approaches tending to be prevalent in most, traditionally taught courses. Such an approach is linked with poorer learning outcomes (Ramsden, 2003), but, and this is worth emphasising, is not necessarily linked to poorer grades or assessment results (Richardson, 2000; Haggis, 2003) and hence, in some students’ eyes, can be seen as having value. This of course, raises important issues about the nature of traditional forms of assessment and highlights the mismatch between their intended goal of assessing student understanding and application and the actual result of rewarded reproduction.

Other work has shown that the totality of the wider “learning environment” shapes the approach that students are most likely to adopt and these factors include: the student’s conceptions of “learning”; their prior educational experience; the particular teaching and learning context and their perception of the context and the particular task to hand.

Table 5.1 of Ramsden’s (2003) book, “Learning to Teach in Higher Education” summarises the circumstances that encourage either surface or deep approaches to learning. Amongst these are the assessment methods, the atmosphere generated by the teacher/learning environment and whether or not there is evident commitment, responsiveness and some degree of intellectual challenge. Of course, subject interest and motivation are also key factors but the teacher can often have scope to stimulate and nurture these aspects by the design of the teaching programme. Whilst such conclusions may appear to be “common sense” it is sobering to categorise much of daily teaching in higher education according to this description and question just how much of routine teaching really does promote deep learning.

As has been pointed out by many authors, there are limitations to the *student approaches to learning* research. Indeed, Haggis (2003) questions whether the educational/staff development community has come to too easy a consensus in the adoption of this perspective as the fundamental basis for most professional development activity in many countries, particularly the UK and Australia. Often, the fact that such inventories are not appropriate for categorising individual students is lost in discussion along with an appreciation of the importance of the wider context of student lives and subject discipline specific aspects.

The enthusiasm for “inventories” and questionnaires to probe student learning is also worth challenging. Of course, there are methodological limitations with such tools, but even at a more basic level, there is within some sections of the educational development community, too much use of instruments which, when scrutinised critically, fail to show statistical reliability or have weak psychometric properties. Richardson (2000) provides a review of many of the most popular questionnaires and highlights their weaknesses. Interestingly, the basic student approaches questionnaires developed by Entwistle’s group do perform

well in this regard, but some of the more popular inventories of learning styles, for example, are very poor.

Prosser and Trigwell (1999) have explored university teachers' *approaches to teaching* and were able to distinguish between conceptions and practices that were either based on *information transmission* and hence were teacher focused, or those which intended to effect *conceptual change* in the learner and which were more student focused. Other work by Biggs (2003) and Ramsden (2003) also make similar distinctions, leading to a 3 level model where teaching is viewed as (a) "telling" or transmission, (b) organising student activity, (c) making learning possible.

Prosser and Trigwell also explored the *perceptions of the teaching environment* held by academic staff and have shown that key factors, in determining the teaching approach taken, include the extent to which a staff member feels that he/she has control over teaching, their perceived workload, the status of teaching in the department/institution (e.g. in comparison to research), perception of class size and student ability. Note, the subtlety in a number of these is that it is the *perception* of the situation that matters. In the case of class size, for example, if a lecturer feels that their class is almost unmanageably large they will tend to adopt an information transmission model, but a different teacher with the same size of class may well adopt a conceptual change approach, if they feel in control and supported in their endeavours.

A recent project in the UK, which explored some 5 academic subject areas at undergraduate level across a large number of universities, was led by a collaborative team from the universities of Edinburgh, Durham and Coventry. Using detailed survey instruments and interviews the ETL (*Enhancing Teaching and Learning Environments in Undergraduate Courses*) project explored a range of concepts including: teaching/learning resources, assessment, course design/management processes, constructive alignment (Biggs, 2003), "ways of thinking and practicing" in the subject, "troublesome knowledge" and "threshold concepts." The project website (<http://www.ed.ac.uk/etl>) is extremely informative and contains detailed literature reviews, survey instruments, project reports and recommendations. This provides vital tools for anyone interested in pursuing an in depth review of teaching and learning at undergraduate level and the survey instruments are easily adaptable and have been used elsewhere in place of more bland, generalized student surveys.

