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We need to talk about teaching

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Abstract

This paper explores the current context of university teaching in relation to socio-cultural influences. It considers the influences of performativity and the impact of a range of initiatives designed to improve learning and teaching in higher education.

It identifies a range of issues with the way teaching is perceived and managed and the negative effect this is having on the professional learning of academic staff and opportunities for developing creative approaches to teaching in the disciplines.

Leadership of teaching is identified as a significant area for growth in disciplines and the important role of academic staff in disrupting the current narrative is emphasised.

Introduction

My purpose in writing this paper is to initiate a discussion with colleagues about the current situation of university learning and teaching with a particular focus on staff learning and leadership in the field. Increased student enrolment worldwide, and high expectations of the economic and social benefits of higher education (HE) for society, are putting pressures on academic staff to teach large cohorts of diverse students in innovative ways and to meet a range of educational purposes. It would be anticipated, therefore, that significant investment would be made in building staff expertise and in creating opportunities for collaborative working to develop educational practice. It could be anticipated that there would be an emphasis on enhancing leadership, both self-leadership and leadership of others, in this area. Drawing on a range of international literature to set the wider context, and reflecting on the UK experience in particular, the paper seeks to identify current trends and their impact on university teaching, and to consider how we might move forward in this area.

The perspective taken here is that individuals will be influenced by their socio-cultural context and that learning is 'embedded in social and cultural contexts and best understood as a form of participation in that context' (Boreham and Morgan 2004:308). This is not to deny the importance of individual identity and agency, but to acknowledge that these will be influenced by, and also influence, the context. Staff working practices and their professional learning will be influenced by departmental and university cultures as well as by the wider national and international context of higher education. Forms of language, procedures, types of management, expectations of practice, ways of working, interactions, stories told, artefacts such as plans, booklets and mission statements arise from, and create, the culture. They are embedded in assumptions so may not be identified and critiqued. What is the current socio-cultural context for university teaching and what is the impact on staff?

The Context

Education at all levels now sits within a neoliberal context, with marketisation as a key element. A political aim is to increase quality through competition and 'as a way of increasing productivity, accountability and control' (Olssen and Peters 2005: 326). Universities compete with each other in all aspects of their work, particularly for students and research

funding. In England, reduced public funding for higher education and the increase in student fees, together with the National Student Survey (NSS), has led to a focus on student satisfaction and the compilation of comparative data on different aspects of learning provision. At the same time, the Research Excellence Framework (REF), providing funding and league table positions related to the perceived quality and number of research submissions within a designated time frame, has led to decisions on appointments, staffing, roles and resources to obtain the 'best' result.

Performativity, centred on judging, comparing and displaying performance in a range of areas, is controlled through managerialism with audits, key performance indicators and reviews within a hierarchical management structure. The language used becomes that of business: cost-effectiveness, targets and efficiency, and artefacts such as action plans, audit mechanisms and league tables are created to monitor and control performance. The ethics of this approach, as Ball (2003:218) points out, is 'based upon institutional self-interest, pragmatics and performative worth'. Within this context, students can be seen as consumers or customers (Barnett 2010) and teachers 'as producers/providers, educational entrepreneurs and managers...' (Ball 2003: 218).

The impact of this environment on academic staff has included the intensification of work, individualisation of accountability, and fragmentation and extension of work into areas beyond teaching, research and academic citizenship. Entrepreneurial activities, engaging with business and the community, marketing and outreach, for example, are increasingly part of academics' work. Roles may become more specialised, and 'teaching-only' and part-time and fixed term contracts are increasing. All of these factors have had an influence on learning and teaching, as will be discussed below. In addition, there have been policies and strategies specifically designed to have an impact on teaching. These have included: the provision of funding to enhance the quality of learning and teaching by the Higher Education Funding Council for England; the creation of Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, now no longer funded; the development of the Higher Education Academy (HEA), offering funding for pedagogic research and other projects in the field and, more recently, developing a series of fellowships based on learning and teaching practice for academics, and a national teaching fellowship scheme designed to reward excellence in the field. In many universities the growth of the provision of courses, particularly for new university staff, leading to a post graduate qualification in teaching in higher education has been an initiative designed to raise the skills and knowledge of staff in this area. Additionally, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) has the remit to assess the quality of learning and teaching in higher education and there has been a growth in staff in quality assurance and enhancement roles.

