

A 'SPECIAL' CONTEXT?: IDENTIFYING THE PROFESSIONAL VALUES ASSOCIATED WITH TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Bruce Macfarlane

Head of Educational Development and Professor of Education, Thames Valley
University, London, UK

Roger Ottewill

Educational Developer, Centre for Learning and Teaching, University of Southampton,
Highfield, Southampton, UK SO 17 1BJ. Tel: +44 (0)23 8059 4472 Fax: +44 (0)23 8059
2651 Email: rmo2@soton.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

The paper draws on the philosophy of higher education and existing codes of professional values as a basis for analysing the distinctive ethical challenges of teaching in higher education. For those who teach in higher education there are many values that they share with colleagues in schools and colleges, including respect for learners, collegiality, scholarship and a commitment to reflective practice. Additionally, however, they face a number of ethical challenges that, to some extent, distinguish them from teachers in other settings. These include protecting the academic freedom of students stemming from the goal of promoting student criticality; ensuring respect for learners derived from the concept of adulthood and the principle of andragogy; and accommodating a series of 'dual' roles which define academic identity. While the character of these challenges may vary between countries, arguably they are of international concern in higher education forming a distinctive basis for the identification of universal, professional values.

INTRODUCTION

Attempts to develop ethical standards connected with 'professional' teaching practice in higher education have resulted in recognition that 'values' form an integral part of any definition. In the UK it was the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) that took the first steps in this direction. Formed in 1993, SEDA began accrediting courses in teaching and learning for academic staff in higher education in the same year. Its accreditation framework included a set of 'underpinning principles and values' for informing the practice of higher education teachers (see figure 1).

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- An understanding of how students learn
 - A concern for students' development
 - A commitment to scholarship
 - A commitment to work with and learn from colleagues
 - The practising of equal opportunities
 - Continuing reflection on professional practice
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Figure 1. Staff and Educational Development Association Underpinning Principles and Values. Source: <http://www.seda.ac.uk/pdf/index.htm>

This initiative was complemented by the Dearing Report on higher education (NCIHE, 1997) which recommended that the accreditation of programmes for higher education teachers should be taken forward by a new professional body, the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ILTHE). Established in 1999, the ILTHE produced a statement of professional values (see figure 2) together with an identification of core knowledge areas. The professional values statement was modelled very closely on the SEDA principles and values.

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- a commitment to scholarship in teaching, both generally and within their own discipline
 - respect for individual learners and for their development and empowerment
 - a commitment to the development of learning communities, including students, teachers and all those engaged in learning support
 - a commitment to encouraging participation in higher education and to equality of educational opportunity
 - a commitment to continued reflection and evaluation and consequent improvement of their own practice
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Figure 2. Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education Statement of Professional Values. Source: http://www.ilt.ac.uk/downloads/040430_AP_IERform.doc

Although individual higher education teachers applying to join the ILTHE were required to provide a reflective statement based on five (later six) core knowledge areas without directly addressing the values statement, higher education institutions seeking accreditation of their programmes had to map the ILTHE professional values against their curriculum learning outcomes. By 2004, it was estimated that some 90 per cent of larger UK institutions had at least one ILTHE accredited programme for new teaching staff (Universities UK, 2004). In January, 2003, the UK government published a white paper on the future of higher education which, *inter alia*, expressed the expectation that all new teaching staff should obtain a teaching qualification incorporating agreed professional teaching standards by 2006 (Department for Education and Skills, 2003). At the time of writing, a consultation process,

overseen by the recently created Higher Education Academy (incorporating the ILTHE and other agencies concerned with teaching support and development), is in train to establish an agreed national standards framework for implementation by the beginning of the 2005-2006 academic year (Universities UK, 2004).

- Reflective practice and scholarship
 - Collegiality and collaboration
 - The centrality of learning and learner autonomy
 - Entitlement, equality and inclusiveness
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Figure 3. Further Education National Training Organisation Values. Source: http://www.fento.org/staff_dev/teach_stan.pdf

Those awarded Qualified Teacher Status must understand and uphold the professional code of the General Teaching Council by demonstrating that they:

