Can Academic Practice Make Perfect?

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Some questions are persistently troublesome. Why do most people say teaching is important, but think that most other people think research is more important? Why is it hard to find effective ways to reward people for good teaching? Why do some people who really want to be good teachers resist help from educational developers? Why is research funded at less than full economic cost thought of as ‘income generation’, while teaching that earns more than its full economic cost is not? Why is it hard to find evidence that teaching and research must go together to ensure the best higher education? Why, if we believe teaching and research must go together, do we allow hundreds of thousands of students to do HE courses in places where there is little or no research?

These questions have not gone un-researched, but there is a shortage of persuasive answers, partly because our conceptual framework blocks our thinking. We separate teaching and research as basic concepts – and then we agonise about the problems caused by the separation. To improve teaching, learning and how they are valued by academics, we need to change how we think about higher education as a whole. In this article I suggest an alternative approach, which reintegrates teaching, learning, research and scholarship as the main constituents of academic practice. The way to do this is to start with academic practice and pay much more attention to contexts, purposes and academic freedom. By making those ideas explicit and primary, we can give fresh impetus to improving teaching and learning.

Improving teaching and learning

In recent years the UK has seen a series of national experiments in improving teaching and learning, with mixed results. Space does not permit description here of variations in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, but Scotland’s recent Enhancement-Led Institutional Review method, in particular, has some features consistent with my argument in this article. For more than ten years it has been government policy that the quality and professionalism of teaching must be nurtured and improved. Following the Dearing Report (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education 1997) the Institute for Learning and Teaching (ILT) was established. HEFCE created the Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL), then brought together various teaching and learning support activities through the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF), at institutional (learning and teaching strategy), subject (Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN)), and individual (National Teaching Fellowships Scheme (NTFS)) levels. TQEF stimulated educational development and the scholarship of teaching and learning (Summative Evaluation of the TQEF 2005), reinforcing contributions from the Teaching and Learning Technology Programme (TLTP) and Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC). ILT joined the LTSN and the HE Staff.
EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS
The Magazine of SEDA

Issue 10.1
2009

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2009 (Vol.10)
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Packs of 10 copies (each copy containing 4 issues) are available for £240 sterling.

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Development Agency in the Higher Education Academy. Later came further waves of investment in the 70+ Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL), and in the ESRC’s Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP). The scholarship of teaching and learning has become big business, and educational developers are everywhere. What difference has this investment and activity made to teaching and learning?

The Higher Education Academy has had mixed success (Oakleigh Consulting 2008). The formative evaluation of the 70+ CETLs (Saunders et al. 2008) and other research (Gosling and Hannan, 2006, 2007, Gosling, 2008) suggests that they have not yet had wide impact, perhaps because it is only now in the third year of their operation that most CETLs are planning to reach out beyond their immediate institutional environments. Trowler, Fanghanel and Wareham (2005) argue that improvement initiatives have been so disjointed and incoherent that they have obstructed rather than complemented one another. They also argue that most change efforts have focused either at the level of the individual course or at the organisational level, and a greater emphasis on the work group, the department, is needed.

HEFCE has emphasised teaching and learning strategy at the institutional level, and research strategy at the unit of assessment level. But RAE units of assessment only correspond to departmental staff groups in a minority of institutions, so most departments must reconcile an institution-level strategy for teaching with a unit-level strategy for research, neither designed to fit the department. To get funding and support, departmental academic practice must be separated into teaching and research, then submitted to different authorities for different kinds of evaluation. It is not surprising that many academics in these circumstances feel alienated from the management of their institution. Nor is it surprising that academics resist offers of help - framed in this uncongenial structure - from educational developers working at institutional level.

But this alienation and the artificial separation of the elements of academic work is largely academics’ own fault. The way we think about higher education has failed to keep up with changes in what we do, and changes in why, where and how we do it. To see how this has happened, consider first what higher education is for.

What is higher education for?

Robbins’ glorious statement of the purposes of higher education (Higher Education: a report 1963) proved irresistible to academics and policymakers. It fixed the idea of higher education in an age when universities catered for less than 10% of the population. It also fixed the idea of higher education to be synonymous with the idea of the university, something that has been less and less accurate ever since. It appealed because it described the kind of university which many academics and policymakers experienced as an undergraduate, and the kind of university which worldwide enjoys the highest academic prestige.

That idea had grown from von Humboldt’s concept of the research-teaching-scholarship nexus, mediated by Newman, the Webbs at the LSE, by Robbins and others. Trow’s (1974) elite-mass-universal model, coupled with the idea of the research-teaching-scholarship nexus as the defining characteristic of the university, has shaped thinking about higher education policy for the last 50 years, framed the way we pursue the scholarship of teaching and learning, and framed the practice of educational development. It idealised a mix of research and teaching of a kind which could be afforded only by a handful of institutions, fuelling endless arguments about the desirability or otherwise of concentrating research funding.

