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Improving Learning in Higher Education: Engaging Academics in Teaching and Learning through a Transformative Fusion Epistemology

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Abstract

The contemporary focus on quality in higher education (Ramsden, 1998; Hoecht, 2006) arguably reflects an increasingly managerialist approach to education (Ramsden, 1998; Marginson & Considine, 2000) and, perhaps, a shift towards a more instrumental view of the educated citizen (Crowley-Cyr, 2008; Hoecht, 2006). Indeed, a critique of this paradigm reveals the potential for a transactional approach to the role of an academic, with a growing focus on reporting against KPIs as the primary means of academic accountability (Neyland, 2007). The managerialist epistemologies privileged in this dynamic do not sit comfortably with the worldview or professional identity of many discipline-based academics.

Such an approach to higher education also has inevitable consequences for approaches to teaching and learning and the relationship of discipline-based academics to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). Where institutional teaching and learning activities become identified with managerialist discourse, rather than adopt such transactional approaches, academic staff may simply become disengaged from teaching and learning insofar as it challenges their discipline identity. It has, however, become clear that an academic's immersion in their discipline – its culture and epistemology – is insufficient to demonstrate quality teaching and to provide a foundation for contemporary standards of student learning outcomes (Boyer, 1990). In addition, contemporary global concerns with education for sustainability (Talloires Declaration, 1990) and the internationalisation of curricula (Martin, 1999; Qiang, 2003; Altbach & Knight, 2007) require academics to engage in thinking that may be outside their traditional discipline fields (Shephard & Furnari, 2012). In this context, such concepts represent an interface of discipline knowledge and the SoTL – yet also bringing their own discourse.

These unfolding dynamics challenge us to do a number of things. As academics we must avoid capture by managerialism, but also move beyond an identity that is focused solely on discipline scholarship. We must strive to become discipline-informed scholars in learning and teaching (Boyer, 1990; Ramsden, 2003), adopting what the authors call a 'fusion' epistemology: a blend of discipline and educational discourses.

This paper builds on Boyer's proposal for a diverse academic role incorporating 'the scholarship of discovery...of integration...of application and... of teaching' (Boyer, 1990) to describe the process of development of an academic identity reflecting engagement in such a fusion epistemology. It does so by identifying stages in the evolution of academic identity from discipline professional to scholar in discipline learning and teaching based on observation and reflection on the authors' own journeys as academics. In doing so, the authors develop an understanding of the transformative pathways to a more comprehensive professional identity as a discipline scholars of teaching and learning, informed by the quite disparate epistemologies of discipline and education. They conclude with observations about the means by which to build capacity to improve engagement in the SoTL in the academy – with a focus always on supporting student learning.

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