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The Inevitable Contradictions of Student Learning

Abstract

Excerpt: I used to lead a university-wide network dedicated to developing the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). Every second Tuesday at the dot of 1pm, 10-15 or so staff would shuffle into a room (refreshments in hand) to learn about the evaluation of a pedagogical initiative, to critically review a colleague's promising idea for a new curriculum project, to puzzle over something SoTL-like we'd collectively read and sought through dialogue to better understand, and to share experiences of what often felt like contradictory university agendas for curriculum, teaching and learning change. At the best of times, folks would find opportunities to write together. And in less busy times, the SoTL publications and teaching awards achieved among us would be acknowledged, and plans made for celebration. In our learning how to be together, the differences in the politics of our contexts and in our disciplinary/professional training did not seem as stark because of our commitment to think well, and to act in scholarly ways about the project of improving student learning. Among us were those who taught students in the typical ways—in seminars, lectures, labs, online and elsewhere, and there were others who saw students in individual consultations regarding specific learning difficulties. Then, there were those (like me) with two jobs: the first, to support faculty take an inquiry-based approach to their curriculum, teaching, student learning, and second, to make a contribution to integrated, systems-level thinking about student learning in relation to the overall curriculum offerings of the university. That disposition – caring for student learning – seemed to be the stuff that held the network together no matter the level or focus of our interest in SoTL. It helped that we laughed together too....

Keywords

Student learning, Scholarship of teaching and learning

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The Inevitable Contradictions of Student Learning

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I used to lead a university-wide network dedicated to developing the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). Every second Tuesday at the dot of 1pm, 10-15 or so staff would shuffle into a room (refreshments in hand) to learn about the evaluation of a pedagogical initiative, to critically review a colleague's promising idea for a new curriculum project, to puzzle over something SoTL-like we'd collectively read and sought through dialogue to better understand, and to share experiences of what often felt like contradictory university agendas for curriculum, teaching and learning change. At the best of times, folks would find opportunities to write together. And in less busy times, the SoTL publications and teaching awards achieved among us would be acknowledged, and plans made for celebration. In our learning how to be together, the differences in the politics of our contexts and in our disciplinary/professional training did not seem as stark because of our commitment to think well, and to act in scholarly ways about the project of improving student learning. Among us were those who taught students in the typical ways—in seminars, lectures, labs, online and elsewhere, and there were others who saw students in individual consultations regarding specific learning difficulties. Then, there were those (like me) with two jobs: the first, to support faculty take an inquiry-based approach to their curriculum, teaching, student learning, and second, to make a contribution to integrated, systems-level thinking about student learning in relation to the overall curriculum offerings of the university. That disposition – caring for student learning – seemed to be the stuff that held the network together no matter the level or focus of our interest in SoTL. It helped that we laughed together too.

I have since moved institutions and while I am delighted that the network continues to meet, a persistent curiosity continues to gnaw at me. I wonder whether too much is being asked of SoTL in relation to improving student learning, especially *at this time* when the discourses surrounding the student experience operate on such contested ground, and the sheer organizational complexity of improving it is writ-large. 20 or so years after Boyer (1990), could it be said that there is now enough knowledge and know-how about what needs doing to transform the academy in ways that advance a scholarly approach to student learning? If the answer is yes, then the question to my mind is about why student learning (as both a concept, and moral imperative involving particular sets of practices) still feels like such a hard sell. How do we think well about the phenomenon of student learning at the very moment it has become captured by discourses not of our making?

The provocation which has stimulated my thinking on this is taken from a piece by Anita Devos (2012). She invites a similar line of inquiry on the state of Australian student equity research – specifically, the political and discursive contexts that make equity research think-able, visible, and do-able in particular sorts of ways. To make her point, Devos (2012) draws parallels with an event – a public lecture on gender given by Robyn Wiegman where the following question is posed: can 'gender' as a concept shoulder the burdens which we

ask of it? Wiegman raises challenges about the “aspirations we hold for it, conceptually, methodologically, politically and institutionally”. Devos’s (2012) reading of Wiegman is not “that research on gender is no longer necessary... [r]ather [...] that it is becoming increasingly unclear what one means when one purports to be doing research on gender” (p.964). The judgment Wiegman reaches in her lecture is that “gender is always made and remade *according to the political desire that seeks it* in the first place. This is to be neither lamented nor resolved” (Devos, 2012:964, original italics).

Although the emphasis is on ‘gender’ (for Wiegman) and ‘equity research’ (for Devos), I find the conceptual interrogation productive. It goes some way toward quelling my own anxieties about what it is that the student learning experience comes to symbolize even as I have argued for it in the course of my faculty development career. Nowadays, my gaze on it has become a little less steady and I have wondered whether a comparable conclusion might be drawn about student learning and its more contemporary variants: student engagement, student voice, student participation. Might we suggest about the student learning experience what Wiegman draws our attention to about gender? I do not mean to suggest that there is a systematic lack of operational definition or that efforts in these areas have not been fruitful. There are several compelling SoTL studies that articulate their intention, design and outcomes with clarity, and that delineate persuasively between ‘learning’, ‘engagement’, ‘voice’ and ‘participation’ where that has been necessary. My disquiet rather is with how these terms have collectively come to properly mark the way faculty are being encouraged to imagine students’ learner subjectivities even as the political desires which surround them may work both with *and* against SoTL’s aims. Keith Trigwell and Suzanne Shale’s (2004) observation below offers a familiar SoTL inspired rationale:

[s]tudents do not appear as partners in learning. They do not appear as neophyte scholars in the community. They do not appear as critics or connoisseurs of teaching. When they appear it is as objects of concern, objects of analysis, or presumptively passive consumers (p.534).

