Valuing quality teaching through recognition of context specific skills

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Education and teaching are always present in our society. They help us grow and develop in a healthy way. The way we teach and learn shapes our understanding of the world and ourselves. Therefore, understanding the reasons behind the value of quality teaching is crucial. This is discussed through the following article:

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Thus, good teachers across disciplines share key attributes of successful teachers, including a clear understanding of effective teaching, the ability to adapt to different contexts, good organisational skills, and an interest in students. These attributes describe the characteristics that instructors have in common across disciplines and that knowledge of these attributes can assist in enhancing teaching practice and can be used in staff development programs designed to be delivered in a way that is meaningful and relevant to their specific discipline. These skills can also be used to develop checklists and guidelines such as those developed by the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) and the Vice-Chancellors’ Committee (1995), which act as useful reminders of the core skills that all effective teachers share. These attributes of good teaching form a general set of principles which apply regardless of subject matter, level of teaching and specific context. However, such skills are context-specific and require re-framing through a second major approach to teaching, namely student-centred learning. There is considerable research on the use of and student feedback on teaching using this approach. For example, Meris-Sure (1994) demonstrated the importance of the relationship between the number of courses in which students were involved and the number of good teaching practices. McPherson (1990) concluded that the best way to improve teaching is to involve students in the learning process. However, it is important to note that these approaches can be viewed as a form of self-directed learning and that they are not substituting for direct teaching. It is suggested that “teaching portfolios” be used to capture the subtleties and complexities of teaching in context-specific situations. These portfolios are designed to highlight areas of improvement and development for individual teachers. It is important to note that teaching should be viewed as a complex activity and not just a set of isolated skills.

Generic versus context specific skills

It is important to consider the balance between generic and context-specific skills in teaching. This is especially important when considering the value of quality teaching. The skills that are necessary for effective teaching are those that are transferable across contexts, such as good planning, good organisation, and good interpersonal skills, which can be applied in any discipline. However, there are also skills that are specific to a particular context, such as understanding the specific needs of a particular group of students, or the specific requirements of a particular course. It is important to note that these skills are not mutually exclusive and that a balance between the two is necessary for effective teaching.

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knowledge is the category most likely to distinguish the understand- ing of the categories of the teaching portfolio.

Slavin argues that teaching is essentially a private activity, it lacks a history of practice. The future direction of educational research is the "wisdom of practice" which "collected, collate, and interpret the practical knowledge of teachers for the purpose of establishing a case literature for teacher professional parables" (1987:12). While Stolz and his colleagues are using this ap- proach in the study of school teaching, others (see for example, Ecclestone, 1990, Rutter, Reynolds and Qwinn, 1993) are work- ing in the higher education realm.

Making judgements about teaching quality

Improving quality in teaching goes beyond investigating and predicting the outcomes of educational research and includes implementing the findings of educational researchers. Further, it includes examining the value added to teaching in academic, par- ticularly teacher-student, interactions within the academic environment. In this respect, anecdotal evidence as well as the research and policy literatures clearly demonstrate the value of teaching in an educational 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 judgments are made. The second is the role of the 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 universities are now operating in a highly political environment which is dominated by the Federal Govern- ment restructuring and quality agenda. At the level of the current administration, the quality of teaching can be traced back through government statements at least as far as the Williams report. In 1992, the Australian National Centre for the Higher Education and Employment Studies, Peter Baldwin, and his policy statement Quality and Diversity in Higher Education (1990) identifies teaching as an unrecorded 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 judgments are made. The second is the role of the 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.

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application to the variety of specific teaching situations. Portfolios require evaluation of teaching by peer review and set learner congru- enct 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. Theory forms part of the overall management of teaching and indicates the minimum which every university teacher should know in order to teach satisfactorily. However, good teaching goes beyond this level. It is more complex and subtle and involves understanding the specific contexts in which teaching occurs and how teachers understand particular contexts and then communicate them to an ever-changing student population. It is necessary to examine and understand the specific blending of content and pedagogical knowl-edge which occurs in university teaching.

It has also been argued that teaching is perceived by academics to be more valuable within their universities compared with the recogni-tion given to research, especially in promotion decisions. A re-assessment 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 recognize 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 interesting. 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 the recognition to this activity to which academics devote most time.

References