7-2013

The Future of University Teaching: Bleak or Promising?

Joy Mighty
Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada, joy.mighty@carleton.ca

The Future of University Teaching: Bleak or Promising?

Abstract

In this essay I reflect on what university teaching might be like in the future. I first consider the context in which universities exist in the twenty-first century and identify some of the pressures for change that currently face them. These include the changing demographics among students, the calls by various stakeholders for increased access, quality and accountability, and the rapidly changing technological environment. I suggest that a dismal future would be one where university teaching fails to adapt to these changes and I then envisage a scenario in which many of the changes already begun through the SoTL movement take firm hold and transform university teaching for the better.

Keywords
University teaching, Pressures for change, Transforming university teaching

The Future of University Teaching: Bleak or Promising?

Joy Mighty Carleton
University Ottawa,
Ontario, Canada
joy.mighty@carleton.ca

Abstract

In this essay I reflect on what university teaching might be like in the future. I first consider the context in which universities exist in the twenty-first century and identify some of the pressures for change that currently face them. These include the changing demographics among students, the calls by various stakeholders for increased access, quality and accountability, and the rapidly changing technological environment. I suggest that a dismal future would be one where university teaching fails to adapt to these changes and I then envisage a scenario in which many of the changes already begun through the SoTL movement take firm hold and transform university teaching for the better.

Keywords: university teaching, pressures for change, transforming university teaching

Introduction

I was recently invited to participate in a debate on the future of university teaching. The debate was an innovative feature, "the Provosts' Forum", incorporated into the seventh annual conference on university teaching and learning hosted jointly by the Provosts of Oakland University in Michigan, USA, and the University of Windsor in Ontario, Canada, where the conference was held this year. The theme of the conference was "On the Verge: Debating the Future of University Teaching" and the primary debate was organized into four "lightning panels" with each panel focused on a different aspect of university teaching in the future, namely: "who", "why", "how" and "where".

Panelists were asked to present first a pessimistic view of the future of university teaching. The future could be anytime between the next five to fifty years. Each panelist had five minutes to "draw a compelling, convincing portrait of one possible 'nightmare' vision of the future of university teaching". Later, each panelist had five minutes to present a more 'hopeful' vision. An engaging and provocative debate ensued. With only one PowerPoint slide permitted for each five minute presentation, and timekeepers equipped with and eager to use loud noise-emitting devices borrowed from the University of Windsor's Music Department, the debate was stimulating, exciting and highly entertaining. I thought that I would use the opportunity afforded by the invitation to write this essay to share some of the ideas presented during this debate since the current context of higher education has most of us in the field asking, "What indeed is the future of university teaching?"

The Current Context

In recent years there have been many issues affecting teaching and learning across the post-secondary educational system, locally and globally. Key among such issues is the explosion of technology that makes a vast amount of information in every discipline easily available and accessible. This has reduced the need for faculty members to be the major or sole purveyors of information and significantly changes their role from 'the sage on the stage to the guide on the side'. The preferred approach to teaching is increasingly that of facilitation of the learning process rather than the transmission of information. This trend is consistent with a wider paradigm shift in the higher education field as evidenced in the literature, most notably Barr and Tagg (1995), who challenged the professoriate in higher education to shift from the traditional, dominant "instruction" paradigm to a "learning" paradigm (Barr and Tagg, 1995). They called for a transformation from a faculty-and teaching-centered model to a student-and learning-centered model; from a focus on providing instruction to a focus on producing learning. Barr and Tagg argued that the Instruction Paradigm rests on conceptions of teaching that are increasingly recognized as ineffective because they diverge from almost every principle of optimal settings for student learning. The Learning Paradigm, on the other hand, employs whatever approaches best serve to promote learning in a particular context by particular students.

Other pressures on the system include employers' continuing demands for graduates with more employability skills, as well as increasing demands from other stakeholders such as governments, parents, and students themselves for greater accountability on the part of universities. These demands have led to a greater focus on quality assurance, on articulating and measuring graduate attributes and ensuring the alignment of learning outcomes at the course, program, institutional and provincial or state levels. For example, in Canada in 2005, the provincial government in Ontario established the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) with a mandate to enhance quality, access and accountability. More recently, the Council of Ontario Universities (COU), the organization of Executive Heads of Ontario's publicly assisted universities, established the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance (the Quality Council) charged with the mandate of approving new undergraduate and graduate university programs, auditing each university's quality assurance processes on an eight-year cycle, and generally ensuring quality assurance of university programs at both undergraduate and graduate levels (Council of Ontario universities, 2011). In general, such developments have raised the profile of teaching and learning within the province. More specifically, they have influenced an evolving interest in curricular redesign and change. Ontario has taken the lead on these quality assurance measures, but other provinces in Canada are beginning to follow, and we know that other jurisdictions in other parts of the world, notably Australia, the UK, and the USA, have long been concerned with similar accountability and quality assurance issues.

