Enhancing the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: A Study of the Factors Identified as Promoting and Hindering the Scholarly Activities of Academics in One Faculty

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Abstract

Excerpt: The scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) has, at its very core, the linking of research and teaching/learning. Conceptions of SoTL differ to degrees (Trigwell and Shale, 2004) but the common thread within all accounts is the integration of research within teaching and learning to enhance and further develop practice. Additionally, in line with other research activities, consensus emerges on the need for scholarly inquiries to be shared with the wider teaching and learning community to ensure open review and scrutiny. The linking of research and teaching/learning also runs to the processes by which SoTL is carried out. Badley (2003), for example, highlights that scholarship involves the same stages as the research process – planning aims and goals of the inquiry, selecting appropriate methods to use, obtaining and analysing results, disseminating the knowledge gained and critically reflecting on the whole process. In this way it matches, as Laurillard (2008) discusses, the teacher as action researcher.

Keywords

Scholarship of teaching and learning, SoTL

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Introduction

The scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) has, at its very core, the linking of research and teaching/learning. Conceptions of SoTL differ to degrees (Trigwell and Shale, 2004) but the common thread within all accounts is the integration of research within teaching and learning to enhance and further develop practice. Additionally, in line with other research activities, consensus emerges on the need for scholarly inquiries to be shared with the wider teaching and learning community to ensure open review and scrutiny. The linking of research and teaching/learning also runs to the processes by which SoTL is carried out. Badley (2003), for example, highlights that scholarship involves the same stages as the research process – planning aims and goals of the inquiry, selecting appropriate methods to use, obtaining and analysing results, disseminating the knowledge gained and critically reflecting on the whole process. In this way it matches, as Laurillard (2008) discusses, the teacher as action researcher. She sees the linking of teaching and research as the only way the teaching community can "manage effectively the degree of innovation being demanded" (2008:144). As she goes on to state, teaching needs to be problematised, exploratory, experimental and open always to the sharing and review of ideas with the wider community. This connects in turn to Huber's view that teaching "involves inquiry into learning" which "is made public in a way that can be critiqued, reviewed, built upon and improved" (cited in Badley, 2003:305).

It becomes apparent that SoTL is about the combining of research and teaching/learning into one activity. However, the higher education (HE) sector in England appears not yet to be at the point of effectively integrating these two activities. Rather, they still appear overall to remain distinct and separate. Debate in recent literature highlights this separation with discussion focusing on the status that is given to these two activities (e.g. Young, 2006; Hannan, 2005; Gordon *et al.,* 2003; Drennan and Beck, 2000). The general conclusion appears to be that attention to teaching and learning has suffered from a primary importance given by the sector to research. The white paper, *The Future of Higher Education* <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/hegateway/strategy/hestrategy/foreword.shtml>, concluded the same in its remark that "[t]eaching for too long has been the poor relation in higher education'" (DfES, 2003:15).

There have, however, been recent moves within the sector to address this imbalance and ensure a greater focus is given to the area of teaching and learning. An example of this is the launching of the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme in 2000 (Young, 2006). It is *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003:54/55) white paper, however, that takes this one step further to emphasise the relationship between research and teaching in the form of scholarship. Recognising that not every teacher should be engaged in research "as a narrowly defined activity," the paper does suggest that they "might be expected to engage in scholarship to inform their work as teachers." This sentiment had previously been expressed in *The Dearing Report* (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher

Education, 1997) which stated that one of the main reasons for supporting research in HE institutions is to inform and enhance teaching practice.

The evidence gained from recent studies, however, would suggest that there is still work to be done to ensure academics within HE institutions believe that the scholarship of teaching is valued as much as that of other research activities. Given that a general feeling still appears to be that research as a 'narrowly defined activity' is valued more (Young, 2006), a first step may simply be to enhance the focus given to teaching and learning within the sector, and in consequence to enhance the focus that individuals feel they can give to their own teaching activities. The HE institution that is the location of the study reported on below is an example of one of the recent initiatives put in place to raise the status of teaching and learning within the sector.

