

# Valuing quality teaching through recognition of context specific skills

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Education and teaching are pervasive influences in our society and at some stage we all have contact with them. Yet answers to such basic questions as 'How do you become an excellent teacher?' remain elusive. Many are able to identify good teachers who have had a profound impact on their lives, or conversely a poor teacher who has impeded educational development. However, reaching beneath the surface to answer fundamental questions about teaching which go beyond the level of identification of good teaching, is a task that occupies educational researchers and theorists and continually surfaces in the policy realm. It needs to be remembered, that while teaching can be counted among the oldest professions, systematic research into teaching has only a very recent history. An important related issue is the value our society accords teaching and teachers.

This paper argues that teaching is a highly complex practice comprising both generic and context specific skills and expertise. It is the context specific aspect of teaching that has been largely ignored in the past few decades by researchers and policy makers, who instead have focused on general, overarching teaching skills which, while important, only provide a partial picture of what teaching involves. In order to genuinely come to grips with teaching quality, attention needs to focus on understanding the specific contexts in which teaching occurs and on effectively utilising this knowledge to extend the dialogue about teaching within universities.

It is further argued that the development of this knowledge goes hand in hand with the need to re-evaluate the priority perceived to be accorded the role of teaching in promotion of academic staff. The higher education literature over the past decades consistently indicates that academics believe teaching is an under-valued activity when it comes to decisions about their career progress. It is suggested that "teaching portfolios" be used to capture the subtleties and complexities of teaching in context specific situations and that these portfolios form the evidential basis of promotion decisions. It is important that teaching be viewed as a scholarly activity on an equal footing with research.

## Generic versus context specific skills

There is a vast literature on research in teaching, yet we are still a long way from a good understanding of the teaching process. Teaching is complex, involving many variables, variations and subtleties not always readily recognised or acknowledged outside the educational research community. Teaching can, for example, describe a range of formal situations such as lectures, tutorials, seminars, practical and field work, but it can also be extended to less formal situations such as student consultations and research student supervision. In the teaching process, variables include subject area; class size and level; student background, motivation and ability; teacher personality, motivation and intellectual style as well as a variety of departmental and institutional influences. Given the number of possible combinations of variables at any one time, together with the fact that it is difficult to hold situations constant or operate controls, research into teaching is a complex endeavour. This paper does not aim to provide an overview of research on teaching in higher education (for such an overview, see Dunkin, 1986), but rather to discuss some general research trends and their

implications for the evaluation of teaching for academics.

In general, the research focus in recent decades has concerned the characteristics or attributes of effective teachers. Researchers, particularly in the United States, have studied teachers who have been identified as good teachers by their peers or students, often through nominations for excellence in teaching awards, in order to discover what characteristics and behaviours they display in their teaching. For example, Tracy and Tollefson (1979) conducted a detailed, careful study of 30 teachers in a variety of disciplines receiving teaching awards in order to understand their effectiveness as teachers. Through the use of self-report evaluations, student ratings and video-taping of classes they found that key characteristics of these teachers were: knowledge of and interest in the subject; good organisation skills; effective communication of information; and skill in interpersonal relationships with students. As teachers they also actively involved students in the learning process, they respected students and placed heavy work demands upon them. Over 60% of these teachers taught large classes (100-800 students), and 80% of the teachers were teaching in their major area of academic and research interest. About half of the courses were compulsory courses. Attoe and Mugerauer (1991) interviewed 20 architecture design teachers from three American universities who had received teaching excellence awards. From the interviews they developed a profile of fourteen factors that contribute to effective teaching. Similarly, Hedges and Papritan (1987) identified eight characteristics which formed the ingredients of excellent teaching by studying fourteen teachers randomly selected from 130 agriculture teachers who had been nominated for excellence in teaching awards. These characteristics were: keeping technically up-to-date, teacher motivation, interest in students, setting clear goals, evaluating teaching performance, a positive attitude to teaching, use of resources, and supervised professional experience program for students. Miller, Kahler and Rheault (1989) developed a profile of effective agriculture teachers consisting of 42 items under six headings: productive teaching behaviours, class management, interpersonal relationships, professional responsibilities, personal characteristics and demographic characteristics. Thus their profile comprised personal teacher qualities as well as teaching behaviours. Guskey and Easton (1982) identified effective teachers as those who had high levels of student achievement and low levels of student attrition and undertook structured interviews with 28 such teachers. These teachers were all teaching introductory courses but across a range of disciplines. They found that despite differences in discipline, age and experience these teachers had common teaching characteristics. The teachers were well organised and systematic in their teaching, they primarily used whole group teaching which emphasised student participation, they provided regular and specific feedback to students on their learning process, and they had a positive regard for their students. In a brief Australian report from the University of Queensland, Heath (1989) noted the qualities of those teachers receiving that University's first excellence in teaching awards as: good knowledge of subject matter, interest in the subject, respect for students, providing feedback to students in a positive manner, good organisation of teaching and clear presentation.

