

## **Continuing Professional Development in Higher Education – the role of the scholarship of teaching and learning**

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### **Abstract**

The article argues for appropriate links between the continuing development of academic teachers (CPD in HE) and the decisive role in this of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), going back to Humboldt's famous prescription of 1809 for the future University of Berlin. However – and in contrast to his fundamental dichotomy between university and school – over the past 200 years a quite different dichotomy has become dominant, the dichotomy between research and teaching, wholly in conflict with Humboldt's beliefs who saw them as a unity. It is argued that the changes in universities since then and particularly over the past twenty years do not challenge the fundamental Humboldtian principle of a university as a community of scholars – teachers and students – although this community may have to adapt more radically to the 21<sup>st</sup> century than it might like. On the other hand, recent managerial changes are totally against the spirit of the Humboldtian university and potentially endanger the future of universities, not only in England but worldwide. The paper finally argues that the professionalisation of university teaching on the basis of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) could give universities a freedom in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, similar to that which Humboldt gave them in the 19<sup>th</sup> and illustrates this point through an extensive case study.

**Key words:** The Humboldtian University, Continuing professional development, Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Unity of research and teaching, Managerialism.

## Introduction

There have been two recent developments in the area of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: a recognition of the importance of the continuing development of academics in teaching and learning (CPD in HE) and the possible role in this development of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). This article aims to argue for appropriate links between the two.

To understand the meaning of SoTL, one must first understand the meaning of the word 'scholarship' more generally. According to the Oxford English Dictionary it is a translation of the German word *Wissenschaft*, and it can be traced back to Humboldt's famous prescription for the future University of Berlin (Humboldt 1810, English translation: Humboldt 1970). Humboldt was concerned with both research and teaching, and he established a fundamental dichotomy between university and school, according to which the university – in contrast to school – treats scholarship always "in terms of not yet completely solved problems, whether in research or teaching, while school is concerned essentially with agreed and accepted knowledge". The consequence, as he says in a most thought provoking sentence of his memorandum, is that in universities

*"the teacher is then not there for the sake of the student, but both have their justification in the service of scholarship".*

This contrast between school and university to-day is not as absolute as Humboldt thought 200 years ago and the importance of inquiry based learning at school level is now fully recognised (e.g. Stenhouse 1975, Bruner 1977, Elliott 1991), but broadly speaking research is not a school function and his characterisation of work at school level is as described by him. In contrast, the collaborative principle which he enunciated for higher education applies to both research and teaching. However – and unfortunately – over the past 200 years a quite different dichotomy has become dominant, the dichotomy between research and teaching, wholly in contrast to Humboldt's beliefs, who saw them as a unity.

The arguably most regrettable feature of the dichotomy between research and teaching is that it has led to a skewed value system of by now long standing, with research being considered significantly more prestigious than teaching. In contrast, SoTL aims to

achieve – in the service of scholarship – not only a unity between the practice of teaching and learning and research into teaching and learning, but an overall unity of teaching and research, i.e. disciplinary as well as generic teaching and learning, together with disciplinary research and research into teaching and learning; all in the service of scholarship (*Wissenschaft*). It is this originally Humboldtian approach to the work of universities, which is – or should be - fundamental to SoTL.