- 1.1. have high expectations of all pupils, value and respect their diverse cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds, and are committed to raising their educational achievement;
 - 1.2. treat pupils with respect, consistency and consideration, showing awareness of their backgrounds, experience and interests, and having concern for their development as learners more broadly;
 - 1.3. demonstrate and promote the positive values, attitudes and behaviour that they expect from their pupils;
 - 1.4. have the ability to communicate sensitively and effectively with parents and carers, and to recognise parents' and carers' roles in pupils' learning, and their rights, responsibilities and interests;
 - 1.5. can contribute to, and share responsibility in, the corporate life of the schools in which they are trained;
 - 1.6. understand and support the roles of other professionals in pupils' lives;
 - 1.7. have the motivation and ability to take increasing responsibility for their own professional development;
 - 1.8. are able to improve their own teaching, by evaluating it, by learning from the effective practice of others and by using research, inspection and other evidence;
 - 1.9. are aware of the legal framework relating to teachers' employment and conduct.
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Figure 4. General Teaching Council Professional Values and Practice. Source: <http://www.tta.gov.uk/php/read.php?sectionid=110 @articleid =459>

The identification of a set of professional values associated with teaching is not confined to the UK higher education sector. The Further Education National Training Organisation (FENTO) has statutory responsibility for developing standards for teaching in the further

education sector. It has issued a set of values of remarkable brevity (see figure 3). Similarly, the Teacher Training Agency oversees standards for the award of qualified teacher status in the compulsory school sector on behalf of the General Teaching Council. This also includes a statement of Professional Values and Practice (see figure 4).

The existence of these separate sets of professional value statements for each educational sector in the UK raises the question of whether there are distinct moral and ethical concerns facing teachers working in higher education. Are there values and moral duties distinctive to teaching in a university context or are the ethical challenges facing educators largely interchangeable?

It is noteworthy, however, that the various statements of values issued by the professional bodies and government agencies concerned with professional teaching practice in UK education appear to share a good deal of common ground, notably with regard to respect for learners, the importance of collegiality and inter-professional working, scholarship and reflective practice (see figure 5). While there are differences of emphasis and tone, the principles espoused in all three statements appear broadly similar in character.

	Respect	Collegiality	Scholarship	Reflective practice
Higher Education Academy	<i>'respect for individual learners...'</i>	<i>'a commitment to the development of learning communities...'</i>	<i>'a commitment to scholarship in teaching...'</i>	<i>'a commitment to continued reflection and evaluation...'</i>
Further Education NTO	<i>'Entitlement, equality and inclusiveness'</i>	<i>'Collegiality and collaboration'</i>	<i>'Reflective practice and scholarship'</i>	<i>'Reflective practice and scholarship'</i>
General Teaching Council	<i>'treat pupils with respect, consistency and consideration...'</i>	<i>'understand and support the roles of other professionals...'</i>	<i>'...learning from the effective practice of others and by using research, inspection and other evidence'</i>	<i>'...improve their own teaching, by evaluating it...'</i>

Figure 5. An analysis of common ground in professional values

This begs the question of what, if anything, is 'special' about the ethics of teaching in a higher education setting? The answer to this question is important in determining the nature of professionalism in higher education practice.

In considering what is distinctive about the ethical challenges of teaching in a university setting, it is important to draw on the wider literature about the 'specialness' of higher education itself. In many ways, the ethics of university teaching is a microcosm of this debate. This literature needs to be related to the value-based statements issued by leading professional and academic societies not only in the UK but also elsewhere, such as the American Association of University Professors and the Canadian Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. In this paper, particular attention is given to three areas where a case can be made for claiming that the ethics of teaching in higher education is 'special' vis-à-vis

teaching in other contexts. These areas are the academic freedom of students stemming from the goal of promoting student criticality; the importance of respect for learners derived from the concept of adulthood and the principle of andragogy; and a series of 'dual' roles that define academic identity.

STUDENT ACADEMIC FREEDOM

The claim that higher education represents something philosophically different from other stages in the educational process, particularly compulsory schooling, rests heavily on the emancipatory tradition of the universities in the western world. Barnett (1990) argues that, following in the footsteps of Newman, Jaspers and Habermas, higher education is a liberating process that helps students become independent and critical learners.

