

Using an institutional audit to enhance the scholarship of learning and teaching: A UK case study

D.R.E. Cotton

Educational Development and Learning Technologies

University of Plymouth, UK

Plymouth, UK

Abstract

Encouraging and valuing the scholarship of teaching and learning provides a challenge for many institutions. This paper describes how an initial attempt by a team of educational developers to enhance teaching and learning through an institutional audit led to subsequent wider changes within one UK university. The audit involved interviews with 60 academics from across the university, and provided information about teaching and learning projects and also about the constraints currently inhibiting such work. These included negative evaluations of such projects by other faculty members, competing pressure to undertake discipline-based research, and a lack of appropriate skills for pedagogic research.

Introduction

For some time there has been a debate focusing on the importance of developing a scholarship of learning and teaching as an antidote to the overriding focus on disciplinary research encouraged in the UK, amongst other

things, by the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). Building on work by Boyer and colleagues at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (Boyer, 1990; Glassick *et al.* 1997; Schulman, 1993), advocates argue that academic work should be seen in a broader context which incorporates four distinct types of scholarship: the scholarship of discovery research; the scholarship of integration, including the writing of textbooks; the scholarship of service, including the practical application of knowledge; and the scholarship of teaching. It is the scholarship of teaching, and a possible model of support for such scholarship in the form of pedagogic research, which form the focus of this paper.

Healey (2000) argues that if scholarship of teaching is to match that of research, there must be a comparability of rigour, standards and esteem (Healey 2000). Lecturers in higher education must therefore learn to adopt a scholarly approach to teaching, and collect and present rigorous evidence of their effectiveness as teachers. Martin *et al.* (1999) develop Boyer's conception of scholarship of teaching to include three key elements: engagement with the scholarly contributions of others on teaching and learning; reflection on one's own teaching practice and students' learning; and communication and dissemination of aspects of practice and theoretical ideas about teaching and learning.

Increasingly, the scholarship of teaching is explicitly or implicitly being linked with undertaking pedagogic research:

We believe the aim of scholarly teaching is also simple: it is to make transparent how we have made learning possible. For this to happen, university teachers must be informed of the theoretical perspectives and literature of teaching and learning in their discipline, and be able to collect and present rigorous evidence of their effectiveness, from these perspectives, as teachers. (Trigwell *et al.* 2000, p. 156)

Andreson and Webb (2000) interpret scholarship of teaching as requiring someone to be well informed about the pedagogy of their discipline, and to be critically reflective. Schön (1995) goes further to argue that scholarly activity must take the form of action research: “If teaching is to be seen as a form of scholarship, then the practice of teaching must be seen as giving rise to new knowledge” (Schön, 1995, p.31). Developing pedagogic research capacity may therefore offer a way for teachers to acquire these skills and use them to evaluate their own teaching and curriculum developments in which they are involved. However, Yorke (2000) illustrates the potential difficulties which may be encountered in an attempt to enhance the status of pedagogic research – including the inhibiting effects of the RAE, a lack of staff expertise in pedagogic research, and a lack of co-ordination of such research. Taking account of these issues, this paper discusses a possible model by which pedagogic research may be encouraged.

The case study

This paper describes a case study of the University of Plymouth, which moved through various stages of development in order to encourage the scholarship

of teaching and learning via pedagogic research and development projects. The university has a strong record in educational development, having a long-established team of educational developers and one of the earliest accredited professional development programmes in teaching and learning in higher education (the LTHE course, attended by all new lecturers and some established staff). However, in terms of pedagogic research, the situation at this university was probably similar to many others, in that there was a considerable amount of research and development work taking place, but little in the way of co-ordination or co-operation. It was noted that across the university, there were a large number of individuals who were engaged in projects focused on teaching and learning in higher education. Some of these people were working in large, well-known research groups or organisations with considerable support available, but many more were scattered across diverse departments and had little or no contact with others working in a similar area (Fowler-Braund and Cotton, 2002).

As a first step towards bringing researchers together and increasing the level of support and cross-departmental contact available, an institutional audit of research activity was conceived. This audit, undertaken in 2002, aimed to bring together as much as possible of the research into teaching and learning in HE underway at the university and make it available to a wider audience across the University. The first stage of the project involved contacting individuals across the university who were known to be engaged in teaching and learning research in higher education. These individuals were invited to provide information about their work and also encouraged to give feedback on

the type of information which would be useful to them in such a survey. It was at this point that the development of a database was suggested, as a means of making the information from the survey available to as wide an audience as possible. The advantages of an on-line database in terms of the flexibility of searching and indexing, and the ease with which it could be kept updated were felt to outweigh any possible accessibility issues. An IT consultant was therefore employed to develop a fully searchable, easy-to-use, on-line database.