### **The relevance of Humboldt today**

The changes in universities over the past twenty years have been of two kinds. Regarding external changes, Watson and Maddison (2005) provide a perceptive account of just how much the world, in the way that it affects universities, has changed in that time - e.g. through massification (Trow 2005) - which may be thought to raise deep questions regarding the applicability of principles which will be 200 years old next year. Yet, they do not challenge the fundamental Humboldtian principle of a university as a learning community of scholars, teachers and students, although this community may have to adapt more radically to the 21<sup>st</sup> century than it would like. The other and much more worrying change is managerial, leading to top down management and dirigiste pressures from Government. Such management and dirigism go totally against the spirit of the Humboldtian university (Elton 2008a) and are potentially endangering the future of universities, not only in England [1], but in all Europe (e.g. Bennich-Björkman 2007). Yet 'no change' was not a viable option. Could there be a modus which gives universities a freedom in the 21<sup>st</sup> century similar to that which Humboldt gave them in the 19<sup>th</sup>? Clearly, in many ways it would be very different from its so successful predecessor; it would be necessary to reinterpret both the relationship between teachers and students in the light of massification and the famous prescription (Humboldt 1810, Elton 2008a) of 'in loneliness and freedom', as well as the change of status of the academic profession. What would remain are the fundamental nature of an adult relationship between teachers and students and the paradox arising from complexity theory (Elton 2008a) that has provided the rationale for the Humboldtian university, universities best serve the state and the communities in which they are embedded as well as scholarship (*Wissenschaft*), if university staff have maximum freedom of action as individuals and in small groups.

Even then, there is no certainty that universities will act in socially responsible ways, as was demonstrated for example by the unquestioned need of enforcing change in Oxbridge in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, where the inward looking attitudes of individual academics had led, at the next higher complexity level, to inward looking institutions, but that need was met successfully by a Royal Commission - acting as *deus ex machina* - not by the kind of constant and petty interference from outside that universities suffer from at present. Furthermore, there is little evidence of today's academics being largely opposed to governmental aims or inward looking.

A good area to start might be a Humboldtian approach to the assurance and enhancement of teaching quality, something that the Humboldtian university of the 19<sup>th</sup> century sadly never attempted. However, such an approach would be very different from that of the British Quality Assurance Agency, if only because it is not always possible to articulate detailed descriptions of quality statements without distorting them – they invariably contain a tacit component which would lose in meaning through being made overt (González & Burwood 2003, Elton 2008b) [2].

### **Universities and Society**

Is it too late to maintain what is best in universities, while changing them to be fit for today and to-morrow? And if not, could Humboldt be the man to guide us in this venture? Answers to these questions raise the deeper issues of the relationship of universities and the society which they serve, and as Laurillard (Ashwin, ed. 2006, p.76) has remarked:

*“universities have to manage on the large scale the same values, aspirations and modus operandi they used for a privileged elite.”*

The Humboldtian university maintained a distance from the state that was severely tested in 1837, when seven professors in Göttingen - the “Göttinger Sieben” who included the brothers Grimm - were dismissed by the King of Hanover for protesting against a violation of the constitution (Paulsen 1908, p. 260). A hundred years later, no similar protest came from their successors against the dismissal of Jewish professors under Hitler and it is difficult to imagine protests of this kind – under much less

threatening circumstances - from the Vice-Chancellors' Organisation UUK against the current attacks by British Governments on academic freedom today, designed to favour top down management, short term objectives and utilitarianism in both teaching and research. Thus, the suggestion of an Academic Decalogue and a Hippocratic Oath (Watson 2007), designed to reinforce responsible academic freedom and based on the work of Ashby (1969), who knew the Humboldtian system better than any other English person, then or now, should be taken seriously.

### **The advent of SoTL**

A promising way to achieve a high quality system of research and teaching in universities might come out of the recent development of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). Although the current view of SoTL derives from the revolutionary work of Boyer (1990) on his 'four scholarships', the current concept that scholarship should underpin all the activities of universities owes much more to Humboldt than to Boyer. The difference arises from a fundamental difference between Anglo-Saxon and German thinking, the former being essentially Aristotelian and analytic (either/or), while German thinking is Hegelian and synthetic (not only, but also). At the same time, it must be stressed that practice in Germany has moved far from its Humboldtian past and it would be wrong to look to to-day's Germany for a Humboldtian future (Hartwig 2007).

If teaching is as important as research and research into teaching is as important as research in the disciplines, then we should demand a preparation for SoTL equivalent but not necessarily equal to the kind of preparation required for disciplinary research. Thus, while the latter is normally at the level of a first degree in the appropriate discipline, this would not be appropriate as an introduction to SoTL, which is not normally taken up by academics until after they are established in their disciplines. It should therefore be in the form of continuing professional development and involve a postgraduate qualification – Diploma or Master's degree.