An educational process can be termed higher education when the student is carried on to levels of reasoning which make possible critical reflection on his or her experiences, whether consisting of propositional knowledge or of knowledge through action.
(Barnett, 1990, p 202)

The role of higher education in enabling students to become 'critical reflectors' both with regard to their own discipline and the world around them is widely understood and supported by western faculty as a teaching objective (Nixon, 1996; Kolitch and Dean, 1999). Ashby's (1969) 'hippocratic oath' for the university teaching profession includes the appeal 'to teach in such a way that the pupil learns the discipline of dissent' (p. 64). This sentiment is reflected in the American Association of University Professors' 'Statement on Professional Ethics' that higher education teachers should protect the academic freedom of students. The statement, which dates back to a declaration originally adopted in 1966, incorporates a number of expectations with respect to professional conduct. In relation to teaching, the statement makes clear that the first duty of professors is to 'encourage the free pursuit of learning in their students' and to protect their intellectual or 'academic freedom' (AAUP, 1987). While statements concerning teaching values in the compulsory school sector tend to emphasise the importance of respect for the nature of knowledge (e.g. Tomlinson and Little, 2000) they do not reflect the importance attached in higher education to encouraging student critique.

Protecting student (not just staff) academic freedom is a pre-requisite for empowering learners to become critical about knowledge claims. This has a number of implications for higher education institutions and university teachers. While it is easy to state a commitment to student academic freedom certain conditions need to be met to ensure that this principle operates in practice. The management of classroom debate and discussion can often serve as a practical expression of protecting student academic freedom. This demands that the learning environment is a 'neutral and open forum for debate' (Barnett, 1990, p. 8) and that the oral contributions of students are treated with mutual respect (Sachs, 2000). At the same time, there need to be 'ground rules' prohibiting extreme expressions of religious, racial and sexual intolerance especially when debating 'touchy subjects' (Poe, 2000) or 'controversial topics' (Lusk and Weinberg, 1994).

This, it might be argued, is a fairly standard set of expectations relating to the promotion of free and fair discussion in any educational context. However, the particular importance attached to developing critical thinking skills and safeguarding student academic freedom in

higher education demand that the teacher's ideological and theoretical dispositions need to be kept under 'restraint' (Macfarlane, 2004). On the one hand, a combination of intellectual honesty and emotional 'leakage' makes it inappropriate and impractical for a teacher to hide their convictions from their students. Being passionate about one's subject is often recognised as a feature of 'good' teaching (Ramsden and Entwistle, 1981), but this can also demand that personal convictions are revealed rather than concealed. On the other hand, research has shown that students expect to receive lower grades if they disagree with their teacher in class (Lusk and Weinberg, 1994), which also poses the more insidious possibility that students will self-censor their work (Macfarlane, 2004). Ensuring what Rodabaugh (1996) refers to as 'interactional fairness' is a complex matter that needs to be sensitive to the essential power imbalance between the teacher and the student. In the Canadian Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education's 'Ethical Principles in University Teaching', principle three deals directly with 'sensitive topics'. It recommends that teachers identify their own perspective on the issue under discussion and compare this with alternative approaches or interpretations (STLHE, 1996). This conveys to students the complexity of the issue and the 'difficulty of achieving an 'objective' conclusion'. The university academic must maintain a difficult balancing act. They have a duty to defend their own academic freedom of expression and, at the same time, be concerned to protect the student voice (Evans, 1999).

ADULTHOOD

In most national contexts students in higher education are generally regarded as *de facto* or *de jure* 'adults'. The status of the learner as an adult has practical and moral implications for their involvement in the educational process. As adults, learners are, at least in theory, volunteers, not conscripts legally obliged to attend a period of compulsory education. This means that, unlike school instructors, higher education teachers are not normally seen to be acting *in loco parentis*. Consequently they do not assume the same responsibilities as parents. One effect of this difference is that it places a greater onus of responsibility on students for their own actions while, at the same time, building in higher expectations with respect to confidentiality in, for example, maintaining more restricted access to records of academic progress. In practical terms it means that university teachers do not normally discuss the academic progress of students or matters of a personal kind with parents or anyone else without their permission.

There are, though, threats to the confidentiality of the staff-student relationship. These stem largely from the re-conceptualisation of higher education as a service industry and the status afforded to market-based stakeholders. Parents are seen as one of the 'stakeholders' of modern higher education. This means that some parents may perceive they have a right to be more involved in the university careers of their offspring and to information about their progress. Such a view is particularly likely in the new era of tuition fees in the UK and the probability that, in many instances, parents will be called upon to pay or, at least, contribute to them. In other national systems, tuition fees and parent power are more firmly established.

Amongst academics, parents and students opinions differ as to the desirability of greater parental involvement in the university careers of their sons and daughters. Some see it as disrupting the core relationship between higher education teachers and their students and undermining the transition towards greater personal independence, one of the defining

characteristics of adulthood. Others, however, feel that parental interest and engagement can contribute significantly to helping young people adjust to the demands of higher education.