At a later date, a more widespread call for researchers to be included in the survey appeared, and interviews were carried out with approximately 60 members of staff. The survey aimed to be as inclusive as possible, with relevant research activities defined as including both large-scale funded projects and small-scale action research projects undertaken by lecturers on their own teaching activities. (In practice, a number of small scale development projects were also included in the final database). Most of the interviewees were lecturers, although the survey also included a few technicians and research assistants, and a significant number of support staff. Particularly strong areas of research were found in the areas of Health Studies, Psychology, Biology and Geography, though a number of other departments also had significant research activity. The kinds of projects undertaken were largely small scale, many having been funded by small-scale internal grants, in particular via the Student-centred Learning Initiative (SCL), and the Teaching and Learning Development Fund (TLDF), though departmental funding was also available in some disciplines. Small scale

funding was also obtained externally via bodies such as the LTSN subject centres (now part of the UK Higher Education Academy), RATIO (the Rural Areas Training Initiative). Larger-scale funding bodies including the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) generally provided support for projects by well-established individuals or groups doing large-scale research.

An immediate outcome from the audit was the development of a searchable database available to practitioners wishing to develop their own teaching or to undertake further research. The aim of the database was to forge links between members of staff from diverse disciplines, but with similar interests in teaching and learning. It also enables researchers to find out about previous projects in their field of interest. The database can be accessed via <http://www.pedres.net> and it is updated at regular intervals, currently including more than 120 projects. Research covers a wide variety of areas, as reflected in the range of keywords on the database (over 100). This is perhaps indicative of the lack of co-ordination of teaching and learning projects across the university as a whole. Despite attempts by the university's teaching and learning development fund (TLDF) to encourage bids focused on discrete areas of concern, there were few areas in which more than two or three studies existed, and in which any level of coherence in research output had been achieved.

Where it was possible to distinguish recurring themes within the projects, these were themes considered key in the teaching and learning strategy, and which had been encouraged by internal funding calls. These included issues related to transition, retention and progression of students; student-centred learning; and expansion of computer-assisted learning in terms of learning resources for near and distance learning, on-line formative assessment, and software development to aid marking of student work. These reflect key themes in the University's Learning and Teaching Strategy, and the subsequent Learning and Teaching Action Plan. Projects relating to institutional priorities had been explicitly encouraged in bids for internal funding, and there was therefore more coherence than in other areas, although some degree of overlap between different projects existed even here.

Constraints on Pedagogic Research

An unexpected by-product of the survey was the discovery of a wealth of subjective and objective constraints acting upon lecturers who attempted to undertake teaching and learning research and development projects. This was partly due not only to negative evaluations of such projects by staff in the disciplines and the lack of clarity as to where pedagogic research might fit in the research assessment exercise, but also due to a lack of appropriate educational research skills.

The key issues appeared to be twofold:

1. There was a lack of knowledge about educational theory and methodologies amongst many of the teaching and learning researchers across the university.
2. Research was not being published because staff were not familiar with appropriate journals, and did not have access to adequate support or advice.

These two issues appear to be linked in that many people were not able to publish in education journals because they simply did not have sufficient background in education to enable them to do so. Advice and support from within their departments was difficult to obtain and cross-department collaboration difficult (The situation may have been exacerbated at this institution by the placement of the Education Faculty on a different campus, some 60 miles away). Other issues which arose related to lack of knowledge about funding opportunities – although more often research was funded but never written up.

In an attempt to counter these problems, a number of structural changes were made within Educational Development (ED) and the wider university. Two new roles were developed, namely those of a research co-ordinator and research advisor in ED. These appointments were made to enable a more co-ordinated approach to pedagogic research and development projects to evolve, and to provide lecturers in the disciplines with a line of support and advice for undertaking such projects. A series of staff development workshops was initiated, advising lecturers on research methods, sources of funding, and

publication possibilities. Individual advice is also offered to lecturers about issues such as planning research, developing questionnaires and interview schedules, and writing for publication - in one instance resulting in a co-authored publication. Members of staff are encouraged to gain greater knowledge and understanding of the literature, and to develop research skills with which to investigate their practice and that of others. Research on teaching and learning has also been explicitly approved at the highest level, forming a prominent part of the redrafted institutional teaching and learning strategy - although the extent to which this is translated into practice varies.

