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Abstract

Excerpt: In academics, these are the times that try professors' souls. A sampling of recent book-length treatments of higher education suggests that our underachieving colleges (Bok 2006) are declining by degrees (Hersh and Merrow 2005) as our students are cast academically adrift (Arum and Roksa 2011). Faculty, responding rationally to the incentive structures in their jobs, spend so much time on research that they have little time to focus on teaching (Hacker and Dreifus 2010). Much of the responsibility for teaching ultimately falls to a poorly paid army of adjuncts toiling "in the basement of the ivory tower" with a teaching load so heavy that, of necessity, they have little time to devote to individual students, and minimal commitment to the particular institution(s) at which they work (Professor X 2011). Classes and intellectual pursuits matter little to contemporary students, who are interested in higher education not for the learning, but rather for the credentials it can offer them, for the opportunity it affords to live the "college life" and, in many cases, because there is no other logical next step in their lives after high school (Nathan 2005)....

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Defending Our Life: The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in an Academy Under Siege

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In academics, these are the times that try professors' souls. A sampling of recent book-length treatments of higher education suggests that our underachieving colleges (Bok 2006) are declining by degrees (Hersh and Merrow 2005) as our students are cast academically adrift (Arum and Roksa 2011). Faculty, responding rationally to the incentive structures in their jobs, spend so much time on research that they have little time to focus on teaching (Hacker and Dreifus 2010). Much of the responsibility for teaching ultimately falls to a poorly paid army of adjuncts toiling "in the basement of the ivory tower" with a teaching load so heavy that, of necessity, they have little time to devote to individual students, and minimal commitment to the particular institution(s) at which they work (Professor X 2011). Classes and intellectual pursuits matter little to contemporary students, who are interested in higher education not for the learning, but rather for the credentials it can offer them, for the opportunity it affords to live the "college life" and, in many cases, because there is no other logical next step in their lives after high school (Nathan 2005).

The above books, and others like them, paint with a broad brush; it is beyond the scope of this essay to assess all of the specific claims, and the evidence supporting them, in each. More often than we might care to admit, however, these essays raise intelligent and trenchant critiques of higher education today. While higher education has much to be proud of, our college and universities *can* do more to engage students intellectually. We *can* consider ways to modify the reward structure at many institutions and provide more professional incentives for faculty to devote time to teaching. We *can* improve our practices to help our students learn. What is more, in this current environment, we not only *can* do better, we *must* do better.

The days of higher education enjoying a privileged place in society, and operating largely outside the public eye, are over. As more young people head to college, higher education is less the province of the elite. Tightening state budgets and a weak global economy force schools to dramatically increase tuition at a rate far outpacing inflation. As more and more citizens pay more and more for education, they increasingly demand (as they should) that schools offer appropriate value for the cost. At the federal government level, the Spellings Commission Report in 2006 began a continuing process of demanding accountability. Perhaps more scary to faculty are efforts in states like Ohio and Wisconsin to curtail collective bargaining rights for university faculty. Certainly, many faculty legitimately oppose collective bargaining. And, to be sure, these efforts were motivated at least to an extent by ideology and a desire for fiscal restraint. With these caveats, however, we would be foolish not to also see in them an attack on universities, and on the pampered faculty within them. Like Albert Brooks' character in the 1991 movie, *Defending Your Life*, academics increasingly find ourselves undergoing a trial of sorts in the unforgiving courts of public opinion and of legislative bodies.

My argument in this essay is that the scholarship of teaching and learning may well provide the best vehicle we in the academy have of defending what we do, and of making what we do defensible. At the base of my argument is asking what our critics outside the academy, including critical stakeholders such as taxpayers or tuition-paying parents, demand from higher education? Most academics would agree that external constituencies do not have a particularly strong understanding of what we do with our time. Outside of the hours we spend in the classroom, doing our “real work”, what exactly do we do? Those of us in higher education can carefully explain that we prepare for classes, stay current in our fields, engage in scholarly research, participate in faculty governance at our institution, partake in professional activities within our fields, etc. These are generally valuable activities, to be sure. But many of these activities fall outside what our external constituencies want to see – rather than valuing the “research” that many of us legitimately hold so dear, they want us (not unreasonably) to teach students, and to engage students. And they want us to do these important jobs well.

So, to satisfy our external stakeholders, the ultimate aim is to improve teaching within the academy. How does the scholarship of teaching and learning help to do this? The first thing it does is to take teaching seriously as intellectual and scholarly work, and to encourage others to do the same (Boyer 1990; Hutchings, Huber and Ciccone 2011; Hutchings and Shulman 1999). By encouraging faculty to view problems in their teaching as something to be investigated and studied, rather than something to be hidden, we invite faculty to bring the same skills and energy to bear on teaching that they customarily bring to their research (Bass 1998). When the intellectual skills of professors engage around questions of teaching, then student learning will, inevitably, improve.

