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Abstract

Excerpt: The scholarship of teaching and learning includes many activities all of which are focused on critically reflecting on teaching and learning in some way. In the last 10 years or so I have worked at two different universities in Australia both of which have devised ways of rewarding scholarly activities related to teaching. These activities take the form of a) engaging in sustained study and gaining qualifications in teaching in higher education, b) being in receipt of institutional and/or national awards for teaching excellence and c) presenting scholarly work on higher education teaching and learning in conferences and journals. In this piece I want to raise a number of issues related to the latter. Specifically I want to ask some critical questions about the implications of public presentation of scholarly work on teaching and learning for the field of higher education.

Keywords

Higher education research, Scholarship of teaching and learning

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Higher Education Research and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: The Pursuit of Excellence

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The scholarship of teaching and learning includes many activities all of which are focused on critically reflecting on teaching and learning in some way. In the last 10 years or so I have worked at two different universities in Australia both of which have devised ways of rewarding scholarly activities related to teaching. These activities take the form of a) engaging in sustained study and gaining qualifications in teaching in higher education, b) being in receipt of institutional and/or national awards for teaching excellence and c) presenting scholarly work on higher education teaching and learning in conferences and journals. In this piece I want to raise a number of issues related to the latter. Specifically I want to ask some critical questions about the implications of public presentation of scholarly work on teaching and learning for the field of higher education.

I have been working in higher education teaching and learning research since 1968 when I was involved in a research project exploring examinations in higher education (Cox, 1973). My current research is around notions of academic identity. In between I have worked on issues to do with evaluation, teaching and learning innovation, academic development, research as a phenomenon in universities and the relationship between teaching and research. The scholarship of teaching and learning movement has encouraged many academics from a range of disciplines to research their teaching and their students' learning through, for example, participant and action research; and to publish such research. I'm not questioning the intrinsic value of this work. We know that engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning has benefits in terms of students' learning experiences (Brew & Ginns, 2008). But what I want to focus on are the effects of this work on the field which I have been working in for so many years; that of higher education.

Over the last fifteen years or so the introduction of numerous faculty academics into conferences on teaching and learning has progressively changed the face of higher education research. It is changing the nature of conferences on teaching and learning in higher education which are now much more likely to include faculty from a range of disciplines rather than just specialists in higher education. We can look at this issue from the point of view of people whose disciplinary expertise is higher education, and whose main research focus is higher education, and perhaps specifically, teaching and pedagogy of higher education. Alternatively, we can consider the issue from the perspective of faculty academics from a wide variety of disciplines who are carrying out research on their teaching and their students' learning. Readers will no doubt view what I have written in the light of their own experiences.

Disciplinary academics, particularly from the humanities and social sciences, have much to offer in developing our theoretical understandings of higher education teaching and learning. Yet to do this, it is necessary to understand the landscape of the literature. In any field of study, making a contribution to knowledge involves relating work to an ongoing story of the development of ideas in the field. This means that academics coming to the scholarship of teaching and learning need to have an understanding of how ideas in the field of higher education have developed. This is especially true when publishing, but it is also the case when developing new teaching initiatives. It means at

the very least reading the key texts, knowing which are key texts and which texts are derivative or peripheral. Yet I have met many academics who are unaware that a literature on teaching and learning in higher education actually exists and I have reviewed numerous articles for academic journals where a few references often from secondary literature are thrown in for good measure, without an understanding of their standing within the bigger story that has been going on for decades. Work that incorrectly attributes 'deep' and 'surface' approaches to learning to Ramsden, or the concept of a 'paradigm' to Crotty; examples I have seen recently, simply demonstrate that authors have not done their homework.

Imagine, if you like, someone new coming to your own field. Physics, say, without a background in the subject. What would they need to know and to do to make a scholarly contribution to the field? The idea that anyone could do this unless they were from a closely allied discipline is almost preposterous. Yet, the scholarship of teaching and learning makes the assumption that anyone can come to the field of higher education research without a background in education or even the social sciences. Some would say, and I have heard this in workshops I have run with faculty from a range of disciplines, that education research is different; that articles are just 'opinion'; that they are waffly; that the research is not based on evidence and logic like 'more serious subjects' [e.g. science, mathematics, anatomy, geography, law ... any other discipline you like to name] . So we see evidence of anecdote substituted for well-reasoned argument, literature ignored and wheels re-invented time and time again. I am sure this will sound familiar to disciplinary experts in higher education teaching and learning who are working to encourage the scholarship of teaching and learning. Of course, as in any discipline, there is good work and not such good work and in higher education there do exist woolly or opinionated articles, but it is important to be able to critically evaluate them.

