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# Institutional Difference: A Neglected Consideration in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning?

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# Institutional Difference: A Neglected Consideration in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning?

## **Abstract**

Excerpt: This invited essay considers how thinking about institutional differences can enhance the scholarship of teaching and learning. It does this by drawing on a recent piece of South African research which used data produced as part of a national process of auditing institutions for quality assurance purposes (Boughey, 2009; Boughey 2010; Boughey & McKenna, 2011a; 2011b). Overwhelmingly, the research revealed that, although universities were paying attention to issues related to teaching and learning (and drawing on literature and research produced as part of the scholarship of teaching and learning to do so), little attention had been given to the way institutional type could, and indeed needed to, impact on teaching and learning and on efforts to enhance both areas.

## **Keywords**

Scholarship of teaching and learning, Teaching and learning, South Africa

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## **Institutional Difference: A Neglected Consideration in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning?**

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### **Introduction**

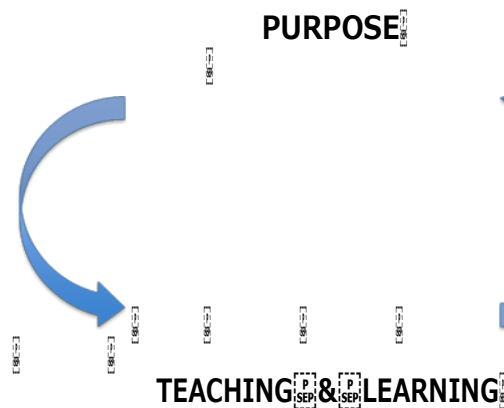
Internationally, higher education systems are usually characterized by differences at institutional level. Universities may be differentiated according to the extent to which they produce research and enroll postgraduate students, the extent to which they are vocationally oriented in the sense that they offer programs and qualifications directly linked to the job market, the extent to which they offer a more general education and so on. It is also possible to identify much finer gradations of difference. In South Africa, for example, it is possible to identify a group of universities that are distinguished by their focus on serving the rural communities in which they are located.

This invited essay considers how thinking about institutional differences can enhance the scholarship of teaching and learning. It does this by drawing on a recent piece of South African research which used data produced as part of a national process of auditing institutions for quality assurance purposes (Boughey, 2009; Boughey 2010; Boughey & McKenna, 2011a; 2011b). Overwhelmingly, the research revealed that, although universities were paying attention to issues related to teaching and learning (and drawing on literature and research produced as part of the scholarship of teaching and learning to do so), little attention had been given to the way institutional type could, and indeed needed to, impact on teaching and learning and on efforts to enhance both areas.

### **The Need to Link Institutional Difference and Teaching and Learning**

Across the world, higher education quality assurance systems overwhelmingly rely on a definition of quality as 'fitness for purpose' (see Harvey & Green, 1993 for an overview). Typically, the purpose of an institution is captured in its mission and vision statements or other documents written by institutional management. The extent to which a university is understood to be 'of quality' is then related to the mechanisms and procedures that are in place to ensure that the purpose is achievable and achieved.

Within this understanding, teaching and learning need to be informed by the purpose a university has identified for itself. In turn, teaching and learning then drive the purpose through the way they are conceptualized and organized. Teaching and learning and institutional purpose thus become part of the sort of dynamic process the following diagram attempts to capture.



**Fig 1.** The relationship of teaching and learning to institutional purpose

The understanding of the links between teaching and learning and institutional purpose is important for a number of reasons not least because it allows us to begin to make judgments about teaching and learning as 'fit for purpose' and, thus, about its quality. In addition, purpose statements typically make reference to the type of graduate a university aims to produce. These statements, and other information related to them, aim to inform students' decisions about where to enroll. Linking teaching and learning to institutional purpose thus becomes part of making good on a promise.

Linking teaching and learning to purpose also draws on the concept of 'alignment' in program design (Biggs, 1999). According to Biggs, an 'aligned' curriculum involves providing students with clear objectives. Teaching and learning activities, including assessment, are then carefully designed to allow students to achieve those objectives. The result of an aligned curriculum is improved student learning. Although Biggs' ideas are focused at program level, clearly the overall goals and purposes of the university would inform the sorts of program offered and the objectives of those programs. Alignment of teaching and learning with the purpose of a university can thus be seen to fit within Biggs' overall schema.

Considering the overall purpose of an institution within the understanding of quality discussed above offers the opportunity to enhance student learning in significant ways. However, it is probably fair to say that dominant constructions of quality in higher education tend to focus on an understanding of quality as undefined 'excellence'. When this happens, teaching and learning tend to be understood as autonomous of the context. Within the scholarship of teaching and learning, this then results in a proliferation of 'generalized' theory and research rather than work which explores both phenomena in context.

This essay now moves to using one piece of South African research in an attempt to exemplify these claims.

### **What the Research Showed**

In South Africa, public universities are categorized into three broad types: traditional universities, universities of technology offering 'career-focused' education, and 'comprehensive' universities, which offer a mix of traditional and vocationally oriented

programs. As already indicated, it is beginning to be possible to identify finer gradations of institutional difference in addition to these nationally designated types.

