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Recognition and Acceptance of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

Excerpt: The acceptance of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) by the academic community has made considerable progress over the past few years, but it is still everywhere a minority interest in a climate that puts disciplinary research above all other academic activities. Furthermore, this situation is strengthened everywhere by features of marketisation which have increased the importance of management and finance in academia, to the detriment of the really important work of academics with which SoTL is concerned – teaching and research. In England – more than in Scotland, and it is important to appreciate that as an outcome of devolution, the two countries are increasingly diverging in their academic concerns – SoTL has had to cope with, on the one hand, management styles which have devalued academics from colleagues to employees, and on the other with the disastrous effects of the Research Selectivity Exercise (RAE), a primarily self-inflicted ‘own goal’ of academia, which has biased research towards short-termism, and has introduced terms such as ‘research inactive’ to label academic staff who, while engaged in both research and teaching could not satisfy the narrow research definitions of the RAE and came as a result to be labelled ‘research inactive.’

Keywords

Acceptance of SoTL, Scholarship

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Recognition and Acceptance of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

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The acceptance of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) by the academic community has made considerable progress over the past few years, but it is still everywhere a minority interest in a climate that puts disciplinary research above all other academic activities. Furthermore, this situation is strengthened everywhere by features of marketisation which have increased the importance of management and finance in academia, to the detriment of the really important work of academics with which SoTL is concerned – teaching and research. In England – more than in Scotland, and it is important to appreciate that as an outcome of devolution, the two countries are increasingly diverging in their academic concerns – SoTL has had to cope with, on the one hand, management styles which have devalued academics from colleagues to employees, and on the other with the disastrous effects of the Research Selectivity Exercise (RAE), a primarily self-inflicted ‘own goal’ of academia, which has biased research towards short-termism, and has introduced terms such as ‘research inactive’ to label academic staff who, while engaged in both research and teaching could not satisfy the narrow research definitions of the RAE and came as a result to be labelled ‘research inactive’.

If we are to understand the meaning of SoTL, we must first understand the meaning of the word ‘scholarship’ more generally. In the meaning that we require, it is in fact not a native English word; but – according to the Oxford English Dictionary - a translation of the German word *Wissenschaft*, a heavily culture laden concept, defined by Ashby (1958, p. 22) as ‘the empirical approach to knowledge’. It can be traced back to Wilhelm von Humboldt’s famous prescription for the future University of Berlin, which became the most successful model for the university of the 19th century. Humboldt (1810) was concerned with both research and teaching, and he established a fundamental dichotomy - not between either research and teaching or between teachers and students, but between university and school, according to which the university – in contrast to school – treats scholarship always “in terms of not yet completely solved problems, whether in research or teaching, while school is concerned essentially with agreed and accepted knowledge.” The consequence, as he says in a most thought provoking sentence of his memorandum, is that in universities

“the teacher is then not there for the sake of the student,
but both have their justification in the service of scholarship”.

This collaborative principle applies to both research and teaching, since both should be concerned with not yet completely solved problems and it is this principle - which, I am sure, is Humboldt’s - that has been guiding universities for the past 200 years. However – and unfortunately - in that time a quite different dichotomy has become dominant, the dichotomy between research and teaching, wholly in contrast with Humboldt’s beliefs, who saw them as a unity. There is little doubt that the modern university cannot be contained within Humboldt’s single prescription; it has to please many more and more utilitarian masters; its aims are inevitably multifarious, but unless the unity of teaching and research and the pursuit of scholarship remain as a fundamental aim of the university of the 21st century – and almost certainly the fundamental long term aim - the latter will be much the poorer for it. Furthermore, it is likely that under these

circumstances it will also fail in its purely utilitarian and inevitably more short term aims. However, this is not a division between pure and applied aims, a division which Humboldt would not have recognised; the basis of his description was the unity of the pure aim - the service to scholarship – and the applied aim – the service to the state.

