What Scholarship of Teaching? Why Bother?

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Abstract
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Keywords
Scholarship of teaching, Shared conceptualization, Defining scholarship of teaching

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Since its ‘launch’ a couple of decades ago, “scholarship of teaching” has been increasingly acknowledged on many campuses in and beyond North America. It has been incorporated into mission statements and strengthened the professionalisation of teaching and concomitant interest in faculty development, peer review and the teaching portfolio. Boyer (1997) reported that the need to recognise and find an appropriate balance between different forms of scholarship has led the majority of campuses in the United States to revise their standards for tenure and promotion, while there have also been changes to the way in which good teaching is recognised and rewarded in other countries, including Australia (Ramsden & Martin, 1996) and the United Kingdom (Brown, 1995; Gibbs, 1995a). The interest generated by the research on scholarship of teaching and the ensuing publications have led to reinterpretation of both roles and rewards for academics (Diamond & Adam, 1993). However, there remains yet some uncertainty as to what the term means, a point reiterated by Trigwell at a recent conference (2009). While Boyer’s (1900) four dimensions of scholarship which inform teaching as well as research and service—discovery, integration, application and teaching—trip off many tongues easily enough, “scholarship of teaching” would appear to signify different things to different people, or at least points of emphasis differ. It is variously associated—and sometimes used interchangeably—with teaching expertise, teaching excellence, scholarly teaching, research into teaching/learning and publication.

While the accommodatingly capacious term is useful in certain contexts, it is not very helpful in attempts at demonstrating, promoting and institutionalising it (Kreber, 2001). It follows that if there is no shared conceptualization, individuals may well be working and talking at cross purposes. With scholarship of teaching increasingly featuring in evaluation of teaching for promotion, tenure and other personnel decisions, there is added impetus for clarification; it is obviously necessary that the assessed and the assessors agree on what is being assessed and based on what criteria.

In an attempt to ascertain if and what “shared conceptualization” exists in the community at the National University of Singapore (NUS), a pilot study was undertaken to solicit views on what constitutes scholarship of teaching. On the assumption that scholarship is not an individualistic and isolated activity, a workable definition has to be one that is developed communally. It needs to draw on a collective experience and wisdom, and have reference to standards that are credible and acceptable to members of the community. Using the “Scholarship of Teaching Questionnaire, Delphi Phase 3” (Kreber, 2001) which was administered to 1760 full-time faculty members, the study examined the differences in conception of scholarship of teaching among differentiated groups at NUS: teaching faculty, members of teaching committees (including those overseeing promotion and tenure), senior and junior faculty, members of different faculties/schools, male and female faculty, and faculty who have participated in the Professional Development Programme and those who have not, with a view to making comparisons and cross-references. Respondents were asked to rate various items using a 7-point Likert scale: 48 pertaining to key features, 36 to unresolved issues, and 25 to
some general statements in relation to scholarship of teaching. The response rate to date is 6%, but hopefully the sample size will grow. That the response has not been prompt and enthusiastic may be attributed to the expressed reason that the questionnaire is too lengthy, or it could be that the community is not ready to discuss the subject.

The responses, though modest in number, are not without meaningful information. The data from the 102 responses has been analysed in some detail. Among other things, it confirms strongly that “we need careful analysis of the meaning behind the words expert teacher, scholarly teacher and practising the scholarship of teaching” (Section 3, #2) and to differentiate these. The responses also strongly suggest that there is no clear shared conceptualization. Take, for instance, the items pertaining to important features/components of the scholarship of teaching: of the seven items which emerged as having high mean scores and therefore high agreement, three suggested that it involves exploring relationships between teaching and learning, understanding learning styles, designing assessment, as well as sharing and documenting the process and outcomes:

- **People practicing the scholarship of teaching need to have assessment, evaluation, and research skills. They need to be able to conduct classroom research and document the process of teaching and learning and student progress. (#15)**

- **A key feature in the scholarship of teaching is the hard intellectual work that goes into preparing effective learning experiences for students. (#38)**

- **Individuals practicing the scholarship of teaching investigate the relationship between teaching and learning. (#39)**

On the other hand, of the eleven items with low mean score/group consensus, four had to do with the association of scholarship of teaching with student learning. Notably the same item (#38) is both high and low-scored.