Thus, good teachers across disciplines share key attributes of subject knowledge, interest and enthusiasm, clear communication, good organisational skills, and interest in students. These attributes describe teaching skills which can be seen as generic teaching skills. Knowledge of these attributes can assist in enhancing teaching practice and can be used in staff development programs designed to heighten awareness of good practice and teaching approaches. They can also be used to develop checklists and guidelines such as those developed by the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (1992) and the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (1993), which act as useful reminders of the core skills which all university teachers should possess. These attributes of good teaching form a general set of principles which apply regardless of subject matter, level of teaching and specific context.

These generic attributes have been confirmed and re-enforced through a second major approach to studying teaching, namely student evaluations of teaching. There has been considerable research on the use and reliability of teaching evaluation by students and what are valid and reliable items to include (see for example, Marsh, 1984). Feldman (1976) reviewed the literature on student views of excellent teachers and listed the following characteristics: stimulation of interest, clarity, knowledge of subject matter, preparation and organisation, enthusiasm, rapport with students, availability and interaction. Erdle and Murray (1986) cite the literature on classroom behaviours as revealing that key behaviours consist of: expressiveness, organisation, clarity, interest and interaction. They maintain that these behaviours consistently correlate positively with student evaluations of teaching effectiveness.

Higher education researchers have correlated the results of such teaching evaluation questionnaires with variables such as discipline and class size, in order to assist in grappling with the complexities involved in understanding what comprises good teaching. Feldman (1978) in a classic study, undertook a meta-analysis of studies on student ratings of teaching examining the consistency of these ratings across different course contexts. Feldman concluded that class size, course level, the nature of the course (compulsory or elective) and subject matter influenced ratings, although the combined influence of these and ratings is difficult to discern. Feldman highlights the complexities of the teaching situation and the difficulties for research in this area, such as distinguishing attributes that students and teachers bring to a particular course which exist independently of the subject and those that are influenced by the subject matter. Erdle and Murray (1986) compared student evaluations with classroom observation of 124 teachers in different disciplines in order to determine if differences exist between disciplines in the frequency of occurrence of specific classroom behaviour and how such behaviours contribute to overall teaching effectiveness. They found that what comprises effective teaching was similar across the disciplines but found that certain behaviours were found more frequently in certain disciplines. The behaviours found in humanities subjects were rapport with students, interest, interaction and expressiveness. That is, behaviours associated with an interpersonal orientation toward teaching. However, behaviours in science disciplines reflected a task orientation while the social sciences reflected higher task orientation behaviours than the humanities and higher interpersonal orientation behaviours than in the sciences. In an earlier study, Pohlmann (1976) studied the ratings of teachers from 1500 courses across five different disciplines. Pohlmann found that the characteristics of effective teaching were consistent across disciplines but that different disciplines rated higher on some teaching aspects than others. Science, humanities and business rated highest on making clear assignments and class preparation, social science on knowledge of subject matter and explanation of complex topics, while education rated highest on specifying course objectives and increasing student appreciation of the subject. In a detailed study Cashin and Clegg (1987) also investigated disciplinary differences across 10 academic fields in student ratings of teaching, finding that the humanities received higher ratings than the social sciences,

which received higher ratings than mathematics and science. The study controlled for student motivation and class size and confirmed that there were still considerable disciplinary differences which were not due to difference in motivation and size. They proposed several hypotheses to account for their findings, favouring the view that disciplines which are sequential in their knowledge base receive lower ratings, as do disciplines which require more mathematical aptitude. Franklin and Theall (1992) pursued the area of disciplinary differences and student ratings by examining how course design variables related to ratings, class size and course level for 1280 teachers across 2700 courses. They report that courses that rely heavily on a lecture format, stress learning of facts and concepts, and have a high assessment weighting on final exams, rate lower than courses emphasising skill development, group discussion, and a variety of assessment techniques. They found that the latter courses occurred more in the humanities and the former in mathematics, engineering and the sciences. They conclude that class size and course level are confounding factors which require further investigation.