Academic development units were formed in many universities worldwide from the 1970s, consisting of centrally funded groups of academic developers whose remit was to enhance learning and teaching within their institution. Although differently configured, and with different emphases depending on their location, there has been a tendency during the past few years for the academic developer's role to move from supporting staff to implementing strategy. With leadership of learning and teaching now at Deputy Vice Chancellor or Pro-Vice Chancellor level, those employed as academic developers may or may not have an influence on the design and content of this strategy.

Impact on Learning and Teaching

The impact of these various influences on learning and teaching will be discussed under three headings: Relationship with Research; Conceptions of Teaching; and Management of Teaching.

Relationship with Research


There was a time towards the end of the last century and the beginning of this, when there was optimism about learning and teaching coming together more closely in higher education for the mutual benefit of both. Building on the ideas of Boyer (1990) and earlier educational research initiatives focusing on practitioner research, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning movement, focusing on researching in education, became recognised worldwide, with journals, conferences and initiatives to engage colleagues in using and building on pedagogic research. Additionally there has been a recognition of the importance of undergraduates learning from those engaged in subject research, research-informed practice, and engaging in research and research-like activities in order to learn skills, knowledge and ethical approaches through participation in enquiry learning.


It has always been difficult to connect research with learning and teaching in university contexts if they have different leaders, committees, priorities and goals. Additionally, pedagogic research has been seen as inferior, particularly action research which may focus on the improvement of local practice (McEwen and O'Connor 2014). Large scale pedagogic research using a range of methods can of course be undertaken, but much work that is developed by university staff relates to curiosity around their own and colleagues' practice and a desire to enhance this. Indeed, some researchers would argue that in relation to learning and teaching it is not enough to research and publish results. Unless there is critical reflection on findings in relation to personal practice there may be no impact of the research on the teacher or on the student learning experience (Kreber 2013). Critical reflection on personal professional practice is a challenging activity which not everyone will be prepared to engage in.

Research in learning and teaching can inform local practice and contribute to wider knowledge through the sharing of findings in academic and professional contexts. It does not, however, contribute in the same way as disciplinary research to promotional opportunities and reward and recognition more generally. This has been exacerbated by the Research Excellence Framework requirements, and consequent developing polarisation between institutions identified as 'research' or 'teaching'. While accepting pedagogic research as valid, many departments may not choose this as part of their disciplinary submission, and indeed cannot if the impact claimed is on teaching within the institution, and academics may be under pressure to undertake disciplinary research. This can set up a competition for time, energy and focus between disciplinary and pedagogic research and also, due to the career importance for academics of the REF, a conflict between undertaking research and spending time on learning and teaching. As Locke (2014:4) noted in his report for the HEA on current trends in HE 'research has become the key activity for individuals looking for job security and career progression to the highest professional grades'.

Macfarlane (2011:72-3), drawing on UK and US research, suggests that there has been a decreasing interest in teaching amongst academics in these two countries with the division of staff into 'haves', who mainly undertake research, and 'have

nots' who mainly teach. As Land (2008:139) notes:

 the declared policy commitments of universities to teaching are often viewed by academics... as little more than lip service. There is a well-recognised "underlying game" that teaching and research are likely to be in conflict with each other and that the highest aspiration of most managers is still to be in the premier league of research universities.

- Land (2008:139) 

Emphasis on research, and indeed on pedagogic research that does not impact on local practice, brings research, and research for development of teaching in the institution, into potential conflict. It also casts teaching as the poor relation in regard to reward, recognition and resources.

