

But is it scholarship? Group reflection as a scholarly activity

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Abstract

The scholarship of teaching is a much-contested concept in higher education. Over the past 15 years, a number of models have emerged which feature activities ranging from keeping up with the literature on teaching and learning to publishing educational research. In this paper, we argue that the key to the many different dimensions of scholarly teaching is reflection. If reflection does not necessarily, in itself, constitute scholarship, scholarship cannot happen without reflection. When those involved in teaching and learning meet on a regular basis to reflect together, as in Central Queensland University's Reflective Teachers Group, the resulting scholarship takes on a further dimension. Group reflection becomes the basis for the development of a supportive learning community whose focus is teaching. Whether or not participants in group reflection publish scholarly papers arising from their reflections, the process of group reflection can, in itself, be seen as a scholarly activity.

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Introduction

Because reflection is an everyday term with everyday meanings, it is not easy to define in the specific context of teaching practice in higher education. A teacher who contemplates the success or failure of a particular class as she leaves the classroom is engaging in reflection. So is a teacher who meets twice a week for a term with colleagues to review and revise an entire course. Reflection can be spontaneous or planned, fleeting or sustained, occasional or systematic (Phillips & Hall, 2002). It can lead to a radical revamp of your teaching practice, or to no action at all. But all the literature suggests that to teach well, teachers need to reflect on what they're doing (e.g., Hall, 1997; Phillips & Hall; Schon, 1983). As Biggs (2003, p. 7) writes, "Learning new techniques for teaching is like the fish that provides a meal for today; reflective practice is the net that provides the meal for the rest of one's life".

When reflection occurs in a group setting, it includes further dimensions. Farrell (1999) suggests that group reflection, particularly when the members of the group come from different institutions or faculties, complements the individual's weaknesses and limitations of experience, creating a richer reflective experience. It

enables the individual to subject their personal beliefs to critical analysis in a safe environment. Similarly, Richert (1992) stresses the importance, in reflective practice, of dialogue, both with oneself and with others. Reflective dialogue has two dimensions: it enables the individual first to speak the truth as they see it in order to clarify their own beliefs, and second, to give voice to their ideas and be heard (Richert).

At Central Queensland University (CQU), the Reflective Teachers Group, a multi-disciplinary group that meets once a month to talk about teaching-related issues, provides a regular forum for teachers to share their experiences. Anecdotal evidence suggests that participants find the process of group reflection invaluable at many levels. But while reflection is clearly useful for teachers, and a formalised process of group reflection particularly so, the question arises as to whether group reflection can be considered to be a scholarly activity.

Increasingly, the idea of teaching as scholarship is taking hold in Australian higher education. While there are as many models of the scholarship of teaching as there are of reflective practice, at the heart of the concept is the idea that academics should apply to their teaching activities the same scholarly rigour they employ in their research and other academic endeavours. This paper asks whether reflection, and in particular group reflection of the kind undertaken in the Reflective Teachers Group, is a part of that process. It explores different models of both reflection and scholarship to identify the role that reflection plays in scholarly teaching.

The scholarship of teaching

Over the past 15 years, there have been dramatic changes in the higher education sector in Australia which have had a direct impact on university teaching and learning. Cuts in government funding combined with increasing student numbers have led to larger class sizes, a blow-out in staff-student ratios, and an increasingly managerial approach to teaching in many universities (Zipin & Brennan, 2003, p. 352; Kimber, 2003, p. 41; Wood & Meek, 2002; Schapper & Mason, 2004, p. 192). Changes in technology and big increases in the numbers of international students studying at Australian universities have also brought fresh challenges to academic teachers, who are under pressure to use both new technologies and new pedagogies in their teaching (Schapper & Mason).

At the same time, teaching and learning in the sector have become increasingly visible, both at the policy and the institutional level. The government has sought to support the enhancement of teaching and learning through initiatives such as the Teacher of the Year program and, most recently, the establishment of the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2004). Staff development for academic teachers has emerged as an important issue in Australia, as in the UK, and most universities now have a centre dedicated to the support and development of teaching and learning as well as an award program in university teaching (Weeks, 2000, p. 63). This renewed interest in teaching is underpinned by the emergence of a new discourse, arising from the work of Ernest Boyer, in which teaching is seen as a modality of scholarship.