The CETL Initiative

In 2005 the Faculty of Health in a HE institution in central England was awarded the status of being a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL). 74 of these centres have been established as part of a sector-wide initiative funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). HEFCE states that the purpose of these CETLs is to "reward excellent teaching practice and to invest in that practice further in order to increase and deepen its impact across a wider teaching and learning community" (2004:1). *The Future of Higher Education* white paper (DfES, 2003:54) reinforced this by stating that funding would be used by these centres to "help promote and spread their good pedagogical practice." Funding is received from HEFCE by each CETL for five years and may range from £200,000 to £500,000 per annum. Additionally, each will have received a capital sum ranging from £0.8 million to £2 million. Over this five year period the HE institution that is the focus of this study will receive a total of £4 million.

HEFCE's intention for this money is that it will be used to "strengthen the strategic focus on teaching and learning" (2004:3). Additionally, the CETLs should have a "discernable impact on teaching and learning within their institutions and on how excellence in teaching and learning is valued and recognised across the sector" (2004:4). The emphasis therefore is on increasing, through funding, the priority given to teaching and learning. This increased focus may take many forms; for example, rewarding good practice or providing funds to attend conferences and events. However, the CETL in this institution has been particularly eager to build and develop the capacity of staff to undertake research into their own learning and teaching practice. A significant amount of funding has therefore been put aside for staff to bid for in order to undertake research into the learning of their students and to build an evidence-based approach for their practice. A growing number of applications for funds would suggest that some staff are keen to engage in it. For the majority of staff, however, it remains a struggle to encourage them to focus on their own teaching practice to this degree. Other studies conducted around this area indicate that there may be many factors impacting on the focus and attention academic staff feel they can give to their teaching and learning activities, which funding alone may not address (see for example Davies, 2003; Hockings, 2005 and Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005). These factors relate to the changing nature of the higher education environment which now positions students as customers and emphasises income generation. It may appear, therefore, that developing a climate in which the scholarship of teaching and learning begins to take a priority may not be a straightforward process.

The Research Project

In light of the aims of the CETL initiative and the evidence from previous studies, this study was designed to investigate the perceptions of academic staff in the Faculty of Health in one HE institution regarding the priority they feel able to give to teaching and learning beyond their day-to-day activities. It is recognised that at this institution, a post-1992 university, SoTL is an under-developed activity and so encouraging staff to focus on their own teaching and learning activity is a first step in building their capacity

for scholarly inquiry. Within the study a definition of teaching and learning was given to participants as "that purposeful activity that seeks to enhance effectiveness of facilitating student learning through practice, policy or enquiry." Staff were asked to identify whether there have been any changes to the priority they feel able to give to teaching and learning over the last two years (the time the CETL has been in existence within the Faculty) and to identify any factors that may have contributed to these changes.

The study was conducted using an anonymous on-line survey that gathered a mix of quantitative and qualitative data. There are a number of on-line software packages that allow web-based surveys to be created which respondents access via a specific URL address. This approach was chosen specifically as it allowed respondent anonymity. Once the survey had been designed, an email was sent to all Faculty of Health staff containing the URL and inviting them to participate. Staff simply had to click on the URL to be taken to the survey and once they submitted their responses, the data was stored in a password protected account. The on-line survey site collated the quantitative data and a thematic analysis of the qualitative data was carried out. In total, 99 responses were received. This gave the survey a response rate of approximately 30%.

Results

Figure 1: Perceived changes in priority given to learning and teaching over the last two years

	% of respondents agreeing
Own individual priority has increased	39.4
Own individual priority has decreased	7.4
Own individual priority has not changed	53.2

Increased Priority
Figure 1 shows that just over half of respondents perceived that the priority they feel they can give to teaching and learning has not changed over the last two years. However, a sizeable number did perceive that their priority has increased over this time. When asked to identify what had contributed to this, five main factors emerged:

1 – Further studies/professional development
This was the most commonly mentioned factor perceived to have contributed to an increased priority given to teaching and learning. More specifically, completion of the Post Graduate Certificate in Education: Learning and Teaching in Higher Education was identified as providing staff with an opportunity to focus on and develop their own practice. Other aspects identified included masters' level study, e-learning training and courses run by the Staff and Student Development Department (SSDD) at the institution.

