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Developing frameworks to promote scholarship as a means of supporting teaching quality and effectiveness: a case study from within and across institutions

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Abstract

Although the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) is now a widely used term within higher education, there has been criticism that the dominant view of SoTL is drawn from research-intensive universities and is therefore not as relevant to college-based higher education (CBHE) staff “whose focus is primarily on teaching and learning and who have [a] high number of taught contact hours” (King and Widdowson 2009).

This paper focuses on the development of two complementary frameworks to promote SoTL in CBHE, particularly as a means of supporting teaching quality and effectiveness. The first is that developed by Hull College to encourage engagement in SoTL amongst its higher education teaching staff. The second is the Open University Partner Scholarship Network, of which Hull College is a member, which seeks to provide resources for SoTL for its validated institutions, many of which are college-based.

Introduction

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning is now widely accepted and promoted across higher education as a means of improving the student experience and providing a basis for the professional development of academics. Although once seen as an activity of the dedicated few (Walker et al 2008), SoTL is now enshrined in the professional standards for higher education (Higher Education Academy (HEA) 2012) and there is an expectation that “all teaching staff engaged in the delivery of higher education programmes have relevant knowledge and understanding of current research and advanced scholarship in their discipline area and that such knowledge and understanding directly inform and enhance their teaching” (Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) 2013, p 2).

This impetus for engagement in SoTL has also been felt within CBHE. However, Healey et al (2014) point to the Research Excellence Framework definition of scholarship, which focuses on the development and maintenance of the intellectual infrastructure of subjects and disciplines (REF 2012, p. 48) as typifying the “predominance of the yardstick which measures the quality of scholarship by how closely it approximates the kinds of original research which typify academic departments in the most research-intensive universities” (Healey et al 2014, p 10). This view of scholarship is not necessarily relevant to staff whose focus may be on vocational education training (Williams et al 2013) or who have a high number of taught contact hours (King and Widdowson 2009). Consequently, in a recent sector-wide study of SoTL, Fanghanel et al (2015) call for an approach to SoTL which recognises the greater diversity of institutions engaged in HE teaching across the sector.

These contrasting views of SoTL can come into particularly sharp focus within the context of a relationship between a validating institution and a validated partner. In particular, questions arise as to which view of SoTL should predominate, what expectations are there on individual CBHE teachers to engage in SoTL, and what support should be provided. This paper argues, however, that it is possible to develop frameworks to promote and support SoTL which address the requirements of quality, but which are also appropriate to the needs and circumstances of colleges. It presents the Open University and Hull College as a case study of one such approach.

The Open University: SoTL as a driver of quality

The Open University is the UK’s largest distance education provider with 200,000 students. Although the vast majority of these students study part-time and at a distance, 42,000 students are
currently studying at one of the Open University's 25 validated partners, primarily within the UK but also in Germany, the Netherlands and Greece.

The Open University’s role as a validating institution is to work with partner institutions in order to enable them to offer programmes leading to Open University-validated awards. Partner institutions take responsibility for the day-to-day quality assurance and management of their own academic programmes with groups of experts from the Open University making peer judgements about the quality of institutions and the learning programmes that they offer.

In one of the very few research papers on the relationship between quality assurance and SoTL, Ottewill and Macfarlane argue that there is, or at least should be, “a close relationship between the pursuit of enhanced quality in higher education and adoption of a scholarly approach to educational practice” (Ottewill and Macfarlane 2004, p 232). However, for the Open University, the role of SoTL in quality assurance and enhancement, either of its own provision or that of its validated partners, is implicit rather than explicit, reflecting the situation Ottewill and Macfarlane found in the HE sector as a whole. Indeed, Harvey and Newton (2004), writing at the same time, argue that quality review had more to do with compliance and accountability and “has contributed little to any effective transformation of the learning experience” (Harvey and Newton 2004, p 157). Of course, much has changed within the HE sector in the past decade. There has been an increased focus on the student as consumer and with quality increasingly seen as a proxy for value for money. The role of SoTL has also gone from something of a fringe activity to a recognised part of academic induction and increasingly integral to recognition and promotion (Chalmers 2011). Despite this, Lodge and Bonsanquet (2014) claim that institutional quality is still determined largely by research output rather than by the educational experience of students.