Perhaps some of the biggest pressures on the higher education system have stemmed from students themselves. Changing demographics have made diversity a phenomenon that has of necessity influenced how faculty engage, teach, and interact with students of every conceivable cultural, socio-economic, and academic background. Student diversity is, in part, a result of "massification", one of the major changes in higher education globally over the last half century (Scott, 1995). Previously, university education was, for the most part, the domain and assumed prerogative of the gifted, the elite, and the privileged, those who could afford to pay for it. With the rise of the knowledge economy in which knowledge has replaced physical resources as the main source of economic growth and power, higher education has become not only more desirable but absolutely essential for personal

advancement. Participation in higher education has, for the most part, become the universal norm rather than the exception. Moreover, increasing globalization and the concomitant competition among universities for students have made it possible for almost everyone who wants a university education to gain access to one.

Not only is universal access a new aspect of the context of higher education today. More important perhaps is the increased emphasis on outcomes that meet the demands of a knowledge-based environment, including creative and critical thinking, the ability to acquire and use appropriate information and communication technology for a variety of purposes, and the relevant skills for engaging in continuous, independent learning to adapt to ever-changing conditions.

Another effect of the massification or democratization of higher education is the enormous growth in average class sizes. As large cohorts of baby boomer faculty retire, university administrators have met the challenge of massive growth in enrolments by creating super-sized classes packed with hundreds of students. With mass higher education, the diversity of the student population has become more pronounced. Many university students are now quite different in social and cultural background from the students who were the participants in the smaller, elite, higher-education systems. Apart from their diversity in race, ethnicity, gender, age, language, sexual orientation, physical and mental abilities, religion, class, or other dimensions of their social identity, students in post-secondary institutions today are also characterized by varying needs in terms of learning abilities and disabilities, learning styles, and levels of preparedness. Given the enormous increase in both diversity and class size, students have, understandably, expressed their concerns and expectations with regard to the quality of their education. They view the quality of teaching as a critical variable in determining the quality of their education. In response to such expressions of concern, post-secondary institutions have established or expanded the roles of centers for teaching and learning with the hope of enhancing the quality of teaching through faculty or educational development initiatives for their teaching staff.

Arguably one of the most controversial issues in higher education today is the increasing use of a wide range of multimedia technologies for teaching and learning in the classroom and online. Such technologies include videos, blogs, wikis and social media, accessed through mobile phones, tablets, learning management systems, and other open educational resources such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCS). Not only has current technology increased access to higher education by anyone. It has also made such education available anywhere and anytime, giving rise to questions about the relevance of traditional university structures and systems. Under these circumstances, the question of the future of university teaching is most fitting.

The Future as Status Quo

John Henry Newman (the 19th century academic and priest) famously wrote in his 1852 treatise on *The Idea of a University* that it is "a place for teaching universal knowledge", which implies that knowledge is static, uni-dimensional, and handed down from generation to generation. However, few people today would argue that the sole purpose of a university education is to transmit a body of knowledge, a canon that is both universal and ageless. The modern university has long evolved to a place where there is more than one way of knowing, and knowledge, with all its multi-dimensionality, is not simply given, but is also created or constructed, and is so dynamic as to be constantly evolving. Given its existence in a time when the technology for communicating knowledge is similarly constantly evolving to meet the current demands for new and better ways of discovering, accessing, creating,

using, storing, and sharing such information or knowledge, the worst thing that could happen to university teaching in the future is for it to remain the same.

Teaching practices that are overwhelmingly didactic are still prevalent in many universities. These   practices, reliant on traditional lectures with emphasis on content coverage, are inconsistent with research on teaching and learning in higher education (Christensen Hughes and Mighty, 2010). Essentially, the research tells us that there is a very close relationship between how faculty members teach and how students approach learning. As we know, students tend to use two major approaches to learning; these are the famous *"surface"* and *"deep"* approaches, labels that students themselves used in research done by Marton and his colleagues in 1976 (Entwistle, 2010). When faculty teach in traditional, didactic ways with an emphasis on the transmission of information, where they talk and most students listen, students tend to adopt what is referred to as a "surface approach" to learning. As the term suggests, this means that they invest minimal effort in the learning process or narrowly focus on developing the ability to repeat what they have been told or what they have read. Students taking a surface approach to learning emphasize rote learning and memorization.

In direct contrast to the practices in this dominant instruction paradigm, the learning paradigm, as mentioned earlier, focuses on creating environments that engage students and promote learning, environments that help them to discover and construct knowledge and solve problems for themselves. When faculty teach in ways that create such learning environments, then students tend to become more actively involved in the learning process and adopt a "deep approach" to learning. We know from the research, for example, that deep learning is fostered when students are encouraged to master threshold or pivotal concepts in the discipline, monitor their own thinking, create their own understanding by connecting new material to what they already know and to the "real world", formulate and investigate their own questions, and share their findings with their peers. In other words, rather than focusing on covering content, teachers who create learning contexts conducive
to deep learning help students develop essential skills so that they can uncover content for themselves.