But many UK universities grew from a different, polytechnic tradition. The polytechnics’ growth put the (pre-1992) universities under such pressure to justify their higher level of funding that they were driven to disaggregate their block grant funds between teaching and research - thus fixing the original amount of QR (quality-related research) funding, creating separate T and R funding streams...
and leading directly to the RAE. When HEFCE (2003) argued that institutional strategy should focus on some but not all of teaching, research, ‘third stream’ activity, and widening participation, some challenged the conclusions, especially after the ‘teaching-only universities’ proposal in the 2003 White Paper The Future of Higher Education. But no-one questioned the way the argument started by separating teaching and research.

Academics have looked hard for evidence that research and teaching must be linked for high quality higher education to be possible, even though many perfectly acceptable higher education courses are run in places, like FE colleges, where there is little or no research. We are looking at the issue in the wrong way. The realities of the whole of academic practice - research, teaching and learning - should be incorporated rather than ignored in the way higher education is conducted and studied. Instead, institution-wide strategies for teaching and learning, or for research, are at best semi-detached from each other. Teaching, learning and research need to be the foundation stones of the whole building, not separate annexes.

Teaching and research are the primary activities in any university, but not its primary purpose. Teaching and research are the means to a higher purpose. Ideas about purpose will always vary - the pursuit of truth or of knowledge for its own sake, the development of human potential or high level skills for employment, the promotion of economic development or social justice. Whatever our view we need to pay more attention to purpose, which reminds us that what matters is academic practice, not the subdivisions within it. The separation of teaching and research in the academic consciousness has led us to mistake what we do for the reasons why we do it. We need to think differently about purposes, and to do that we need a new scholarship of academic practice to reintegrate research and teaching.

**How do we join up research and teaching?**

Most academics believe research brings greater rewards than teaching, even in institutions which consistently promote more people for teaching achievement than for research. The belief is buried deep in academic culture, reflecting the differences between teaching and research. Rewards for research tend to be extrinsic, public and personal, while rewards for teaching are more often intrinsic, private and collective. Attempts to change the reward system and the culture for teaching have had limited success. Awards for individual teaching ‘stars’ go against the grain. There may be some successful institution-based teaching fellowship schemes, but there is considerable resistance to the idea of individual awards, and award-winners tend not to play an influential part in enhancing teaching and learning outside their own area.

This resistance is understandable. There is a strong culture of openness and collaboration in teaching and in the scholarship of teaching and learning, captured in the idea of the teaching commons (Huber and Hutchings, 2005). Such a culture naturally resists attempts to individualise reward for collaborative effort. But the question remains: how can we improve the rewards for those institutions, departments and staff who are truly excellent at promoting student learning?

Teaching and research have an asymmetrical relationship. Teaching, however good, does nothing for academic reputation. Research, on the other hand, creates academic fame and fortune. The asymmetry is a problem everywhere. In Britain we make it worse by separating the funding streams for teaching and research. That makes the reputational hierarchies steeper, it intensifies inter-institutional competition for resources, and it encourages academics and universities to fall into the trap of seeing teaching and research in competition with one another, instead of being interwoven.

The prestige of research encourages theoretical contortions to massage academic self-esteem. Boyer’s (1997) four scholarships paradigm for interpreting academic practice dominates less for its achievement as a conceptual synthesis than for the politically inclusive way in which it places every HE institution and every academic somewhere on the scholarship map. It is a politically correct reformulation of the research-teaching-scholarship nexus idea. But it submerges the reputational hierarchy which higher education reinforces – discovery is top, integration and engagement are lower, and the scholarship of teaching and learning is often near the bottom. Our dominant perspective conceals rather than reveals one of the key issues we should examine. We need to look at academic practice more holistically.

Academic practice involves changing how people think. To change how we ourselves think, we must shift away from the scholarship of teaching and learning towards a scholarship of academic practice which addresses both research and teaching. How can we do this? By reinventing the idea of academic freedom.

We need a 21st Century idea of academic freedom. That is more important than deciding where and how to draw the boundary between teaching and research, and the boundaries between different kinds of scholarship. The four scholarships are not separated by those clear black lines in Boyer’s diagram. They are completely interwoven. We need new ways of seeing the higher education world which focus our attention on the interplay between four ideas: academic practice; academic purpose; academic freedom; and academic context.

The narrowest freedom is associated with the narrowest purpose. In a commercial context where the purpose is high-level professional training, all you need is the freedom to draw on the results of other people’s research to instruct trainees in developing work-related skills.

In an industrial research laboratory, where the purpose is commercial problem-solving or new product development, the freedom to conduct applied research and development means closer working relationships and exchange between university and industry academics, with correspondingly
greater freedoms for the commercial researchers.

In a further education college the broader purpose of education for individual development calls for the freedom for teachers to express controversial opinions without fear of retribution.

A university dedicated to expanding our understanding of the world, where academic practice covers all kinds of research as well as teaching, can still claim the widest kind of academic freedom, to teach, research and publish in a spirit of relatively untrammelled intellectual enquiry.

If we do not pay close attention to academic freedom and its contingent justifications, we will damage what is most important for higher education. In general the narrower the academic purpose, the narrower the academic freedom. If we care about teaching, research and scholarship, and we want to respect and defend all the places where good research and teaching go on, we need to change our understanding of the academic world. The concepts of academic practice, academic freedom, academic purpose, and academic context can reunify higher education without homogenising it.