Thus our present position, which only satisfies the belief that we have moved from stressing 'teaching' to stressing 'learning', is seriously deficient and an essential aspect

of the kind of preparation which I have referred to must challenge the fundamental dichotomy of what in SoTL is disciplinary and what is generic.

## **SoTL and CPD**

In the light of the nature of SoTL, as described, what form should the continuing professional development (CPD) of academics take? Such development is clearly additional to the development of students in their discipline which follows the undergraduate degree and normally is included in the preparation for a higher degree in the discipline, but it should be of equivalent weight and not be of the type of initial training courses, common now in the UK.

CPD for academics is a special case of CPD in general, which in turn is a special case of the education of adults. For the last of these, and *a fortiori* for all three, it has been well established that adults learn best if they are actively involved in their learning, so that they internalise it, and if they see it as relevant to their needs. For the continuing development of professionals, these needs in general arise out of their practice and the problems created by their practice. However, it is a well known and regrettable fact that academics rarely transfer this approach - which is so close to well developed approaches in their research - to their teaching, an activity which, apart from the quality with which it is carried out, many academics consider uncontentious, to the extent that when in an inaugural lecture (Elton 1995) I raised the question: "Is university teaching researchable?", many in the audience responded negatively. Hence it must be one of the main features of any really successful programme of CPD for academic teachers to convince them that university teaching is a problematic and researchable activity. It is reasonable to postulate that this is best achieved through academic teachers reflecting on problems in their own teaching and then attempting to solve these problems.

One possible approach to CPD for academics is therefore through Problem Based Learning (PBL), with the additional requirement that the problems must arise from on-going practice. In that way, this form of PBL is radically different from normal PBL in university courses in one respect: the problems should not be selected in advance by the course designers, but must be chosen through negotiation by the academics in question together with their course tutors. The fact that the whole CPD process is then

initiated by the academic teachers undertaking the course also means that their learning will be self-initiated and autonomous, and not prescribed by others. One hoped-for outcome of this CPD process should then be that academics will see the processes of research and teaching as very similar, and that they will transfer this attitude to the learning which they engender in their students. Almost certainly the first course of this kind, which was accredited by the Staff and Educational Development Association, was developed some years ago at UCL and will now be described (Stefani & Elton 2002). Similar courses have more recently been developed at the University of Oxford, Hong Kong University and Dublin Institute of Technology, and independently at the University of Glasgow, so that it is reasonable to claim that the UCL course has stood the test of time. It is also the most thoroughly evaluated of all relevant courses.

### ***The UCL Course***

The 'students' on the UCL course were throughout referred to as 'course members', not only so as to avoid confusion, since they themselves taught students, but also to give them the appropriate status. The course aimed to be a collaborative venture between all involved in it – members and tutors. The main features of the course were:

- *Coursework.* Course members negotiated with their tutor a number of mini-research projects in the teaching and learning of their discipline, after which they worked through them and reported on them in their portfolios.
- *Knowledge and Understanding.* While they were not directly assessed on 'knowledge', their reports on the mini-research projects revealed the extent to which they had acquired appropriate knowledge. The latter was largely based on the twelve volume compendium "Effective Learning and Teaching in Higher Education", edited by Dr Pat Cryer (1992) for the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals [3].
- *Assessment criteria.* Their flexibility within firm overall boundaries, which departed radically from the criteria for orthodox courses that are related to specified learning outcomes, gave members the freedom to 'do their own thing' via negotiated learning agreements and thereby do things well beyond what could have been

expected. The form of assessment – through the member's portfolio and not through any formal examination - proved wholly appropriate.

