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A Case Study in Engaging Academics in Research-Based Professional Development

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Abstract:

In this paper I outline a strategically important project to provide academics with multiple pathways to engage in research-based professional development for teaching. These pathways include engaging in reflective teaching, scholarly teaching and the scholarship of teaching in order to enhance and improve teaching practice. I discuss the rationale for offering multiple approaches to professional development and detail how we aligned this project with Faculty strategic priorities and academics' career progression. I conclude the paper by discussing our evaluation plan for determining the utility of the various professional development resources.

Key Words:

scholarship, teaching, learning, professional, development.

Introduction

In early 2009 the Associate Dean for Education at the Faculty Medical and Health Sciences (FMHS), The University of Auckland (UoA) initiated a strategically important project to achieve systemic change in the teaching culture of the Faculty. The sort of changes that the Faculty wanted to see included: an improvement of the status of teaching relative to the status of discipline research; an increase in academic engagement with the knowledge-base for teaching; academic commitment to the development and enhancement of their teaching practices; commitment to a more rigorous process for evidencing improvements made to teaching; and a resultant improvement in the student learning experience within the Faculty.

With the project aims for systemic change in mind, the project deliverables were specified as: a transparent teaching performance rubric to guide staff in developing their teaching in line with University performance expectations; a teaching and learning "hub" consisting of a set of on online research-based Educational Professional Development (EPD) modules (Knight, 2006) designed to help academics to develop their teaching in

line with university performance expectations; and an ePortfolio to allow academics to maintain records of their teaching performance for formative (self-development) and summative (formal reviews) purposes. Readers interested in looking at these resources can visit the professional development website at <https://www.fmhshub.auckland.ac.nz/>.

The University Context

The University of Auckland is a research-intensive university with funding, national prestige and international reputation contingent on a research rating awarded during rounds of the Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF). During PBRF rounds (2003, 2006 and upcoming in 2012) all eligible academics at higher education institutions must submit a research portfolio for peer review. The core of the portfolio (70% of the overall score) is made up of four nominated research outputs (NRO's) along with up to 30 additional research outputs. Individual academics are rated from "A" through to "Research Inactive" and the cumulative scores of all portfolios yield an overall research rating for the University. As already mentioned, this rating is extremely important both in terms of securing PBRF funding and in terms of the national and international reputation of the university. According to one senior New Zealand academic, the importance of the PBRF along with the nature of the criteria for judging a research portfolio entails that researchers need to focus their efforts on their discipline research if they are to achieve a high PBRF score (Willis, 2009). That is, engaging in educational scholarship would be a risky business. Consideration of PBRF requirements therefore played a fundamental part in our judgment about the potential place of SoTL in the Faculty project to improve teaching and learning.

The research picture at the University of Auckland needs to be balanced by an understanding of the teaching context and culture. The University of Auckland – like many universities – has a raft of policies, procedures, guidelines and support mechanisms related to delivering quality teaching. There is, therefore, an evidenced commitment on the part of the university to guiding and supporting staff in their teaching. Rigorous quality assurance processes including program reviews and course reviews that involve student evaluation as a key component of the review process further evidence this commitment to quality teaching. However, a commitment to teaching quality does not necessarily involve academics engaging in SoTL or SoTL related activities. For example, the University's teaching performance guidelines do specify the "Contribution of scholarship, research and professional activities to teaching and learning" as an area in which academics might evidence the quality of their teaching. However, the sorts of activities that we might understand as SoTL activities are required only for those seeking to evidence excellence or distinction – the higher levels of performance – in teaching. Consideration of SoTL expectations within the University was a second factor that influenced our thought processes around the potential place of SoTL activities in this strategic initiative.

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.

Whilst there has been a great deal of debate over the concept of SoTL and its cognates (Boshier, 2009; Brew & Ginns, 2008; Gossman, Haigh, & Jiao, 2009; Healey, 2000; Carolin Kreber, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2002a, 2002b, 2006; Prosser, 2008;

Richlin, 2001; L. S. Shulman, 1999; Trigwell, Martin, Benjamin, & Prosser, 2000; Trigwell & Shale, 2004; Tsang, 2010), a review of SoTL literature reveals broad agreement that SoTL – however defined – has a number of core aims including: raising the status of teaching; enabling teachers to become more knowledgeable about teaching; providing a way to assess the quality of teaching; and improving the student learning experience. Whilst we wanted to achieve each of these aims through promoting SoTL and engaging academics in SoTL, the reality of the teaching and learning culture in a research-intensive Faculty suggested that promoting SoTL and SoTL related activities per se would be a mistake because discipline academics within the Faculty focus on discipline research for their career progression. Additionally, SoTL publications do not enhance a discipline academic's PBRF submission.

