

7-2008

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: What is it? A Personal View

Michael Prosser

The University of Hong Kong, mprosser@hku.hk

Recommended Citation

Prosser, Michael (2008) "The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: What is it? A Personal View," *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*: Vol. 2: No. 2, Article 2.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.20429/ijstl.2008.020202>

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: What is it? A Personal View

Abstract

The scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education is an idea and a practice that is relatively new and still in its early stages of development. What it means, how to engage in it, what are its expected outcomes, etc. are still issues of debate. In this short essay, I argue that the scholarship of teaching and learning should be about individual and groups of academic staff within disciplines engaged collegially in working to improve student learning within the disciplines. It is not research in the traditional sense, its focus should be on better understanding our student learning experiences and outcomes within our disciplines, and on ways to improve those experiences and outcomes.

Keywords

Scholarship of teaching and learning

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: What is it? A Personal View

Michael Prosser

University of Hong Kong
Hong Kong, China
mprosser@hku.hk

Abstract

The scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education is an idea and a practice that is relatively new and still in its early stages of development. What it means, how to engage in it, what are its expected outcomes, etc. are still issues of debate. In this short essay, I argue that the scholarship of teaching and learning should be about individual and groups of academic staff within disciplines engaged collegially in working to improve student learning within the disciplines. It is not research in the traditional sense, its focus should be on better understanding our student learning experiences and outcomes within our disciplines, and on ways to improve those experiences and outcomes.

There is a great deal of discussion about the meanings of, and relationships between, the scholarship of teaching and learning, pedagogic research, and evidence based practice in teaching and learning in higher education (Healy, 2000; Kreber, 2000). One of the most influential analyses of the state of research and teaching in the modern university is that by Ernest Boyer in 1990. He drew analytical distinctions between the scholarship of discovery (more traditional forms of research), the scholarship of integration (writing textbooks, conducting literature reviews), the scholarship of application (investigating local issues and problems and applying scholarship to addressing those issues and problems), and the scholarship of teaching (which I think about as evidence based critical reflection on practice to improve practice).

In a study of academics' conceptions of the scholarship of teaching and learning, my colleagues and I (Trigwell et al, 2000) found a range of categories of conceptions of the scholarship of teaching held by academic staff in Australian Universities. These included the scholarship of teaching and learning being about:

- A. knowing the literature on teaching by collecting and reading that literature
- B. improving teaching by collecting and reading the literature on teaching
- C. improving student learning by investigating the learning of one's own students and one's own teaching
- D. improving one's own students' learning by knowing and relating the literature on teaching and learning to discipline specific literature and knowledge
- E. improving student learning within the discipline generally by collecting and communicating results of one's own work on teaching and learning within the discipline.

(Trigwell et al, 2000, pg 159).

In that paper we argued that the categories were inclusive in structure, with those further down the list being inclusive of those further up. We also noted the shift in focus from teaching to student learning, and from just knowing about others work to communicating your own work. Finally, there is a shift from generic views about teaching and learning to more specific views. We argued that category E. represented the most sophisticated view of the scholarship of teaching and learning.

In thinking about scholarship, research and evidence based practice I have drawn upon this analysis to draw analytical distinctions between pedagogic research, investigations and evaluations, literature reviews and scholarship of teaching.

Specifically, I think it is worthwhile to draw distinctions between the following:

- Research
 - enhances our theoretical and/or conceptual understanding of teaching and learning
 - is firmly situated in its relevant literature and makes a substantial contribution to that literature and or field.
- Investigations and Evaluations
 - enhances our understanding of a local problem or issue, providing recommendations for policy and / or action
 - is firmly situated in its relevant literature
- Literature Reviews
 - collection and analysis of literature aimed at describing the various ways in which the object of the review is thought about and recommendations for practice
- Scholarship of Teaching and Learning
 - evidence based critical reflection on practice aimed at improving practice

I wish to draw these distinctions mainly because I think we need to keep a very firm focus on the scholarship of teaching and learning being about improving our students learning, using evidence based approaches. If we are not careful, the scholarship of teaching and learning will become a subset of either Research or Investigations and Evaluations, losing the focus on improving students' learning.