- **A key feature in the scholarship of teaching is having an understanding of how people learn, knowing what practices are most effective, and having knowledge about what we have learned about teaching. (#1)**

- **The scholarship of teaching involves knowing where and why students have difficulty. (#3)**

- **Faculty who practice the scholarship of teaching are curious about the ways in which students learn and the effects of certain practices on that learning. (#21)**

- **A key feature in the scholarship of teaching is the hard intellectual work that goes into preparing effective learning experiences for students. (#38)**

Similarly, while some rate lowly the following items:

- **Those who practice the scholarship of teaching carefully design ways to examine, interpret, and share learning about teaching. Thereby they contribute to the scholarly community of their discipline. (#2)**

- **People who practice the scholarship of teaching generate new ideas about teaching. (#40)**

- **Learning to pose questions about teaching and learning is a starting point in the scholarship of teaching; gathering evidence, interpreting it, sharing results, and changing practice continue the process. (#44)**
- Engaging in classroom research is important but is not sufficient for the scholarship of teaching. (#41)
- The scholarship of teaching includes research and publication, but this is not the primary component of a scholarship of teaching. (#42)

This is contradicted by others who believed that those involved in scholarship of teaching should “conduct classroom research and document the process of teaching and learning” (#15), and share teaching practices, generate new ideas and contribute to the scholarly community.

Interestingly, too, there are significant differences between regular faculty (N=91) and members of teaching committees (N=11):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Faculty members</th>
<th>Teaching committee members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>People practicing the scholarship of teaching can coherently link their discipline or professional knowledge with their knowledge of teaching.</td>
<td>5.16±1.25</td>
<td>4.18±1.78*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>People who practice the scholarship of teaching generate new ideas about teaching</td>
<td>5.47±1.27</td>
<td>4.64±1.57*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Engaging in classroom research is important but is not sufficient for the scholarship of teaching.</td>
<td>5.41±1.19</td>
<td>4.45±1.44*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Response scale: 1 - strongly disagree, 7 – strongly agree
Scores represent means ± SD
*significantly different (P<0.05)

Most revealing was the fact that the former group showed more doubt about what constituted the components of scholarship of teaching. It is not unreasonable to expect members who have the important responsibility of evaluating teaching to be experts on this subject, and it would seem desirable that they be. Unless these individuals have a good grasp of the multiple ways that scholarship can be practiced, evaluation will be problematic. Furthermore, it will be difficult for faculty members to receive support from them.

But contrary voices notwithstanding, there is at least agreement that scholarship of teaching is important in that it raises awareness and promotes reflection which can lead to improving learning and teaching practices. That there is low agreement with the statement that “one can be professional about teaching without being a scholar of teaching” (Section 3, #14) is indirect affirmation of this, as also the strong agreement about the need to encourage new faculty to become involved in and to support the scholarship of teaching. As others have pointed out, for scholarship of teaching to develop into a robust culture, there must be “buy in” and support from the faculty. This requires a mindset change (Trigwell, 2000); conceptions of teaching and learning need to change. Such changes are more likely to occur if faculty see a real value in such scholarship. While the data collected suggest that the more senior and experienced faculty regard scholarship of teaching as contributing to advancement of pedagogical content, junior faculty tended to be more utilitarian: whether it contributes to their advancement. As Kreber (2002) has observed, whether something is valued is to a not insignificant degree dependent on how it is valued by the institution: if and how it is rated/weighted in decisions regarding merit, tenure, and promotion. Even in academe, the reward system will influence value systems and behaviours. Though a number of the items in the questionnaire related to “assessment, recognition and reward of the scholarship of teaching” are not highly rated, the observable reality is that these are
not trivial issues.

