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SoTL as Catalyst to Re-Envision the Nature of Academic Work

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SoTL as catalyst to re-envision the nature of academic work

Presented @ SoTL Commons Conference, Georgia Southern University, 9-11 March 2011

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Session Outcomes

- Institutional context
- Overview of the re-envisioning process:
  - What does academic work encompass?
  - New question - What is scholarship and what counts as outputs?
  - New question – What can data related to student learning offer us to enhance teaching & student learning?
  - Outcomes related to institutionalising ST and SoTL (strategic planning, policy-making, career progression, research status)
- Concluding remarks (key enabling factors)
Context – NMMU – dynamic African university in Port Elizabeth, South Africa
Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University

- **2005** University of Port Elizabeth, Port Elizabeth Technikon and Vista University PE merged to form the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU)

- One of six comprehensive universities in SA – offering both diploma & degree programmes (vocationally/career-oriented, professional & generally formative programmes – 47% = diploma; 42% = degree; diplomas growing at rate of 12%.

- Location: Port Elizabeth (5 campuses) and 1 campus in George.

- **26 000 students** (31% in SET; 25% in business & management; 22% in education; and 22% in humanities). 87% registered for undergraduate programmes.

- Multicultural (61% Black; 23% White; 13% Coloured; 2% Indian) & multilingual (Xhosa, English & Afrikaans); from diverse learning backgrounds

- Merger – created challenges for us!
Background – grounding the work

- Merging 3 institutions with differing approaches and cultures related to teaching & learning, research & engagement

- Initial issue – how to create equitable recognition and promotion opportunities across merging institutions.

- Dissatisfaction that the research criteria carried the most weight and teaching much less weight in the promotions process – reinforced former institutional divides.

- The possibility of a “teaching track” – where being a good, effective teacher was the prime/only focus.

- Decided to:
  - Start with a broad question related to what constitutes the nature of academic work.
  - Adopt a research approach to answer this question.
Project Process Outline

Literature Review & Ann Austin Input at EMANFO 2008

Data-gathering

INFORMATION SHARING WORKSHOPS

PANEL DISCUSSIONS

LECTURERS
Assoc Lecturers and Lecturers
Senior Lecturers

PROFESSORS
Professors
Assoc Prof
Principal Lecturers

INTERVIEWS
Faculty Deans
Dean: T&L
SD: Strategic and Institutional Planning
DVC Academic
DVC R&E
Vice Chancellor

Feedback & Faculty & Dept. discussions
Key Findings and New Questions

- 3 focus areas for academic work emerged from the discussions: Teaching & Learning (T/L), Research & Creativity (R/C), and Engagement/outreach/service – where do management & leadership fit? (academic citizenship).

- General consensus that there should be participation, to some degree, in all 3 focus areas by an academic but there will be different patterns for different staff depending on their career stage, departmental teaching needs, and faculty interests.

- Consensus re key stressors & their impact on career profiles (e.g., workload overload, work-life balance, limited promotional opportunities).
Key Findings and New Questions

- Need clarification on how a focus area activities should be defined – especially where there is overlap.

- Need to adopt an integrative view of the 3 focus areas

- Scholarship underpins T&L, R/C, & Engagement – it is key to how an academic approaches all aspects of their work.
  - What role does scholarship play in teaching? Is it enough to be a “good teacher”? This led to a research literature review and lively discussions.

- What is scholarship & what counts as output?
  - Developed a position paper drawing on Boyer’s work
  - Included scholarship criteria (not just output types)
  - Good teaching, scholarly teaching, and SoTL
Role of SoTL in Enhancing Learning

“There are many ways to improve the quality of higher education, but we believe that the scholarship of teaching and learning holds special promise. ... we have been struck by the power that comes with seeing teaching as challenging, intellectual work – work that poses interesting, consequential questions. The scholarship of teaching and learning invites faculty from all disciplines and fields to explore those questions in their students’ learning – and to do so in ways that are shared with colleagues who can build on new insights. In this way, such work has the potential to transform higher education by making the private work of the classroom visible, talked about, studied, built upon, and valued” (Huber & Hutchings, 2005, p. ix).
SoTL is about more than researching T&L issues in the classroom

- Multiple levels and forms of SoTL work “can be used to inform and transform teaching and learning in the classroom, program, department, institution, discipline, and broader higher education contexts” (McKinney, 2007, p. 121).