Interest in the scholarship of teaching and learning, pedagogic research in higher education and evidence based practice is growing. Recent examples of such growing interest are:

- The establishment and ongoing programmes of the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) Program in Higher Education in the United States of America (<http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/programs/index.asp?key=21>)
- The establishment and ongoing programmes of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council – formally the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education in Australia (<http://www.altc.edu.au/carrick/go>)
- The establishment and ongoing programmes of the Higher Education Academy in the United Kingdom (<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/>)

- The University Grants Council of Hong Kong's Teaching Development Grants Programme
- The recent Research Assessment Exercise in the UK in which pedagogic research in teaching and learning in the disciplines is seen as part of disciplinary based research and scholarship (<http://www.rae.ac.uk/aboutus/policies/pedagogic/assess.doc>)
- Increasing number of conferences on scholarship, research and evidence based practice; research and development journals, graduate certificates in higher education and research doctoral programmes in teaching and learning in higher education
- The establishment of pedagogic research groups within research departments in, for example, the USA, Canada, Australia.

Recently the United Kingdom has adopted a set of [professional standards](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/policy/framework) <<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/policy/framework>> for teaching in higher education in which 'the ability to incorporate research, scholarship and/or professional practice into those (teaching and learning) activities' is seen as a key feature of teaching and learning in higher education. From my knowledge, such standards are unique in the world.

But why all of this activity? Why not draw upon the generic research in education conducted within education faculties within universities and apply that. Why do we need systematic reflection on evidence collected about our own practice to improve the quality of our students learning?

For me, drawing upon conception E described earlier, the importance of the scholarship of teaching and learning within the disciplines in higher education is in the interplay between the generic and contextual. Research in faculties of education can produce generic descriptions and ways of thinking, but individual disciplines and academics need to give those generic descriptions and ways of thinking meaning in their own teaching and learning contexts and practices. For example, what a deep approach to learning might look like in English, Physics or Mathematics may be quite different (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999). The meanings need to be worked out in each individual context and individual teaching practices. But the generic research and evidence can and does identify issues and ways of thinking that can be very powerful in improving practice.

Another way of thinking about scholarship, research and evidence based or informed practice is to consider what evidence individual institutions, faculties, departments and academic staff should be collecting for themselves, analysing, reflecting on, responding to, and acting upon. The sort of evidence collected, how it is analysed and interpreted needs to be informed by the ongoing, more generic research in the field. Institutions, faculties and individual academics should have structures and processes for collecting evidence of student learning experiences – using questionnaires, focus groups, interviews etc. The questionnaires used, questions for the focus groups, how to analyse and present these data should be carefully informed by the more generic research, but adapted to fit the local context and needs – research informed practice. When collected, analysed and reflected upon at the institutional level, survey data such as that collected in the Course Experience Questionnaire in Australia, the National Students Survey in the United Kingdom, and the National Survey of Student Engagement in the USA play a very valuable role in institutional research. But this institutional level data is not always appropriate for diagnosing ways of improving students learning at the individual unit level. Institutional research may identify areas needing to be improved, but that needs

to be contextualised and situated within individual discipline and classes. It is here that I believe the scholarship of teaching and learning is worked out.

An excellent example of the interplay between the scholarship of teaching and learning, pedagogic research and evidence based practice is shown in the Carl Wieman Science Education Initiative and the University of British Columbia (<http://www.cwsei.ubc.ca/>). Weiman, a Nobel Laureate in physics, has set up an initiative in which he is engaged in pedagogic research in students' learning in physics. He draws upon much of the more generic research in education and cognitive science, situating that research within physics, developing approaches to teaching, survey measurement instruments, ways of investigating students' learning in physics, which others can draw upon in collecting their own evidence about their own students' learning in order to improve that learning and their own practice.

So what do I conclude from this? For me the main point of engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education is to work towards improving our students' learning. To do this we need to systematically reflect upon evidence of our own students' learning within our own classes and disciplines. We need to draw upon the more generic research, but carefully situate that within our disciplines. We then need to monitor the success or otherwise of our efforts to improve our students' learning, and then communicate the outcomes of those efforts to our colleagues. The scholarship of teaching and learning from this perspective is not research in the traditional sense. It is a practically oriented activity, conducted collegially, and increasingly being conducted alongside traditional research within the disciplines.

References

Boyer, E. L. (1990) *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriate*. Princeton, NJ: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of University teaching.

Healey, M. (2000). Developing the scholarship of teaching in higher education: A discipline based approach. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 19, 169-189.

Kreber, C. and Cranton, P. (2000) Exploring the Scholarship of Teaching *The Journal of Higher Education*, 71, 476-495

Prosser, M. and Trigwell, K. (1999). *Understanding learning and teaching: The experience in higher education*. Buckingham: SRHE and Open University press.

Trigwell, K., Martin, E., Benjamin, J. and Prosser, M. (2000). Scholarship of Teaching: a model. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 19, 155-168.