Concept of Teaching

The culture of performativity has had a significant impact on how teaching is perceived by staff. If teaching is seen as being about responding to a perceived deficit, for example in relation to the NSS, it can lead to short-term reactive responses rather than proactive, thoughtful, research and disciplinary based developments. This can lead to a 'surface' view of teaching (Rowland: 2001) that is about getting procedures 'right' rather than exploring the purposes of education and how to create learning opportunities in a range of contexts. This is not to argue for ignoring student views or for failing to streamline procedures, as these things support learning and teaching development but are not at its core. In addition to technical and theoretical understanding in teaching there is also 'professional wisdom' or professional judgement which grows from critical reflection on experience and allows choices to be made on how to act in a range of different circumstances to meet the needs of a range of students. This places the emphasis on the development of staff, not just procedures, and on staff working together, as critical reflection on professional practice needs the involvement of other perspectives which come from colleagues, students and research literature (Brookfield). Gibbs (2012), for example, in a report looking at the measurement of quality in relation to student experience in higher education, argues that the auditing of individuals and modules has ignored the greater impact of programmes and teams. Kreber (2013) identifies the importance of groups of staff working together as communities of enquiry around teaching where trust can be developed and underlying assumptions explored and challenged. The content, the process and the premise involved in the educational practice being undertaken all need to be considered. This enquiry into practice allows for growth and change and is different from a performative context where practice has to be presented as excellent in a form of public relations exercise that militates against using uncertainty, questioning and exploration to drive change.

Teachers' professional wisdom will relate to their values and beliefs and to how they understand their roles and the purposes of what they do. This will connect to an individual's professional or disciplinary heritage and context. Teaching involves an investment of the whole person. Skelton (2009:109) for example, argues that, for him, excellence in teaching 'is about the enduring human struggle to 'live out' educational values in practice'. This quest for 'authentic practice' is far removed from the idea of teaching as compliance to particular ways of acting. A deep rather than a surface understanding of teaching may not be visible in a performative context. Teaching may be seen as simple and not involving intellectual capacity and if teachers lack autonomy, a traditional feature of working in higher education at least in some aspects of work, then academics may be reluctant to engage with it.

Universities tend to have expectations around innovation in learning and teaching - that it will happen and that it will have an impact on the student learning experience. To create new approaches requires imagination and creativity. Creativity involves risk, something that does not fit well in a performative, audit culture where success is expected. Craft and Jeffery (2008: 579) draw on research in school systems to argue that there is a tension between developing creative pedagogy and 'performative policies which imbue low trust in professional judgement in favour of technician-oriented pedagogies and technicist-oriented curricula'. Exploring education in the UK and Australia, Barnard and White (2008:672) argue that for both students and teachers, creativity is important to meet emerging needs and that 'pedagogical autonomy and professional agency' are important if teachers are to be creative in their teaching and curriculum development. The argument here is that performativity and creativity are positioned in opposition to each other and that expectations of university leaders that staff will spend time leading exciting new approaches to teaching may be unrealistic in a context of control and conformity.

In addition to limiting approaches to teaching, a performativity culture may also reduce the quality and number of staff prepared to choose teaching in higher education as an option, particularly with lower status teaching-only contracts. '...the more teaching in higher education is controlled and constrained and its status undermined', argues Locke (2014:23) 'the less attractive it will become as a career for creative, intelligent people, even as part of a broader role, let alone as the sole focus of their professional endeavour.' One could argue that it will become particularly less attractive to men. Clegg (2003) draws on evidence that suggests that women may be more likely to achieve promotion in the area of teaching than research. If teaching becomes a 'women's area' then this will lower its status further.