The arguably most regrettable feature of the dichotomy between research and teaching is that it has led to a skewed value system of by now long standing, with research being considered significantly more prestigious than teaching, as evidenced for instance in my first contract (in 1951!) which defined teaching as one of the duties I had to carry out, but research as an activity in which I was expected to engage in and for which time and facilities were provided. It is this dichotomy which SoTL aims to remove – through establishing a unity of, on the one hand, the practice of teaching and learning and, on the other, research into teaching and learning. To describe the latter as pedagogic research would be wrong, as every University Education Department is likely to point out, for in contrast with pedagogic research, as carried out in Education Departments and which is primarily generic and related to school, the research into teaching and learning in universities is primarily – though not wholly - discipline specific. This division between university and school – which progressive educationists do not treat as rigidly as Humboldt did, is not and should not be firm, for if it were, it would prevent any synthesis of the separate parts, but it is nevertheless there. What SoTL must synthesise – in the service of scholarship – is disciplinary as well as generic teaching and learning, together with disciplinary research and research into teaching and learning. This SoTL concept of scholarship therefore goes further than that of Boyer (see Rice 1991), whose four scholarships covered different domains, which SoTL attempts to unify. Furthermore, in contrast with much German and French thinking which leans towards synthesis, Anglo-Saxon thinking leans towards antithesis – one only needs to think of the concepts of education and training which in English are usually considered antithetic, in contrast with the synthesis in the German concept of *Ausbildung* and the equivalent French concept of formation - SoTL would find life easier on the other side of the Channel!

That SoTL has established itself at all in this essentially hostile or at least unfriendly climate is little short of a miracle; however in order to establish itself more firmly, it is now important that we, the protagonists of SoTL, look dispassionately at ourselves in the SoTL community and look for deficiencies within ourselves, irrespective of whether these are likely to be major causes for our still being a minority interest or not. Where we have departed from traditional academic attitudes is in three areas:

- we believe that teaching is as important as research and that indeed the two ought to be inseparable in higher education;
- we have moved from stressing ‘teaching’ to stressing ‘learning’;
- we believe that research into teaching and learning is as important as research in the disciplines.

In analysing these three issues, let me go back to the start of the modern university – Humboldt’s amazing memorandum of 1810. In a crucial passage, he wrote [here I use ‘learning’ – as a noun – to translate a different aspect of the deeply value laden word *Wissenschaft*, see Elton (2001)]:

“It is furthermore a peculiarity of the institutions of higher learning that they treat higher learning always in terms of not yet completely solved problems, remaining at all times in a research mode [i.e. being engaged in an unceasing process of inquiry]. Schools, in contrast, treat only settled bodies of knowledge. The relationship between teacher and learner is therefore completely different in higher learning from what it is in schools.”

Hence university teaching only deserves that title if it involves a joint endeavour of teacher and learner in a common search for knowledge, and the outcome of both

research and teaching is new learning, wholly new in the case of research and new to the learners in the case of teaching. The last nine words make it clear that such learning in a research mode (*forschendes lernen*) is in no way the same as the equally valuable learning from and through research, as is the case in the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Programme (UROP), which was started at MIT in the 1960s and involved students engaging in research.

While the Humboldt programme was a resounding success in research, it was a total failure in teaching and learning, where – in contrast to the Humboldt prescription of “the teacher is then not there for the sake of the student, but both have their justification in the service of scholarship” – teachers remained in total control, although they may have seen their role as the ‘school’ role of being there “for the sake of the student”. This situation changed in the past half century through two essentially independent developments: the advent of the teacher as facilitator of learning – see e.g. Rogers (1969) – and the advent of Problem Based Learning (PBL) – see e.g. Savin Baden and Howell Major (2004). The extension of PBL to Enquiry based Learning (EBL) which is applicable to all disciplines – PBL itself is confined to applied disciplines with ‘real’ problems – has in the Anglo-Saxon world been accomplished in many disciplines: two examples are Geography, as documented in a review paper by Spronken-Smith et al. (2008); and English literature, starting with a seminal paper by Hutchings and O’Rourke (2002), who also incorporated the ‘facilitator of learning principle’ in their approach to student learning (a recent paper by Dickinson and Tosey, 2008, discusses possible forms of EBL in some detail and suggests as a working definition that “EBL is a process of learning in which the learner has a significant influence on or choice about the aim, scope, or topic of their learning; and a process attends intentionally to, learns about, and is guided or supported in, the process of learning. This process of learning draws upon research skills and study skills, but enquiry is not reducible to either research or study.”); and more generally through the ‘Learning Through Enquiry Alliance, a consortium of six Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (see <http://www.ltea.ac.uk>).

