

Scholarship in Teaching

Like those at other colleges and universities, faculty members at Western engage in the perennial process of determining tenure and promotion using criteria that are ozone-like (there's at least one hole in it isn't there?). We seem to have endless discussions about teaching, service, and research, discussing their relative value and how to assess each of them. My impression is that service generally is slighted at WCU while teaching is measured with a very rough yardstick. Most faculty are considered adequate in teaching and teaching is sort of checked off as "okay." Research then becomes the critical factor. After all, it's relatively easy to count publications and to sort them into their various categories, such as articles in refereed journals, chapters in books, reviews, and so forth. Maybe there's a better way.

I am not satisfied with the way research seems to be evaluated by me and others. Counting publications seems inadequate. A few years ago a committee on campus reviewed the term "scholarship" and how we defined "scholarship." Maybe "scholarship" is a better term than "research" for what we want in faculty members. However, I don't think that it is a matched substitute for research (leaving us with "teaching, service, and scholarship"). I think that if we valued scholarship more in all we do, research (as we have considered research) would not be the critical component of tenure and promotion decisions that it currently seems to be.

I would like to see scholarship be an important part of teaching in particular. If we value teaching as we say we do in our mission statement and elsewhere, scholarship should, I think, be an important part of it. Teaching is enjoying new popularity across the country. Several institutions, large and small, are touting their renewed commitment to teaching. Our institution is on the leading edge of this movement with the active Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence and the new Institute for College and University Teaching. We ought to find a way to really value teaching, and scholarship is the ingredient that can make teaching substantial. The problem is how to do it.

Evidence of scholarship in teaching would raise teaching above our current standards, which seem to be based on how popular a course or instructor is with students. Evidence of scholarship in teaching might include the following:

1. Syllabi that show careful development and understanding of content,
2. Readings or other resource material that demonstrate currency in the field,
3. Relevant assignments and exercises that require higher level thinking and application,
4. Examinations that require students to demonstrate application of skill and knowledge,
5. Methodology that is varied, appropriate, and consistent with current best practices, and
6. Program development that includes reviews, revisions, and changes in program components such as courses and admission standards.

Others can certainly add to this list. I'm not certain how each item above can be applied to every discipline or instructor, but I am certain that scholarship is important and ought to be recognized.

What would this mean in operational terms? A colleague of mine in the College of Education and Psychology provides a good example of a "teaching scholar." Each course she teaches uses a different method or mode. Lecture/discussion is used for some courses, but not all; the approach to each course and even each class is reviewed and changed to fit current thought in her field, which means the textbook, readings, and even the seating are subject to change to fit the goals of the course. Assignments and exams are carefully developed to encourage problem-solving and reflective thought; outside resources are often used, and students are connected with other individuals who are experts in a particular project on which the student is working. Working in this way, my colleague takes risks by trying a book, an assignment, a unit, or an approach that she has only heard or read about. Since her involvement in program development influences the way her program is structured and since she is responsible for innovative approaches to evaluating the work of graduate students, these activities seem to be strong evidence of scholarship in teaching. But her scholarship appears in course materials such as syllabi and through the observation of her teaching rather than in publications. Her work might also not be reflected in student course evaluations, but her activities are authentic manifestations of scholarship because they result from her currency in her academic field.

Now might be an opportune time to highlight the role of scholarship in teaching and subsequently reduce the burden of producing publications that can be simply counted. Research that adds to and complements teaching but doesn't result in a publication can therefore be acknowledged. Published research can and does complement teaching and we ought to expect it and reward it. However, we should also expect and reward scholarship wherever it occurs and certainly in teaching.

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