In his 1990 work *Scholarship Reconsidered*, Boyer argues that there are four dimensions of scholarly work: the scholarship of discovery, the scholarship of integration, the scholarship of application or practice, and the scholarship of teaching (Boyer, 1990, p. 16). Seeking to revise the traditional conception of

scholars as “academics who conduct research, publish, and then perhaps convey their knowledge to students or apply what they have learned”, he argues that scholarship could also begin with teaching and/or the application of knowledge (Boyer, 1990, p. 15). At its best, he writes, teaching “shapes both research and practice” (Boyer, p. 16).

This re-conceptualisation of teaching as scholarship has been embraced not only in the US, where it originated, but in the UK and Australia. The phrase “scholarship of teaching” is widely used in Australian universities (see, for example, Brew & Peseta [n.d.]; James & Baldwin [2002]; Martin, Prosser, Conrad, & Trigwell [n.d.]). The ever-increasing number of journals centring on university teaching and learning (two new Australian journals, *Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development* and the *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, were launched in 2004, joining the US-based *Journal of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, established in 2001, and a number of other journals dedicated to university teaching) suggest that within academe, reading and writing about teaching is on the rise.

But what exactly is the scholarship of teaching? As Kreber’s (2002) research with a group of ‘expert’ teachers in North America shows, it is in some ways easier to define what scholarly teaching is not than to say what it is: “In general, one can observe that experts agree that the scholarship of teaching is associated with, yet is *not* the same as, teaching excellence, is *not* the prerogative of the educationist, and is *not* limited to publishing research on teaching in peer-reviewed journals” (Kreber, pp. 160–1). Given the many different interpretations of the phrase within the higher education sector, and the many uses to which it may be put—from staff development activities to appointments and promotions committees—it is not surprising that there is some confusion among academics as to what the phrase “scholarship of teaching” actually means. A recent study of UK academics found that though they had a clear understanding of the term “scholarship”, “they were very unsure as to the meaning of the term scholarship of teaching” (Nicholls, 2004, p. 40).

In Boyer’s original conception, the scholarship of teaching was inherent in good teaching. Good teachers are “well informed, and steeped in the knowledge of their fields” (Boyer, 1990, p. 23). But they also use “pedagogical procedures” that are “carefully planned, continuously examined, and relate directly to the subject taught” (Boyer, pp. 23-24). Scholarly teachers “stimulate active, not passive, learning and encourage students to be critical, creative thinkers, with the capacity to go on learning after their college days are over” (Boyer, p. 24).

Others have argued that scholarly teaching involves specific activities aimed at improving one’s teaching practice, and hence the learning of one’s students. Trigwell, Martin, Benjamin, and Prosser’s (2000) model of the scholarship of teaching is based on four dimensions:

1. “being informed about the literature and/or knowledge of teaching and learning in a discipline
2. focusing on student learning and on teaching, rather than mainly on teaching alone
3. reflection on the literature, one’s own context and the relations between the two and
4. communication” (Trigwell et al., pp. 162–163).

According to this model, teachers who are fully engaged in the scholarship of teaching use the literature on teaching in their discipline to investigate and reflect

on their own teaching practice, and formally communicate the results of their investigations to their peers (Trigwell et al., p. 164). At the other end of the scale are those who engage in only some of these dimensions, or engage in them at lower levels. For instance, some scholarly teachers may keep up with the literature on teaching in their discipline but may not implement changes in their own teaching practice as a result; or they may communicate their own theories and practice of teaching to colleagues in their own university but not to a wider audience.

Reflection as scholarship

Reflection is central to this model. Scholarly teachers are engaged in reflection at several levels: they reflect on the literature they read, on their own teaching practice, and on ways to bring the two together. According to Dewey's (1933) seminal work on reflection as a cornerstone of professional practice, reflection is a system of deliberate thinking to solve a problem. However, the idea that reflection is equivalent to problem solving is not universally accepted. Writers such as Brookfield (1988) see ongoing activities such as keeping a reflective journal or engaging with a trusted other in a critical friend dyad as a part of reflection defined as systematic rather than focused on solving a specific problem.

