

Editorial

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A question often asked is whether university teaching is more art or science? For those who value the intangible and spontaneous interactions that occur within the classroom, they might lean towards viewing teaching as an art form. For others it is much easier to see how scientific method might apply to teaching, with the certainty offered by basic research from neurobiology potentially holding the key to motivating our students to learn.

Behind the question lies the understanding that these two fields offer fundamentally different ways of knowing. C.P. Snow (1998) famously argued in his 1959 lecture that these different epistemic traditions are responsible for two distinct cultures in higher education. For Snow, the literary intellectuals and natural scientists were equally incomprehensible to each other. He characterised himself as being a bridge between the two cultures, something he identified we would increasingly need to solve society's big issues. The challenge he raised was whether it would be possible for students to receive adequate education in both fields to also act as a bridge.

Elliot Eisner (1998) made similar observations from the literary intellectual's perspective. Distance and detachment did not improve the complex social interactions that make up teaching. As a practicing visual artist Eisner argued that education requires the skill to see qualities that are not always easy to perceive. His experience of the arts showed there was a long history of describing, interpreting and appraising the world that can be drawn upon to help others see often missed qualities.

Bridging art and science will occur when teaching is more like working in a studio or an innovative science laboratory where answers are not ready-

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to-hand. It asks educators to develop sophisticated ways of continually exploring their own practices to develop the integrationist attitude outlined by Van Leeuwen (2005). This recognition that no single discipline can address any given problem on its own is unlikely to occur in environments where there is widely held scepticism about teaching evaluation. Academics are predisposed to critique and investigations into the quality of teaching would appear to be a good match for academic practice. Indeed, the scholarship of teaching as proposed by Ernest Boyer (1990), makes precisely that suggestion. Boyer calls for turning the natural preferences of academics for inquiry towards the academic enterprise. Yet, rather than inquiry into teaching being embraced as a critical academic attribute, the centralist model of disciplinary practice places the methodology of evaluating teaching under constant attack.

It is this expansion of perspectives beyond traditional frameworks that Sarah O'Shea calls for in her review of students who are first in their immediate family to attend university. Rather than being critical of students from less educated families, O'Shea argues that first-in-family status could be framed in a positive and celebratory manner. First-in-family students cut across all manner of backgrounds, whether they are low-socio economic, regional, gender, disability or indigeneity. Through a series of student narratives O'Shea shows that first-in-family students may be experiencing multiple disadvantages in their educational journey. While the first year has been the focus of institution programs for many years (Kift, 2015) first-in-family learners encounter specific difficulties whilst transitioning between school and higher education, particularly for those from rural and remote areas. They may carry the aspirations of their whole family, sometimes across multiple generations, and without significant support and advice coming from within their family or community, they tend to have poorer educational outcomes. A more positive framing recognises that first-in-family students bring with them strengths that are hidden in the university landscape, O'Shea argues that rather than the individual learner needing to change or develop, the structural inequity embedded within university systems needs to be more actively exposed.

Denise Chalmers & Lynne Hunt see similar challenges in the evaluation of university teaching and learning. Just as the student body is changing, so too is the nature of the academic workforce which in turn changes the landscape of quality assurance and evaluation in universities. The challenge, they argue, is to evaluate the widening range of academic roles within this new context. Governments and students still want to know that universities teach well and provide high quality, relevant courses. Academic staff largely resist participating in evaluation which is seen as a tool of managerial

surveillance and a threat to academic freedom. To counteract this view Chalmers and Hunt focus on evaluating teaching from the perspective of teachers. They argue that evaluation of university teaching and learning should be part of a reflective cycle that leads to improved student learning as well as career development. The underlying premise of their review is that all sources of evidence should be used holistically with multiple strategies drawing on evidence from multiple sources. The four sources of evidence—students, assessment, peers and self-assessment— become the building blocks of holistic evaluation which, when combined, overcome any inherent weaknesses that can be found in any single source of evidence. It is only by using all four sources of evidence that Chalmers and Hunt argue it is possible to capture the many different aspects of university teaching including the context, processes and outcomes.

Angela Carbone, Julia Evans, & Jing Ye also take up the challenge of thinking holistically about teaching quality. They argue that quality too often refers solely to the characteristics of the teacher. Yet the teacher is only one of a number of elements that influences student learning and many of the other elements are outside of the teacher's control. To succeed students need more than personable teachers and Carbone, et al. present an alternative definition of teaching quality that focuses on student achievement in course units. Their framework for unit quality is based on ten main attributes revealed in a study of qualitative data obtained from student evaluations. They define a quality unit as one that aims to enhance quality assurance with better unit design practices, such as on-going evaluation and development. Carbone, et al. set out standards against five facets of a unit design including teaching, learning outcomes, learning activities, assessment and feedback, and unit resourcing that can be used to evaluate unit quality in a university's cycle of unit accreditation and improvement.

Each of these authors is at least tacitly aware of the paradox of having one of the ablest groups within any profession opting out of creating an effective evaluation regime focussed on continually exploring its own practices. The failure to recognise the close alignment between evaluation and other academic practices suggests that change from within is more difficult than we all realise. However, teaching is not a process that can be easily automated or outsourced to external experts. It is better served by an integration of art and science that prepares academic staff for the complexity inherent in our contemporary higher education sector.

I. References

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