- *Standards.* As a result of the flexibility of the assessment criteria, the standard of the work considerably exceeded any that could have been ascribed as appropriate. This and the previous point were explicitly recognised by the External Examiner and the accreditors of SEDA (the Staff and Educational Development Association), and also by the assessors of the QAA (Quality Assurance Agency).
- *Role of tutor.* The way that the relationship of the tutor and member changed from teacher via facilitator to colleague, which is common in the best of research supervision, was found wholly appropriate at this in principle slightly lower level.
- *Role of mentor.* Here again, the policy of giving the maximum of freedom and flexibility to members in their choice of and relationship with their mentors proved successful. An odd indication of this was that at least one mentor refused to accept the, admittedly tiny honorarium, because 'it was such a pleasure to be involved'.
- *Mode of CPD.* The course established a mode of CPD for experienced staff that was genuinely at the intellectual level of research active staff who wish to devote some of their creativity to the improvement of teaching and learning. An indication of this was the comment of one of the successful members:

*"I believe that the course has contributed immeasurably to my development as a teacher and also to the development of my career here. I would not have got my fellowship without it I don't think and I certainly wouldn't have had the confidence to do many of the things that I have done either."*

The main problem with the course was that it was ahead of its time. It was likely that it would not attract many course members and therefore from the start it was decided to conduct it at a distance. An unplanned bonus of this mode was that the students worked very independently. What had not been expected was that there would be only four students and none of them from UCL. The lessons learned by the course designers from the very small cohort were however both profound and positive. As mentioned above, each course member had a mentor, chosen by the course member, whose role

was strictly non-disciplinary. Professor Phil Race was the external examiner for the course and staff and course members owe a huge debt of gratitude to him. The course was eventually evaluated by one of its members and the originator of the course (Stefani & Elton 2002). The conclusions were that its above features had been successfully realised.

To make the course experience come alive, it is worth quoting from Lorraine Stefani's evaluation (Stefani & Elton 2002):

### ***Evaluation of the UCL CPD course by Lorraine Stefani***

(It may be noted that this course dates from an earlier technological era; the main point of presenting it here is to illustrate its SoTL aspects, although the course also predates SoTL.)

#### Introduction

*I was particularly attracted to the Diploma in Higher Education Research and Development course (Dip HERD) for a number of reasons. I interpreted the aims of the course to mean that there was encouragement and support to link teaching and learning by posing the question: 'how might my teaching affect my students' learning experience?', and to link teaching, learning and scholarship. The distance learning nature of the course suited my needs and my commitments, although this would be my first experience of this mode of learning.*

*With the shifting status of HE teaching I viewed the Dip HERD programme as providing a creative pathway for my CPD and credibility within my field. The member centred nature of the course was very appealing to me, ie the framework is presented but there is ample scope for individual creativity in shaping the course round one's own needs, interests etc.*

#### Getting Started

*After having my application to pursue the course accepted I waited for the 'resource pack'. What arrived was very impressive but slightly overwhelming: a complete set of Cryer's 'Effective Learning and Teaching in Higher Education' modules, the Course Handbook; a Mentor's Handbook; a Course Bibliography; a book on Small Scale Research in Teaching and Learning; and a letter of welcome. The arrival of this 'resource pack' marks the starting point of the course. It is then up to the member to choose a mentor, to tune in to the nature of the course and to make headway with the first Learning Contract.*

*My initial reactions to this official start of the Course were slight panic and insecurity. On first reading the Course Handbook I felt that I was not really sure how to progress, how to read the Handbook and make sense of it enough to prepare a statement of intent for the first module. So I procrastinated for some time before bracing myself again to read the Course Handbook and the book on Small Scale Research and re-assure myself that of course I could do this but instead of being directed, I was led along a pathway and it was my responsibility to shape my course.*

*We have worked over the years to develop a student-centred curriculum and to raise students' awareness of personal responsibility for learning. When this was turned around and teacher became learner, it was a learning experience in itself for me to determine the direction of my own learning. I felt rather like a first year student saying to a tutor, 'you mean there are no instructions for me!' To complete a course such as Dip HERD one must be motivated and have goals to aim for.*

