

**[O15] The perils and possibilities of pedagogy: A critical analysis of the Teaching Fellowship Scheme and its role in promoting pedagogic research amongst HE academics**

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Whilst it is to be hoped that “Good teachers possess certain virtues whose acquisition is a practical matter” (Winch, 2004), pedagogy has also been described as “a cloistered and unsung virtue” (Yorke, 2000).

### **Background**

Since the Dearing Report (1997), the professionalisation of university teaching has been of growing importance in the UK Higher Education (HE) sector.

‘Effective teaching and learning is essential if we are to promote excellence and opportunity in higher education. High quality teaching must be recognised *and rewarded*, and best practice shared.’ (my italics) (The Future of Higher Education – Government White Paper, 2003).

One of the most obvious aspects of this has been the increasing requirement for new members of academic staff to undergo a probationary period of training in the practice of teaching to supplement their discipline-specific knowledge. To further raise the status of learning and teaching in HE, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) inaugurated in 2000 the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS) to reward excellence in HE teaching. It is the concept of excellence however, how it is defined and assessed, that has been the focus of much attention both in the NTFS and in the ‘local’ teaching fellowship schemes at the individual university level, that feed into the national process.

### **My Perspective**

Many universities then, in response to the NTFS, have set up their own local versions of the teaching fellowship scheme. Recipients of these awards may be entered into the NTFS process. At the local level however, the emphasis is still on rewarding teaching ‘excellence’ and most of the schemes adhere fairly closely to the model promulgated by the NTFS. Apart from the contested concept of ‘excellence’, the NTFS in the past made the additional assumption that the reflective approach is the one that all academics should aspire to. This concept also has rarely been critiqued or evaluated in terms of its effectiveness as a mediator of academic professional development.

From my own position however, I do think reflection upon one’s own practice, especially when conducted with colleagues in a non-judgemental atmosphere, is an important stimulus for professional growth and development. The most beneficial interventions in my own practice have come about through the observations of others and from the sharing, discussion and analysis of common problems. It is noticeable however that in the most recent documents emanating from the Higher Education Academy concerning the NTFS the emphasis upon reflection has disappeared.

In the latest version of the Scheme the aims are:

- i. to raise the profile of learning and teaching

- ii. to recognise and celebrate individuals who make an outstanding impact on the student learning experience
- iii. provide a national focus for institutional teaching and learning excellence schemes

Candidates are enjoined to prove their excellence in a number of ways:

1. **Individual excellence:** evidence of promoting and enhancing the student learning experience
2. **Raising the profile of excellence:** evidence of supporting colleagues and influencing support for student learning in (and if appropriate beyond) your institution, through demonstrating impact and engagement beyond your immediate academic or professional role.
3. **Developing excellence:** commitment to your ongoing professional development with regard to teaching and learning (and/or learning support)

(HEA website, 2009)

This still leaves the problem of how to assess 'excellence'. Additionally, as the aims and criteria of the national scheme are followed closely by individual institutions, when awarding local teaching fellowships, this emphasis on proving excellence has percolated throughout the HE sector in the UK. In my own institution, the university teaching fellowship process required that evidence for 'Claims for Excellence' were provided which followed very closely the current NTFS criteria.

Whilst I was successful in my application for a teaching fellowship at my own institution, I am in no way confident that I was able to demonstrate excellence in any of these areas. In any event the selection process for the teaching fellowship did not overtly include an appraisal of my claims in this regard. Then there is the problematic criteria, reflecting and developing practice. How any of the selection panel could ascertain whether I reflected or not on my practice is presently not clear to me.

Like many other local teaching fellowship schemes, the one at my institution was designed so that the successful applicants undertook a pedagogic research project which furthered faculty and university teaching and learning goals. It may be thought that *completing* a project successfully *first* would be one way of discerning whether an applicant could demonstrate excellence in, and a commitment to, teaching and learning which would subsequently make them eligible for a teaching fellowship award.

