



# Faculty Forum

*From the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence*

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## **GOOD RESEARCHERS ARE GOOD TEACHERS: A MYTH**

There is a well-established myth that good researchers are good teachers, but empirical evidence shows no necessary relationship between research and teaching. Researchers reviewing studies between 1970 and 1985 have found no evidence of a positive or negative relationship between research and teaching (bibliographic information available upon request). Correlational studies simply do not support the hypothesized, supportive relationship between research and teaching.

Jens-Jorgen Jensen suggests that the relationship between teaching and research is more complex. This Danish author posits that the relationship varies, depending on teaching level and discipline. Research is more likely to be related to graduate teaching than undergraduate teaching, particularly in the sciences. In the humanities, research and teaching are less related, though the relation that exists is manifested more consistently across graduate and undergraduate lines.

Why, then, do otherwise knowledgeable people continue to believe in and spread the myth? David Webster suggests a simple explanation: we would like it to be true. He suggests that we maintain the myth to support what we like to do--research--instead of doing what students, parents, and legislators want us to do--teach. To justify to ourselves that we are meeting students' needs (and parents' and legislators' expectations) we convince ourselves that research is directly related to teaching. That way we do not have to feel guilty about taking time and other scarce resources away from students. We kid ourselves that our research is really in the best interest of our students and that enhancing our research enhances our teaching. How cozy! Unfortunately, the empirical evidence indicates that enhancing research does not necessarily enhance teaching. It may, but it also may not.

Lewis Elton raises a more serious, systematic argument. He states that we have asked the wrong question. He asks, "how are teaching and research related to scholarship?" Elton argues that teaching can be related to "scholarship" if we understand the true meaning of "scholarship."

The current model of the research university, imported into the United States when Johns Hopkins University was founded in 1876, is based on three concepts in the German ideal of the university. These concepts are academic freedom for faculty, freedom of learning for students, and "science." However, the

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interpretation of the third concept, "science" ("Wissenschaft" in German), is problematic.

Harold Perkin writes that *Wissenschaft* "was not a thing but a process, an approach to learning, an attitude of mind, a skill, and a capacity to think rather than a specialized form of knowledge." He adds, "*Wissenschaft*, far from denoting natural science, lay much nearer to the traditional humanism inherited from the medieval university." Similarly, Lewis Elton uses the word "Naturwissenschaft" to indicate the difference between scholarship and our concept of science, stating that "*Wissenschaft* contains notions of scholarship from the humanities point of view, but that notion of scholarship is absent from *Naturwissenschaft*."

What Perkins and Elton are suggesting is that at this point scholarship and research diverge. The qualities of scholarship or "*Wissenschaft*" are more appropriate to teaching, a process, than to research, which is generally thought of as a product. The assumption that good researchers are good teachers is based on a misunderstanding of the historical development of scholarship and research.

Research implies a tightening of focus while scholarship pertains to breadth. The reason that teaching might relate to scholarship is that it takes the breadth of scholarship to develop master teachers while the sharp focus of research, though important, does not generate the knowledge or skills of a master teacher.

The teacher is not a phonograph, playing back bits of information which he has gathered hither and yon. Rather he is personally responsible for having encountered the world of knowledge and for having fashioned out of this encounter something called subject matter. (Pfnister, 1970, p. 228)

What differentiates scholars from researchers is the breadth of knowledge from which scholars manufacture a subject matter to teach to students, a subject matter that is an individual creation of the mind. As researchers narrow their focus to understand the detail revealed by their methodology, they move further away from manufacturing a subject matter that is pertinent to the student, particularly the undergraduate student.

The tension between research and teaching has existed in United States universities since the late 1800s. It is unlikely that we are going to resolve the issue easily. However, blind adherence to mythology does not contribute to scholarship, research, or teaching. Western Carolina University's Role and Mission Statement asserts that scholarship can be manifested through teaching, service, and/or research. Perhaps it is time to take a hard look at our mythologies, practice the diligence that we preach, and inform all of our activities with scholarship.

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