Duna Sabri (2011) puts an altogether different rationale, and rather more forcefully:

It [the student experience] has become an absolute representation of reality that exerts moral authority on conduct and utterances that relate to almost any aspect of higher education (p.659).

Moreover, ‘learning and teaching’ initiatives intensify the discourse that steadily elevates ‘the student experience’ and detracts attention away from broader institutional, financial and socio-political issues. It revolves around the idea that ‘the student experience’ can be improved through academics and other professional staff researching their own practice, and specifically, this usually takes the form of asking students about their ‘experience’ and using this somewhat partial data to ‘enhance’ the academics’ practice. *The implication here is that students have perceptions and experiences that are static, and not amenable to challenge or cannot be justifiably challenged.* They, after all, are the customers (p. 662-663, my italics).

There seem to be two contrasting political desires at work here – and both require faculty to make sound judgments in encountering them. Trigwell and Shale’s (2004) logic appeals to those of us in the SoTL community keen to see students as collaborators in learning and

teaching. I note a distinctly liberal-humanist vein to their plea – one that moves us beyond students' experiences presented as patterns of numbers and narrative removed from the contexts that might identify them. Theirs seems a view that reminds us to return to the vulnerable pedagogical acts of conversation and challenge with students in ways that facilitate their induction into scholarly ways of thinking and practicing. Although there is perhaps a gap between the student and teacher, it is offered as a genuine space for shared inquiry.

On the other hand, Sabri (2011) suggests that the student experience of learning now dominates all else, including any alternate interpretive judgments made by faculty themselves that explain student learning as they see and experience it. It is a view that seems fuelled by a suspicion that access to an authentic student experience is near impossible, sullied precisely because it has become subject to the regulations of the market. Further, it is a logic that encroaches on all others – including the pedagogical. We might observe this view being played out (for example) in a faculty member's unease about how to respond to something reasonably typical such as an end of semester student feedback process. In asking students 'what has been your experience of learning with me and others in this subject?' – faculty are also asking themselves about aspects of the feedback they can trust to inform their future teaching development when students may not have turned up for lectures, do not read what is asked, or are not submitting their assignments on time. On this view, the feedback system breaks when students have not engaged in the learning that enables them the privilege of their experiences being taken seriously. For Sabri, the student experience has spilled out from its proper place, and any thoughtful consideration of it ought to be properly situated within a contemporary higher education scene fraught with socio-political contestation.

While it does seem the case that the contexts which offer up improved student learning as a desirable pedagogical and institutional project are marked by zones of ambivalence, contradiction, good will and eros¹, the inclusion of 'and learning' onto the landscape of Boyer's (1990) original framing of the scholarship of teaching continues to be a tough conceptual and practical task. Despite the difficulty, my goal here is not to abandon a commitment to the student learning experience as a key part of SoTL but to inquire after its reasoning in the following way,

... to question a form of activity or a conceptual terrain is not to banish or censure it; it is for the duration, to suspend its ordinary play in order to *ask after its constitution* (my italics, Butler, Laclau & Zizek cited in Taylor & Robinson, 2009: 163).

In asking after 'the student learning experience', I have been reading with some interest a body of scholarship by UK sociologist of schooling Michael Fielding (2001; 2004; 2011). Fielding has written extensively on the necessity and complexity of student voice in relation to the patterns of, and conditions leading to, learning partnerships. One part of Fielding's (2011) work proposes a continuum for developing judgments about students' involvement in learning where they are seen as:

- *Data* (where staff utilize information about student progress and well-being)

¹ After bell hooks (1994), I take eros to signal a motivating force for self-actualisation.

- *Active respondents* (where staff invite students dialogue and discussion to deepen professional learning/professional decisions)
- *Co-enquirers* (where staff take a lead role with high profile, active student support)
- *Knowledge creators* (where students take lead roles with active staff support)
- *Joint authors* (where students and staff decide a joint course of action together)
- *Partners in intergenerational learning as lived democracy* (where there is a shared commitment to/responsibility for the common good).

Many of us in the SoTL community will have aspired to a good many of Fielding's (2011) patterns of partnership at different times in our higher education lives, although the final pattern may sit a little oddly. Underscoring it is what Fielding sees as *democratic fellowship*, or a commitment to fellow-feeling:

Democratic community [...] is important because its explicitly egalitarian form enables a deep and demonstrable reciprocity, thereby providing both existential and practical testimony of the need and for presence, if not of love, then of care, of kindness of human fellowship and the reciprocal needs of recognition (Fielding, 2011: 12-13).

Imagine if this was our starting point for working with the inevitable contradictions of student learning?

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