Research on correlation of variables with student ratings of teaching, clearly, still has a large number of complexities to unravel and is being assisted by increasingly sophisticated analysis techniques. However, findings to date consistently indicate that different disciplines tend to rate differently and that this appears to be independent of factors such as class size. A key issue is, whether there are differences in the disciplines per se which produce these results, or whether preferences for different teaching approaches occur across the disciplines without any direct relationship to the characteristics of the discipline. To answer this, it is necessary to study more closely what occurs in specific disciplines and in specific contexts, in order to better 'get inside' the teaching process.

Such an approach would also be consistent with developments in other areas of higher education research, which have highlighted the importance of disciplinary variations within academia. Becher (1989) examined the relationship between the nature of knowledge and the cultures of disciplines in a large scale study of academics in twelve disciplines in the UK and the USA. The findings of this research have helped to build a picture of the disciplinary shaping of academic work and practices through an understanding of the similarities and differences among the various disciplinary subcultures. This work has been further extended (Becher, Henkel and Kogan, 1993) in an empirical study which highlights disciplinary variations in research student supervision. Extending such an approach to the study of teaching would appear to yield promising results.

What is required is a union of disciplinary area and pedagogy to develop what could be termed pedagogical content knowledge. For example, "What should a (university teacher) of biology know, and be able to do, that a biologist may not?" (Edgerton, 1990:5). Further, what is it that a good university physics teacher knows and does, that is different from a good university history teacher? By asking questions such as these, recent educational research in the United States has the potential to be very influential in altering thinking about, and research into, teaching. In particular, research by Shulman (1987, 1986) and his colleagues is leading the way to unravelling the knowledge base of teaching by focusing on such specific contexts.

Shulman argues that good teaching goes beyond principles of teaching or attributes of good teachers and includes detailed subject knowledge which can be communicated and transformed through knowledge of situations and ways of responding to these situations. It is important to comprehend how good teachers transform their knowledge of a subject in ways that lead to student understanding. Shulman (1987:8) explains that:

*pedagogical content knowledge is of special interest because it identifies the distinctive bodies of knowledge for teaching. It represents the blending of content and pedagogy into an understanding of how particular topics, problems, or issues are organized, represented, and adapted to the diverse interests and abilities of learners, and presented for instruction. Pedagogical content*

knowledge is the category most likely to distinguish the understanding of the content specialist from that of the pedagogue.

Shulman argues that because teaching is essentially a private activity, it lacks a history of practice. The future direction of educational research will be to undertake what he terms "wisdom-of-practice studies" which "collect, collate, and interpret the practical knowledge of teachers for the purpose of establishing a case literature and codifying its principles, precedents and parables" (1987:12). While Shulman and his colleagues are using this approach in the study of school teaching, others (see for example, Edgerton, 1990; Edgerton, Hutchings and Quinlan, 1991) are working in the higher education realm.

### Making judgements about teaching quality

Improving quality in teaching goes beyond investigating and understanding the complexities of the teaching process and includes implementing the findings of educational researchers. Further, it includes examining the value accorded teaching in academia, particularly the status of teaching in the promotion of academic staff. In this respect, anecdotal evidence as well as the research and policy literature indicate that teaching is an undervalued activity in universities. In considering the assessment of teaching, two key aspects need to be kept in mind. The first is the political context within which such judgements are made and the second is the use made of educational research findings to assist in the judgement process. In practice, these two aspects are not necessarily separate. This section considers each of these aspects.