A second step, closely linked to the first, is to make teaching public. Good teaching need not disappear when the teacher walks out of the classroom and closes the door behind her; instead, treating teaching as a scholarly act provides us the opportunity to “put an end to pedagogical solitude” and capture what we have done so others may learn from it (Shulman 1993). When we become more self-conscious of teaching as a field in which earlier studies inform later work, we enable ourselves to use the literature on effective teaching to help others improve their practice. Like all scholarly pursuits, those who come first leave a trail of breadcrumbs to help those coming later to improve their practice.

A third step, and one in which the scholarship of teaching and learning already excels, is to respect the disciplines in addressing teaching and learning issues. While aspects of good teaching may be shared across disciplines, the nature of how we teach, and the nature of what we teach, dictates different methods in different disciplines. One would not teach *Beowulf* the same way one would teach differential calculus. Rather than proscribing a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching, which is bound to turn others against this work, scholars of teaching and learning concern themselves with finding the best way to teach *within any particular discipline*. Much good work in the scholarship of teaching and learning comes at the intersection of subject matter knowledge and general knowledge of effective teaching practice, what Shulman (1987) has termed “pedagogical content knowledge.” In my case, I believe I understand American political behavior, and I have more than a passing knowledge of active learning strategies and of effective classroom management techniques. When I blend the two, and use the tools in my teaching toolkit to most effectively teach the content of political behavior, I am at my best as a teacher, and my teaching becomes a disciplinary act of scholarship. It also becomes something I can share, very explicitly, with colleagues in my department (and them with me), helping to minimize pedagogical solitude within academic departments.

To return the problem with which we began, satisfying our external stakeholders in an academy under siege requires to a large extent that we demonstrate that we are paying greater attention to teaching, and to how our students learn. And, ideally, a professor engaging in scholarly investigations of his or her own teaching is motivated at least to a significant extent by a desire to do better in the classroom. Perhaps, following from Randy Bass (1998), we have had that epiphany moment when we look in the mirror and find some *problem* in our teaching. Perhaps our students are not engaged by a particular topic with which we think they ought to be engaged. Perhaps we have run into some kind of bottleneck that halts our understanding of the course material, and we need to help our students move past that bottleneck (Díaz, Middendorf, Pace and Shopkow 2008). The process of scholarly investigation forces me to identify the problem, suggest a solution, try it out, gather data (however formally or informally) on the efficacy of my solution, and then determine if I wish to continue using this solution (or try something different, or leave things alone). In so doing, I will improve my own teaching.

And, if the scholarship of teaching and learning gains a foothold among individual faculty, collectively we will improve the teaching of those all around us. If I go public with the results of my inquiry into teaching, I will enable others to learn from the work I am doing. At conferences, in the pages of journals and books, and at the water cooler, I can share the insights I gain from my teaching investigations with colleagues. When the scholarship of teaching and learning flourishes, our faculty development centers, and (dare to dream!) our academic departments can become trading zones (Huber and Hutchings 2005) for discussing teaching techniques, and for discussing ways in which we can gather and interpret evidence of student learning. When this happens, and we find acceptable and comfortable ways in which to problematize teaching, the results of these inquiries improve teaching as a whole.

For many years, academics have enjoyed a privileged position. Society has given us a high degree of trust to do the work we want to do, with minimal interference. As those days are ending, and as a culture of assessment begins to emerge, academics are being forced to show that the work we are doing is having an effect on student learning. Much of this comes from the top down, often from people who are not in as good a position as we are to talk about teaching and learning. As a case in point, during the various protests regarding unionization and public employees in Wisconsin, a campaign button appeared. Mocking the old saying, "Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach," this one read "Those Who Can't Teach Make Laws about Teaching." Again, at the risk of oversimplifying these issues, the button suggests that if university faculty do not answer the calls of those who regulate us, this regulation will be imposed on us. We do not want that.

In responding to these calls for reform, we must remember that we have a professional obligation to do our best work when entrusted with the sacred responsibility of educating the future leaders of our communities, and of our nations. The scholarship of teaching and learning helps to facilitate this by providing us a framework for taking teaching seriously as intellectual work, for enabling us to "go public" with what we have learned and build on past practice, and by respecting and valuing the disciplinary expertise of those who teach in higher education. When we engage in scholarly inquiries of teaching and learning, and when we are able to document our teaching effectiveness (and, relatedly, to document the struggles we go through in pursuit of teaching effectiveness), we show our stakeholders that we take this part of our job seriously. Doing so is no longer just an option; it has become a moral, and political, imperative.

Such work will not be easy. But, to return to an earlier analogy, the payoff can be high. In *Defending Your Life*, Albert Brooks faced the danger of being sent back to Earth for another life (rather than “moving on” to the next phase). His weakness here on Earth was being conquered by his fears, and not showing enough courage. Only when he made a dramatic show of courage at the end of the movie did he show he was worthy of moving on to the desired next phase. Likewise, I would suggest that failing to demonstrate courage to do things differently might doom us in academia to repeating the struggles of the last few years *ad infinitum*. I would hope that we can respond to this call and use the principles of the scholarship of teaching and learning as a vehicle to address these pressing issues in a scholarly manner. Time is most certainly of the essence.

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