Scholarly teachers in the Trigwell et al. model of teaching scholarship are focused more on reflection as process than on reflection as problem-solving. In effect, they are engaged in what Schon (1983) calls reflection in action, a cyclic process in which the teacher develops an approach to a specific teaching situation ('framing'), monitors and evaluates the response to this approach, then reconsiders the approach in light of the situational response, leading to a cycle of experiment, evaluation and reframing (see Hatton & Smith, 1995). Reflection in action is a flexible, responsive approach to teaching, in contrast to what Schon calls technical rationality, in which a set of teaching rules are applied in a hierarchical process. Both the scholarship of teaching and reflection in action assume a complex world where the teaching situation is influenced by various competing interests and the discipline is alive with a plurality of teaching paradigms.

For Hall (1997), the key element of "pedagogical", as opposed to "everyday", reflection is not that it involves a cycle of reflection and action but only that it is deliberate and sustained, and engaged in with the intention of improving practice. Hall identifies three levels of reflective behaviour: everyday or fleeting reflection, deliberate reflection and systematic or programmatic reflection, which includes formal activities such as course reviews or action research. Of these, only the second and third levels are considered "scholarly" (Phillips & Hall, 2002). Kreber (2004), too, develops a hierarchy of reflection with the lowest level being reflection on content (characterised by the question "What do I know?"), the second reflection on process ("How do I know my approach to solving this problem is valid or effective?") and the highest reflection on premise ("What assumptions am I making in choosing this problem, this goal or this solution?"). This hierarchy is explicitly linked to the scholarship of teaching by Kreber and Cranton (2000, cited in Kreber, 2002, p. 153), who conclude that "academics who practise the scholarship of teaching engage in content, process and premise reflection on research-based and experience-based knowledge in the areas of instruction, pedagogy and curriculum in ways that can be peer reviewed".

Group reflection

The range of reflective activities teachers may engage in as part of the Trigwell et al. (2000) model of scholarship is wide. These activities may be informal, such as keeping a reflective journal or engaging in in-depth discussions with colleagues, or more formal, such as planning and conducting course evaluations or participating in program review committees. They may also combine the formal and the informal in forums such as the Reflective Teachers Group at CQU. At its monthly meetings, this group investigates different aspects of the participants' teaching experience.

Members of the Reflective Teachers Group have a wide variety of teaching experiences from different disciplines, different modes of teaching and different classroom contexts, but find commonality in their current contexts. As Farrell (1999) suggests, this enables participants to reflect on their individual experiences in the context of the broader experience of the group. The group provides what Richert (1992) calls a safe environment for people to voice ideas in their early stages and be heard without the risk of more public exposure. As a forum for reflective dialogue, it also provides participants with immediate input and feedback.

Group discussion is usually focused on a theme that has been either proposed by the group or suggested by an external person who has joined the group to discuss that specific topic. Themes for discussion have varied from the use of online technologies to an understanding of the new student's experience. In practice, discussion often relates to moral issues regarding choices made in dealing with students, and developing understandings of the cultural and socio-political settings of both the teacher and the student. In some instances the group has also acted as a sounding board for specific ideas about teaching brought to the group by individual members. In these cases, a member of the group presents a teaching challenge together with a proposed solution for input and feedback as part of a formal research and publication cycle.

According to Lenning and Ebbers (1999, p. 5) the characteristics of a community include "shared values, caring for one another, and appreciation of cooperation". All of these elements are present in the Reflective Teachers Group. The sense of keen interest and mutual support during group meetings is often palpable. Group members have found a new basis for community—not shared disciplinary interests but a shared commitment to teaching. Lenning and Ebbers (p. 97) report that while higher education institutions "were originally intended to be faculty learning communities", institutional pressures have increasingly created "'stand-alone' fiefdoms". The Reflective Teachers Group is one means of undermining such fiefdoms. Through the Group, members of CQU staff have met who would ordinarily not come across one another in their day-to-day working lives. Several members have commented on how little they previously knew of the great variety of teaching activities and practices that go on across the university. As a result of their participation in the Group, they have been exposed to whole new areas of practice, new ways both of seeing and of doing, new problems and new solutions. In this collective setting, reflection on teaching practice has ranged across all levels of Kreber's (2004) reflection hierarchy, from the simplest to the most complex.

