

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)

The Higher Education Academy believes that “Teaching is having a zeitgeist moment. It is starting to come out of the shadows of its glamorous sibling, research, to step into its own spotlight.”¹ One is tempted to ask why it has dwelt so long in the shadows and why it has been considered less than glamorous. There is no reason why teaching should be considered the poor relation of research; both are vital to the success of a higher education institution. We could, perhaps, argue that students are more likely to learn from great teachers than from great researchers.

The focus on the quality of teaching has been given a boost from the drive for lecturers to undertake professional development to enhance and improve their teaching and to gain Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy. More recently, the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) has made teaching quality a key measure of an institution’s success.

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) movement affirms that if academics are required to continually research, extend and improve their discipline knowledge they should also continually develop their pedagogical knowledge, skills and understanding. As Boyer, the leading proponent of SoTL, states, teaching is not “... a routine function, tacked on, something almost anyone can do.” More importantly, training and development for teachers is not ‘remedial’², it is not about ‘fixing problems’ with teachers’ performance.

Disciplinary and subject-specific research is central to universities’ principles and practice. Research into teaching and learning by academics, though expanding, is not always regarded as a core activity or an element of professionalism. Boyer’s intention was that pedagogical research should have the same status as discipline-based research. One implication of SoTL is that teachers and institutions should research, ‘discover’, use and evaluate teaching and learning in their own contexts, rather than simply importing ‘best practice’ from elsewhere. The ability to demonstrate your own engagement with the scholarship of teaching and learning is at the heart of your Fellowship application. Teachers who inquire in to their own practice are more likely to produce inquiring students. As Sarason suggests “You cannot have students as continuous learners and effective collaborators, without

teachers having these same characteristics."³ In short, good teachers are 'inquiring teachers'.

Reflective practice is central to the idea of the scholarship of teaching and learning. It requires engagement with, and probably contributions to, the body of literature and practice. Investigation, experimentation and improvement will begin with reviewing the literature as well as seeking out and observing the practice of others. Improvement does not mean replicating 'best practice' or adopting generalised recipes from elsewhere in the hope or belief that they will be effective. The notion of 'best practice' is the antithesis of scholarship because it does not result from teachers' investigations into the needs and characteristics of students in particular contexts leading to the solution of particular teaching and learning problems.

Boyer's model of SoTL has four, overlapping, elements:

The scholarship of:

- discovery
- integration
- application
- teaching

The *scholarship of discovery* is the closest to traditional research. It entails the search for new information, knowledge and models of teaching and learning and also the testing of theory through application and action research. Such discovery might be demonstrated and disseminated through, for example, research projects, journal articles and exhibitions and conferences.

The *scholarship of integration* involves knowledge and discovery from different sources. It has an interdisciplinary aspect in that it encourages teachers from across disciplines to collaborate and explore ideas out of their 'comfort zone'. One of the most rewarding experiences I had teaching on a Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education (PGCHE) was to see the excitement and productivity of groups of people from a wide variety of disciplines sharing and developing teaching ideas and methods.

The *scholarship of application* is about the ways in which the discovery and development of ways of teaching can be applied to real situations. The scholarships of discovery and application are, in essence, the same as the processes of action research. Action research is a systematic and focused form of reflection and experimentation specifically planned and implemented with a view to improvement in a particular context. Action research is a cycle of action - evaluation - modification - observation - reflection - action.

The *scholarship of teaching* is about the ways in which teaching and learning is continually developed and improved. It involves a cycle of synthesis, planning, evaluation and revision. The scholarship of teaching is seen not only in the quality of an individual's teaching but also in the ways in which an institution provides support and mentoring, opportunities for development and research into teaching and learning, and provides incentives and encouragement for excellent teaching.

This article has been concerned, primarily, with teaching. We must, remember, however, that the only reason for teaching is to bring about learning. Investigations into the effectiveness and quality of teaching cannot be undertaken without an understanding of some of the major ideas about learning, especially constructivism and social constructivism. As Ramsden proposes, 'Higher education will benefit if those who teach inquire into the effects of their activities on their students' learning.'⁴ Briefly stated, good teachers are good learners.

References

¹ HEA (Higher Education Academy) (2015) 'Good, better, best: transforming teaching through connections and collaboration.' Supplement to *Times Higher Education* November 2015

² Boyer, E. (1990) *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass

³ Sarason, S. (1993) *The Case for Change: The Preparation of Educators*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

⁴ Ramsden, P. (2003) *Learning to Teach in Higher Education* (2nd Ed.) London:
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