There is a fundamental concern over what value is attached to scholarship of teaching. The general perception is that scholarship of research is privileged over other forms of scholarship. Institutions may state otherwise, but if this is not demonstrated in practice—e.g. in the pattern of promotion—the inference will be that time and effort in disciplinary/inter-disciplinary research is likely to earn more “brownie points” than time and effort invested in “the hard intellectual work that goes into preparing effective learning experiences for students (#38).” By extension, time and effort expended on scholarship of teaching will be more rewarding if the focus is on “research and publication” rather than on “having an understanding of how people learn, knowing what practices are most effective, and having knowledge about what we have learned about teaching (#1)”, i.e. creating better opportunities for learning to occur. Publications “count” and are “countable,” and therefore have more value. There is perhaps greater sensitivity to this in an institution that is actively transforming itself from a teaching to a research-intensive university and there is tremendous emphasis on research and publication. Not surprisingly then, there is growing interest in securing teaching grants (possibly because winning grants is a performance indicator used in evaluating a researcher), doing classroom research and translating it into publications. NUS started offering these grants with conference and journal articles as possible by-products, but there has been some shift in priorities. This in itself is not necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, scholarly articles would serve the cause of scholarship of teaching, assuming that a publication represents the crystallisation of meaningful investigation and learning, but this assumption may not always prove to be correct.

We return then to the question of “what scholarship of teaching?” Is it one that feeds the paper mill? The answer seems obvious. Central to Boyer’s argument is that the scholar-researcher-publication equation is limited and limiting, and “faculty must assume a primary responsibility for giving scholarship a richer, more vital meaning”, one that would encompass a range of activities which include searching for new knowledge, seeking to understand, deriving new insights from the investigations, making connections, becoming more aware and informed about one’s teaching, and making it more useful and helpful to learners and learning. These are all scholarly activities that challenge the intellect, enlarge the knowledge base, advance the profession, and contribute to the larger community. They are activities which any member of the academy would or should see as part of the rights and responsibilities of membership.

Of course, part of the scholarship is that these activities be not only rigorously executed but also demonstrably so; communicating the discoveries—through various mechanisms including publications—would make these activities public and verifiable. But “teaching” is not the only—or the primary—dimension of the scholarship of teaching. For a teacher, the core business is to enable and optimize learning. The research should first serve this end, to increase understanding of how and why people learn, to gather evidence of productive teaching and learning, and to develop more effective ways to help learners learn better.

There is little doubt that if faculty members make the scholarship of teaching a significant part of their commitment, there would be a vibrant community of teacher-scholars whose work will enrich and deepen student learning. How to encourage this—especially when “shared conception” is yet to be fully realized—is not easily answered, but perhaps a multi-prong strategy might be adopted. Experts suggest that faculty and future faculty should be formally educated in the scholarship of teaching. More easily implemented might be acculturation through promoting dialogue and systematic communication of investigations and outcomes. This will not only stimulate individual reflection on and improvement of practices, but is also likely to be productive of shared insights into the broader nature of academic work. Further, means should be made
available to facilitate research into teaching and learning. Mentoring, which often occurs in scholarship of research, could also prove very helpful. There is no doubt that these activities will take up time and lack of it is often an issue. A practical approach might be to have a system which recognizes different priorities at different career time points: junior faculty in research-intensive universities need to focus on research and publication while the tenure clock is ticking, but tenured and more senior faculty members should be able to devote more time to the scholarship of teaching, perhaps for a number of years and/or using sabbaticals for that purpose. Ultimately, time will be found for whatever is perceived to have value, and clear and consistent signals—backed by the reward system—need to be sent.

Through whatever means, the scholarship of teaching should receive greater attention—not just as an espoused theory but as theory-in-use, and more and more this is an imperative in the dramatically changing landscape in higher education.

The academic system must change. It works to some extent, but not well enough... we cannot defend a mode of operation that actively undermines a professional approach to teaching. Teachers need to know more than just their subject. They need to know the ways it can come to be understood, the ways it can be misunderstood, what counts as understanding: they need to know how individuals experience the subject. (Laurillard, 1993)

Something is amiss if “they are neither required nor enabled to know these things” (ibid). As scholarly practitioners, we should bother to know these things; we owe it to our students, to the profession, and to ourselves.

References


Notes

1 Trigwell, Keith, 'The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Research and Research-Led Teaching'; invited lecture at the 5th International Conference on Teaching & Learning in Higher Education, 3-5 December, 2008, National University of Singapore.

2 The Professional Development Programme – Teaching (PDP-T) at NUS is offered to faculty members with less than three years of full-time teaching experience in higher education with the aim of providing support to teachers so as to enhance students experience and quality of learning.