The idea of the nexus has made us focus too much on what we teach, and on how we teach, in a technical sense. The scholarship of teaching and learning has become unduly instrumental. We must pay more attention to why and where we conduct our academic practice. And we must pay more attention to how we do it in the sense not of technical proficiency but of moral proficiency – what our values are, and how we exercise our academic freedom responsibly. We need to replace the elite model of the research-teaching-scholarship nexus with a broader idea of higher education which recognises the range of academic practice and the necessity of academic freedom, conditioned by purpose and context. This means changes for everyone.

Higher education providers should be more subversive and more assertive in protecting their definition of academic practice, against the reductionist pressures of government and its agencies. For example, it is debatable whether a university needs a separate learning and teaching strategy. A university needs an academic strategy for the whole of its academic practice. Whether it needs to break this down to smaller elements such as teaching or research should be an open question.

The Higher Education Academy should rewrite its mission to reflect its primary concern for teaching as part of integrated academic practice. Subject networks and institutions are important, but within those subdivisions and beyond them the academy should try to reintegrate academic practice in all its diverse contexts. To start with, it might support a new stream of activities which explore the nature of academic freedom in teaching and the variety of forms it might take in diverse contexts, and with diverse groups of students.

SEDA need not rewrite its mission, but educational developers need to recognise the significance and variability of contexts for learning, and make more use of ideas that integrate teaching with other aspects of academic practice, rather than differentiate it. For example, induction/development programmes for new academics should not be narrowly focused on teaching, nor focus on only one institutional context.

To return to those troublesome questions:

- Why do most people say teaching is important, but think that most other people think research is more important? Because we live with reward systems which differentiate between the two instead of rewarding a balanced contribution to academic practice, fit for purpose and suited to the context.
- Why is it so hard to find effective ways to reward people for good teaching? Because we look for reward mechanisms too far removed from the department, the only place where essential tacit knowledge about teaching performance can be understood and applied.
- Why do some people who really want to be good teachers resist help from educational developers? Because some educational developers frame their efforts in an alienating structure disconnected from the realities of departmental academic practice.
- Why is research funded at less than full economic cost, thought of as ‘income generation’, while teaching that earns more than its full economic cost is not? Because preserving the research-teaching-scholarship nexus as the gold standard incites most institutions to do more research, inhibiting the development of broader ideas about the kind of academic practice needed in different contexts.
- Why is it so hard to find evidence that teaching and research must go together to ensure the best higher education? Because contexts vary, and academic practice varies accordingly; there is no one best way.
- And why, if we believe teaching and research must go together, do we allow hundreds of thousands of students to do HE courses in places where there is little or no research? Because we know that those students do get a good educational experience, but we cannot square that knowledge with our inadequate conception of a good higher education.

As academics we need to face the consequences of our own rigid thinking, and change it. We must remain reflective practitioners, but re-contextualise how we pay attention to teaching. We must pay more attention to the contexts in which teaching takes place, value their differences, and not unthinkingly devalue non-elite contexts. We must pay less attention to our freedom to research and publish, and more attention to how we use our academic freedom in teaching and in knowledge exchange, and whether there is enough of the right kind of freedom in all the contexts where academic work is done. We must switch research and scholarship away from research-teaching linkages and towards developing a new idea of academic freedom, calibrated for context and purpose, to take the place in our minds of the idea of the research-teaching-scholarship nexus. We must switch our teaching attention more towards the values which
underpin our practice, and the way in which values, purposes and contexts interact. We need to re-imagine academic practice as a unified whole, wherever and however it takes place. Only then will we be able to re-think higher education as it should be for the 21st Century.

References
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SEDA Values – The Jewel in the Crown

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Introduction
‘Values are concerns about what ought to be. A value is a belief which need not rely upon facts or evidence, although a value position can be supported or challenged by knowledge propositions… Basic values are those which seek to monitor and maintain values within the system as a whole. These may include freedom, equity, the value of the unique individual, community, family and defence of society and social justice. An example of a values statement in education is found in the German Constitution which, in addition to general freedoms, safeguards specific freedoms in art and science, research and teaching.’ Le Métais (1997)

In the past I have been asked if SEDA discusses and changes its values – the simple answer is ‘yes’ but this is possibly more complex in regard to how the value statements arise and are confirmed within our community. The purpose of this article is to stimulate a wide debate, with the potential outcome being a revised set of values which are refreshed, shared and relevant to the broad community which forms SEDA.

Our values
I started this article with the proposition that values are about beliefs – complicated by the fact that they might be divided into several overlapping, and sometimes conflicting, sets: personal, community, professional, societal and so on. I recognise that for SEDA, acting as a professional association there is significant virtue in having a set of values. What is a great strength can also be a weakness. At inception SEDA used the title ‘Values and Principles’ but over time this has become truncated to values. It is my twofold contention that:

• In the current format of the wording we now have statements which are more like principles than values
• The tone of the value statements does not reflect the full community which SEDA represents i.e. they are very much about the academic teacher.

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