- McKinney (2007) argues that “the scholarship of teaching and learning can aid in creating and nurturing a culture of teaching and learning in departments, institutions, and disciplinary societies. At the same time, a culture of teaching and learning is needed for adequate support and acceptance of SoTL” (p. 119).
What can data related to student learning offer us to enhance teaching?

- Using institutional research – the South African Survey of Student Engagement (SASSE) provided an opportunity to learn about aspects of T&L in the institution and to engage faculty around how they could use this info to enhance their teaching practice. It also offered avenues to triangulate the SASSE information with other information.

- Setting high expectations and providing high support:
  - 55% = expect sign. level of academic challenge
  - Students (75%) indicate that they are provided with the necessary support to succeed academically

- Actively engaging students in learning:
  - Btwn 40% & 50% say they are actively engaged.
  - 61% want Work-integrated Learning

- In a largely commuter university, what happens in the classroom is NB
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues</th>
<th>Total Count</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In Lectures</td>
<td>925</td>
<td>20.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tests and exams</td>
<td>647</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing your studies</td>
<td>526</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Problems</td>
<td>492</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing your time</td>
<td>462</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal/emotional problems affecting you now</td>
<td>379</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilities</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course/Programme Choice</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings About Yourself</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Module Content</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Life</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LEC – most significant issues - Lectures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Tally Agreed out of 95</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I don't read ahead before attending the class</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don't ask questions in all of my classes</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am too shy to speak in class</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don't know when all of the lecturers are available for consultations after class</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can't concentrate for the duration of all of the lectures</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can't keep up with note-taking in all of the classes</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Linking SASSE findings to policy-making & resourcing & staff development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What are we doing well?</th>
<th>What can we improve?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Campus environment emphasizes spending significant amounts of time studying and on academic work (84%)</td>
<td>Students prepare for class (studying, reading, writing, doing homework or laboratory work, analyzing data rehearsing and other academic activities (53%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic priority – to create more study spaces (individual and group)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment tasks challenge students to do their best (rating of 5 out of 7)</td>
<td>Received punctual oral or written feedback from lecturers on academic performance (never =31%, sometimes = 36%, often = 23%, very often = 11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strategic priority – focus on assessment in faculty dev.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Outcomes – Included ST and SoTL in Strategic Plan

- Incorporated into our Vision 2020 Strategic Plan and the NMMU Vision 2020 story
  - Strategic priority 2: Create and sustain a responsive environment conducive to fostering learning and student success
  - Strategic goal 4: Promote ongoing professional staff development with respect to teaching practices
  - Strategic objective 4.4: Provide forums for academics and professional support staff to publicly share good practices to enhance student learning and success.

- Strategic priority 3: To create and sustain an environment that encourages, supports and rewards a vibrant research, scholarship and innovation culture.
- Strategic Goal 4: To promote a broad conceptualisation of research, scholarship and innovation
- SO4.1: To enhance & foster SoTL and SoE
Outcomes – ST and SoTL Included in Policies

- Incorporated in NMMU’s Teaching and Learning Policy
  - Provide a conducive work environment where staff can function optimally and engage in ongoing professional development
    - Developing strategies to encourage academics to be reflective practitioners that research their teaching and assessment practices and increasingly engage in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL).
    - Providing forums for academics and professional support staff to publicly share good practices to enhance student learning and success.
Outcomes – SoTL Included in Policies

- Built into T&L excellence awards policy

  • Criterion 1: Demonstrates a high degree of subject/discipline expertise.
  • Involvement in scholarship (as evidenced by e.g., conference papers, articles, books, technical reports for industry) in a discipline, and/or related to teaching and facilitating learning in a discipline, or in the field of student development and success in higher education.
Outcomes – Scholarly teaching & SoTL linked to career pathways policy

- Final stages of developing the Multiple Career Pathways for Academics Policy
- Based on a set of principles
- Three career pathways
- Irrespective of career pathway, certain qualification, experience and/or professional registration criteria apply for each post level.
- **Specific** criteria for the three pathways per post level. The specific criteria are a mixture of the areas of T&L, Res, and Engagement/service/outreach.
- Examples provided of unpublished scholarly outputs and published research to ensure that R is evaluated broadly, but also that there is an expectation that as one moves up the pathway, the numbers of publications must outweigh unpublished outputs.
Principles