If, as Lodge and Bonsanquet assert, there is a “valid and evidence-based approach to understanding quality in higher education” (Lodge and Bonsanquet 2014, p 15), then the case for an increased role to be given to SoTL is to make explicit the underlying goal of SoTL to enhance the quality of the learning experience through rigorous evaluation of practice.). Within the context of the relationship between validating and validated partners, what is needed, however, is an approach to SoTL which promotes a “rigorous evaluation of practice” while acknowledging the institutional context of the partner institutions.

Hull College: the institutional context for SoTL

Hull College Group (HCG) is one of the largest further education colleges in the UK and comprises Hull College, Goole College, Harrogate College and HCUK Training. The group has over 27,000 students, including a significant number of HE students, and is a member of the Mixed Economy Group of colleges (MEG) and the 157 Group (a consortium of the largest UK colleges). The engagement of HE in FE delivery has developed over many years and awarding body partnerships are held with the Open University, Huddersfield University and the University of Hull.

The delivery of the HE provision at HCG has changed emphasis over time and a diversity of awards have been included in the provision (including higher nationals, foundation degrees, top-up degrees, Bachelors (Hons) degrees, Masters degrees and teacher education qualifications - PGCE, Cert Ed). Presently, the majority of the provision is through direct delivery. Employer engagement in the course of curriculum development at all levels is an underpinning theme at HCG together with widening participation for the student body; these principles are identified particularly with respect to foundation degrees as indicated in foundation degree characteristics (QAA 2014b) and the foundation degree qualification benchmark (QAA 2010). Engagement with professional statutory and regulatory bodies is also considered; for example, degrees at HCG have accreditation arrangements with the Royal Institute of British Architects and the Architects Registration Board providing professional integration within the curriculum. Combining these aspects while developing curriculum are scholarship activities in themselves and incorporate definitions and references to scholarship other than SoTL. The definition of scholarship included in the strategy for scholarship and research at HCG does not refer specifically to SoTL:
maintenance and extending knowledge in a subject area through reading, active contribution to the interpretation of research and participation in professional practice, learned societies and through consultancy (Hull College Group 2013, p. 3).

Activity relating to this definition reflects the findings of Fanghanel et al (2015) and embraces guidance from the QAA (2013); review of the strategy would benefit from the inclusion of SoTL and encompasses the wider outlook of SoTL development within the HE sector.

Supporting quality improvement, the development of teaching delivery is a consistent expectation and focus within further education, SoTL might be considered as part of this. Professional body support for teachers in post-16 education, including FE colleges, has been under the auspices of the Education and Training Foundation since 2014, which promotes and supports practitioner research (ETF 2015a). Previously this opportunity was available via the Institute for Learning (IfL), and the Society for Education and Training (SET) website now provides an archive for Fellowship Research Programme outcomes, many of which are examples of SoTL (ETF 2015b), and provides a platform for dissemination as advocated by King and Widdowson (2009). There has been engagement with the IfL and SET professional bodies among HE teaching staff at HCG, which is a positive indication that SoTL activity has been part of continuing professional development (CPD), but has not necessarily been captured. Changes to statutory requirements have affected membership of SET, but the combined association of this group of staff through these bodies does provide implicit evidence of SoTL activities and is a primer to build upon. Furthermore, discipline and pedagogic developments through staff affiliations to subject associations and learned societies are additional opportunities for development through SoTL.

Developing an institutional framework for SoTL

During the development of the HE provision at HCG a number of established processes have combined to provide a structure for the promotion and support of scholarship, research and for undertaking higher level qualifications. These areas support documented guidance for the pedagogical effectiveness of staff (QAA 2013).

The processes relate to:

- recognition of the experience and discipline background of staff in relation to the teaching area and level of delivery they are involved in; this is reviewed every three years with recommendations for continuing scholarship and research
- financial support for individuals to gain higher level qualifications and attend short courses and support for attending conferences, including presenting papers and networking
- internal opportunities for the sharing of work, scholarship and research, including bulletins from the curriculum areas, an annual journal and two annual HE conferences, one of which is dedicated to learning and teaching

During the process to achieve foundation degree awarding powers (FDAP) work to compile a profile of staff was undertaken at HCG. A questionnaire was constructed to collect pertinent information which was self-reported from staff. Information was collated, as required, (QAA 2014a) and included: qualifications, teaching level, engagement with aspects relating to scholarly and pedagogical developments of discipline areas, outputs of research and scholarly activity, employment experience and professional practice, staff development, curriculum development and assessment design experience and engagement with other HE organisations. This information also provided an organisational overview and allowed for a useful analysis of activity; further information capture subsequently enabled monitoring of changes and development of wider contexts for HCG including strategy review for enhancement, learning and teaching, and research and scholarship.

