Academic Collegiality in Research and Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Universities consider collegial exchange and review essential in research. The same is not true of teaching. These fundamental differences in teaching and research make it possible for teaching to be little more than a faculty member reiterating a discipline's base. But content driven teaching is widely criticized. Reforms in undergraduate education will require that, like research, teaching receives collegial nurturing and critical attention. We explore the myths and realities of university teaching that impede change and offer examples—the case method, problem-based learning, interdisciplinary courses—of teaching faculty working together. When teaching has collegial exchange and review, it becomes possible to develop a curriculum that enhances students’ capability to think critically and solve problems.

In research, collegial exchange and review are essential and frequent. Even if research proceeds with little collegial interaction, peers must review discoveries or new knowledge not recognized (Altbach, 1987). Teaching, however, lacks collegial exchange and review. The fundamental changes needed in undergraduate education require the collegiality that now fosters progress in research. To support this argument we will discuss five teaching myths impeding change, cite studies exposing these myths, examine the realities of academic life, and consider ways of encouraging change through a collegial teaching culture.

UNIVERSITY TEACHING: FIVE MYTHS

In graduate school, academics are prepared to conduct research, but rarely to teach. Yet, when they are appointed to an academic position, they are expected to teach. Five powerful myths replace any preparation for teaching and make it possible for faculty to enter the classroom and, as they teach, believe that they are doing it well when they tell students current discipline knowledge (Gaff, 1975; Cross, 1980).

Myth 1: Everyone with a Ph.D. Can Teach

Teaching in a university requires extensive discipline knowledge. Those with a doctoral degree know their disciplines and, as a consequence, are capable of teaching. When they conduct research, they are current in their disciplines and, hence, teach well.

Myth 2: Faculty, Concerned about Teaching, Have Been Converted

Conversion, in this sense, separates the faculty who are interested in teaching from those who are not. They demonstrate their conversion as they attend teaching workshops, seminars, or conferences. Because, the converted are considered good teachers someone invariably remarks at the teaching sessions they attend, "The wrong people are here. We are preaching to the converted."

Myth 3: Teaching and Research are Equally Rewarded in the University

University mission statements claim institutions seek excellence in teaching and research. When promotion and tenure committees meet, they take teaching seriously when they examine the students' evaluations and discuss how well the individual gives a departmental seminar (Shulman, 1993). If they agree the faculty member teaches well, they reward the person's teaching proportionately less than the effort allocated.

Myth 4: I Don't Have Time to Teach Well

Faculty lament that pressures to do research prevent them from teaching well. They say, "If I just had a little more time, I could teach as well as I know how and then my teaching would improve" (Smith, 1984).

Myth 5: No One Knows What Good Teaching Is

The remark, "No one knows what good teaching is," is made frequently. Faculty, however, say it with greater conviction after they say there is no use spending time evaluating teaching because it will never be valued. They then add, "Besides no one knows what good teaching is anyway" (Elrick and Gillespie, 1985).

RESEARCH ON TEACHING: COUNTERING THE MYTHS

Anecdotal evidence, although it is rarely accepted as proof, feeds the myths. Some faculty do teach well with seemingly little more preparation than a Ph.D., and those interested in teaching do attend workshops and conferences on teaching. But academics interested in research attend research conferences and no one says the wrong people are there. Time is important, but it does not ensure excellence in teaching any more than it ensures its in research. Some good researchers do teach well. Baker (1986) refers to them as the dean's delight because academic administrators have a particular stake in maintaining the ideal link of teaching and research.

Research on academic life, however, challenges the myths. For example, the link between research and teaching that permeates Myths 1, 2, and 3. Feldman (1987) and Finkelstein (1984) find a slight to nonexistent relationship

between teaching well and doing good research. Thorsen's (1984) findings question the time myth because most academics spend their time as they like. Actually they do spend time on teaching. Even in research intensive universities, academics spend about half their time on teaching. Feldman (1987) finds research does not take time from an individual's teaching but from his or her family life or/and leisure activities.

Academics conduct research because they enjoy it, not because of external rewards and pressures to publish (Finkelstein, 1984). Yet, Fairweather (1993) and Shulman (1979) note that, even if an academic devotes half of his or her effort to teaching, when rewards are allocated, research is weighted as about 80% of the individual's work. Logan (1989) is aware of those values when he notes, "... poor teaching can hurt your chances of promotion or tenure, but good, or even exceptional, teaching will not compensate for a lack of research productivity. The message is clear: Do an adequate job of teaching but spend more of your efforts in research, because research will be rewarded. I have seen little to suggest that this impression is false."

Academic administrators particularly are loath to acknowledge the reward structure. But they are not alone. Academics, although they claim to want more rewards for teaching, value research and, as they sit on promotion and tenure committees, continually reward it more than teaching. They make those decisions believing research is an academic's highest calling. They hold this value system even if they do no research themselves (Ladd, 1979).

