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Prizes, pedagogic research and teaching professors: lowering the status of teaching and learning through bifurcation

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Considerable resources and intellectual attention have focused on seeking to raise the status of teaching in higher education over the last two decades. Initiatives at an institutional level have included the funding of pedagogic research, teaching awards and the creation of teaching professorships. In a broader context, the scholarship of teaching and learning movement has campaigned for a reconfigured and more inclusive understanding of scholarship. However, despite the good intentions of these initiatives, the effect been to lower still further the status of teaching, bifurcating universities between ‘teaching’ and ‘research’. It is argued that efforts should instead be directed at integrating academic practice as a more effective way of raising the status of teaching.

Keywords: reward and recognition; scholarship of teaching and learning; pedagogic research; teaching professors

There is an increasing tendency for research to be divided into two types: ‘subject-based’ research and ‘pedagogic’ research. Subject-based research is serious, scholarly and well-respected stuff. It is published in prestigious subject-based journals. This kind of research is what counts in the assessment of research quality in countries like the UK, Australia and New Zealand. Then there is ‘pedagogic’ research. This is where academics from various disciplines do research about their own teaching, that of others or focus on the way students learn. Sometimes, ‘research about learning and teaching’ is the phrase used to distinguish this type of scholarly endeavour from everything else in academic life. But apparently, unlike subject-based research, ‘pedagogic’ research is not ‘proper’ research. It is not, therefore, any good for the purposes of research assessment. Or so we are told by those charged with responsibility for getting universities the most money from this exercise. Here, the operating assumption is that such work is of little intellectual value beyond the improvement of an individual’s practice in a localised context. This, of course, only applies to some pedagogic research but everything labelled as ‘learning and teaching research’ tends to be tarred with the same brush.

Ironically, the distinction between subject-based and pedagogic research has arisen, to a large extent, from the misguided efforts of those most committed to ‘raising the status of teaching’ in higher education (NCIHE 1997). However, I believe that the distinction between ‘subject-based’ and ‘pedagogic’ research is entirely erroneous. What really matters is whether a piece of research is based on sound

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methods, has something interesting or useful to ‘say’ and has been properly peer reviewed before publication. The only important distinction is between good research and poor research. However, it is hard to undo the now widespread perception that research about ‘learning and teaching’ of *any kind* exists in some sort of separate, box marked ‘second rate’. This curious state of affairs has in many respects been created by the keenest advocates for ‘learning and teaching’ (not, of course, ‘teaching and learning’ to the zealots) or the ‘scholarship of teaching and learning’ (SoTL). These advocates promote the work of Boyer (1990) seen as a seminal figure in promoting a more inclusive definition of scholarship. It is telling, though, that Boyer’s much vaunted four forms of scholarship lists the ‘scholarship of discovery’ first and the ‘scholarship of teaching’ last (Boyer 1990, 16). This, perhaps inadvertently, confirms the status of pedagogic research – in last place in terms of status. Sadly, enthusiastic advocates of SoTL have proven their own worst enemies. Extolling the distinctiveness of ‘pedagogic’ research and the notion that anyone can and should do educational research has lowered, rather than raised, its currency. It has simply ‘devalued the enterprise’ (Harland 2009).

Other allied efforts to ‘raise the status of teaching’ in higher education have, in fact, also done directly the opposite. Examples in a UK context include the shameful waste of ‘soft’ funding for learning and teaching projects encouraging a ‘not invented here’ or vacuum packed mentality among disciplinary communities and institutions. This has resulted in work which is low in quality, lacks theorisation and often fails to draw on, or even acknowledge, a substantial *existing* body of relevant literature on teaching in higher education. Research into the teaching of particular disciplines frequently replicates findings, which are well known but have simply been generated in a different discipline-based context. Between 1999 and 2009, the English Higher Education Funding Council’s teaching quality enhancement fund was used by institutions to support all manner of such projects. If this money had been used to increase understanding about what is already known it might have been more effectively spent.

Then there is the tokenistic, all-must-win-prizes world of teaching awards and teaching ‘fellowships’, which have become a key feature of a patronising culture standing in stark contrast with the harder edged and more competitive realities of advancement through research. Teaching conferences are also symbolic of this divided world largely attended by an alliance of enthusiastic teachers and learning support staff and studiously ignored by those who see themselves as ‘researchers’. These various initiatives are overlaid with a bifurcated infrastructure of committees, Associate Deans, department co-ordinators and strategy documents; one set for ‘teaching’ and the other for ‘research’. One result of this is that institutions have never been so divided as they are now between the worlds of teaching and research.