### Drawing up the First Learning Contract

*I found drawing up the Learning Contract quite challenging in the first instance and it determined the means of communication between myself and my tutor for the remainder of the course. The ethos of the Course is that it is problem-based. On particular broad areas regarding delivering the curriculum, the member must identify a problem or issue and then devise a means of solving the problem or dealing with the issue. Ideally one should then put a strategy in place and reflect on the outcome and enter into this cycle again. What I found difficult in the first instance was articulating clearly enough my intentions for the assignment.*

*Lewis Elton, who was my tutor, and I started off using e-mail but I find this medium too immediate. It often leads me into rapid response without thinking out clearly enough what I want to say and how I want to convey what I want to say. After struggling with the first contract a couple of times until it received a signal of approval, we shifted to communicating by fax and that worked very well indeed throughout the course. Once I had mastered the art of clearly articulating my objectives we rarely had problems understanding each other. The importance of clarifying the aims and objectives of assignments was another major learning experience for me and I am more careful now than I was previously when I work with staff and students. If the aims and objectives are clear then you work to these aims and objectives and you are assessed on these. This makes for a very transparent assessment system.*

*This is a key learning point as regards pursuing the course. On reading the Course Handbook I had great difficulty getting any sense of the assessment criteria. How often have we heard students say this? However given the member-centred nature of the course it would be too constraining if specific as opposed to general criteria were determined in advance.*

## Assessment and Feedback

*It is of course slightly nerve wracking sending off one's first assignment. Is it good enough, have I really followed my aims and objectives? These are not unreasonable sentiments, doubts etc when one first embarks on a new course of this type. What was impressive was the speed of turnaround and the quality and depth of the feedback.*

*Occasionally I engaged in dialogue with my tutor on aspects of the feedback eg responding to questions or comments. This goes way beyond what happens in most classroom situations but again provides a good model for giving feedback on extended assignments. The feedback itself supports learning and helps members to move forward in their thinking. In an ideal world we would provide such quality feedback on all student learning.*

## Meeting Deadlines

*Commitment must be given to completing assignments. Setting deadlines is a good idea even if they have to be changed within reason. The very act of changing my deadlines was generally enough to spur me into action. I did not have designated time off my work commitments but I used any free time I had to progress my work.*

## Personal and Professional Gains

*When I think of the gains of completing a course such as Dip HERD, I think back to 'why did I choose the course?' I feel very strongly a higher level of professional credibility, particularly in the light of my role as Advisor of Studies on the Advanced Academic Studies accredited course for academic and related staff currently being offered at the University of Strathclyde which is in fact modelled on many aspects of the Dip HERD programme. Because I decided, on completion of the Dip HERD course, to prepare a portfolio for assessment for the award of a SEDA Fellowship I consider that the course opened up a further credible pathway for accreditation of my own academic practice.*

*Other gains include the development of a deeper understanding of the nature of distance/self-directed learning. Given that the prevalence of these modes of learning will undoubtedly increase in the short to medium term future, this is an added bonus.*

*I feel equipped with new skills which I can transfer to new situations. It is often easy to lose sights of the constraints under which learners are operating, be these learners 'traditional' students or staff pursuing CPD.*

### ***More recent developments***

The fact that the course which has been described was a distance course proved a very positive feature, since it threw course members much more on their resources than would be the case with an on-campus course. However, it essentially predated recent developments in computer technology and there was almost no interaction between course members. Both these deficiencies were successfully tackled in a more recent distance course at UCL (Russell, Elton, Swinglehurst & Greenhalgh, 2006), developed by Professor Greenhalgh for practising doctors, which successfully integrated student-student interaction and teacher-student interaction into it through up-to-date technology. Her team initially included one educationist (L. E.) whose experience of the earlier CPD course for academic teachers proved very useful. That these courses could be successfully developed at UCL, which is so heavily oriented towards research and overall very conservative in its approach to teaching, is one of the remarkable aspects of this story.