### Potential Problems in the NTFS Process

A quick analysis of the gender of past fellows (at least as far as could be ascertained by ascribing gender by first names) shows that 46 % more men than women are made National Teaching Fellows. It has been observed that female academics feel less confident in "playing the system" to progress themselves professionally (Vasil, 1996). This has resulted in a marked gender imbalance in the male to female ratio in the higher echelons of the academic ranks. This may account for the gender imbalance seen amongst the recipients of the National Teaching Fellowships. At a local, individual university level males occupy most of the senior managerial positions and academic career progression is dependent upon an ability to navigate this male environment. This may also be true for gaining access to the NTFS via success at being awarded a local university fellowship. Institutional barriers may then impede female progress in the NTFS as well as HE careers generally as has been pointed out by a number of authors (e.g. Bagilhole, 1993; Belenky *et al*, 1986). Currie *et al* (2000) also point out that institutions of HE are gendered workplaces in which the prevalent patriarchal context hinders the career progression of female academics even when it has been found that females on average spend more time on teaching (Acker and Feuerverger, 1996) and more time working as a whole (Morley and Walsh, 1995) than their male counterparts.

Additionally, it may be argued that the very process of professionalisation of HE teaching seeks not to empower university academics but to disenfranchise and control them. Many researchers have

highlighted the perception that academic freedoms are being curtailed in the pursuit of excellence and 'quality'. Currie *et al* (2000) employed the concept of 'the greedy institution' to show that academic staff have had to make increasing personal and professional sacrifices to conform to contemporary university systems of working. Latterly these have been informed by a university context which is 'increasingly economic and managerial' (Currie *et al*, 2000, p.269). Furthermore, 'More of academics' time, though, is now devoted to tasks not associated with research or teaching. This means, in effect, that greater inroads are made into time that would otherwise be spent with families and friends. Social life and health may suffer. General staff, like academics, are being asked to give more time to the university, work overtime and weekends while not being paid any more money to do so' (Currie *et al*, 2000, p.270).

It may be then that the NTFS in seeking to promote excellence in teaching and raise the profile of teaching and learning throughout the UK HE sector, in a closely managed process subscribing to the commercial ethos of quality, is undermining the efforts of the very staff it seeks to reward. The following quote taken from Currie *et al* (2000) is very revealing in this regard: 'An academic's time is being privatised. If you can find money to do certain things, you can buy your way out of certain responsibilities. The effect is that teaching often becomes relegated to people who have inappropriate or weak teaching experience. But this also allows people to do the important research that they want to get on with.' (Currie *et al*, 2000, p283).

The current formulation of the institutional teaching fellowship which requires one to undertake a pedagogical research project which presumably will reduce the time one is available for teaching students certainly has resonances with the above quote.

### **The perils of pedagogy**

Skelton (2004) has undertaken his own critique of the NTFS. A review of his main points is discussed below in conjunction with the work of other authors:

#### **Peril number one: how to assess teaching excellence?**

Reading through the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme rubric from the Higher Education Academy, and from the literature emanating from individual universities concerning their local university teaching fellowships that feed into the national scheme, one is struck by the fact that fellows must demonstrate excellence at teaching. It is not immediately apparent if teaching excellence is a concept which is monitored and measured by institutions or even if such a concept *can* be measured. Certainly this author has never been aware of any academics being rated for the quality of their teaching or the effectiveness of their teaching upon student learning outcomes. Skelton (2004, p452) suggests that the concept of excellence is 'located within a shifting social, economic and political context'.

Latterly, in the UK the state has attempted to use the HE system to produce productive workers in the capitalist system. The state has also imposed a huge increase in the number of students feeding through the system with no corresponding increase in funding to manage these greater numbers of students. This may be thought to be a serious detractor of teaching quality (Morley, 1997). It has however also had the effect of drawing attention to the pedagogical responses needed to cope with the new stresses imposed upon the HE system.

Since 1999 and the introduction by HEFCE of the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF) the NTFS has followed a 'directed' strategy. In the NTFS, 20 academics each year were awarded £50,000 to support various educational projects. It has been suggested that the monetary value of the awards was so high to ensure that the scheme was taken seriously in the research-orientated ethos currently prevalent in most UK HE institutions. (In the latest version of the scheme the monetary

reward is now £10,000 to be awarded to 50 candidates demonstrating teaching and learning excellence.)