2 – Students
Responses to the survey suggest that the growth of the market-place and consumerism within HE (also commented on by Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005; Davis, 2003; Martin *et al.*, 2003) has resulted in an explicit need to focus on the area of teaching and learning in order to respond to the growing numbers of students and the increased competition for them. Additionally, respondents comment that the student body is becoming more diverse as is, in consequence, the learning needs that need to be catered to. This, they suggest, may require critical reflection and review of the traditional pedagogical approaches applied and the evidence used to support them. Recent research conducted by Shaw *et al.* (2007) about the widening participation agenda endorses the view that a more diversified student body necessitates further teaching and learning knowledge and abilities from academic staff.

3 – Visible agents of change
In increasing the priority given to teaching and learning, respondents indicated the importance of seeing and being made aware of other developments, activities or projects occurring that are changing practice and encouraging debate, critique and reflection within the area as a whole. The CETL strategy was mentioned as an example of encouraging this to take place.

4 – Response to low management priority
A number of comments given in the survey suggest that a high individual priority to teaching and learning has arisen in response to a low perceived priority given by Faculty management. This lack of management priority is perceived to be occurring in consequence of aspects such as increasing administrative duties, reductions in staff numbers and a general focus on managing day-to-day functions. It appears this may galvanise some staff into focusing more on teaching and learning to make up for the insufficient attention given by management.

5 – Learning and teaching culture
Many respondents commented on a general feeling of a culture change occurring and perceived to be emerging from a number of directions. An awareness was expressed of an implicit culture within HE that now emphasises teaching and learning issues, as well as attention being focused more explicitly through national education strategies, such as CETLs, and the developments taking place within e-learning.

Decreased Priority
Figure 1 also shows that, in contrast to the above, a smaller percentage of respondents perceived that the priority they feel able to give to teaching and learning has decreased over the last two years. Three main factors emerged as contributing to this:

1 – Increasing administrative duties
The growth in the administrative workload of academic staff was noted as a particular detriment to the focus available to give to teaching and learning matters. More specifically, respondents commented on increasing paperwork and administration leading to information and documentation overload. This is a factor raised in other studies conducted around similar issues. Clegg (2003) and Knight and Trowler (2000) for example argue that universities are becoming more bureaucratic and consequently are requiring staff to spend more time record-keeping and documenting their activities. Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) endorse this by remarking on the extensive monitoring procedures required by a consumerist framework of higher education. They state that this shifts time and energy to "second order functions," such as accounting for professional activity, rather than to 'first order functions', such as researching or developing practice.

As discussed briefly above, management priority to teaching and learning is also seen to be affected by the increase of administrative activities. In particular, respondents felt that increasing attention is given by management to financial matters, such as budgetary issues and income generation, at the expense of teaching and learning concerns. Previous studies support this changing focus of attention, particularly for those in middle management roles (e.g. Hockings, 2005 and Clegg, 2003). Hellawell and Hancock (2001) argue that those in middle management, such as divisional or departmental heads, have to become more focused on administrative and financial matters because of government funding decisions. They suggest these decisions have led to these management roles becoming more service-orientated and customer-driven. Respondents to this survey not only perceived quite clearly this change in focus by management, but also indicated that it has a direct impact on the subsequent focus and attention they feel able to give to teaching and learning.

2 – Time
Connected to the previous factor, respondents suggest that the time they have available to focus on teaching and learning beyond their day-to-day activities is being continually lessened through increasing administrative policies, growing student numbers, heavy teaching workloads and reductions in staff numbers. Other studies again highlight the increasing commitments of staff and the difficulties this causes in developing their own activity or engaging in debates and discussions about new or existing practices (Clegg, 2003 and Davis, 2003).

3 – Increasing student numbers
This factor has already been discussed above in the context of leading to increased attention given to teaching and learning. However, for some it was also felt to have a negative impact. These respondents suggest that increasing the student numbers was gaining more attention for the greater amounts of funding they would bring. It was perceived that this then leads to a pragmatic focus on simply coping with larger class sizes rather than on enhancing and developing teaching and learning practice.