Turning firstly to the political context of evaluation, it is stating the obvious that Australian universities are now operating in a highly political environment which is dominated by the Federal Government restructuring and quality agendas. At the system level, the current focus on quality is intense, but a concern with quality can be traced back through government statements at least as far as the Williams Report of 1979. However, the present intensity stems directly from the former Minister for Higher Education and Employment Services, Peter Baldwin, and his policy statement *Quality and Diversity in the 1990s* (Baldwin, 1991). In this statement, Baldwin asserts the need to systematically reward teaching as well as research and the importance of the government providing incentives for institutions to enhance teaching quality. These incentives include funding through the National Priority (Reserve) Fund to encourage good teaching practices in institutions, the establishment of a National Centre for Teaching Excellence - later substituted by the Committee for the Advancement of University Teaching (CAUT) - and the continued support for staff development. In this statement, the Minister asked the Higher Education Council to examine a number of matters relating to quality, including the relative importance of factors affecting teaching quality, and to report recommendations for future policy through the National Board for Employment, Education and Training. In 1992, after seeking the views of key higher education interest groups, the Higher Education Council (HEC) delivered its report, *Achieving Quality*. In defining teaching quality, the report looks to the Schools Council for the characteristics of effective teaching and adopts five conditions for good teaching used by the British Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council. The second approach to teaching quality used by the HEC lists the attributes that all graduates should possess. In both these approaches, the characteristics of effective teaching and graduate attributes, the focus is on generic skills and a process - product outlook to teaching as discussed in the previous section of this paper. It may be that at the system level this focus is the most suitable in practical terms. However, the argument of this paper is that teaching is far more complex and subtle than listing generic principles of behaviours and attributes. Hence, at a political level due recognition needs to be accorded to the complexities of the teaching process, particularly if the quality of teaching is to be assessed for the purposes of funding decisions.

There are several other important issues regarding teaching, particularly the status of teaching within universities, which consistently arise in the political arena. These include the need to reward teaching as well as research in university promotion decisions and the need to provide training or staff development in teaching for academics. It is recognised that while academics spend considerable time being trained in their disciplines, they receive no training at all in teaching and limited encouragement or opportunities for staff development in teaching. Most recently, this has been raised by the National Union of Students (NUS) in its response to the HEC (1992) and the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) (1992). The discrepancy between research and teaching preparation for an academic career was a key point made by the 'Aulich Committee' (1990) and had been taken up in the Second Tier Settlement for Academic Staff (1988). The Second Tier agreement requires that universities - funding permitting - establish staff development units which provide programs relating to teaching development. Further, all new academic staff without teaching experience should be encouraged to undertake training in teaching and their teaching loads adjusted accordingly (Second Tier Settlement, Staff Development Attachment, point 8). To assist with staff development and also the enhancement of teaching within institutions the Government has provided incentives through the National Staff Development Fund and the National Priority (Reserve) Fund, including the establishment in 1993 of CAUT grants for teaching development. Approximately \$5 million dollars is available annually for these grants. Thus, the Federal Government has gone beyond mere exhortations to actually providing funding support to assist in realising some of these goals. It could, however, be argued that the amount of money provided for teaching development compared with research grant funding is small. Nevertheless it needs to be recognised that the first tangible steps have been taken.

The recognition and rewarding of teaching through the promotion system lie clearly in the domain of institutions. Views that universities do not sufficiently recognise teaching in promotion decisions continually surface in the policy literature. Most recently, the issue was raised by Minister Baldwin in his policy statement (1991) and the NUS (1992) also raised it in its response to the HEC discussion paper on quality. Rewarding teaching was discussed at length by the 'Aulich Committee' (1990) which received many submissions indicating that academics perceived the reward system to favour research at the expense of teaching.

It is difficult to assess if this perception of the lack of status of teaching voiced in the policy arena is in fact the case, since details on the actual reasons for promotion decisions within institutions are not easily discernible. However, that academics perceive teaching not to be rewarded equally with research by their institutions is consistently shown by research on academics and academic work both overseas (Bassis and Guskin, 1986; Clark, 1987; Haneman, 1975; Stevens, Goodwin and Goodwin, 1991) and in Australia (de Rome, Boud and Genn, 1985; Everett and Entekin, 1987). Further, the research literature shows that in the past few decades academics are increasingly being socialised into a research culture rather than a teaching culture (Corcoran and Clark, 1984; Everett and Entekin, 1987; Startup, 1985). However, studies of academic work show that the vast majority of academics spend more time teaching than researching and that they enjoy teaching. Indeed, the majority prefer to undertake a combination of teaching and research activities (see for example, Clark, 1987). Further, the cross-fertilisation of the two work roles, the teaching-research nexus, can be clearly articulated by academics (Neumann, 1992). Thus, while academics enjoy both teaching and research, they perceive that the two roles are not accorded equal status in promotion.