However, as far back as 1993 in the UK Elton and Partington had published a paper entitled 'Teaching standards and excellence in higher education' and this and other work (Ramsden and Martin, 1996) showed that academic staff thought that **promotion** was the best way to reward and promote good teaching. Tellingly in these early surveys staff also thought that teaching 'awards' were unlikely to be helpful in the promotion of teaching in HE.

Gibbs (1995) has provided a commentary on the struggle to define teaching excellence and incorporate it into mechanisms to promote academic staff. A survey conducted in 1995 (Wright, 1995) found that most academics thought the best way to improve the quality of teaching was to include recognition of good teaching as a criterion in decisions on promotion. Despite innovations such as peer observation, student feedback questionnaires and academic posts earmarked for excellent teachers, teaching still had less importance in the practice of many academic professionals than research (Higher Education Quality Council [HEQC], 1994). This was even true of universities in the post-1992 sector which previously had been much more focused on teaching than research. This resulted in the observation that academics were unlikely to be rewarded for being identified as excellent teachers in both the post-1992 universities and in older, more established universities (Gibbs, 1995).

Even though universities may then pay lip service to the concept of excellence as a criterion for promotion little on the ground seems to have changed. Again the problem of assessing the quality of teaching is apparent. The HEQC report (1994) stated: 'at least part of this problem might be that universities had not adequately addressed the issue of what makes up quality in teaching' (p.63). Therefore, the reluctance of UK universities to promote academics through their teaching ability alone may reside in the fact that objective criteria to compare the 'excellence' of different academics' teaching is absent.

Whilst the concept of teaching excellence may be an elusive one in the UK it has been more explicitly tackled elsewhere. For the University of Sydney a definition of excellence is based on a commitment to pedagogical research, especially those improvements in student learning that relate to learning outcomes and not to the personality of the teacher. It is likely to include teaching that encourages the active engagement of the students with the learning process. In some educational institutions in the US criteria for excellence at teaching vary over an academic's career so that at each progression point in a career different threshold standards are needed to be met.

Gibbs (1995) makes the very pertinent point however that excellence at teaching at each stage of one's academic career is not, on its own, an appropriate criteria for advancement. Thus, advanced types of excellence are needed to progress into higher academic positions. This again may be another reason why excellence at teaching is not more widely used as a criteria for promotion. 'It should not be possible to be promoted repeated simply for being good at one thing' (Gibbs, 1995, p77).

Gibbs (1995) concludes from this that standards of teaching excellence are low, in comparison to the usual marker of attainment in research, award of a PhD. Most academics have had a long career of research training but few have had any pedagogical training. It is presumably this deficit that is being addressed by the increasing provision of professional doctorate programmes in education throughout the UK. Elton (1998) in warning that examples of teaching excellence would be rather rare in an untrained population also put forward the view that some form of training would be needed for academics to aspire to pedagogic excellence.

Some universities have nominated specific positions as teaching focused. Gibbs (1995) comments on a scheme from Kingston University in which one could be appointed as a Principal Lecturer for 'pedagogic excellence' on the grounds of teaching alone although sadly this scheme is no longer in place. Similarly Coventry University awards the title of Reader for educational innovation and Guildhall University had a post entitled 'Readership in Teaching'. More recently, Bristol University has announced that it will provide a specific career pathway for its teachers (including a Professorial Teaching Fellow grade called Pathway 3).

Whilst it is my personal belief that students should be included in assessing the efficacy of the teaching they experience it has been observed that immature students may not experientially or cognitively be in the best position to evaluate what constitutes good teaching. (Van Rossum and Taylor, 1987). 'They often prefer what is actually bad for them' (Gibbs, 1995, p.79). Universities should perhaps instead focus on practices which improve the quality of teaching and thus reward an academic's engagement with the teaching improvement process. In fact Warren and Plumb (1999) have identified four ways in which teaching excellence has been recognized at various UK HE institutions, traditional award schemes, teaching fellowship schemes, educational development grants and promotion/bonus schemes.