Analysis of the published guidance for pedagogical effectiveness of staff (QAA 2013) against themes arising from the exploration of staff profile data led to a proposal of areas which form a
more structured framework for CPD for staff. This included methodology, pedagogy/student learning, subjects/disciplines, networking, communication and outputs and reflection through mentoring or coaching to encompass research and scholarship development in a flexible set of units or modules. Referring to the activities and outcomes arising from the definition of King and Widdowson (2009), the areas described here can be developed to specifically draw out SoTL activities, with detail from the staff profile providing additional background and identifying work and resources for dissemination.

Supporting scholarship across institutional boundaries: the development of the Partner Scholarship Network

As the case of Hull College demonstrates, CBHE has developed its own models of SoTL which reflect the nature of the institutions themselves. The approach taken in this study was to try to find a means of promoting and supporting SoTL as a means of quality assurance and enhancement which took this institutional context into account. The principal purpose of the Partner Scholarship Network (PSN) (Hills, 2015), therefore, is to provide resources to validated institutions to engage with SoTL and also to encourage the sharing and dissemination of SoTL between partner institutions.

To do this, two key factors were taken into account: the first was to base support on a CBHE model of SoTL, and the second was to consider what standards might contribute to successful engagement in SoTL within the context of CBHE.

The definition of SoTL offered by King and Widdowson (2009) is particularly pertinent here as it recognises the need for SoTL to develop and enhance teaching and learning, but within a context where contributions to major research databases (REF 2012) may not be desired or appropriate:

An activity or activities with the potential to:

- create or affirm knowledge and/or expertise of a subject or discipline
- develop or enhance understanding of a subject or discipline
- develop or enhance methodologies for the delivery of a subject or discipline

To be accepted as Research & Scholarly Activity this activity must be shared with peers, disseminated across the institution and possibly beyond and archived in ways which are easily accessible to staff (King and Widdowson 2009, p. 9).

The issue of standards is a difficult one within SoTL, and particularly within CBHE. Proponents of SoTL have had to fight hard against claims that SoTL lacks rigour (Fanghanel et al. 2015) and there is recognition, as evidenced by the growing number of SoTL support websites and publications, that there is a way to ‘do’ SoTL. However, as this paper has made clear, notions of SoTL also have to be in keeping with the nature of the institution. Therefore, a pragmatic approach has been used to devise a SoTL support framework for the PSN, drawing on existing work at the Open University, and reflecting broad notions of what we understand by successful engagement in SoTL, particularly Glassick et al. (1997): “A work of scholarship must be characterised by clear goals, adequate preparation, appropriate methods, significant results, effective communication and a reflective critique” (cited in Williams et al. 2013, p. 17).

As such, the structure of the PSN focuses on the following areas (See appendix):

- sharing SoTL news and activities
  - PSN news forum
  - PSN forum
- SoTL support
  - what is SoTL?
The PSN: creation of a critical mass?

The study of SoTL at Hull College indicates that there is both a wealth of expertise within institutions but also a desire to further promote and support staff engagement with SoTL. Within the context of validation, both the Open University and validated partners have much to gain from an approach to SoTL which emphasises its relationship with teaching quality and effectiveness. The design of the PSN, launched in April 2015, is intended to provide partner-wide support, which could be adapted to the needs of the individual institution and generate a space for discussion and the sharing of good practice. Development of a web-based resource such as this is proven to require a period of time and engagement in the initial stages. The network has not been as well used by institutions as had been hoped and promotion to increase awareness of SoTL and the PSN to encourage participation will continue. Through this study the resource has been confirmed as providing a useful framework for SoTL which supports institutional processes and practices at HCG.

Conclusion

The work undertaken at Hull College indicates that implicit engagement with SoTL occurs; while some of this has been undertaken in compliance with professional updating, there is much scope to broaden this and to encourage staff awareness of activities they are already engaged with which they can develop through SoTL combining this with their discipline practice. It is also apparent that there are benefits in collating information regarding staff activity, making more explicit the rich picture and diverse experience of staff and what they bring to their teaching and learning delivery. Additionally, opportunities for scholarship and research are indicated, including that which impacts on vocational, professional and practice-based work which contributes to the strengths of CBHE.
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