Despite what the research says, however, and despite the best intentions of many outstanding teachers who care deeply about their students, dominant practices in higher education continue to reflect traditional approaches to teaching.

A More Hopeful Vision

In a much more optimistic vision, the overarching purpose of a university education in the future will be to make a significant difference in the world. It will ensure that everyone who receives a university education becomes a responsible citizen of the world, contributing to making the world a better place. To achieve this vision, there will be greater use of a student-centered and multi-pronged approach to teaching and learning using innovative pedagogies, including a range of active and collaborative learning approaches in which students are purposefully involved, and safe, inclusive learning environments that allow all students an equal opportunity to succeed, regardless of their social identities.

The curricula will be truly interdisciplinary and diverse, providing multiple new and global perspectives. It has long been recognized that there is no problem of the world that can be solved by one discipline alone. Whereas today's graduates tend to be experts in one or two content areas and often have to go back to school, learn on the job, or find some other means of educating themselves in other areas, future graduates will be better equipped to

solve old as well as new problems because they will benefit from teaching that will help them acquire the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes to do so. Students will be selected for entry into university programs based on the questions they want to be able to answer, or the social problems they want to help solve. For example, a student might be selected to work on a specified health problem or on an environmental challenge or on a social problem such as a particular aspect of poverty or malnutrition or homelessness. Once admitted, students will choose from a cafeteria style curriculum, studying a menu of subjects and collaborating with professors and peers to find answers to the questions they have on their selected problems. In this inquiry-based approach, students will engage in a just-in-time style of education where they will study and research subjects as they need them, when that knowledge is most relevant. They will not necessarily remain with the same cohort of students or follow a timetable structured in a linear way. In fact, traditional auditorium/lecture-style classrooms as we know them today will be relics of the past. Students will learn, not just from their professors and fellow students, but also from the communities with which they will work on their chosen problems. This increased use of community service learning is just one of several high-impact practices (Kinzie, 2010) that will become the norm. Many other experiential, active and collaborative learning approaches will be used to enrich students' learning experience. The goal will be to empower and engage students through self-discovery, high-level thinking, and other approaches that allow them to learn deeply, to see the relevance of what they are learning, and to continue learning long after they have left the sphere of our immediate influence. The goal will not be to acquire knowledge for its own sake, although one will be free to do so as well, but more importantly, it will be to contribute to society's well-being, to solve the consequential or significant problems of the world, just as Ernest Boyer envisioned (Boyer, 1990). Enhanced approaches to university teaching will yield many other positive outcomes. As a result of its direct and indirect contributions to society, the university will enjoy a better relationship with society. It will no longer be considered an ivory tower that is inaccessible and distant from the communities in which it is embedded.

One very satisfactory aspect of this optimistic vision of the future is the degree of integration and balance between research and teaching. University teaching will no longer be the distant relative of research, as is often the case in many of today's universities, and the two will be so well integrated in their search for answers to significant societal questions that it will be hard to separate them. In particular, faculty will routinely engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) for the purpose of enhancing both their teaching practice and students' learning, and SoTL will be fully integrated into the professional development and teaching evaluation processes of most universities.

In summary, more than ever before, the student lies at the core of this promising vision of university teaching in the future. Ultimately, student learning is the university's raison d'être and the university's mission must be to engage students fully, with a learning experience that is meaningful and that leads to their success here and beyond. Given the context of today's university with the various pressures for change affecting it, achieving our mission will require all of us to pay extra special attention to what we include in our curricula, the teaching and learning processes we use, and the kinds of learning environments we foster.

References

Barr, R. B., and Tagg J. (1995). From teaching to learning - A new paradigm for undergraduate education. *Change,* 27(6) November/December, pp. 13-25*.*

Boyer, E. (1990) *Scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriate*. Princeton: NJ: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

Christensen Hughes, J. & Mighty, J. (Eds.). (2010). *Taking stock: Research in teaching and learning in higher education.* Montreal and Kingston: Queen's Policy Studies Series, McGill-Queen's University Press.

Council of Ontario Universities (2011). http://www.cou.on.ca/related-sites/the-ontario-universities-council-on-quality-assura.aspx. Last retrieved on June 7, 2013.

Entwistle, N. (2010). Taking stock: An overview of key research findings. In J. Christensen Hughes & J. Mighty (Eds.). (2010). *Taking stock: Research in teaching and learning in higher education* (pp. 15-57). Montreal and Kingston: Queen's Policy Studies Series, McGill-Queen's University Press.

Kinzie, J. (2010). Student engagement and learning: Experiences that matter. In J. Christensen Hughes & J. Mighty (Eds.), *Taking stock: Research on teaching and learning in higher education* (pp. 139-154). Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Newman, J. (1852). *The idea of a university*. Originally published in 1907. London: Longmans, Green and Co.

Scott, P. (1995). *The meaning of mass higher education*. Buckingham. SRHE/Open University Press.