So what are Australian university practices in regard to the evaluation of teaching for promotion? Unfortunately, little is known about practices aside from the beliefs reported in the research literature and anecdotal evidence. These would suggest that teaching receives little, if any, weighting in promotion decisions, except

originally in the former college of advanced education sector, which did not have a strong research mandate. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that since the formation of the unified national system in 1988, the former college sector has increasingly been emphasising research over teaching in promotion and that the pre-1987 universities are re-assessing their promotion guidelines to place greater weighting on teaching. Certainly there has been a longer tradition in documenting and quantifying research activity than teaching. Donald (1984), examining the Canadian and North American tradition, discusses the quality indices used in assessing research, teaching and service and notes that among the possible research indices, publications, citations and quality of research as judged by peers are the most frequently used indices. Of the service indices, Donald notes that service to the university through committee work and academic advising are more frequently used than indices relating to service to the profession and to the community. However, for teaching, Donald notes that only one indicator is widely used, namely student evaluations of teaching. Australian universities have a much shorter history of the use of student evaluations; in fact with only a few exceptions, most universities have only moved to wider use of student evaluations in the last few years. Thus, widespread use of student evaluations in promotion decisions has no established tradition in the Australian context. It is interesting to note, however, that in their United States study of factors affecting university promotion decisions, Lin, McKeachie and Tucker (1984) found that while promotion committee members claimed that teaching and research should be accorded equal weighting, in practice statistical summaries of student ratings had little effect on promotions decisions compared with research productivity.

There are two important factors to consider in the recognition of teaching in promotion decisions. The first is the weighting attributed to teaching compared with research, and the second is the type of evidence which would be suitable for making fair and valid assessments of teaching performance. The weighting really relates to the status and valuing of teaching. As already noted, the literature states that academics perceive teaching to be under-rated compared with research. For this to change universities need to be willing to reform the way academic work is defined and rewarded. Boyer (1990) suggests the direction that this re-definition should take. He argues that the research, teaching and service components of academic work have become too segregated. Academics need to be viewed as scholars who work in four overlapping areas, namely: the scholarship of discovery; the scholarship of integration; the scholarship of application; and the scholarship of teaching. The area of the scholarship of teaching refers to scholarly expertise in a body of knowledge which can be identified and made public through teaching and which should be evaluated, with academics themselves responsible for monitoring this area of scholarship.

The second factor in the recognition of teaching is how academics monitor the quality of the scholarship of teaching. As indicated above, of all the possible areas which could be used to assess teaching quality, the most common, at least in the United States, has been student evaluations of teaching. As discussed in the first half of this paper, considerable educational research has been undertaken to develop evaluation systems which are reliable and valid. Indeed, student evaluations can form an important component of teaching in providing information from the recipients of our teaching. Nevertheless, students are only one source of information on teaching and as has been argued in the earlier part of this paper, student questionnaires focus on those aspects of teaching which relate to the generic teaching skills and classroom management expertise which should be expected as standard of all university teachers. A deeper evaluation of teaching takes into account more fully the content and context of teaching, thus allowing for the complexities of the teaching process, and is by necessity judged by peers. Such an evaluation has not been a significant part of the assessment of teaching in the past and educational researchers are examining appropriate ways of undertaking such evaluations. Most importantly

it involves making judgements about teaching performance which are not solely based on teaching behaviour, and emphasises the intellectual basis and reasoning incorporated in the teaching.

The approach of Shulman and his colleagues reported earlier is central to the development of such an assessment of teaching. Given the centrality of pedagogical content knowledge in Shulman's research, any assessment of teaching must be able to evaluate subject specific teaching skills as well as generic teaching skills. Thus, Shulman argues (1988) that the assessment of teaching must be controlled by pedagogical principles rather than measurement choices and that central to its reliability is that the assessment remain faithful to the real teaching situation. His research in the school situation is examining a number of different approaches to such an assessment. Each has strengths and weaknesses, but Shulman believes that portfolios hold a special promise. Thus an argument for portfolio-based assessment of teaching is developing.

