

The Quality of our Teaching and Learning

Professor Belinda Probert, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic)

Academic Board, 13 February 2008

Before we go any further with this discussion about ‘quality’ I would just like to clarify one fundamental point. For me, quality is a noun – meaning the ‘degree of excellence, relative nature or kind or character’ – and it is the opposite of quantity. According to my admittedly old dictionary, it is not an adjective. We should not, therefore, be talking about ‘quality teaching’ or ‘quality students’ or ‘quality learning’. And if we do, we can expect to find ourselves in Don Watson’s book of *Weasel Words*. Things can be of high quality or low quality, but to speak of quality teaching or quality learning is meaningless. In fact, were it not for the looming AUQA exercise it would be probably good if we all took a vow of abstinence in relation to both the word excellence and the word quality.

But that is asking too much and doesn’t get us to the point, I admit, which is how do we know whether our teaching is excellent – or even just of high quality? Because I do think we should be testing our assumptions about the quality of teaching and learning; that we should make explicit what we think our teaching is intended to achieve, how we think our teaching results in high quality learning, and to follow this up by seeing if the students in fact learn what we intend.

The first problem, after the grammatical one, is that we need to acknowledge that the proof of the teaching is in the learning, or in what students can do as a result of being our undergraduates. That is, there can be no evaluation of teaching that does not focus on what is learned as a result of that teaching, and on the capabilities of students.. And this is something that many university teachers still do not accept. Late last year an academic wrote a column in *The Australian Higher Education* section arguing that, unlike a school teacher, he should not have to think about pedagogy. University students should know how to learn from great minds – and if they didn’t, by implication, they should not be at university.

This is not a view widely shared in the newer universities, but not uncommon in the oldest, where students often arrive with large amounts of cultural capital and academic

competence. Indeed one perennial question that is asked about the quality of teaching in universities is how do we know what difference university makes? Most of us do not engage in any kind of testing at entrance and testing on leaving which might help answer this question. Where it has been done, the answers have been slightly alarming. Our disinterest in skills means that in some courses, students end up with lower literacy skills than when they started out.

But what IS the relationship was between the teaching and the learning?

In the lead up to the establishment of the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund (LTPF), which we must remember has injected about \$200m into universities over the last three years, there was general agreement in the sector that we did not have the indicators to allocate such sums with any credibility. It is something on which the sector is, uncharacteristically, totally united. Within universities the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) in particular has been a source of great contention because it clearly does not measure what students have learned – though it does measure some things which are known to be factors in improved student learning.

The danger is that academic staff fall upon the inadequacies of the CEQ and the LTPF as reason for excluding any consideration of evidence about good teaching, and revert to thinking that good teaching is an art – or that university students are old enough not to need good teaching. And it is relevant to note that most academics do not feel at ease in evaluating a staff member's teaching portfolio when going for promotion, being rightly sceptical about the value of student evaluations on their own.

Academics like to say that good student feedback depends on being a soft-marker, or setting easy work-loads – when there is in fact plenty of evidence which shows that there is no link between pass rates or workloads and student feedback. Or they will tell you that very big enrolments or compulsory subjects lead to lower student satisfaction, and that it is easier to get good feedback in small, higher level subjects. Again, there is no evidence to support these hypotheses. Indeed, the Faculty of Economics and Commerce at the University of Melbourne studied the relationship between different kinds of subjects and positive feedback and found none. For example, Professor Jeff

Borland teaches compulsory Introduction to Microeconomics to about 600 first year students in that Faculty, and at the end of the semester they regularly burst into spontaneous applause. And Jeff is NOT a showman. They applaud because of his skill in helping them to understand material that is far from easy.

In fact the biggest issue really is that most academics do not think that quality can be measured and improved systematically; or that they can learn how to be better teachers – nor are they familiar with the large body of research on what things maximise what students will get out of being at university. As Derek Bok, a previous President of Harvard has written: ‘Throughout undergraduate education, a great wall separates the world of research from the world of practice – even though the practitioners involved are professors, trained in research, who would seem ideally prepared to take full advantage of whatever findings empirical investigators have to offer’ (*Our Underachieving Colleges*, Princeton University Press, 2006, p.9).

An ideal system of evaluating the quality of what students learn would need to include a lot of elements. It would have to begin by acknowledging that research also tells that engagement is the key to learning and this is the result of things like students social lives, their informal interaction with academics, their becoming part of a learning community. As John Tagg concludes, the ‘single most powerful influence on college students, in their cognitive as well as social development, is other students’ (*The Learning College Paradigm* p. 253). And you probably are unaware that we now have some benchmark data on some of these questions following the introduction of the Australian Survey of Student Engagement last year.

Our evaluation of the quality of our teaching would need to cover questions such as are the goals of the teaching clearly identified? Is the curriculum appropriate, not just in terms of a subject or unit content, but in relation to the course structure? (And we have feedback on student perceptions of our course structure in the CEQuery data for this university.) Is the method of delivery appropriate and based on sound teaching principles; and finally, what evidence is there that the students learned what we wanted them to learn and what new capabilities do they have? So an ideal quality assurance system would include a team reviewing the curriculum and its purpose, watching our teaching, and finally looking at the work produced by students.

But leaving aside an ideal approach, the key to assessing the quality of our teaching (and to improving it) is to talk about its effectiveness (not just its content), to be familiar with some of the literature, to experiment, and to evaluate. And we don't all have to be innovative. It is probably more important that more of us simply know what has been shown to be effective, and that we talk about this with our colleagues, and that we make explicit what we are doing and why, and look for evidence about what works and what does not. This should come naturally to academics.