At the same time, it must be conceded that the distance nature of the course is far from an essential feature. None of the three courses mentioned earlier, at the University of Oxford, Hong Kong University and Dublin Institute of Technology, all of which had as their first external examiner the author of this article, are distance courses, and neither is the independently developed course in Glasgow.

### **Conclusions**

The most important – and possibly least expected conclusion relates to the primacy of scholarship in universities. Traditionally, there was always an expectation in Britain that scholarship would underlie all university teaching, but this was rarely formalised and, indeed, it often remained tacit. Furthermore, it was never explicitly extended to research, where routine forms of research were always acceptable (Elton 1986). In contrast, the concept of *Wissenschaft* was central to both teaching and research in Germany, but – as has been pointed out (Hartwig 2007) – this no longer is so, at least in the first years of university study. One central aim of SoTL is to formalise this primacy of scholarship in both research and teaching.

A second and equally important conclusion relates to the provision of appropriate continuing professional development in teaching and learning which turns out to be the arguably most important development in SoTL. The traditional view, although not always expressed as blatantly, was that one improved in teaching through imitation of role models - one taught, as one had been taught by academics that taught, as they had been taught, an apostolic succession, going back to the middle ages. In practice, a high proportion of academic staff in Britain still believe that improvement in teaching is largely a matter of imitation on the basis of role models, but this view is becoming less acceptable and continuing professional development in teaching and learning, together with the acceptance of a research component is becoming respectable. In contrast, in the USA, where what is called there 'faculty development', was until recently confined largely to graduate students, but this is changing now through e.g. the Carnegie Foundation work on SoTL and many universities now have faculty development programmes and/or centres [4]. However, my belief is and I will be happy to be challenged on this, that these are largely concerned with improving rather than changing present practices. Only the latter will in the long run lead to real improvement and for that to happen, full courses at up to Master's level, of the kind described, will be necessary.

The integration of research with teaching and learning, and of discipline specific and generic components in both, have received a considerable impetus through the SoTL movement, as has the need for the CPD of academics, which surely constitutes a more fundamental tackling of the quality issue than those of the Quality Assurance Agency. However, there is a long way to go before SoTL will be accepted generally as the road to quality. The connection to the Humboldtian concept of the university lies in this integration of teaching and research, paradoxically, since in practice the Humboldtian university only rarely attempted such an integration except at times in the advanced seminar.

Finally, a word must be said about interdisciplinarity. Traditionally, universities have been oriented pre-eminently towards single disciplines, but there is an increasing pressure for interdisciplinary work. It will not be easy to move traditional universities in that direction and the recent suggestion by the Leadership Foundation (Gill 2007) that academics should have both a disciplinary and an institutional loyalty is wholly irrelevant

and dangerous in the present climate. Genuine interdisciplinary work must grow organically out of the requirements of research and the transfer to teaching; in some ways it is already doing the former, but rarely, if ever, the latter; the multidisciplinary of modular degrees is more likely to confuse students than to make their degrees interdisciplinary. Finally, while interdisciplinarity in no way conflicts with the principles of the Humboldtian university, its achievement as a by-product of top down managerialism and through dual loyalties certainly does.

In sum, this paper argues that the way towards the university of the 21<sup>st</sup> century should be through SoTL, with its stress on the links between research and teaching, its demand that university teachers should become a trained profession and its recognition that the Humboldtian university, with its structure now validated by complexity theory, continues to be the way forward [5].

## Notes

- [1] The differences between the different parts of Great Britain may appear parochial to the outsider, but they are becoming very real.
- [2] A much more comprehensive attempt at combining the eternal verities of universities with the conditions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been provided by Watson (2007).
- [3] UUK was previously called the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals.
- [4] My thanks are due to the Editor for bringing me up-to-date on this matter.
- [5] I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to the two Readers of this paper, whose insightful comments much improved it.

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