

Preconceptions, perceptions and misconceptions: embedding scholarship in the teaching of modern languages at university

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Abstract

Scholarship lacks a clear definition in spite of the work carried out by Boyer (1990) and numerous others since. This is particularly problematic in relation to teaching-focused academics for whom engagement with scholarship is important for professional recognition and career progression. This paper analyses data from a survey of research and teaching-focused academics in a UK university department, comparing their conceptualisations of scholarship with institutional definitions. A strategy to improve understanding of and engagement with scholarship is presented and recommendations for a broader understanding of the concept, in keeping with that originally proposed by Boyer, are made.

Keywords: scholarship; teaching-focused academics; Boyer; scholarly teaching; scholarship of learning and teaching;

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Introduction

Almost all colleges pay lip service to the trilogy of teaching, research, and service, but when it comes to making judgements about professional performance, the three rarely are assigned equal merit. Today when we speak of being 'scholarly', it usually means having academic rank in a college or university and being engaged in research and publication (Boyer, 1990, p. 15).

25 years after Boyer, definitions of scholarship remain problematic. In the UK, the definition of scholarship is further problematised by differences in British and American usage of term and by the clear distinction drawn in many UK institutions between scholarship and research, with scholarship often associated with the work of teaching-focused academics and research with their research-focused colleagues. Indeed, the need to more effectively operationalise the term is evident from the academic and institutional attention it is currently being given, for example, with the recent publication of an extensive UK Higher Education Academy project specifically into the scholarship of teaching and learning (Fanghanel, Pritchard, Potter & Wisker, 2016). This paper has two main aims: to explore preconceptions, perceptions and misconceptions of scholarship within the context of UK higher education and to consider ways of enhancing engagement with it. It will argue that most current definitions of scholarship are too narrow to encompass the range of professional activities in which academics engage, and, more specifically, that a less restrictive understanding of the concept would allow the work of teaching-focused academics to be better recognised and valued.

The paper begins with a brief review of conceptualisations of scholarship since Boyer. The context of our own study is then set out (the School of Modern Languages and Cultures in Durham University in the UK), followed by discussion of our methodology (discourse analysis of interviews with faculty, UK higher education research-funding policy statements and university human resources documents). After presentation and analysis of the data, the conclusion offers the example of an institutional strategy to promote scholarship, in support of an argument for a return to a broader, more inclusive understanding of what scholarship means in terms of academic practice.

Literature review

Scholarship, for Boyer, included the full range of activities in which American academics were engaged: "discovery" (original research contributing to the "advancement of knowledge"); "integration" (research integrated and applied within and across disciplines); "application" (later "engagement") (knowledge and academic rigour applied as social engagement); and "teaching" (all of the activities surrounding teaching practice and student learning) (1990; 1996). Although some subsequent studies retained a broad focus (e.g. Glassick, Huber & Maeroff, 1997; Rice 1991; 1992; 2002), most shifted attention to a more limited consideration of the scholarship of teaching specifically. In particular, an important distinction was made early on between scholarly teaching and the scholarship of teaching and learning, between self-reflexive, discipline and pedagogically-informed, quality teaching, and formal, published research into teaching and student learning (most notably, Bass 1999; Shulman 1999; 2000; Hutchings & Shulman 1999; Richlin, 2001). Here, the scholarship of teaching is closely aligned to Boyer's categories of discovery and integration by stressing "question-asking, inquiry, and investigation" and by insisting on the need for scholarship to be "public ('community property'), open to critique and evaluation, and in a form that others can build on" (Hutchings & Shulman, 1999). It is to go beyond simply sharing teaching tips and should mirror research in the disciplines by approaching teaching problems as something to be "investigated, analysed, represented and debated" (Bass, 1999).

Early initiatives, such as the Carnegie Foundation's Centre for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning in the US (from 1998) and the establishment of academic societies such as the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (founded in 2004), further reinforced the trend to focus attention on the scholarship of teaching and to recognise the importance of both quality teaching and of scholarship as a form of research. Similarly, in the UK, establishment of the Higher Education Academy in 2003 helped embed scholarly approaches to teaching and a culture of teaching and learning research within the higher education landscape. At around the same time, a project into scholarship by the largest of the UK HE funding councils again focused mainly on the scholarship of teaching and created a new UK-specific terminology to distinguish academic activities

associated with professional development and quality teaching (“pedagogic development” or “PedD”) from those associated with formal research into learning and teaching (“pedagogic research” or “PedR”) (Gordon, d’Andrea, Gosling & Stefani, 2003).

Nevertheless, uncertainty about the precise definition of scholarship remains. If the scholarship of teaching involves research, how does it differ from Boyer's categories of "discovery" and "integration", and how does it relate to teaching-focused academics? Should research into teaching be given greater consideration than teaching excellence? What about the scholarship of engagement or service? A number of studies have already pointed explicitly to a lack of clarity and consensus in relation to definitions of scholarship (for example, Andresen 2000; Atkinson, 2001; Kreber 2002; 2003; 2005; Bowden 2007; Albers 2007) and this is implicit in numerous others. Most recently, however, the authors of the UK HEA project, while noting problems due to a lack of clarity, sought to avoid offering yet another new definition of scholarship, opting instead to propose a broader, more flexible "definitional framework", allowing a variety of different types of scholarship practices and contexts to be included within any understanding of the concept (Fanghanel et al., 2016).