With our strategic aim in mind we therefore adopted a distinction between expert teaching, scholarly teaching and the scholarship of teaching. We defined expert teachers as self-directed teacher-learners who strive to improve their teaching through ongoing reflection and through making use of teaching and learning literature (Carolyn Kreber, 2002b). We then followed Richlin (Gossman & Haigh, 2007; Richlin, 2001) and others in distinguishing between: scholarly teaching as research-based enquiry into teaching that is necessarily communicated; and the scholarship of teaching as research-based enquiry into teaching and learning that requires dissemination of research in peer reviewed publications (Richlin, 2001). Finally, we applied the view that the scholarship of teaching must focus on student learning (Gossman, et al., 2009; Hutchings & Taylor Huber, 2008; C. Kreber, 2007; Prosser, 2008; L. Shulman, 2002; Trigwell & Shale, 2004; Tsang, 2010) because this view accorded with a key aim of the project.

Engaging Educators in Teaching Improvement.

As previously mentioned, we made the judgment that discipline research takes precedence within our Faculty even though the University has a clear strategic aim to achieve excellence in teaching and even though academics are directed to divide their time in terms of 40% teaching, 40% discipline research and 20% service. The first challenge was, therefore, to produce EPD resources in such a way that academics would be motivated to engage in EPD for their teaching. The second challenge was to produce resources that would, minimally, engage academics as expert teachers whilst also directing academics towards taking a scholarly approach to their teaching and / or to engaging in the scholarship of teaching. The motivation question was addressed through connecting the EPD modules with the university's reward and recognition processes. The engagement question was addressed through a learning design for the professional development resources [insert reference post review] that allows academics to move through the EPD modules in terms of a pathway – expert, scholarly or scholarship – of their own choosing. We will describe each of these initiatives in turn.

We connected the EPD modules with the university's reward and recognition processes in order to motivate staff to engage in professional development for their teaching. First, we produced a teaching and learning performance rubric setting out the university's expectations with respect to teaching performance at the various academic grades. The teaching performance rubric greatly simplified the representation of the

performance criteria contained in the university’s policy document on academic grades, promotion and criteria, thereby providing staff with a straightforward way to make judgments about their teaching performance. An example from the teaching rubric (Table 1 below) will help to make clear how the performance rubric works in practice. Table 1 presents the rubric for one teaching activity, ‘Delivery of teaching to facilitate learning’. Examples of the different sorts of achievements that might be evidenced are listed under the four performance levels. We can see, for example, that a satisfactory performance might be evidenced through making use of a range of teaching and learning methodologies. Interested readers can access the performance rubric at <http://www.fmhshub.auckland.ac.nz/23.html>.

	Satisfactory	Merit	Excellence	Distinction
Delivery of teaching to facilitate learning	Competent use of a range of teaching and learning methodologies to engage students in the learning process	Innovation in teaching methodologies and evaluation of impact on learning. Applies appropriate pedagogical frameworks to the improvement of own teaching practice	Promotes effective teaching practice at institutional level through mentoring, peer review, workshops or seminars. Researches into approaches to teaching that improve learning outcomes.	National / international standing in furthering understanding of and improving of teaching and learning.

Table 1: Teaching Performance Rubric

The University’s teaching performance guidelines do specify the “Contribution of scholarship, research and professional activities to teaching and learning” as an area in which academics might evidence the quality of their teaching. To put this in context in terms of promotion, the Faculty Staffing Committee responsible for making recommendations concerning promotion, must be satisfied that the candidate has reached a satisfactory (or in the case of Associate Professor – merit) level of performance consistent with his or her grade of appointment in each of the three broad areas for promotion. Second, in order to be promoted, the candidate must also demonstrate merit (for promotion to Senior Lecturer), excellence (for promotion to Senior Lecturer over the bar), and distinction (for promotion to Associate Professor), in at least one of the three broad areas. Therefore, only those applying for Senior Lecturer over the bar or promotion to Associate Professor would need to evidence SoTL activities – scholarly publications in teaching and scholarly activities – if they chose to base their promotion application on excellence or distinction in teaching. Academics evidencing satisfactory or meritorious performance are required only to show evidence of reflective teaching practice. In other words, no SoTL activities need to be demonstrated.

The second aspect of this project involved providing staff with the EPD modules to help them to improve their teaching in areas that they had identified using the teaching performance rubric. The learning design has been described elsewhere (Doherty, 2010) and will be summarized here. We developed the EPD modules in terms of a learning design that embodied the three options for teaching improvement: developing teaching expertise; taking a scholarly approach to teaching; and engaging in the scholarship of teaching. Each module addressed a particular teaching performance area and presented research-based information on how to develop in that performance area. Educators who engage at the basic level of reading each module can, therefore, develop as expert teachers. Each module also contains a “Taking it Further” page that consists of additional research articles. Educators who engage at this level can develop a scholarly approach to their teaching. Finally, academics are encouraged through prompts within the modules to engage in independent research into teaching, and to seek the advice from educational support units to produce publications related to their teaching improvements. This provides academics with a route into the scholarship of teaching. Academics are of course free to engage with the EPD modules at a level of their own choosing. However, the EPD modules also provide a “developmental track” (Gossman, et al., 2009) for academics. For example, educators might progress from being expert teachers to scholarly teachers and finally to scholars of teaching.