Whatever stance one adopts on this issue, for higher education teachers there can be a very real tension between, on the one hand, safeguarding the privacy of students and, on the other, responding to reasonable requests for information from parents seeking reassurance as to the progress of their children and that they are obtaining value for money. Many students, however, are likely to take the view that their legal status as adults overrides such considerations.

Along with parents, business organizations are also recognised as important 'stakeholders' in modern higher education. This can raise ethical challenges for the teacher where universities enter into arrangements with business organisations to provide an academic programme (such as an MBA) on a single company basis. Where such agreements exist the essentially voluntary nature of being a higher education student is put at risk by what has been referred to as a 'conscript culture' (Macfarlane, 2000). Refusal to participate can raise fears of being passed over for promotion or even being selected for redundancy. The power of the client organisation as sponsor can, moreover, adversely affect the confidentiality of the staff-student relationship where grades and progress issues are disclosed. The possibility of student academic freedom in classroom discussion, raised in the previous section, can also be endangered where criticism of the organisation occurs or is perceived to have taken place in class. Here there is a fear that class peers will act as whistle blowers, reporting critical remarks as acts of corporate disloyalty, thereby curtailing the open and neutral forum envisaged by Barnett (1990).

Lastly, adulthood implies a qualitative difference in the relationship between teachers and students. Here, Knowles' (1984) theory of 'andragogy' is instructive. As adults, learners are self-directed and expect to take more responsibility for their own decisions. This, as Knowles has argued, has implications for the approach and style of those teaching in higher education through, for example, designing learning based on the experiences of students and making it problem rather than purely content-orientated. This is not just a pragmatic response. It is also an ethical response to teaching adults that necessitates respect for their previous life experiences through building learning which is relevant to their career and personal life. While respect for learners is a universal maxim, it has special resonance for those educating adults.

DUAL ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS

The nature of higher education is such that academics are often involved in performing dual roles that may not sit easily with each other, thereby giving rise to ethical dilemmas. Three of the most potent dualities are those of teacher and assessor; teacher and intimate; and teacher and researcher.

Teacher and Assessor

The inherent power imbalance between student and teacher in higher education has a number of expressions. One of these is the dual role of teacher and assessor. This, according

to Kennedy (1997), is the most significant challenge facing the university teacher. For pupils in compulsory school systems much of the critical summative assessment during the final stages of their school careers involves external examinations where someone other than their teacher acts as assessor. Thus, there is a relatively clear divide between those charged with the provision of learner support (i.e. teachers) and those who assess.

By contrast, in higher education the position is far less clear-cut. Universities, by definition, award their own degrees. This means, in effect, that higher education teachers are often responsible for setting their own summative assessments, both coursework and examinations. Thus, they commonly act as not only teachers but also final arbiters of the performance of their own students.

In performing their assessment role, academics face an in-built tension between the desire to encourage and motivate students to learn and the responsibility to sit in judgement on their performance (Shils, 1982; Kennedy, 1997). This tension is especially acute given the impact that assessment decisions can have on the future career prospects of individual students, whether in academe or more generally. At the heart of any discussion of assessment from an ethical perspective is the virtue of fairness (Macfarlane, 2004). Ultimately, any suggestion that higher education teachers have acted either arbitrarily or inflexibly with regard to assessment will undermine their credibility. Thus, in seeking to address the needs of the individual they have to ensure that they do not act unfairly towards others in the group. While fairness in assessment is an ethical imperative in any stage of the educational process, the comparative autonomy of university teachers makes it distinctive in the higher education context.

Teacher and Intimate

Popular representations of academic life, such as David Mamet's *Oleanna*, often focus on the development of close personal or even sexual relationships between students and teachers. While such relationships can be legally proscribed in the compulsory sector, in higher education, where students are defined as adults and of an age to have intimate sexual relations the situation is more complex. On the face of it students, and in particular mature learners, who enter into close personal and sexual relationships with their teacher do so as fellow, consenting adults. However, given that the relationship between the teacher and the student is fundamentally based on an inequality of power, this poses dangers for the actual and perceived fairness of the educational process, including assessment. Principle 5 of the Canadian Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education's 'Ethical Principles in University Teaching' concerns 'dual relationships with students'. While this does not seek to prohibit all close sexual and personal relationships with students, it raises their problematic nature in relation to assessment and supervision duties and suggests that senior colleagues should be notified when such circumstances arise (STLHE, 1996). While such relationships do not automatically imply that assessment practices will be unfair, the perception of favouritism means that they are, at the very least, tainted (Macfarlane, 2004).