Although the two developments of ‘teacher as facilitator’ and ‘enquiry based learning’ are applicable to any stage of the educational process, Humboldt’s prescription – which is based on the development of a student from child to adult and sharply differentiates between school and university – is not. Whether this is the reason why University Education Departments have shown such a lack of interest in SoTL, which is of course confined to higher education, may be difficult to establish, but it is certainly a fact. Also, SoTL links the pedagogic and discipline specific aspects of teaching and learning in a way that is quite different from the way that they are treated at school level. I would therefore argue that it is SoTL – and not pedagogy – that must provide the theoretical basis for university teaching.

At this point, SoTL runs up against a deeply ingrained belief in academics that university teaching is not a researchable subject, but that there are ‘born teachers’ and the rest (I once gave an inaugural lecture in a strongly research oriented university on the subject “Is university teaching researchable?” and found that, before the lecture, a substantial part of my audience thought that the answer was ‘no’, although some changed their minds as a result of my lecture. I suspect that few would have held the same view on university car parking, but regrettably I did not ask that question.) Indeed, in practice this belief would appear to exist also in the majority of supporters of SoTL, since they do not demand a formal education in this new field, although in Britain it has been seriously challenged, as will now be indicated.

If teaching is as important as research and research into teaching is as important as research in the disciplines, then we should demand a preparation for SoTL equivalent but not necessarily equal to the kind of preparation required for disciplinary research. Thus, while the latter is normally at the level of a first degree in the appropriate discipline, this would not be appropriate as an introduction to SoTL, which is not normally taken up by

academics until after they are established in their disciplines. It should therefore be in the form of continuing professional development and involve a postgraduate qualification – Diploma or Master’s degree. Such a course, based on action research, was pioneered some years ago at University College London (Stefani and Elton 2002) and courses like it have since been developed elsewhere – in Oxford, University of Hong Kong and Dublin Institute of Technology.

Thus our present position, which only satisfies the third of our beliefs, namely that we have moved from stressing ‘teaching’ to stressing ‘learning’, is seriously deficient and an essential aspect of the kind of course which I have referred to must challenge the fundamental dichotomy of what in SoTL is disciplinary and what is generic, a dichotomy which is essentially based on the Aristotelian principle of thesis and antithesis, and excludes the Hegelian concept of synthesis. At its crudest, this view draws a sharp line between, for instance, what to lecture on and how to lecture; yet it has been known for a very long time that this is incorrect; thus the totally generic book by Brown (1978) was accompanied by video-recordings of lectures in different disciplines which demonstrated large differences between appropriate lecturing styles in the different disciplines.

But there is much more. When Boyer (1987) started the movement which has led to SoTL, he wrote:

“Scholarship is not an esoteric appendage; it is at the heart of what the profession is about. All faculty, throughout their careers, should themselves remain students. As scholars they must continue to learn and be seriously and continuously engaged in the expanding intellectual world.”.

Following him, Kreber (2007) unpacked the meaning of SoTL and concluded that:

“SoTL involves a deep knowledge base, an inquiry orientation, critical reflectivity, peer review, as well as sharing or going public with the insights and innovations resulting from the inquiry process” and it “is linked to creativity, innovation and change”.

Quoting Elton (2000) who, she says, expressed this most succinctly:

“The scholarship of teaching is concerned not so much with doing things better but with doing better things”.

All of these go in one way or another against the long standing traditions of university teaching, which has been characterised as “an activity, carried out in private by not always consenting adults”. From there to the sum of the above features, as listed by Kreber, is a huge step.

We have come a long way in a remarkably short time, but we still have a long way to go before we can make a strong claim for SoTL on a par with well established disciplines.

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