Management of teaching

Learning and teaching have market value in the current HE agenda and its organisation tends to be via top-down strategies which are mandated and promoted but may involve 'sometimes superficial, de-contextualised, normative notions about what 'good' learning and teaching are' (Napoli, 2014:4). Implementation of the strategy is led by managers of learning and teaching. Expectations of compliance with a central strategy, which may conflict in some aspects with individual or disciplinary priorities, can lead to conformity but also tokenism. One respondent in Crawford's study of 36 academics in two UK universities noted, '... they [academics] do what they need to do and tick the box' (Crawford, 2010:194). In a performative context time has to be spent on 'erecting monitoring systems, collecting performative data

and attending to the management of institutional "impressions" (Ball, 2003:221) which takes attention away from the core focus on teaching and learning and its development. Ball and others (e.g. Mackenzie, McShane and Wilcox, 2007) argue that this leads to creation of materials such as plans, booklets, statistics, for the purpose of being accountable. For example, learning and teaching action plans and reports can be developed to fulfil the demand that a particular type of evidence and approach to development is expected. The purpose is to 'tick the box' and gain the approval of whoever the plan was written for. It is a version of the truth but may not be the most helpful in enabling real change to happen —only the impression of change. This leads to the experience of inauthenticity in relation to practice and reluctance by academics to engage in it.

In addition to performative accountability documentation work, academics have experienced an increase in workload related to activities around learning and teaching which include issues with managing larger groups; organising materials and resources; responding to needs of significant numbers of students; documenting sessions; increased assessment; higher expectations of feedback in terms of both response times and quality; and using a range of technologies. Time for thinking about teaching processes is reduced, leading to less innovation in teaching and less satisfaction for the teacher, and potentially the students. Professional development in relation to teaching is seen as not possible due to time constraints, or because professional subject updating takes priority, while institutional imperatives around initiatives such as HEA fellowships can be seen by staff to be more about key performance indicators and institutional league tables than meeting personal professional development needs (Crawford, 2010). Locke (2014:26) identified in his study a dislike of 'managerially-driven or institutionally-driven development activity' in relation to teaching.

A great deal of academics' professional learning will occur in groups of colleagues who come together to explore a common focus. This can involve internal and external colleagues and relate to research, learning and teaching or other interests. Networks, conferences and small communities of practice, both disciplinary and multidisciplinary, can enable dialogue and critique. In Crawford's (2010) research in two universities she found that academics were involved in separate research and teaching networks. 'The data also revealed that teaching networks were experienced as pragmatic, business and organisation-led, while research-related communities were considered to be collegiate and discursive' (Crawford, 2010:197). If this finding is replicated in other institutions then it raises significant cause for concern in relation to academics' professional learning in relation to teaching. It can lead to teaching groups being conceived as being about organisation, management and procedures and perhaps teaching itself being construed in this way. It can embed the divide between research and teaching and position the latter as unrelated to scholarship or research. It can also lead to academics being reluctant to engage in teaching groups where they do not perceive themselves having opportunities for engaging in dialogue and exploring issues and practices in a scholarly way, or where they lack opportunities to be proactive or autonomous.

Impact on academics' engagement with teaching

The current policy agenda and institutional cultures mean that initiatives designed to support teaching may have resulted in staff compliance but not engagement. This is emphasised by Fanghanel (2009:204-5) in his exploration of learning and teaching regimes within university disciplines, departments or teaching groups.

Managerialist change initiatives tend to adopt relatively linear strategies: deploying policies through the setting out of objectives and targets, providing guidelines for their implementation, and measuring performance through a set of objective criteria. In reality this leads to compliance rather than reflective adoption of change. Some academics will continue to be enthusiastic teachers building their practice in relation to ongoing scholarship but they will be doing this in a socio-cultural context that works against this.

Some academics will engage in subversion or resistance to the system. A recent editions of the International Journal for Academic Development (Napoli and Clement, 2014), for example, focused on the topic of 'compliance or resistance' in academic development. Key topics included: raising awareness of the current political agenda; managing contexts where individual and institutional values conflict; raising awareness of the rhetorical use of language so that it becomes possible to debate such terms as 'excellence'; and the nature of professional responsibility as academics to our profession and our students.