Teacher and Researcher

Few university teachers are, by definition, only teachers. Many conduct research and publish as part of their professional role as academics and see it as part of their commitment to the value of scholarship. This dual teacher-researcher role can create a difficult dilemma though for university faculty torn between a desire to carry out research in their field and the time-consuming nature of teaching preparation and supporting student learning via assessment, feedback and tutoring.

Although much has been written about the potential synergy between teaching and research and the need for teaching in higher education to be research-informed, there are tensions especially when the teaching responsibilities of academics do not closely match their research interests. The conditions of mass (or universal) higher education make this increasingly likely, creating a potential cognitive dissonance between the lecturer's teaching duties and personal research goals. Moreover, career reward and recognition structures have historically tended to favour research over teaching excellence. In the UK and Australian context, university teachers have come under increasing pressure in recent years to research and publish as a result of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and Australian Research Quantum. Both are peer-reviewed audits of research excellence resulting in the grading of departments and the differential allocation of research funding from the government on the basis of this grading. This has created greater competitive pressures on institutions to improve their ratings and this, in turn, has had a significant impact on the expectations placed on staff. In such an atmosphere if academics do not fulfil their research potential, for whatever reason, it can be said to cast doubt on their commitment to collegiality.

Here the dilemma is often made more acute by presenting research versus teaching as a 'zero sum game'. In other words, the more time and energy academics devote to research the less they have to devote to their teaching. Inevitably, this can put strains on the quality of the service that they provide for their students. A more productive approach, drawing on the Aristotelian tradition, might be to consider the virtue and associated vices that permeate this dilemma. A critical virtue for both effective research and creative teaching is curiosity. However, an excess of curiosity leads to the vice of obsession, while a dearth can be characterised as a lack of inquisitiveness. To maintain an appropriate balance between research and teaching, lecturers need to hold fast to the virtue of curiosity while resisting the temptation to become obsessive about either. Obsession, particularly where it is directed at one aspect of a researcher/teacher role, is every bit as damaging as being disinterested in either or both.

THE VALUES OF UNIVERSITY TEACHING

In developing professional standards for teaching in higher education, due recognition needs to be given to the distinctive nature of the setting. Arguably, the statements of professional values produced by the American Association of University Professors and the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education in Canada are more finely tuned to the particular circumstances of those teaching in a university environment than those of the UK's Higher Education Academy or Staff and Educational Development Association.

Taking a lead from the American and Canadian statements, the analysis developed in this paper has identified six values, which are of special importance to the professional practice and behaviour of teachers working in higher education (see figure 6).

- Active protection of student academic freedom
 - Confidentiality in the student-teacher relationship
 - Respect for the prior learning and experiences of students as adults
 - Fairness in the exercise of the power of assessment
 - Transparency with regard to dual relationships with students
 - Managing the tensions of the dual teacher-researcher role
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Figure 6. Some values distinctive to university teaching

It might be contended that two of the values presented in figure 6 – fairness in assessment and transparency in dual relationships – are equally applicable to the role of the teacher in other phases of the educational process. However, the first of these stems from the unique dual role of higher education faculty as teachers and assessors while the second demands transparency principally to ensure fairness (and the perception of such) with regard again to assessment. The values presented in figure 6 do not necessarily cover all aspects of teaching in higher education, but they do relate to some of the key distinguishing features of university life. Moreover, they are essentially intended as latter day Aristotelian ‘virtues’ rather than a detailed and prescriptive code of conduct. They provide an analytical basis for further work in designing a values statement suitable for professional teaching standards both nationally and internationally.

CONCLUSION

As Tomlinson and Little (2000) recognise, university teachers face additional dilemmas to those working in other parts of the education system. It is with the nature of these dilemmas and the extent to which they can be addressed with a framework of values common to all members of the teaching profession that this paper has been primarily concerned. The stance adopted here is that such dilemmas present those teaching in higher education with ethical challenges that can only be partially met by recourse to a common set of values. While the character of these challenges may vary across national boundaries, in most respects they are likely to be of universal concern.

With the globalisation of higher education the need to ensure a degree of harmony between the values statements of individual countries becomes increasingly necessary. At a minimum, where there are differences, academics and students moving between countries need to be made aware of them. However, in line with the foregoing analysis the similarities are likely to be greater than any differences. In the UK context, it can only be hoped that in developing a framework of professional standards for teaching in higher education adequate attention is paid to the special nature of the ethical challenges that face faculty members.

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