Other changes within the institution include altering the funding of teaching and learning projects with a move away from the TLDF towards a new Teaching Fellowship Award Scheme (TFAS). This scheme aims to provide funds so that members of staff have the opportunity to undertake innovative developmental work in teaching and learning. The scheme is closely linked to the University Learning and Teaching Strategy and applicants are encouraged to focus on learning and teaching priorities, thereby leading to more focused bids linking with key themes. The scheme also explicitly encourages members of the staff to use part of the fund to support their own personal and professional development. Award holders join an informal network of teaching fellows which meets several times a year, and they are encouraged to develop the pedagogic research potential of their projects. Reports are increasingly focused on providing evidence of the publication potential of the project (copies of draft publications or conference papers may be submitted)

in order to encourage teaching and learning work to be written up during the life-span of the project, rather than waiting to find the time after it has finished.

More recently, the influence of the nationally-funded Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) has made a substantial difference both to the status and extent of pedagogic research at the university. The award of four CETLs, plus a share in a fifth CETL (worth a total of £18 million over 5 years) has increased the number of researchers working in this area considerably, and some large scale pedagogic research strands have been initiated. The work of the research co-ordinator and research advisor has become even more crucial, as has the need for some level of institutional co-ordination. Future plans to provide support for teaching and learning projects at the university therefore include the proposal to establish an Institute for Higher Education Practice. Such an institute would give a high-profile focus for teaching and learning projects, as well as providing support and information about teaching and learning issues. It would have an advisory and consultancy role, developing a body of expertise on issues in HE so that individual academics, course teams, departments, faculties or senior managers of the university could consult the institute for advice on decisions about practice and policy.

Conclusion

The survey of teaching and learning activity at the University of Plymouth revealed a number of issues which needed to be addressed to enable staff to engage effectively in the scholarship of learning and teaching. Even amongst

staff who were currently active in this field, aspects of teaching scholarship considered to be central in the literature were frequently lacking. For example, both engagement with the scholarly contributions of others on teaching and learning (awareness of previous work), and communication and dissemination of aspects of practice and theoretical ideas about teaching and learning (Martin *et al.*, 1999) were frequently rather limited. Jenkins (2002) raises the question of whether staff who carry out pedagogic research have the 'competence' to do so, and this does appear to be an issue for some of the staff interviewed. However, rather than discourage staff from undertaking such research or even, as Jenkins suggests "... encourage staff to (initially) use the disciplinary research traditions with which they feel comfortable", individuals can be encouraged to fulfil their potential by the provision of training opportunities and resources focused on plugging these gaps.

Dissemination of teaching and learning projects was greatly increased by the development of the database, in line with the view of Andreson and Webb (2000), in which more formal scholarship activities involve presenting work to an ever-expanding audience. Staff are encouraged to publish a short summary of their project on the database, they have opportunities to present their work at an internal seminar or the annual teaching and learning conference, and they are advised on how they might submit papers to peer-reviewed journals. However, the external constraints acting upon university staff which prevent them from undertaking pedagogic research are harder to remove. Many authors have noted the negative effect of the RAE:

Pedagogic research has long held Cinderella status in the UK ... Though often patronised with words of encouragement, it has not really been recognised or valued by the 'ugly sisters' of the QAA and in particular the Research Assessment Exercise. (Jenkins 2002)

Although pedagogic research can now notionally be included in the RAE, the extent to which this will occur is difficult to gauge at this stage.

In contrast to the disciplinary-based approach to developing the scholarship of teaching and learning advocated by Healey (2000) and others, this case study illustrates the potential benefits that can accrue from increasing centralised support for teaching and learning projects. Advantages include cross disciplinary co-ordination reducing the overlap of projects undertaken in differing faculties and increasing cross-fertilisation of ideas from different disciplines; increased visibility of teaching and learning projects aided by the university-wide database; and strength in numbers, especially if supported by a central institution such as that described above. The overall effect is to increase the status of teaching and learning scholarship in higher education by making it rigorous, visible and accountable.

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