One such nuance relates to the extent to which the 'traditional' universities are 'research focused' or 'research intensive' where the 'focus' or 'intensity' would be indicated by the number of postgraduate enrolments and the amount of research produced. In the study that forms the basis of this discussion, several universities attempted to explain the relationship of this focus on research to teaching. Several claimed, for example, that academic staff would draw on their research in their teaching (in the sense of introducing their research findings to students) whilst another claimed that the focus meant that the university itself would use research on teaching and learning to improve its teaching. Yet another university noted that the fact that a large number of staff were engaged in producing research would mean that most students would be taught by a 'research active' staff member in their undergraduate years, although no attempt was made to explore how this might benefit students' learning.

Whilst all these observations about the link between research and teaching can be seen to be valid, in the data which formed part of the study there was no indication of the way these universities were organizing and conceptualizing their teaching to develop students' understandings of knowledge production other than offering research methods courses at postgraduate level. At undergraduate level, what might happen if university teachers focused not on getting students to acquire knowledge but on understanding how it was made (Boughey, 2009)? How might this not only prepare them for postgraduate work but also give them different understandings of themselves as graduates? Although the literature on higher education offers accounts of inquiry based learning requiring students to complete a piece of research at undergraduate level (see, for example, Brew, 2003), consideration of the link between purpose and teaching and learning could add immeasurably to the contributions already made in this area to the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Another set of universities in the study, the universities of technology, all aimed to produce highly skilled graduates who could contribute to the social and economic development of a new democracy that needed to compete in a globalised economy. As Gamble (2003:46) points out, however, '[t]here is no neat overlap between global demands for general and transferable skills, and the reality of trying to develop such skills.'

In the context of higher education, the development of high level skills is dependent on bringing together theory and practice. Gamble proceeds to explore the complex relationship of theory and practice by drawing on the work of Muller (2001) and Layton (1993) in order to note that practical work needs to provide an opportunity for conceptual knowledge to be 'translated' or 'reworked' rather than merely providing an opportunity for theoretical knowledge to be applied in practice.

The idea of practical work needing to provide opportunities for the reworking of theoretical knowledge has profound implications for teaching and assessment, most notably for the provision of opportunities for students to be able to reflect on knowledge-in-use. Although universities in the study drew on concepts such as 'reflective practice' (Schon, 1983), this was in relation to the development of academic staff as educators and not in relation to the development of students' learning. Overwhelmingly the understandings of teaching and learning in the data could have applied to any university rather than to universities of technology in particular. Similarly, the theory those engaged in the scholarship of teaching and learning at these universities drew on could also have applied to any university and no attempt appeared to have been made to identify understandings which could inform the development of the high level skills the universities aimed to produce.

The final gradation of institutional difference noted earlier in this essay, the desire on the part of some South African universities to serve the rural communities in which they were located, also merits exploration in relation to teaching and learning.

In South Africa, service-learning, has long been identified as a potential means of making universities more responsive to society in general (CHE, 2006) where, following Bringle and Hatcher (1995:112), service learning is defined as:

. . . a credit bearing, educational, experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility.

As a result of the perceived need to make universities more responsive to society, a body of work has begun to be produced which explores attempts to introduce service learning into the curriculum (see, for example, Hlengwa, 2010; Karakezi *et al.*, 2007; Roos *et al.*, 2005).

The universities identifying the need to serve rural communities were characterized not only by a common location in rural areas but also by the fact that the majority of the students they enrolled were 'historically disadvantaged' by apartheid. As a result, the focus of any discussion on teaching and learning in the documentation analysed for the study was student 'preparedness'. Whilst the need to deal with students' readiness for higher education is obviously of critical importance in relation to the scholarship of teaching and learning, a failure to acknowledge the way teaching and learning could be used to further the goal of contributing to rural development through service-learning, or other related activities, is clearly an omission. Even more significant is a failure to consider the way service-learning could allow students deemed to be 'underprepared' for university study to draw on their knowledge of the communities in which service learning opportunities were located to develop themselves as learners. Conceptualising teaching and learning in relation to the goals of the university could therefore have provided an opportunity not only to make progress towards those goals but also to develop students' learning more generally. At another level, it could also add to the scholarship of teaching and learning in these particular universities as well as at an international level.

### Conclusion

This essay began by arguing for the need to link institutional purpose to teaching and learning within an overall understanding of quality as 'fitness for purpose'. It then went on to use one South African piece of research to identify instances where this kind of link had not been made in an attempt to show how making the connection could not only enhance teaching and learning at an institutional level but could also contribute to the scholarship of teaching and learning more generally.

At the root of this claim is the idea that context is critical to teaching and learning. Teaching a physics class to a group of well prepared students at a prestigious university will require and mean different things than teaching literature to a minority students in a community college in the USA or black working class students in a rural university in South Africa. Just as disciplinary difference and difference in the composition of the study body comprise context, so too does the purpose the university has identified for itself.

In some countries, including South Africa, the range of universities open to students caters to diversity in the student body itself. If teaching and learning ignores difference at the level of institutional purpose, we run the risk of ignoring the choices students have made and of offering them teaching which is less than the best it can possibly be within institutional contexts. Yet all too often, as the study on which this essay draws has shown, this is exactly what happens. The need to consider differentiation of purpose as we engage with the scholarship of teaching and learning therefore needs to be taken seriously.

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