Overview

This short paper explores the relevance of the scholarship of teaching to advancing Deakin University’s mission and core commitments, to teaching and learning and to its staff. The concept of the scholarship of teaching is defined and a discussion of the relevance of the concept to Deakin is then presented. Some broad guiding principles for implementation are offered.

Deakin University and teaching and learning

Deakin has set itself the ambitious goal of becoming a national leader in teaching and learning and in the provision of high quality flexible education. Deakin also aims to be Australia’s most progressive university, recognised for the relevance, innovation and responsiveness of its teaching and learning.

According to the Teaching and Learning Plan 2008-2012, there are five key drivers at Deakin as it establishes its own, distinctive approach to teaching and learning, based on its heritage in distance education and flexible delivery, its strong focus on partnerships with industry and employers and its reputation for being a friendly and supportive institution. These five drivers are:

- The aim to create a connected community of teachers and learners;
- The adoption of a new conception of flexible education based on educational choice;
- The continuing provision of a friendly and supportive learning environment;
- A focus on producing graduates who are well equipped for careers and employment in their chosen field and who have appropriate skills to support ongoing learning; and
- Facilitating a culture of research and scholarship in teaching and learning.

A culture of research and scholarship in teaching and learning

The first four drivers require Deakin to develop a connected, flexible, supportive and responsive approach to teaching, learning and the student experience. A
solid foundation in research and scholarship in teaching and learning is fundamental to making progress in such an approach. In order to achieve its goals, Deakin must commit itself to developing a culture of research and scholarship that provides an evidence base to inform pedagogical practice and the University’s approach to flexible education.

What is the scholarship of teaching?

One of the challenges of defining the scholarship of teaching is that ‘the grandfather’ of the concept, Ernest Boyer, did not really define it per se. Boyer (1990) asserts that scholarship has four separate yet overlapping dimensions:

• the scholarship of discovery (i.e., traditional research);
• the scholarship of integration (i.e., making connections, such as through critical literature reviews);
• the scholarship of application (i.e., professional practice); and
• the scholarship of teaching.

This expanded idea of scholarship attempts to elevate teaching from a routine, often secondary, function to a central component of an academic’s scholarly life – perhaps even equal to research in importance and status. But there are other possible benefits related to the scholarship of teaching, as discussed later in this paper.

There have been numerous attempts to pin down the notion of the scholarship of teaching, sometimes also known as the scholarship of teaching and learning. These attempts include highlighting particular aspects of the notion, such as:

• rigorous and thoughtful investigation of student learning;
• communicating and disseminating findings, including through presentations and publications;
• subjecting one’s work to critical review and evaluation by members of one’s community; and
• the knowledge-building that results from the sharing of such outcomes.


A number of authors use the metaphor of ‘the classroom as the laboratory’ where student learning is examined (see for example, Crebin, 1996; Cross, 1990). But
of course the scholarship of teaching does not only happen within the classroom.

The concept originated in North America and the bulk of the work done in the area has been in an American context. One definition that has been suggested by Australian authors encompasses three related activities:

- engagement with the existing knowledge on teaching and learning;
- self-reflection on teaching and learning in one's discipline; and
- sharing ideas about teaching and learning publicly.

(Martin, Benjamin, Prosser, and Trigwell, 1999).

But this definition might lead to the assumption that the scholarship of teaching is a one-off endeavour. In summarising the scholarship of teaching as ongoing learning about teaching and the demonstration of such knowledge, Kreber and Cranton (2000) point to the aspect of continuity that some proponents of the concept see as critical.

The notion of sharing what is discovered about teaching and learning with others is also seen as central. Connection with scholarly communities can occur through documentation, exchange and peer review (Hutchings, Babb and Bjork, 2002), among other avenues. It has been suggested that critical review by one’s professional peers is essential to the scholarship of teaching, as it is to the scholarship of discovery (research).

Six standards against which all scholarly work, including the scholarship of teaching, should be evaluated, have been proposed. These standards were chosen because they are familiar to academic staff in evaluating research (or as it is otherwise called, 'the scholarship of discovery'). Glassick et al. (1997) claim that scholarly work should:

1. have clear goals;
2. incorporate adequate preparation;
3. incorporate appropriate methods;
4. produce significant results;
5. be presented effectively; and
6. incorporate reflective critique, which ultimately leads to new understandings on the part of the teacher.
Is the scholarship of teaching congruent with the values and priorities of Deakin University?

Deakin’s mission is to be a catalyst for positive change for individuals and the communities it serves. Deakin aims to achieve this by ensuring its teaching and learning; research; partnerships and international programs are relevant, innovative and responsive. Through all of this, Deakin seeks to be recognised as Australia's most progressive university.

Deakin University’s six core commitments, recently approved by Council, are to:

• Rural and regional engagement;
• Continuing education and lifelong learning;
• Equity and access for individuals and groups who might not otherwise enjoy the benefits that flow from participation in higher education;
• Research that makes a difference;
• Contemporary and flexible teaching programs; and
• An international outlook.