Nowhere is this phenomenon of scoring ‘own goals’ by those committed to raise the status of learning and teaching better illustrated than through the creation of ‘teaching professorships’. This possibility has been opened up, in part, as a result of the emergence within institutional promotion structures of so-called ‘job families’ which tend to focus on three or more separate career routes in teaching, research or management. A growing number of universities, in the UK and internationally, are now adopting a separate route to a full professorial position on the basis of teaching and learning.

For example, at the University College Dublin (UCD) promotion to full professor may be based either on research and scholarship (and academic leadership) or on contributions based on achievements in teaching and learning (and academic leadership). Promotion to professor on the basis of teaching and learning depends, according to their criteria, primarily on ‘externally validated evidence of outstanding performance as a University teacher’ (UCD 2008, ii). The criteria, of course, goes on to list a ‘sustained, high-quality contribution to the SoTL and/or pedagogic innovation in their discipline’ (UCD 2008, x). The University of Warwick has a bifurcated structure that includes Teaching Fellows and Research Fellows at four levels. At the apex are ‘Professorial Fellowships’ (i.e. in research) and ‘Professorial Teaching Fellowships’. Among the criteria required to acquire this latter position is to have made ‘a substantial contribution... to the pedagogic research of the discipline’ (University of Warwick 2009, 5). Symbolically, once someone reaches professorial level the word ‘research’ is dropped from their title unless, of course, they are a professorial *teaching* fellow!

As part of a research project looking at intellectual leadership (Macfarlane 2011), I interviewed someone who had been awarded a professorship on the basis of their work as a champion of teaching and learning in their discipline. What he told me was that he felt ‘uncomfortable in the role because the drive [i.e. in the university] is all about research’. He went on to state:

I am a very unusual professor in this university and feel quite self conscious about this. The general conversation is about research but I have done minimal research...

Like teaching awards and funding for learning and teaching research, teaching professorships are designed to raise the status of teaching but do directly the opposite. This is demonstrated by the experience of my interviewee. The notion of a ‘teaching professor’ is counter-posed, of course, by a ‘research professor’, an adjective which means, in effect, a ‘real’ professor. We do not need adjectives such as ‘research’ or ‘teaching’ to describe a professor although others such as ‘good’ or maybe ‘lazy’ might of course apply! It is also hard to understand why someone who has achieved recognition for the quality of their scholarship at a national and international level would have been able to do so without publication in peer reviewed outlets. What matters is not what someone specialises in but whether they have achieved the status and recognition, which corresponds with being a professor. The relevant question is simply, are they a distinguished authority in their field? This is what it means to be a professor.

The intention behind creating ‘teaching’ professorships is in many respects laudable. It represents an attempt to go beyond the tokenism of teaching awards to mainstream recognition of teaching excellence. The reality though is that university promotion procedures are still heavily geared towards research rather than teaching excellence as a recent survey has again confirmed (Cashmore and Ramsden 2009). Creating professorships in ‘learning and teaching’ seeks to challenge and alter this reality but the unfortunate effect is only to further undermine efforts to raise the status of teaching and reinforce the divide with ‘research’.

It is 13 years since the Dearing Report on UK higher education (NCIHE 1997) expressed the desire to raise the status of teaching. Considerable resources have been devoted to achieving this goal but often, I would argue, in a counter-productive way.

Critically, those who wish to raise the status of teaching in higher education need to stop demanding special treatment. Soft funded projects, teaching awards and teaching professorships are part of a culture, which only serves to lower the status of teaching by seeking to create a structural equivalence between two different sets of activities via endowing teaching with the prestige associated with research. This strategy smacks of tokenism and as such is doomed to failure. Nor is research into 'learning and teaching' necessarily synonymous with 'pedagogic' research. Indeed, a better nomenclature is research into education or, perhaps, a distinct area such as higher education. This involves theory, policy and practice elements, including teaching. We need to take every opportunity to integrate teaching and research and to point out the lack of logic behind dividing these areas of academic practice at every turn.

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