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Book Review: "Balancing acts: The scholarship of teaching and learning in academic careers" by Mary Taylor Huber (2004)

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Book Review

Balancing Acts: The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Academic Careers. Huber, Mary Taylor (2004). Washington, DC: American Association for Higher Education and Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

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Balancing Scholarship or Complicating Careers?

Balancing Acts is biographical account of four distinctly individual pathways into the scholarship of teaching and learning whose intention it is to help make 'work that matters work that counts' (Huber 2004, 3). The four biographies selected for analysis display a set of symmetries or balances: they encompass representatives of four universities and different academic cohorts. They portray the experiences generated in four disciplines in hard and applied science, humanities and social sciences. Two chapters are dedicated to investigating each scholar's first steps in academic careers to engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning; and their subsequent success in gaining disciplinary and institutional recognition for their scholarly work in teaching and research.

As Lee Shulman points out in the Preface, the only similarity is that the four stories selected are all stories of success, but from which it is difficult to generalize their processes or conclusions. Sheri Sheppard's work on mechanical dissection, Brian Coppola's introduction of peer instruction and a new approach to curriculum in undergraduate chemistry, Daniel Bernstein's development of mastery teaching as a principle in teaching undergraduate psychology, and Randy Bass's inroads into new media methodologies for teaching American Studies are all examples of faculty at research universities in the U.S. who have been successful in defining scholarly work on teaching and learning as worthwhile and significant for themselves and their disciplines.

Huber leaves us with rich narrative data and many questions: are these stories to be read as accounts of "differently balanced careers" or careers that have been "put back into balance"? In other words, is all scholarship of teaching to be perceived as a balanced or integrated portfolio of scholarly activity, or as research-led teaching? Is it an academic version of classroom research, or distinct educational leadership in the disciplines? And when will we know that "work that matters is work that counts"?

As with every good piece of qualitative research, the devil is in the detail. Although positive in their outcomes, the accounts generated by Mary Huber are also realistic and "balanced" in showing the difficulties and contradictions as much as the final success. In the words of one of the commentators cited in Sheri Sheppard's tenure case, we are able to find in these four scholars' work "contributions beyond classroom performance, (...) which move the educational effort in a larger field and have promise of doing so beyond the field" (Edie Goldenberg, 105-106). Yet, in the particular contexts of four research universities, what we encounter with unavoidable regularity are problems at

the tenure junction. While lip service is often paid to innovators in teaching, giving them formal recognition in terms of tenure or professorship is a process fraught with difficulties. Some things change fast in academia, while others change extremely slowly, and always with a degree of contestation and debate.

Nevertheless, we are reminded that academic lives are always lived and experienced as profound transformations, of individual biographies, departmental politics, disciplinary cultures, and whole educational systems, in which individual innovation is always possible or even natural, though larger impact is never easily achieved or guaranteed.

Balancing acts is a tribute to individual agency, though placed within the institutional and cultural context of universities and disciplines. As someone who had a chance to meet some of the scholars whose lives are the subject of this book and who has had the opportunity to talk extensively with the author, I believe that the balancing acts of the scholarship of teaching and learning are risky, but worthwhile if we are prepared to further complicate academic careers in the process.