- Academics participate in the core academic functions of teaching and learning, research and innovation, and engagement.
- The core academic functions should be integrated, where possible.
- The extent of involvement in the core academic functions will vary.
- Academics should participate in appropriate activities to enhance their development as scholars & to progress along the career pathways.
- A broad conceptualisation of scholarship as well as the criteria for assessing outputs is promoted and supported.
- The careers of academics can be characterised in relation to three pathways.
3 Career Pathways

- **Career pathway 1 (CP1):** academics primarily focus on developing & sustaining expertise & excellence in *Teaching and Learning* practice & increasingly focus their *Research* on teaching and pedagogy in their discipline. CP1 academics likely to be in the advancing & established career stages.

- **Career pathway 2 (CP2):** in which expertise is developed in both *Teaching and Learning* practice & in *Research*, although excellence is normally only developed in one of these areas. This pathway represents the traditional role of academics.

- **Career pathway 3 (CP3):** in which academics in established career phase primarily focus on developing & sustaining excellence in *Research* in their disciplines or in an inter-disciplinary context. While their teaching load may be reduced, their *T&L* practices are effective & they are expected to make a significant contribution to supervising PG student research.
3 Career Pathways continued

- In all 3 pathways, academics are expected to be involved with engagement activities – to various extents.
- Irrespective of career pathway, certain qualification, experience and/or professional registration criteria apply for each post level.
- Specific criteria for the three pathways per post level. The specific criteria are a mixture of the areas of T&L, Res, and Engagement/service/outreach.
- Examples provided of unpublished scholarly outputs and published research to ensure that R is evaluated broadly, but also that there is an expectation that as one moves up the pathway, the numbers of publications must outweigh unpublished outputs.
Principles continued

- The activities that academics in each of the pathways engage in must be equally challenging, and any evaluation processes must be equally stringent and rigorous, especially in terms of the level of achievement required.
- Career focus and pathways may vary over time and post levels.
- Reward and recognition systems must be aligned to the three career pathways.
Outcomes - Support for and uptake of SoTL

- SoTL learning communities have been established – sometimes linked to Faculty Teaching and Learning Committees, disciplines, or inter-disciplinary groups.
- SoTL related to enhancing learning and curriculum development is included as one of the research themes supported by the institution and a call for funding proposals is made each year.
- In 2010, a section on SoTL was included in the Annual Research Report (examples of studies were included).
- In 2009, 8% of the research outputs that qualified for subsidy could be classified as SoTL (broad focus on researching student learning and success factors).
Concluding Remarks

- The journey has taken us a while (started in 2008) and we have gone down various pathways and has had an impact on our strategic plan, policies, the elevation of SoTL as a legitimate research focus, number of academics talking about and sharing teaching practices, etc.

- This impact and the way it is being sustained would not have been possible without a range of enabling factors.
NB Enabling Factors for Developing a Culture of Teaching and Learning (McKinney, 2007, p. 120)

- Community, collaboration and inclusion

- Both bottom-up and top-down support and persuasion

- Importance of key, respected campus leaders (faculty, staff, students, and administrators)

  - The Vice-chancellor has used many institutional platforms to foreground the role of scholarship and the enhancement of teaching and learning.

  - Discussions initiated by some HoDs, by the faculty Deans, by the chairs of the faculty teaching & learning committees, or the Dean: T&L – all informed by the research undertaken and the position paper on scholarship developed (& debated).

  - Academics & student reps could participate
Integration with mission, values, strategic plans, budget, key initiatives

Use of the reward system

Support of assessment, classroom research, and SoTL

Use of existing structures such as the research office, graduate school, teaching centers, technology centers, and faculty senate.

- Research Capacity Development
- Centre for Teaching Learning & Media
- Teaching & Learning Committees and Senate

Put the impact on student learning at the forefront of every campus conversation and every campus decision.

Everyone is responsible; everyone is a social change agent.
Progress

- Measured progress:
  - You don’t use both feet to test the depth of the river.
  (Wise African saying in van Rensburg, 2010, p. 130)

- But … the time comes when you have done enough testing and you need to take the plunge and jump into the river.
References