From Barr and Tagg's perspective, the question is *can we effect change in the teacher's conceptions of teaching that lead to change in the students' approaches to learning?* Ramsden outlines six principles of effective teaching to effect this change and argues that these should be at the core of academic staff development work. The principles are: (1) interest and explanation; (2) concern and respect for

students and student learning; (3) appropriate assessment and feedback; (4) clear goals and intellectual challenge; (5) independence, control and engagement; (6) learning from students. Often in the debate, those who are resistant to change present the argument that student centred approaches to teaching lead to decline in standards, with students being supported more than is felt necessary. However, the weakness of this argument is that such critics are usually dominated by the information transmission model and fail to see that conceptual change is in many ways more challenging a teaching strategy. In item (4) for example, Ramsden emphasises the need for “intellectual challenge” – it is not about making courses “easier” for students, but rather should be about encouraging them to engage much more in the construction of their own, individual understanding of the subject discipline. Students need to take responsibility for their learning, but will not be encouraged to do so under the transmission model. One could, argue therefore, that it is in this traditional scheme that intellectual standards are lower.

The transmission model has been dominant for a considerable time in most universities. If we look at how this model adapts to change, a clear example is in the incorporation of new technologies. As Laurillard (2003) points out, each new “technology” which appears, rapidly becomes driven into the service of information transmission whether this be the book, lecture, word-processing, videoconferencing, multimedia or the web. Laurillard herself (1999), outlines a *conversational framework* that highlights the relationship between the teacher’s conceptions of the subject area and the student’s conceptions. There are many opportunities for dialogue and communication through feedback and several new technologies support this (e.g. discussion fora, “live” online tools for conferencing, shared workspaces, group blogs, etc). Laurillard argues that focusing on these aspects for mediated discussion and the extent to which such feedback and review is facilitated within any given course will lead to a greater understanding of the difference between a curriculum that teaches what is known and one that teaches “how to come to know.”

Barnett (2001) and Barnett & Coate (2005) take this discussion to a further level by examining, firstly the distinction between *critical thinking* and *critical being*, and, secondly, the opportunities for addressing many of these issues in curriculum design, providing a useful model of curriculum that is based on the three areas of *knowing*, *acting* and *being*.

3. Facilitating the change

What then can we, as academics or academic staff developers, do to facilitate the desired shift from teaching to learning? Are there practical steps that

can help or are the structures and traditions in place in many universities so resistant to change that our endeavours will prove fruitless?

The role of the educational/staff developer is potentially crucial but faces a number of challenges. Such staff, as they exist in many institutions at present, are often seen as peripheral to the main work of the university. They are held in low esteem by academics in other disciplines. This is an issue that must be addressed but which requires serious self-criticism by the community. There is a need for educational development to be research informed and for such staff to exhibit a genuinely scholarly approach to their role. In the past there have been too many examples of enthusiastic developers running numerous courses, workshops and other activities, whilst the majority of the institution's classes and teaching continue as before. The reasons for this lack of "follow through" beyond workshops into routine practice are many and inter-related. Certainly, there is a perception that the methods being advocated in workshops are idealistic and do not properly taken into account the "reality" of the teaching situation: methods for small group discussion and engagement do not readily translate to large classes with minimal contact between lecturer and student; the resource implications aren't fully thought through; the language/terminology of education jars with that of other disciplines; research focused staff need to be convinced of the substance of the approaches being advocated, etc. There is a need, therefore, for a more strategic engagement with academic departments and course teams, where educational developers need to be prepared to move from generic solutions to those that best match the *specific* culture and context of particular discipline areas (Shulman, 1987).