The current narrative of teaching in universities is that it is a second class activity. This was illustrated recently by Laurie Taylor in his comic piece in the Times Higher Education (2015) when in the 'University of Poppleton' it was decided that staff on teaching-only contracts would not be allowed access to the senior common rooms on campus. If the national narrative denigrates teaching, then it is hard for individual institutions to fight against this. However it is possible for institutions to resist. How the narrative is enacted in particular institutions will depend on their histories, traditions and leadership at all levels. Reclaiming teaching as a central focus for staff engagement and critique is important because students need learning opportunities to enable them to be critical, creative and active participants in society and society, of course, needs this too. If academics are to commit to working to create these learning opportunities, then the context to do this needs to be fostered within each institution.

What can be done?

Universities need to identify the existing culture around teaching in their own context and identify the artefacts and procedures which result in particular stories being told in departments and in the institution and the impact of these on staff engagement in learning and teaching. 'Universities are remarkably untheoretical about their own practice...' (Blackmore & Blackwell, 2006:382) but need to examine what they are doing and the impact of what they are doing. Professionalism in relation to teaching, it could be argued, needs to be reclaimed. Currently, the rhetoric has become professionalisation through qualification and audit rather than through responsibility which should include proactivity and critique. Locke (2014:28), in the conclusion to his report, argues that a key area for universities to consider is 'how to reconceptualise, promote and enhance professionalism in teaching and learning in higher education and the research and scholarship that underpins this'.

One way of doing this is to foster conversations around learning and teaching that encourage critique and scholarship. The implementation of teaching approaches at local level takes place within local cultures which will be placed within a

particular relationship to the wider institutional culture. These local cultures, it can be argued, are constructed and maintained through the conversations undertaken during planning, assessing and organising teaching. While these will be embedded in institutional influences and local traditions and assumptions, they can also be the site of change: '...strategies to influence TLRs [teaching and learning regimes] should focus on influencing faculty's everyday conversations, as this is where they construct their understanding of the teaching and learning reality' (Roxa and Martensson 2009: 212). Conversations need to become scholarly conversations, involving exploring evidence and current literature if they are to raise the status of teaching and to engage academics. It is important therefore that 'academic development initiatives are geared towards offering arenas for scholarly conversations, as well as supporting and rewarding scholarly perspectives on teaching and learning' (Roxa and Martensson 2009:217). This requires space within workload models as well as resources, reward and recognition. If influencing teaching policy and practice is a role potentially taken by all academics, then a more distributed leadership approach will need to be fostered and a senior leader's role would be to 'acquire skills and expertise in nurturing teacher leadership' (O'Donoghue and Clarke 2010: 98). A recommendation of Gibbs (2012:10), in his summary of current institutional approaches to quality in learning and teaching, is that 'institutional career structures still need to be developed that reward the leadership of teaching, rather than only individual research or individual teaching'.

Initiatives currently being undertaken by some academics in relation to learning and teaching are very exciting. The work on 'threshold concepts' in disciplines, for example, involves academics working together and with students to identify key concepts that students need to understand in order to pass through the doorway into disciplinary ways of thinking and to develop approaches to achieve this conceptual understanding (Land et al. 2008). These processes are engaging academics who are passionate about their discipline in conversations about learning and teaching. If academics are to engage in thinking about ideas such as these, and join in internal and external networks to share expertise and develop more nuanced and thoughtful practice, then institutional and departmental leaders need to provide space, resources and recognition for this to take place. If this does not happen then it is likely that teaching will become a sterile, compliance activity, given scant attention beyond minimum requirements and failing to give students the best possible learning experience.

The impact on institutions that fail to engage effectively with learning and teaching could be disastrous for their reputation and resulting recruitment. The impact on students, and ultimately on society, which needs engaged, knowledgeable graduates, could be devastating. Academics have a responsibility to critique and disrupt current thinking in all areas. We must undertake an urgent consideration of where we are going in relation to learning and teaching before it is too late.



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