Is it likely that the scholarship of teaching will threaten, or advance, this mission and core commitments?

Might the pursuit of the scholarship of teaching contribute to lifelong learning for students from rural and regional backgrounds? Could it help contribute to applied research with tangible outcomes or with ensuring contemporary and flexible teaching programs? Might the scholarship of teaching have the potential to positively impact on teaching practices across schools and faculties at Deakin? Might it help determine the success of our engagement with local and international students and communities? These are questions to consider within institutional, disciplinary and individual contexts.

Does the scholarship of teaching ‘work’?

Some astute colleagues might ask about the evidence that the scholarship of teaching is worth the time and effort involved. What is the evidence, in Deakin’s case for instance, that the scholarship of teaching will contribute to the relevance and/or level of innovation within Deakin courses or to better learning outcomes for students?
This is an excellent question as it highlights that our collective agreement in Australia, and internationally, to pursue the scholarship of teaching is, to some extent, an article of faith. We don’t yet have any proof that, in the Australian context, the scholarship of teaching is where energies should be directed, if guaranteed outcomes are sought. And when the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund and the perceived importance of university rankings are considered, the value of pursuing what can appear to be a circuitous route to improving student learning can seem even more uncertain.

There is not yet any hard evidence that the scholarship of teaching will necessarily lead to specific improvements in teaching or learning institutionally or nationally. It may do, but those improvements might have occurred anyway because the individual person undertaking the scholarship is a dedicated, gifted and/or committed teacher who was likely to improve their teaching and/or to inspire high quality student learning in any case. Or because excellent leadership in teaching at a school, faculty and/or institutional level has facilitated a continuous improvement of teaching to which scholarship has only made a small contribution.

**So what if we don’t do it?**

Where does this leave Deakin University in relation to the scholarship of teaching? Well, let’s momentarily consider *not* engaging with the scholarship of teaching.

If we *do not* think deeply about teaching and student learning in our own specific contexts, conduct rigorous studies to examine the impacts of our approaches and innovations, share our findings with critical colleagues who can help us interpret and understand them, and learn from others undertaking the same sorts of investigations, how will we know that our students are learning?

Well-designed assessment practices will give us some indication about levels of learning but will not give us the whole picture. Without deeper investigation, how will we understand which particular components of our curriculum, our teaching methods, our online approach, our assessment tasks and/or any other aspects of our teaching are contributing to positive outcomes for student learning?

Further, understanding *how* our students are learning in our programs can assist us to continue with and extend good practice and aspects of flexibility that are assisting our learners. At Deakin, we may be particularly interested in *where* students are learning and at what pace, two important aspects of flexible education, in which we seek to be a national leader. But such understanding is not possible without systematic scholarly reflection and investigation.
Given our commitment to facilitating access and equity for students who might otherwise not enjoy the benefits that flow from participation in higher education, we might also be interested in why students choose to study at Deakin and what keeps them here – what factors and aspects are motivating them, capturing their imagination, engaging them intellectually and ensuring they feel supported.

Without detailed knowledge of our students’ learning, and how our activities help and hinder that learning, how can we monitor the quality of our teaching and improve it, where this is necessary? How will we know whether our university’s mission is being advanced? How will we know that we are succeeding in our quest to be Australia’s most progressive university? In addition to providing evidence for ourselves on our performance, engaging in the scholarship of teaching allows us to gather data that can be used externally as evidence of our performance in relation to our mission and commitments.

**Is the scholarship of teaching congruent with individual staff values and priorities?**

The concept of the scholarship of teaching can often raise questions for staff about its relevance at an individual level. University leaders, too, might wonder about its usefulness in terms of developing capacity in academic staff. Asmar (2002) has argued that the emphasis of academic development must be on the strategic focus of the institution as a whole. Ramsden (2003) argues strongly that what ought to be considered very carefully when reflecting on the quality of teaching in universities, is the environment in which an individual teacher works – “…the system of ideas which that environment represents…[including] …teams, curricula, courses and departments” (p. 9).

This ‘big picture’ level is often the central focus when questions of institutional mission and commitments are being considered. However, as I have pointed out elsewhere, multiple foci on institutional, school, faculty and individual efforts to improve teaching are not mutually exclusive and it is entirely appropriate, and indeed, desirable, for universities to work toward global strategic initiatives and individual academic development concurrently (Devlin, 2003).

I have also argued that the very basis of successful teaching development and improvement is at the level of the individual teacher “…who must make the choice to implement policy, embrace change and focus on improving teaching and learning” (Devlin, 2003, p.77). This is because the individual university teacher is at the core of teaching and learning improvement because he or she is “…at the heart of students’ day-to-day, semester-to-semester and overall learning experiences (p. 78).

What might the scholarship of teaching mean for you as an individual higher education teacher and/or researcher? Could it help you better understand your students’ learning? Might it contribute to improving your teaching? Will it help...
you advance your career? Or will you use other avenues for advancement? These are questions for you to consider and explore further within your own contexts.