Curriculum reform which takes accounts of the needs, language, cultures and norms of particular disciplines, whilst promoting greater learner engagement, is needed. Clarification of learning goals, outcomes and a focus on "learning for understanding" can help to ensure greater constructive alignment of goals, teaching methods and assessment. To do so effectively, however, academic developers must raise their own standards and be prepared to accept the rigour of critical peer evaluation, become more resistant to the adoption of "fads" and accept that it is academic staff themselves that should have ownership over the process, becoming reflective practitioners in teaching and learning.

We need, also, proper recognition for high quality teaching through the rewards and promotion schemes within university career structures. Exploiting the synergies between research and teaching, rather than seeing them as competing forms of activity could enable a renaissance of the concept of the scholar: one who teaches and researches, creating and sharing knowledge and understanding.

4. The wider purposes of a *higher* education

The purposes of higher education in many countries are currently being questioned by politicians, industry and wider society (OECD, 1986). Certainly, much of the focus is on the economic imperative to develop a highly educated, graduate workforce for the "knowledge economy." (DTI, 1998; Bok, 2003; Wolf, 2002; Hayes & Wynyard, 2003; Kirp, 2003) This, however, coupled with "massification," quality monitoring frameworks and greater administration within institutions, runs the danger of actually reinforcing traditional teaching, and further depersonalising the student experience. On the other hand, the need for change due to external pressures such as these could lead to a wider debate and those advocating a transformation of university teaching and learning should respond to the challenge. The key argument here is that a higher education should be about personal *transformation* (Freire, 1974) and not just about accreditation. One could argue that the wider goal of such an education is to nurture the development of engaged citizens and critical, reflective professionals (Zemsky, 2003).

Of course, what is required is leadership at senior management level, backed by detailed institutional research and clarity over the meaning of institutional goals and mission. Furthermore, the relation with government and society, in many cases, needs to be refreshed if universities are to shed their image as elitist, conservative "ivory towers." Institutional autonomy is under threat in many national systems in Europe and elsewhere, and only by demonstrating willingness to engage with the problems and issues of wider society will such continue to be supported (Boyte & Hollander, 1999). Indeed, universities have a potentially strong role to play, perhaps as Habermas' "public sphere," where issues of the day can be debated, positions challenged and new understandings constructed. As Barnett (2003) has pointed out, the *National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education* (1997) in the UK (commonly known as the *Dearing Report*) mentioned this very aspect, although it hasn't received as much attention as it merits. Universities can seek a role as the,

"'critic and conscience of society' and as a promoter of civil society... research can justifiably be seen as enabling the university to be the conscience of society in that such publicly projected research calls to account current stories of our age; and it promotes civil society by injecting contesting frames of understanding in society. The university this dual responsibility that is bequeathed to no other social institution"

In practical terms, some institutions are pursuing such a goal, albeit in somewhat limited form, through activities such as "service learning," where ac

ademic programmes incorporate reflective and critical learning founded on direct experience of working with community groups and non-governmental organisations. The National University of Ireland, Galway for example, is a leader in this field in Ireland and is a member of the US based organisation, Campus Compact (<http://www.compact.org/>), which supports service learning, community based research and the promotion of voluntary activities.

Where this fits with learning and teaching is that it is a vital endorsement of the concepts of transformation, conceptual change, learner autonomy and critical being. To bring it about at institutional level, however, requires firm, committed and confident leadership, something which is not always evident in the sector (Matthew, Radloff & MacLaren, 2006).

5. Conclusion

Our ultimate goal in higher education should be set at as high an aspirational level as possible and educational developers should not be content simply with a greater commitment to improving teaching quality. Rather, we need to be prepared to take the lead in transforming institutions themselves from being simply the providers of courses and certificates to become the developers of human potential, producing active learners, new forms of knowledge, a valuing and sharing of culture and active and engaged citizens.

However, academic/educational developers will be unable to respond to this challenge unless they pursue the highest levels of academic rigour in their work, practice active scholarship and are prepared to critically re-evaluate much of their practice to date. Their practice must be evidence based and respectful of the specific requirements of individual academic disciplines whilst also infused with a commitment to educational and social justice.

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Teil II:

Hochschuldidaktische Qualifizierung im Kontext des Wandels