In terms of award schemes Land (1994) has found that there is some evidence that as a result of these schemes the emphasis on research shifted to teaching with an improvement in the **status** of teaching being noted. There is however, no evidence for an **improvement** in teaching as a result of these schemes. In institutions where academics could be made a University Teaching Fellow this was sometimes associated with a salary increase with the consequence that such schemes may be viewed as being expensive as well as formalising the divide between research and teaching.

For educational development grant schemes, Warren and Plumb (1999) found that these were based on a philosophy of incentive rather than reward with benefits explicitly accruing to student learning. The prospective nature of such awards tends to foster a collegial approach rather than a competitive one but again this approach may be an expensive one. Schemes which include an element of promotion or monetary gain have the obvious advantage that they raise the prestige of teaching in an institution and the beneficiaries have a long-term boost to their careers rather than a one-off award. In general however, Warren and Plumb (1999) found that all of these schemes worked best in institutions where teaching already had more emphasis.

That teaching needs to be promoted in the UK HE sector has been observed by a variety of authors (e.g. Nixon *et al* 2001). Skelton (2004) states 'the 'scholarship of teaching' is becoming just as important as 'blue skies' research or the 'scholarship of discovery' (Boyer, 1990). It is still not obvious to this UK HE academic that this is really so, especially being, as we are, in the aftermath of the latest RAE round with all the attendant focus on research that that has entailed.

### **Peril number two: losing touch with one's 'home' discipline**

There is a new wave of academics who can be viewed as discipline-specific pedagogic experts (Healey, 2000). However a possible negative outcome of choosing this path is that one might be taken less seriously as a discipline-specific researcher. NTFS fellows from research-orientated universities felt that being associated with teaching excellence in their environments meant that they were taken less seriously as discipline-specific research academics and that time devoted to teaching excellence and projects detracted from their core research activities. Additionally, some respondents reported feelings of isolation or separateness from their colleagues and occasionally being exposed to negative or ironic comments about their NTFS success.

Furthermore, devoting time to pedagogic research rather than discipline-specific research and emphasising teaching more generally in universities may result in a divergence between university

'teaching academics' and university 'research academics'. Rowland (1996) has argued that teaching and research need to be brought more closely together to really fulfill the outcomes desired of a university education.

### **Peril number three: entry into a new discipline**

There appears to be no overarching model whereby the work of teaching fellows changes as a result of the NTFS or in local practice settings and additionally there is no indication of how the fellows should interact with their wider communities. The cohort of fellows might be viewed as a resource, a source of expert knowledge which can be transmitted to others (as in the transfer theory of knowledge, Fox, 1983). However, the applicability of one person's good practice in a specific setting may not be relevant to others in a different setting.

Most of the academics were made fellows on the basis of applications which included significant elements of practical action research involving technical solutions to teaching problems. Whilst this might have the benefit of being directly relevant to the practice of the individuals concerned it may lack continuity with previous work in the same field as well as lacking a holistic view of the theoretical and epistemological basis of the research relative to other research traditions and paradigms.

The scheme originally envisaged that the fellows would work together but difficulties in achieving this objective revolved around the fact that the fellows saw themselves as subject-specific practitioners, the fellows forming groups amongst others with similar interests, some of the academics being more experienced at pedagogical interventions and fellows concentrating on meeting the aims of their own individual projects. The fact that the group was unable to successfully form a cohesive unit meant that individuals felt that they couldn't positively impact upon policy and practice as they had expected.

Surprisingly little thought seemed to have been paid as to how to ensure that fellows pursued the aims outlined in their applications. For instance, non-attendance at meetings of the fellows was not penalised and no oversight over the actual project process was exerted so that in practice some of the fellows didn't start their projects until a year and a half after they had been awarded the fellowship.

