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EXPLORING DIFFERENCE – MAKING UNIVERSITY TEACHING COUNT

Enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in universities

J. Fanghanel, City University London

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Keynote

I have been asked to answer this deceptively simple question 'is it possible to distinguish good teaching from bad teaching? And what are the consequences of making individuals/institutions compete for 'excellence'. In the ten minute allocated, I will simply show how complex these questions actually are when considered with reference to the context of practice and the broader issue of managing change in higher education

There have been many initiatives the UK to develop and enhance teaching and learning, formally at the national level. In fact one could legitimately see the UK approach as an experiment in HE policy

At the institutional level - (£340M over a period of 10 years) although always short-term funding

At the individual level - National Fellowships for Excellence and local awards/prizes

At the intermediate level - funded projects for disciplinary groups - applications based on scores achieved by departments in national quality 'institutional reviews'

What is then recognised as characteristic of good / excellent teaching?

Nationally an ambivalent approach – at the same time elitist (for the happy few) and relativist (groups/institutions define their own understandings of the term). On the one hand, funding goes to those who are already excellent at TL; on the other, institutions have been given the licence to define their own criteria for excellence (e.g. NTFS or CETLs). As a result there is great variety in what people understand as excellent teaching – 'almost anything goes' (Skelton, 2007).

Nationally, generally, excellence has been defined as being able **to promote and enhance the student learning experience**. But it also includes other criteria 1) **Supporting colleagues** 2) **Committing** to ongoing **professional development** 3) **disseminating** good practice

In my own institution at the individual level, we emphasise specifically:

- innovation

- giving good guidance and feedback, supporting students outside the classroom
- a commitment to the scholarship of both subject knowledge and learning and teaching
- participation in professional activities and research on learning

The problem may be, as B. MacFarlane puts it (Macfarlane, 2006), that when we think about teaching excellence, we focus on 'excellence' rather than on 'teaching'. When students are questioned about good teaching, they often focus on psychological traits (approachability, enthusiasm) and the amount and quality of support they get (availability, feedback). That is not always visible work!

Taking those broad understandings of excellence into account, the answer to the question 'is it possible to distinguish between good and bad teaching' is therefore yes. And we all know of typical examples of bad teaching: being late and unprepared, transmissive delivery of knowledge and facts, inadequate or late feedback on work and progress, etc. For me the main difference really is that 'good' teachers engage with students, communicate with them about all aspects of learning and teaching, and 'bad' teachers don't – they come and they go!

What is less clear is whether distinguishing through rewards for individuals/groups is the best way to improve practices for the benefit of student learning. What happens when we set-up competitive schemes to reward 'excellence' is this:

- We emphasise 'practical' solutions focusing on individual practices without problematizing the context in which individuals work, and therefore the lack of transferability of these 'solutions' – project outcomes are not always transferable
- We reinforce divisions between 'stars' and 'mainstream' teachers in departments
- We set up pedagogical challenges for established teachers but do not always provide ways of taking those challenges up
- We do not necessarily capture the 'best' lecturers, as those do not always come forward. We capture those who are good at demonstrating that they are good.
- We ignore contextual differences and inequalities, and the 'swampy lowlands' of practice (Schön, 1983)
- We focus on 'measures' of excellence (second level evidence)
- We focus on 'techniques' (see the University of Berkeley and its 200 techniques for teaching with excellence)
- The focus is often on linking HE to the economy- leaving aside a 'moral' mission for higher education (Fanghanel, 2007)

Do we change practices for the better, for the long term, and for the benefit of students?

- Some research has shown that 'star' teachers are often removed from teaching after an award, focusing on marketing themselves and their

research on teaching, and gaining promotions that release them from teaching

- The principles on which this model is based is of a technical rational approach to change. Trickle-down effect doesn't work.
- Knowledge about teaching and learning doesn't increase through rewards only, there needs to be an engagement with pedagogical research in the discipline
- Evaluation of these initiatives has shown that they do not join-up (they remain isolated from each other)

Having highlighted the negative effects, I will conclude on a positive note, and report on what have been the positive outcomes of the quality enhancement initiatives in the UK (based on the official evaluation made of these initiatives in 2006)

- TL strategies – coherence and an opportunity for institutions to distinguish themselves from each other – but limited forward thinking because of short-term funding cycles
- Central units for Teaching and Learning – TL on the agenda, a chance to educate the new generation of lecturers, but precariousness of these units relying on short-term funds
- A shift from teaching to learning (looking at learning from the student perspective)
- Adoption of ICT/VLE – much money was spent on IT infrastructures
- A chance for teaching institutions to develop their own area of expertise

So on the whole, it is a mixed bag. There have been some positive outcomes, the main one being that TL is now being spoken of. It is no longer a taboo subject. And teaching and learning is starting to emerge as an academic discipline, worthy of enquiry – rather than as a set of techniques. But policies have not always taken into account cultures of departments and individuals' own beliefs – the approach has often been of seeing teaching as 'disincarnate' activity. And, generally, there has been a lack of joining-up in all these initiatives – the different levels don't merge easily into each other. The challenge for HE now is to focus on promoting change that will truly transform cultures and approaches for the benefit of all students, with an emphasis on social logic as well as on economic logic.

J. Fanghanel
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