As academics talk about their work, they clearly reveal their priorities. They "... speak of teaching loads and research opportunities, never the reverse" (AAC, 1985, p. 10). They hope for release time from teaching, and lament, "I didn't get any work done today" if they did no research.

Weimer (1987) dismissed the final myth, "No one knows what good teaching is." She finds the research on teaching consistently establishes five qualities that characterize good teaching:

- Enthusiasm
- Clarity
- Preparation/organization
- Ability to stimulate thought
- Knowledge (implying both content, competence, and love of subject matter)

Although faculty agree these qualities are important, many cling to the first myth that subject knowledge is most critical. When asked to define good teaching, they describe it as "being at the cutting edge," "faculty with something to say," "intellectual stimulation carrying students to new levels," "a real command of the subject" (Elrick, 1990, p. 75).

While the five myths might be useful if they supported excellent teaching, unfortunately, they perpetrate the idea that teaching is a transmission of knowledge. But teaching as telling is extensively criticized (AAC, 1985; NIE, 1984; Entwistle, 1984; Bok, 1992). When Gardner accused faculty of handing students cut flowers and forbidding them to see the growing plants he coined an appropriate metaphor for higher education's problems (cited by Arons, 1986).

To bring students into the garden, faculty must explore a discipline's paths of inquiry, question its assumptions, assess it critically, and synthesize its ideas to make practical applications of knowledge. To accomplish these changes the AAC (1985) urges all faculty to take control of the curriculum as a whole. They believe the curriculum ought not begin with concern for covering factual material but with "... methods and processes, modes of access to understanding and judgement. ... While learning cannot of course take place devoid of subject matter, how that subject matter is experienced is what concerns us. ..." (AAC, 1985).

The AAC offer nine experiences that create a coherent undergraduate education. The experiences are translated into skills and ways of understanding necessary for all students:

1. Inquiry, abstract logical thinking, critical analysis
2. Literacy: writing, reading, speaking, listening
3. Understanding numerical data
4. Historical consciousness
5. Science
6. Values
7. Art
8. International and multicultural experiences
9. Study in depth

The AAC elaborates on students' experience of depth by saying it requires sequential learning and must be activated through imagination and synthesis. For students, depth also reveals that no matter how much they discover, there is always much more to know. "Depth is an enemy of arrogance" (AAC, 1985).

TEACHING AND RESEARCH: THE REALITIES

If universities are to change, they must confront academic realities. Most compelling is the reality of teaching's isolation from colleagues. "We close the classroom door and experience pedagogical solitude, whereas in our life as scholars we are members of active communities: ... the reason teaching is not more valued in the academy is because the way we treat teaching removes it from the community of scholars" (Shulman, 1993).

It is bizarre to think teaching is conducted in seclusion when students are present in the classrooms. Nevertheless, the faculty member is alone when members of the academic guild are not discussing and examining an individual's teaching, as they are discussing and examining his or her research.

Teaching also has little peer review. In an environment where collegial review is critical in maintaining and promoting research excellence, teaching is evaluated almost exclusively by students (Skolnik and Rowen, 1984; Marsh, 1987). Because students are not discipline experts and, hence, cannot evaluate the aspects of teaching that faculty value, it is difficult for faculty to take the students' assessment too seriously (McKeachie, 1990).

Unfortunately, without the collegiality that maintains and promotes excellence, Bok (1992) is able to claim, "... teaching remains one of the few human activities that does not get demonstrably better from one generation to the next."
Unlike teaching, research involves faculty, graduate students, postdoctoral students, technicians, and often even undergraduates as part-time employees in a public, collegial problem-solving process. Perutz (1991) senses that, as he conducts research, his critical colleagues are continually looking over his shoulder (and he theirs). At the home institution, peers exchange informal remarks about research as they drink coffee and converse in the halls. Colleagues at other universities read draft proposals and articles in progress. The fax and email facilitate these exchanges by making distant colleagues immediately accessible. Colleagues scrutinize grant applications and make funding decisions on the basis of their assessment of past work and future potential. Finished manuscripts are peer reviewed and even after an article is published or a paper presented at a conference, the critical analysis and appraisal continues. In this interplay of ideas, knowledge is created.

The continual scrutiny of research makes it possible for academics and academic administrators to reward it. With little or no collegial review of teaching, promotion, and tenure committees do not feel confident about rewarding teaching excellence (Fairweather, 1993; Ladd, 1979; Cheatby, 1982; Shulman, 1993; Skolnik and Rowen, 1984).

CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT FOR CHANGE

For changes to occur, teaching must be displayed to peers (Shulman, 1993). As teaching becomes part of the collegial conversation it is possible to evaluate and reward it. Shulman suggests making a case for teaching that includes an organized argument, with evidence, interpretation, and posed logical reasoning. The Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) urges faculty to display teaching in a teaching dossier (CAUT, 1986). The American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) calls a similar document a portfolio but, as with the CAUT’s dossier, it is to be a “... display of best work ...” (Edgeron et al., 1991).

Whether faculty present a case, dossier, or portfolio to colleagues, they are creating teaching artifacts as they now create research artifacts. Shulman (1993) explains this is essential because, “In the absence of such artifacts teaching takes a bit like dry ice; it disappears at room temperature.” He urges faculty to make the invisible visible. “We don’t judge each other’s research on the basis of casual conversations in the hall; we say to our colleagues, “That is a lovely idea” but really must write it up... Discipline colleagues are essential when the work is assessed because they exercise responsibility for quality control ...” (Shulman, 1993).

As a first step, departments and disciplines need to establish teaching criteria and procedures. Without these prior exchanges, faculty are wise to be skeptical about peers viewing their teaching. Reasonably, they wish to know how and by what criteria they will be judged. Again, quite reasonably, they will want to be evaluated by a discipline colleague who understands and has successfully confronted the challenges of teaching in that field. Those who suggest teaching can be assessed by anyone who teaches well in the diversity forget that depth in discipline knowledge makes possible for colleagues to assess those aspects of teaching academics value. Otherwise peers are not much different from those of the students.

The continuing collegial exchange so necessary for teaching needs fostering at coffee room discussions and conferences seminars and workshops. In all these settings, academics need opportunities to talk about their teaching as they now talk about their research. Too often at teaching conferences or workshops there is a sense that presenters are attempting to convince participants that teaching is important. By contrast at research conferences, everyone knows they are talking about important work.

When might faculty talk about their teaching? One situation is team teaching that presents a unique opportunity to discuss teaching, revise it and assess it. Too often, unfortunately, team teaching means faculty divide the number of lectures among themselves, write their own examination questions and mark them. No meaningful exchange occurs. However, when team teaching mirrors the processes valued in research, some or all of the members of the team are present in the classroom, listening to one another, and engaging in a debate or discussion among themselves and with students. These exchanges enable students to comprehend the many sides of a question or problem. If the course is interdisciplinary, a question or problem can be offered from the perspectives of each faculty’s field. Students remark about such an exchange, “It made me think” (Elrick et al., 1990). Perry (1970) too finds that an interdisciplinary approach promotes the idea that knowledge is multiplistic and, hence hastens students’ intellectual development.

Real team teaching enables the faculty to see different perspectives in their own and other disciplines. They say, “I felt my understanding of my discipline deepened.” “I learned so much from the others on the team” (Elrick et al., 1990). When the team is actually working together, their work benefits from continual collegial review. As two faculty who team teach an interdisciplinary course remarked, “It keeps teaching sharp” (J.R. MacDonald and N.P.C. Westwood, 1990, personal communication, Univ. of Guelph, Guelph, ON).

Faculty can talk seriously about their teaching in collegial consultations and mentoring relationships. In our experience, a colleague spending a sabbatical in the department attended a course and discussed it with the instructor. Graduate teaching assistants have been invaluable in providing suggestions, especially regarding revisions to the laboratory components of courses.

As faculty actually engage in conversations about teaching, it becomes possible for them to innovate. For example, the case method, developed at the Harvard Business School, provides students with opportunities to solve problems rather than learn solutions to problems. This process also reflects what students will be doing once they leave the university (Christensen et al., 1987).

Problem-based learning is another example of Elmore’s recognition that “How we teach is what we teach.” When students learn through the problems set by the curriculum they must employ explicit knowledge, understandings, and skills as they search for answers or further questions (Boud and Feletti, 1991). Problem-based learning and the case method also recognize that knowledge is created as people
work together. Thus, the methods mirror the processes of research.

VULNERABILITY AND COURAGE

As academics create new knowledge by developing a question, collecting and interpreting data, drawing conclusions, making predictions, they are vulnerable. As they teach, academics restrict their vulnerability by telling research's results that have weathered peer review.

Teaching only research results, however, without also teaching the processes that make the results possible, leaves students with a distorted vision of knowledge. This cannot continue. The AAC (1985) emphatically urges faculty to teach students to practice knowledge not just to hear about it. Teaching that draws students into knowing enables them to comprehend how we know we know, how we address ethical concerns, challenge assumptions, develop a sense of knowledge's depth and breadth and communicate ideas to permit them to be refined.

But, helping students engage in a discipline means that faculty become as vulnerable in the classroom as they now are in the lab, the field, and the archives. As knowledge is criticized, reinterpreted, and sharpened in the classroom, teaching, like research, will require collegial exchange and review. Our courage to approach the unknown in both teaching and research will prepare students to face reality that they, too, will be vulnerable as they approach the edges of knowledge.

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