As most of the recipients of this cohort of NTFS fellows had had previous experience of educational development environments it is possible that the development of a new type of academic professional is underway i.e. the subject-specific educational developer. This new type of scholarship may bridge the divide between teaching and research. However, most of the award recipients recognised that concentration on pedagogic matters would negatively impact upon their discipline-specific research interests and this ultimately may have a negative effect on their careers especially in research intensive institutions.

The validity of the work being pursued by the fellows needs to be more closely examined. Whilst it has been recognised that there should be a stronger link between teaching practice and educational research (NERF, 2000; Universities UK, 2001 cited in Skelton 2004, p.464) and HEFCE is providing support to further pedagogical research there is a danger that academics who are non-specialists in education not well versed in the relevant literature will undertake work which is not validated by the current research. 'Good educational research, in all cases, is located conceptually and methodologically, taking into consideration relevant previous studies and literature' (Skelton, 2004, p.464).

### **Peril number four: being stretched**

Being identified as a source of pedagogic excellence in the multi-faceted and stressful working environments many HE academics work in could itself be one impediment to the elevation of the status of teaching and learning in this sector. For instance, advising senior colleagues who may have many years of teaching experience or who devote more time to research on what constitutes good

teaching practice may be fraught with the potential for conflict. Again, reflecting on the teaching and learning experience and perhaps making this an area of research inquiry may paradoxically mean less time is spent with students to the detriment of their learning. After all shouldn't a good teacher teach? Furthermore, concentrating on the student learning experience may mean getting involved in: "a swampy lowland where situations are confusing messes incapable of technical solution" (Schoen, 1983).

## **Possibilities of pedagogy**

### **Possibility number one: promotion through pedagogy**

Three of the fellows in the NTFS had been promoted to professors after having gained the fellowship due, at least in part, it was thought to their receipt of the award. This 'informal' route to promotional progression may counter the criticism levied against the NTFS that it wasn't formally tied into career progression (Currie 2000). However, it was still noted that of these 3 promotions, 2 were in post-1992 universities and the other in a teaching-orientated department of an old university. Evidently then, research-orientated staff in old universities seem unlikely to see teaching and the NTFS as a route to career progression.

All of the respondents in the work of Skelton felt that the award had been acknowledged and valued by their colleagues, students and institutions and had given them more confidence in their abilities and more likely to speak out about pedagogical matters in a variety of settings. "those people for whom being an academic is fundamentally about research....those people have to recognize.....that what I'm doing is significant" (Skelton, 2004 p.461).

Is it necessary though for excellent teachers to be excellent researchers (Stenhouse, 1975)? If the assumption is that it is then the fellows may benefit from more support of an academic and theoretical nature such as a critical friend model provided by an experienced educational researcher. This would serve to place the fellows' work in context and ensure that relevant work was being done.

Even in a more research-orientated environment fellows thought that receiving the fellowship raised the profile of teaching and validated their own emphasis on the importance of pedagogy in HE. This led a number of the fellows to the conclusion that they should perhaps concentrate even further on the pedagogical aspects of their work and become educational developers within their own disciplines. The NTFS could perhaps fruitfully examine the linkage between teaching and research in HE and how to achieve parity between teaching and research careers.

### **Possibility number two: development of a new hybrid academic**

Alternatively it may be thought that a better arrangement would be to develop a hybrid model of an academic as practitioner and as a researcher into that practice on behalf of colleagues locally and of the whole institution employing that individual.

The advantages of this kind of role are:

- i. the pre-existing knowledge and experience may ease the path of the research and facilitate the whole process due to familiarity with the context.
- ii. The results of the research may not be resisted by colleagues as might be done with externally derived research conclusions.
- iii. There may be a synergy between the roles of researcher and practitioner that greatly enhance the effectiveness of the role.

In this way practitioners can themselves help to develop and add to a pedagogic knowledge base and theory. If research was based on local, but cumulative studies, sensitive to the local context and

culture then this should make it more relevant and accessible to the local practitioners and enable them to adapt it to their own specific contexts.

“The role of teachers [as researchers] would not then be one which took them away from teaching, but one which left them firmly anchored in practice” (Foreman-Peck and Winch, 2005).

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