This work from the school environment is being further extended by researchers in higher education. Edgerton et al. (1991) are investigating how portfolios can be used in the assessment of teaching in higher education. A teaching portfolio is described as "a structured collection of evidence of a teacher's best work that is selective, reflective, and collaborative, and demonstrates a teacher's accomplishments over time and across a variety of contexts." (Wolf, 1991). Edgerton et al. suggest four areas be covered in a portfolio: (1) course planning and preparation; (2) classroom practice; (3) evaluating student learning and providing feedback, and; (4) keeping up with the professional field in areas related to teaching performance. However, Urbach (1992) suggests seven areas for a teaching portfolio: (1) subject content of teaching; (2) approach and method of teaching; (3) changes in approach to teaching over time; (4) maintenance of academic standards; (5) student views of teaching; (6) professional development in teaching; and (7) evaluation of teaching by colleagues. The suggestion of these areas builds on prior work on teaching dossiers, notably that developed by the Canadian Association of University Teachers (1986) and in Australia by Ernest Roe for the Federation of Australian University Staff Associations (1987). It also extends prior work on the peer review of teaching (see for example, Winter and Kestner, 1990). However, one of the key issues for research and practice currently is the content and design of portfolios. The content of portfolios suggested by Edgerton et al is still in the development stages. The major focus is on the clear specification of criteria and developing a strong rationale for the framework. Robinson (1993) reports the lack of success of portfolios among academics in sociology, accounting and dentistry in one university due to the lack of explicit criteria. Anderson (1993) documents profiles of teaching portfolio development in 25 universities in the United States which include the content of portfolios, evaluation practices and their impact on, and implications for, ongoing practice in each of the universities. A related, important issue is the time required to compile and evaluate teaching portfolios. The work being undertaken by Edgerton et al on teaching portfolios in several large universities is showing that evaluators can assess reliably the quality of teaching with only a limited number of entries, hence portfolios need not be overly long documents. Judgements about teaching using portfolios tend to be based on holistic evaluation rather than an analytic scoring system. Finally, researchers examining the development and use of portfolios report that the act of creating portfolios has increased discussion about teaching and hence may assist the development of a culture of teaching in universities.

Clearly, the research on portfolio-based assessment is still in fairly early stages. Major issues still to be more thoroughly investigated include a framework for items to be selected for the portfolio as well as criteria for judging excellent teaching in specific contexts. However, a clear advantage of portfolio-based evaluation of teaching lies in its potential to take into account the complexities of the teaching situation and the evaluation of the scholarship of teaching - that is the special blending of the deep subject knowledge and its

application to the variety of specific teaching situations. Portfolios require evaluation of teaching by peer review and are hence congruent with key elements of academic culture.

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that much of the research and the discussion of teaching and its assessment has focused on viewing teaching as consisting of a set of generic teaching skills. This focus has provided a useful and important set of teaching principles which apply regardless of subject matter, student level and other situational factors. They form part of the overall management of teaching and indicate the minimum which every university teacher should know in order to teach satisfactorily. However, good teaching goes beyond this level. It is far more complex and subtle and involves understanding the specific contexts in which teaching occurs and how teachers understand particular concepts and then communicate them to an ever-changing student population. It is necessary to examine and understand the special blending of content and pedagogical knowledge which occurs in university teaching.

It has also been argued that teaching is perceived by academics to be under-valued within their universities compared with the recognition given to research, especially in promotion decisions. A reassessment of the status of teaching is important in order to give it equal weighting with research, rather than in competition with it and thus better recognise the multi-faceted nature of academic work. Teaching therefore needs to be taken seriously for promotion. Moreover, assessment techniques need to be used which enable us to make judgements about those aspects of teaching which we value as important and as indicating quality. A case has been made for the development of portfolio-based assessment of teaching by peer review. Such a development also has the possibility of assisting in the nurturing of a teaching culture, according due recognition to the activity to which academics devote most time.

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