**How does the institution contribute?**

The scholarship of teaching is more likely to be embraced by individual staff if there are incentives to do so. In addition to providing an avenue to satisfy the interests of those intrinsically motivated to improve their teaching as an end in itself, other incentives would include ensuring that evidence of having undertaken the scholarship is beneficial, or perhaps even necessary, for promotion, probation or teaching award applications as well as for performance appraisal purposes.

Deakin specifically includes both teaching development\(^3\) and the scholarship of teaching in its promotion criteria. The prompt questions included in the guidelines produced by the university to assist staff in applying for promotion and addressing these criteria include questions about how individual staff keep informed about developments in teaching, contribute to the development of teaching inside and beyond their School and demonstrate leadership in teaching. Exemplars given include undertaking applied research into teaching and learning and achieving refereed publications on teaching and related activities.

Institutional support for the scholarship of teaching, in various forms, is critical. Deakin demonstrates significant support through a wide range of resourced initiatives, structures and plans including: the Teaching and Learning Plan; the Strategic Teaching and Learning Grant Scheme (STALGS); the Vice-Chancellor’s awards for teaching; the establishment of the Institute of Teaching and Learning; the compulsory Graduate Certificate of Higher Education for new staff, among many others. These types of support mechanisms are necessary to allow the scholarship of teaching to flourish at Deakin and for the University to achieve its ambitions in relation to national leadership in teaching and learning.

**How do we do it, and do it well?**

In closing, I would like to offer five suggestions for guiding principles related to the scholarship of teaching for consideration in individual, school and faculty contexts.

1. **Choose a focus carefully**

If an individual, team or school wishes to choose an area of teaching and/or students’ learning to investigate, one related to the institution’s foci would be ideal. This would provide some alignment between individual, area and institutional quality assurance. A focus on one or more aspects of flexibility,
example, or on teaching students from low socio-economic backgrounds, might be appropriate.

2. **Connect to existing knowledge**

It almost goes without saying that it is wise to consult existing peer-reviewed literature on higher education teaching and learning, as well as considering other existing literature and resources in a specific area of investigation. This will inform and guide thinking and efforts to ensure that there is a solid base of understanding on which further investigation can be built. The Institute of Teaching and Learning can offer advice on such literature.

3. **Conduct rigorous investigations**

Ideally, investigations into teaching and learning will be guided by clear, articulated research questions, carried out with meticulous adherence to appropriate methodology that incorporates valid and reliable measures of the variables under consideration, and will result in faithfully reported findings, including those that may not be palatable or easy to explain. In other words, the principles of high quality research should infuse all endeavours in the scholarship of teaching.

4. **Close the loop**

Ensuring a feedback loop – to those conducting the scholarship investigation, to students, to colleagues and to the university, both of the findings of investigations and of the efforts made to act on them, will ensure the scholarship of teaching is not just an end in itself. Teaching practice should be enhanced, both for the individual or team conducting the scholarly investigation, and for those who have participated in the critique of that investigation.

5. **Communicate effectively**

What is learnt should be shared in scholarly fora. It is advisable to aim for international peer-reviewed journals and book chapters as avenues of communication, as well as other options, such as contributions to conferences, presentations at school or discipline-group meetings, web publishing of case studies and the like.
Conclusion

As is evident in Deakin University’s Strategic Plan 2008-2012, Deakin values excellence, collegiality and continuous improvement. These values are infused throughout the endeavour of the scholarship of teaching. The scholarship of teaching also seems more likely than not to be an avenue through which Deakin University might advance its mission and core commitments around progressiveness, engagement, learning, equity, research, flexibility and having an international outlook. It also seems likely that Deakin’s goal to be a national leader in the area of teaching and learning would be advanced by the contribution to a solid evidence base around Deakin’s practice that an increased focus on the scholarship of teaching will make.

It is hoped that this paper will stimulate discussion on the scholarship of teaching and contribute to an ongoing consideration of how we might utilise this concept to further our institution’s aims as well as to advance school and individual teaching practice and individual careers as well as enhance student learning and the Deakin student experience.

Postscript

Professor Marcia Devlin (PhD) is Chair of Higher Education Research at Deakin University and is very interested in hearing from and speaking with colleagues about the scholarship of teaching and learning and in assisting efforts in this domain. Please contact Marcia directly to arrange a time to meet or for Marcia to visit your School: mdevlin@deakin.edu.au; 9251 7092; 0488 550 560.

References and further reading


Devlin, M. (2007, May). The scholarship of teaching in Australian higher


1 This paper draws on an earlier paper presented as the keynote address in May 2007, at The University of the Sunshine Coast Vice-Chancellors Colloquium, in Queensland, Australia.

2 Flexible education at Deakin is understood as an approach that provides choice for students in time, place, pace, content and format of learning, to various extents, while maintaining sound academic standards. (Deakin University, Strategic Plan 2008).

3 ‘Teaching Development’ is defined as professional activity which demonstrates the applicant’s capacity to apply knowledge about teaching in situations that are not in the first instance concerned with direct teaching practice (Deakin University, Academic Promotions Guidelines 2008).