The School of Modern Languages and Cultures at Durham University

The School of Modern Languages and Cultures at Durham is a relatively large academic department within a medium-sized research-intensive university. There are approximately 1000 undergraduate and more than 100 postgraduate students in the School, taught by nearly 120 staff on either research or teaching-focused contracts. The core degree programme is a BA in Modern Languages and Cultures (covering 8 language areas) but teaching is also provided for a number of other Combined and Joint Honours undergraduate degrees. Postgraduate students either follow a taught course or study by research. Finally, there is also a Centre for Foreign Language Study, which offers both credit and non-credit-bearing elective language modules and evening classes to students on any Durham degree programme as well as to staff and members of the public. In total there are:

- 56 Research-active academics – with 770 workload hours for *research* out of a total of 1540
- 21 Teaching Fellows (on teaching-focused contracts) – with 385 hours for *scholarship* out of a total of 1540
- 19 Assistant Teaching Fellows (on teaching-focused contracts) – with 192 hours for *scholarship* out of a total of 1540
- 22 Part-time teachers (on teaching-focused contracts), who have no allowance for scholarship. However, for each hour of teaching they are also allocated and paid for one hour of preparation.

Methodology

The data was gathered by conducting interviews with 10 teaching-focused and 9 research-active staff members, and by analysis of Durham University human resources materials alongside other institutional or national policy documents, all available online. In the interviews, respondents were asked about what they understood by “scholarship”. The data is therefore mainly qualitative, providing a sense of how academics in the School perceive the concept of scholarship. Within the data, we searched for key words or categories mentioned by more than two people. In terms of a definition of scholarship, the results were as follows:

Teaching-focused academics

- Professional development as a teacher (6/10)
- Research (6/10) (including pedagogical, discipline-specific and action based research)
- Sharing good practice (3/10)
- Attending conferences (2/10)

Research-active academics

- Research (6/9) (research in second language acquisition; untheorised research; research that is not ground-breaking, or research aligned to the interests of teaching-focused academics)
- 'What teaching-focused academics do' (3/9)

Analysis

Predictably, then, our findings supported the existing literature and a similar study by Atkinson in 2001, in that both teaching-focused and research-active academics tended to equate scholarship with some form of research. A distinct definition of scholarship is therefore elusive precisely because amongst academics themselves scholarship is not adequately differentiated from research (Atkinson 2001).

Responses from research-active academics, considered separately, demonstrated a very general understanding of scholarship which was not, on the whole, informed by the literature or by a significant engagement with the scholarship of teaching and learning. Moreover, there was no mention that 'impact' or other forms of academic service or engagement could be considered as scholarship. At the same time, however, research-active academics clearly considered scholarship to be a second rate form of research without the rigour and seriousness expected from research within the disciplines ("it does not have to have a theoretical framework"; "it is normally on the teaching subject"; "it would be in second language acquisition"; "it does not necessarily have to be original or transformative").

This limited view of scholarship also reflected the opinion of some of the teaching-focused academics who felt that scholarship was ongoing professional development, keeping up-to-date with the subject taught and teaching materials and applying subject or disciplinary expertise in teaching. There is no mention in their responses of publication and dissemination of this scholarship beyond presentations at internal and external 'sharing

good practice' events. This may point to a perception that the workload allowance for scholarship is not sufficient to allow teaching-focused academics to get involved in more rigorous, transformative and ground-breaking discipline or pedagogic research. Finally, as with their research-active colleagues, teaching-focused academics made no mention of service or engagement as a form of scholarship, in spite of the fact that many are actively involved in a range of public service activities.

In terms of professional recognition and career development, the question therefore arises as to whether teaching-focused academics should be expected to engage with scholarship beyond maintaining subject expertise and carrying out basic teaching preparation. Moreover, if they are to engage with other forms of scholarship, with which kinds of scholarship should they engage? Whereas, across the sector, engagement with scholarship is already taken into account, either explicitly or implicitly, in the recognition of teaching excellence and in decisions about career progression and promotion, there is often a lack of clarity and transparency about exactly what is valued and required. Indeed, the Fanghanel et al. (2016) project report notes variation in the application of promotion criteria relating to scholarship, with most institutions again conflating scholarship and research, recognising scholarship most easily in the form of publications, and prioritising discipline-related over pedagogic research; the extent to which pedagogic development is supported and valued is often much less clear (Fanghanel et al., 2016). There is, then, a need to explicitly operationalise the term within the context of any particular institution and to specify transparently what is expected of teaching-focused academics in terms of career development and progression.