Discussion

The integration of research and teaching/learning has been identified by scholars and the government alike as a key way of enhancing, developing and informing practice. Implicitly or explicitly, SoTL is regarded as a necessary activity for the professional development of both the teaching community and the individuals within it. However, this integration is a difficult step to achieve when the two activities have, for some time, been seen to be at odds with one another.

Though the recent emphasis within the HE sector to address the imbalance of status and attention given to research and to teaching and learning has been noted, the literature suggests that academics still feel these perceptions of value are directed more to other research pursuits. The move to simply increasing the attention an individual feels able to give to their own teaching and learning has been suggested in this paper as a first step in the promotion of more scholarly activities. This may be particularly pertinent to those institutions that have yet to build a strong research focus amongst their staff. The results of this study suggest some of the factors that may have both a positive and negative impact upon this individual focus.

In terms of increasing the attention an individual feels able to give, the most important factor identified by this research is the opportunity to engage in further study or training that is related to their teaching activity. This is supported by Donnelly (2006) who found

that all staff who undertook a postgraduate course in learning and teaching in one institution stated that their teaching practice had changed after completion. In particular, changes were reported to have occurred in the pedagogical beliefs and assumptions the staff held about HE teaching. Additionally, both Gordon *et al.* (2003) and D'Andrea and Gosling (2000) suggest that undertaking such courses promotes communities of practice to form in which staff, from the same or other disciplines, may learn from each other and change their practice as a result. Engaging in courses such as this may therefore enhance the attention individuals feel able to give to their own activity at the same time as encouraging dialogues that promote the sharing and dissemination of good teaching practice.

However, the results also indicate that there are significant perceived barriers to allowing individuals the opportunities to engage in activities such as this or to simply focus more, on a day-to-day basis, on their teaching and learning. In relation to the factors that may have a negative impact on increasing an individual's own attention, the two most commonly stated were growing administrative duties and decreasing amounts of time available.

The results section describes how the move to a more consumerist and market-driven HE sector has led to increasing administrative work both at management and academic levels. A consequent impact is then had on any other activities that individuals feel able to engage in. This is a point well supported within the literature. Gordon *et al.* (2003:12), for example, argue that there is rising concern in Britain about the "erosion of time for scholarship as a result of the impact of administrative work…" Additionally, Davis (2003:246) suggests that the lack of reflective practice occurring within institutions is due in large part to the changing nature of HE and the redirection of time, effort and energy required. She states that though "reflective practice might be the ideal it is hardly the priority." Both Clegg (2003) and Knight and Trowler (2000) comment that the changes occurring within academic life are reducing the mental space needed for reflection and contemplation in order to improve teaching and learning practices.

In terms of promoting the scholarship of teaching and learning, barriers such as these may have a severely negative impact. The ideal situation would undoubtedly be to have scholarship embedded within the day-to-day activities of teaching staff. However, the lack of value attributed to teaching and learning in recent years compared to that of research suggests that there is much work to be done first in simply enhancing its status. In the ideal situation Laurillard's (2008) teacher as action research role may effectively bridge the gap between research and teaching/learning. In this way a teacher's practice would be continually subject to the research process of identifying issues to explore, selecting the appropriate methods to use, analysing the results obtained and disseminating the information gained. Arguably SoTL, the fusion of research and teaching/learning, could find no better place than within this role.

However, this is a big leap to make for those institutions or faculties whose research capabilities within their own practice have not yet been developed to their fullest potential. Rather than focusing on the scholarship of their teaching and learning practice, the main concern for the majority of staff within the Faculty at this institution is completing their day-to-day activities to the best of their abilities within the current context and climate of HE. The author would suggest, therefore, that before the ideal of action researcher can be realised, a first step needs to occur of encouraging staff to focus on their own teaching/learning activity. From this, the capacity and motivation to investigate their practice, gain evidence, and reflect on their work and that of others will develop. This study identifies the factors that can help or hinder this first step to be taken.

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