Of course, this raises the question of who the higher education disciplinary experts are. At one time, they constituted quite a narrow group and they tended to be quite separate from those in other fields of education. That is no longer the case. Many people working in higher education teaching and learning research are academic or faculty developers. But we should not confuse higher education research with research on or in academic development. That is a sub-field with its own sets of concerns, journals, and conferences. But the question of who are the disciplinary experts in higher education *per se* has become problematic. Indeed, perhaps the field is such that it is moving from being characterised by the work of a limited community of higher education scholars to defining a large multi-disciplinary space.

In teaching a graduate certificate in higher education course, my colleagues and I have worked to develop the understanding of faculty from many disciplines about what it is that makes education research rigorous. In many disciplines the nature of knowledge is assumed. It is non-problematic. In education, we have not only to research the questions that we are interested in, we also have to have some idea about what kind of knowledge it is that we have developed. For academics working in the positivistic scientific paradigm, and who have had little or no exposure to the history of ideas, this can be extremely perplexing. Academic articles in teaching and learning in higher education have not only to present what is found, they also have to demonstrate what kind of knowledge those findings represent. Further, there has to be some attempt at a theoretical understanding of the implications of the ideas. They have to be related to wider theory.

I am not saying that those whose primary discipline is research in higher education are necessarily expert in these matters either. A key issue in the field of higher education currently is the question of theory: specifically its role, concerns about the limited use

of theory and about which theories should be used. There has been a recognition of the importance of moving away from psychological views of teaching and learning (see for example Haggis, 2004), as, for example, enshrined in the phenomenographic perspective which has dominated this research in Europe and Australia over the past thirty years or so. A wider range of theories, building on work in adult and school education and learning in the workplace, using critical, feminist, post-colonial and other perspectives is now being explored.

What I would like to suggest is that unless attention is paid to questions of rigour and theory, publication of scholarly work in teaching and learning will never achieve the status of research excellence. Journal editors and conference organisers need to be mindful of what is happening to standards of research in the field of higher education by the watering down of scholarship in this way. I believe that there is, and indeed should be, a place for the 'show and tell' type of contribution to discussions in some conferences. To use an example that is familiar to me, the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) conferences are often the first place that an Australian or New Zealand disciplinary academic talks in a public forum about their teaching. This is to be encouraged. Discussions of such contributions often lead to further work and pointers to relevant literature and to related developments. But what worries me, are the effects on those whose primary research is on teaching and learning in higher education, of a tendency of this kind of presentation to dominate certain conferences. Concerns are frequently expressed about the standards of scholarship and scholarly debate. Indeed, I have known leaders in the field to eschew attendance at these kinds of events. This is highly regrettable.

Some people would argue, and I have heard this, that it is not possible for academics working in other fields to make contributions to the literature on higher education at all. I would not go that far. I have seen some excellent examples of scholarly publication in teaching and learning in particular disciplines which has been done and written up by, for example, physicists (see for example, Sharma, Miller, Smith & Sefton, 2004; Brew & Sachs, 2007)). In the 1990s I worked on a number of projects to encourage faculty to research their teaching. We thought that those who would become most productive would be those whose primary focus was teaching; people who were not particularly interested or productive in research in their discipline. However, what we found was that the most research productive academics in the scholarship of teaching and learning, were those who were also research productive in their own discipline. Amazingly some people manage to do and succeed in both!

In the context of national research assessments, which have become commonplace in many countries (McNay, 2009), some academics have been discouraged by senior people from engaging in research on teaching in the discipline and instructed to concentrate on disciplinary research. This action is based on the misguided belief that present-day disciplinary research productivity is all that matters. However, it undermines the capacity of the very discipline to reproduce itself. In 21st century society, the capacity to adapt and change teaching and learning in continually shifting circumstances is critical for the future of the discipline.

So my final question is this: where is all this leading? The scholarship of teaching and learning has the potential to make rich and significant contributions to the field of higher education. Indeed, it is, as a consequence, becoming an exciting and diverse multi-disciplinary field of endeavour. It is potentially an inspiring space open to theoretical insights drawn from diverse disciplines. Multiple perspectives are to be welcomed. But the field will only be taken seriously by the broader community if it is based on rigorous research and analysis. This means that disciplinary experts in a wide variety of fields must bring into the scholarship of teaching and learning, the same standards of rigor and

meticulousness in research that are applicable in their own disciplines. New teaching and learning initiatives must be developed in the context of known previous work; standing on the shoulders of giants. Higher education experts need to be open to insights from numerous theoretical perspectives. This may mean that far more faculty need to engage in sustained and more substantial study in the discipline of higher education. It means that all research into teaching, learning and curriculum should be carried out and publicly presented according to the highest standards of scholarship. For this to happen, more widespread, nuanced and critical appreciation of what constitutes good work in the field and, by implication, what is poor work is needed. We all have a responsibility to develop the highest standards of professional scholarship whenever we investigate our teaching and share our ideas with others.

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