This has been achieved to some extent in Modern Languages at Durham, where, over past academic year, a number of strategies have been implemented in order to enhance understanding of and engagement with scholarship among teaching-focused academics. This includes the development of a detailed definition of scholarship within the immediate context of the School and the broader context of the discipline of Modern Languages, and the introduction of an annual scholarship review to sit alongside the annual staff review process. The concept of scholarship was also further operationalised through formal and informal discussions amongst stakeholders, focus group sessions and in committee-level

consideration of the issues involved, all taking place over a period of several months. Teaching-focused academics have been encouraged to develop their scholarship activities, participate in and organise scholarship-related events and to actively seek the dissemination of their outputs.

Research and scholarship

In Durham University, more generally there has also been a drive towards a more transparent distinction between the roles research-active academics and teaching-focused academics are expected to carry out.

Before 2013, definitions of scholarship and research on the University's human resources webpages lacked detail and were limited. Research, for example, was defined as "original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding" and "the mainstay of work submitted to the RAE [UK Research Assessment Exercise]". Scholarship was "the creation, development and maintenance of the intellectual infrastructure of subjects and disciplines" which "might take the form of dictionaries, scholarly editions, catalogues and contributions to major research databases and does not embody original research". The main distinction here being that research is original whereas scholarship is not. Moreover, the element of pedagogical development within scholarship was limited to discipline-related teaching preparation and described as "the work we undertake in preparation for teaching; keeping up to date with developments in the subject area to ensure our teaching is 'research informed'".

The same webpages currently provide more detailed information and guidance. Scholarship for teaching-focused academics is presented as a combination of "pedagogic research" and "pedagogic development". Pedagogic research is defined as an "investigation undertaken employing formal research methodologies in the field of teaching and education" whereas pedagogic development "includes informal activities e.g. mentoring, giving feedback as well as projects investigating aspects of teaching, learning and the subject, to find ways of improving student learning". Moreover, a comprehensive

list of concrete examples of scholarly activities and outputs is provided, including: “Contributing to or writing a) texts e.g. papers, books, reports, good practice guidance etc.; b) electronic media e.g. websites”; “Peer reviewing journals or texts”; “Generating evidence-based ideas and making changes to practice”; “Contributing to the educational skills of colleagues”; “Giving seminars”; “Running workshops”; “Attending the seminars and assisting research groups”; “Publishing in academic journals”; “Winning research funding”; “Being an active member of a professional body”. Scholarship is also explicitly linked to career progression as these activities and outputs “are key factors with regard to promotion”. Here too, detail is supplied so as to give an indication of what scholarship would look like at various points on a career pathway: “at the Professorial Teaching Fellow level, one would expect international impact and for this to be recognised as being the case by senior peers in the subject” (Durham University, 2016). Problems do remain. Realistically, it would seem difficult to achieve international impact within a discipline without conducting original research of some kind. It should therefore be made clear that although teaching-focused academics are not contractually required to engage in original research, they are encouraged to do so in order to achieve the highest level of promotion available to them. Moreover, while the scope of scholarship is extended beyond activities purely related to teaching (e.g. with membership of a professional body), more could be done to encourage and develop the scholarship of engagement.

Conclusions and recommendations

Definitions here are not just problematic in terms of unpicking Boyer’s four categories of scholarship or distinguishing between scholarly teaching and the scholarship of teaching and learning. Used by both non-specialists and specialists, the term ‘scholarship’ itself is not entirely transparent. For non-specialists, scholarship is associated with ‘learning at a high level’, study in general, or academic achievement; it may also have the meaning of a grant or some form of financial support for education. For Boyer, however, scholarship seems to be an overarching term used to define the broad professional practice of academics and including all forms of research, service and teaching. However, this understanding of scholarship, common among North American academics, does not

entirely match UK usage. In UK higher education, institutional definitions of scholarship are more likely to present it not as a superordinate term but as a subcategory of academic practice. It is often contrasted with research (for example in the definitions used for the RAE (2008) and REF (2014)) and considered to be something carried out by teaching-focused rather than research-focused academics (as is clear from HR documents available on numerous UK university websites). Scholarship in the UK is frequently the poor relation of serious academic research and the term is often selected to explicitly or implicitly exclude other forms of academic practice such as disciplinary research or activities relating to impact or engagement.

If the term scholarship is not going to be used in the UK as a superordinate, and if it is to refer to the activities in which teaching-focused academics engage, then it should be understood broadly and should not be limited to research and publication in the scholarship of teaching and learning. This will allow the inclusion of a range of academic activities (research, integration, engagement, teaching) within its scope. Curriculum development, mentoring and peer review, student engagement and learning enhancement initiatives, academic support and advising, expertise applied in a range of local, national and international partnerships with private and public organisations beyond academia, contributions to subject and professional associations, and various outreach activities can all be mapped onto an understanding of different types of scholarship. Variation in types and levels of engagement with scholarship across individuals and institutions could, in this way, be more effectively recognised. This brings us back to a key recommendation, which has been mentioned throughout this paper, namely, the need for each institution to operationalise the term within its own context of practice and to make it transparent.

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