The UoA has a research information management system where academics can maintain records of their research outputs. The research management system is used to generate both the PBRF portfolio – which as we indicated above is crucial for both the individual and the institution – and the annual performance review document that is pre-populated with research outputs from the entire PBRF review period. In the absence of a system to maintain teaching records, we developed an ePortfolio to allow academics to maintain records of their teaching for formative and summative purposes. Academics are directed towards the ePortfolio at key points during their EPD learning and encouraged to start records regarding what they are learning how they intend to implement their EPD learning in their teaching practice.

The ePortfolio is structured to ensure that academics: provide a clear statement of their teaching development; explain why the development was needed; record the results of their teaching development; and detail their next steps. Academics can complete the ePortfolio records as teaching experts, as scholarly teachers or as teachers engaged in the scholarship of teaching. The ePortfolio guidelines make the connection between teaching performance and university promotion and review processes very clear whilst also emphasizing Faculty and University priorities around teaching excellence. The connection between the EPD modules, the ePortfolio, the University’s reward and recognition processes and university strategic aims goes some way to addressing the issue of incentives and rewards for teaching developments. Additionally, the structure of the ePortfolio provides a foundation for a consistent means of judging the quality teaching innovations. (Brawley, 2008; Lynch, Sheard, Carbone, & Collins, 2002).

Evaluation.

This project has sought to engage academics with EPD for teaching through connecting professional development with university reward and recognition processes. The EPD resources were designed and developed to offer academics various pathways through their professional development including developing as expert teachers, developing as scholarly teachers and engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning. The resources should, therefore, meet the EPD needs of diverse educators at different stages of their careers. The resources should also benefit academic managers who have responsibility for advising academic staff on their teaching performance. Finally, the resources – particularly the rubric and the ePortfolio – should be of benefit to members of the staffing committee responsible for making recommendations concerning promotion applications.

We need to know whether we achieve each of the aims outlined in the previous paragraph and with this in mind, the success of the project will be determined through evaluating the utility of the various resources for three different user groups: academics seeking promotion; academic managers responsible for advising academics seeking promotion; and members of the staffing committee responsible for making recommendations about promotion applications. These evaluations will differ for each group because the expected benefits are different for each group. For example, academics should benefit in terms of: making judgments about their teaching performance; improving their teaching; and evidencing their teaching. Academic managers should benefit in terms of advising academic teaching staff about their teaching performance and in terms of making judgments about teaching during review processes. Members of the Staffing Committee should benefit in terms of being better able to make standardized judgments about teaching performance.

Discussion.

SoTL is not well established at the University of Auckland. The same is true at other tertiary educations within New Zealand (Gossman & Haigh, 2007; Gossman, et al., 2009). It might be argued that a project such as the one described in this paper will do little to change that fact. In particular the project does nothing to explicitly promote SoTL and its cognates. Rather, SoTL approaches to teaching are embedded in the EPD resources. Against this line of thought we would note that, broadly speaking, SoTL has failed to establish itself within the teaching culture of the majority of universities. Certainly this position is changing with, for example, the establishment of teaching focussed positions at Universities in Australia including the University Queensland and the University of Sydney. However, this example serves to make our point. These are teaching focused positions. A significant number of research universities – as opposed to teaching focused institutions to be found in, for example, the United States – still operate in terms of research and teaching imperatives and academics at these institutions still engage in both discipline research and in teaching (as well as service). It is our contention that in these conditions there is a need for realism. Academics must be offered multiple pathways to teaching improvement including but not limited to engaging in scholarly teaching and the scholarship of teaching.

It has been suggested that the failure of SoTL to embed itself in the teaching culture of universities has to do with a failure to connect with institutional strategic priorities (Schroeder, 2007). Our contention is that institutional priorities compete with one another and the reality is that the research imperative puts significant pressure on both individual academics and on institutions. This means that Boyer's vision of placing teaching on the same footing as discipline research is unlikely to become a reality. We were clear that from a strategic perspective we wanted to see systemic change in the teaching culture of the Faculty including: an improvement in the status of teaching relative to the status of discipline research; an increase in academic engagement with the knowledge-base for teaching; academic commitment to the development and enhancement of their teaching practices; commitment to a more rigorous process for evidencing improvements made to teaching during formal review processes; and a resultant improvement in the student learning experience within the Faculty. However, these changes will result from academics engaging in various approaches to teaching improvement – teaching excellence, scholarly teaching and the scholarship of teaching – as opposed to engaging in SoTL related activities per se.

Conclusion.

We have argued that the educational reality at a research-intensive university in New Zealand means that multiple pathways must be provided for professional development in teaching. Academics need to be supported to become expert teachers, scholarly teachers and to be able to engage in the scholarship of teaching. We presented a Faculty project that delivers these three forms of support for teaching. The project also connects with University and Faculty strategic aims with university reward and recognition processes in order to encourage Faculty to develop their teaching. Finally, we outlined our evaluation plan with respect to these resources.

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