Evaluating reflection

The informal nature of the Reflective Teachers Group makes it a safe environment for dialogic reflection. But it also places it outside of any formal review and reward structure. Reflection cannot, in itself, be peer reviewed—an essential element, according to Kreber (2002), of the scholarship of teaching. It may result in changes to teaching practice that are significant enough to be written up and published. But it may also have *results* such as incremental adjustments to teaching practice, attitudinal shifts, or even confirmation that one’s teaching practice is effective that, while highly significant for the individual teacher and their students, cannot be easily measured.

The need to be able to assess scholarship, and the reflection that is central to it, emerges repeatedly in the literature. The emphasis on peer review (Kreber, 2002) means in practice that scholarly teachers must publish the results of their reflective practice in academic journals in order to be recognised as engaging in the scholarship of teaching. But this view is by no means the only one. A number of researchers draw on Glassick, Huber, and Maeroff’s (1997) proposed six criteria for evaluating all forms of scholarship, including both research and teaching (e.g., Fincher et al., 2000; Booth, 2004; Badley, 2003). These criteria are:

1. clear goals
2. adequate preparation
3. appropriate methods
4. significant results
5. effective presentation and
6. reflective critique (Fincher et al., p. 889).

For Fincher et al., being able to demonstrate that each of these criteria have been met need not involve scholarly publishing. For instance, university teachers can demonstrate that they have met the first four criteria by having clear objectives for teaching, being up-to-date in their discipline knowledge, organising the curriculum effectively, selecting appropriate teaching and assessment methods, and measuring the effectiveness of both teaching and learning (Fincher et al., p. 889). “Effective presentation” can include simply “making results/ process [of teaching] available to colleagues”, while reflective critique involves “critical analysis of teaching activity that results in changes to improve” (Fincher et al., p. 889). In other words, informal discussions with colleagues or a presentation at a staff seminar would count as evidence of meeting the fifth criteria, while improvements to teaching practice would demonstrate the sixth.

Similarly, at the University of Melbourne, scholarly teachers are expected to be familiar with relevant educational literature and to evaluate and reflect on their own teaching practice, but there is no explicit requirement for them to publish their reflections (James & Baldwin, 2002, p. 2). This model of the scholarship of teaching includes the main elements of the Trigwell et al. model: “academic staff being familiar with and drawing on research into the relationship between teaching and student learning” and “evaluating and reflecting on the effects on student learning of curriculum design, teaching styles and approaches to assessment” (James & Baldwin, p. 2). However, there is less of an emphasis on the communication of the outcomes of this scholarly reflection.

The publication of scholarly articles on teaching and learning is an easy way for appointments and promotions committees to identify the presence of scholarly teaching. However, the models of scholarship discussed in this paper have clearly shown that there are a wide range of activities involved in scholarly teaching. To

reduce it to the publication of peer-reviewed articles would be both to impoverish our concepts of scholarship and to short-change teachers engaging in other aspects of scholarship. Boyer (1990, p. 55) reports that the majority of academics agree that “the pressure to publish reduces the quality of teaching”. More helpful in the long-run would be to ensure that, as Kreber (2002, p. 164) also suggests, tenure and promotions committees are “educated in the multiple ways scholarship can be practised”.

Conclusion

The concept of teaching as scholarship is taking hold in Australian higher education. While there are many useful models, at the heart of the concept is the idea that academics should apply to their teaching activities the same scholarly rigour they employ in their research and other academic endeavours. Very often, however, this is understood, in the rhetoric of appointments and promotions committees, to mean that the academic produces refereed publications not only in their discipline area but in the area of educational research. In this view, the scholarly teacher is not (necessarily) the teacher who reflects on their practice and introduces effective innovations but rather the one who produces refereed articles on education.

We have argued in this paper that at the heart of the scholarship of teaching is not publication but reflection. Reflective teachers may or may not publish the results of their reflections; but they will improve their teaching practice, and the learning that happens in their classrooms. Reflection can be casual, formal or systematic, action focused or theoretical, general or seeking solutions to specific problems. It can be focused on practical questions of teaching technique or considerations of the ethical and moral dimensions of practice, aimed at changing practice or at re-constructing one’s theoretical frameworks. When it takes place collectively, in a group of reflective practitioners, it not only facilitates scholarly teaching but also builds community. Group forums for reflection, such as CQU’s Reflective Teachers Group, enable participants to share information and good practice, build support networks, and create a sense of cooperation and collaboration. Whether or not it results in publications, group reflection is a scholarly activity.

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