

'I prefer research to feed my teaching, not lead it'

Ian McNay

School of Education & Training

I do get irritated by senior academics from some universities who proclaim an institutional policy of research-led-teaching in a tone which implies that such an approach is an axiomatic good, universally applicable, to which there is no legitimate alternative and, which cannot be questioned. Let me question this unthinking approach.

I did a research-led degree, in English, in the 1960s. What I got, then, was a fragmented programme with no internal coherence. It seemed that staff pursued individual research interests and did not talk with one another about the programme as a whole, or about the student experience. The Council for National Academic Awards did much to improve that in the 1970s and 1980s for the newly emergent challengers to tradition; I do not want to regress. I was interested when one of my students on the Greenwich course for new academics, in an assignment on the research-teaching nexus, argued that he could not use his research in teaching since the gap between what he was researching and where his students currently were situated in the discipline, would take considerable time and effort to bridge, reducing time for other more relevant and accessible material and risking deterring students.

From that individual experience, let me move to the institutional level. *Times Higher Education* has regular reports of courses, or even whole teaching departments being closed, not because of lack of student demand or poor quality ratings for teaching, but because of research assessment exercise results. The issue of 24 September, 2009 reports (p. 11), the proposed closure of sociology at Birmingham and the decision by Stirling to move to a staff:student ratio of 1:30 and, an end to appointing teaching fellows in favour of rising research stars, because the balance between teaching and research staff is not appropriate in a research-led institution. So, decisions on teaching provision are being made on the basis of judgements on a different activity. Jon Adams and his colleagues at Evidence Ltd., which spun off from the University of Leeds, have shown that the aggregated consequence of such decisions is that some regions of the country may have no courses in some key subjects within easy reach. That runs counter to policy on access, where geography is a prime factor in student decision-making. Part-time students will be particularly disadvantaged. Since statistics from the Higher Education Statistics Agency on graduate employment show that full-time graduates tend to seek jobs in the locality of their university, there are also implications for the supply of people with key skills in certain regions – not helpful to re-generation (another policy priority).

The paradox is that the policy does not operate in universities where the claim is made. My research on research quality assessment led to a conference session where I asked participants whether

'I prefer research to feed my teaching, not lead it'

research policy was linked to teaching policy. Nobody said 'yes' out of more than 50 people. There were very few policy linkages to anything - even enterprise, when the two activities may be located in the same unit. Research stood by itself, a discrete entity, somewhat apart from other elements of the university. That confirms the HEFCE review of strategic plans, which found fragmentation into silos. My experience of research into top teams in universities underlines that: PVCs in many places have an implicit norm of not commenting on others' portfolios in return for not having them comment on their own. That is not good.

The National Science Foundation in the USA has a criterion for approving research bids, which is that there must be evidence that outcomes will feed into learning. In the Netherlands, quality in research and teaching is assessed by the same agency, often together. In Hong Kong, the University Grants Commission uses all four of the Carnegie Scholarships in its RAE, so discovery, teaching/ dissemination, application and integration form a synoptic framework. None of that is evident in the UK. Here, even 'impact' has not meant impact as the lay person would understand it - changing people's lives, but influence on other academics in a closed world, assessed by a citation count of journal articles written by a coterie in an exclusive club. When I ask research staff in places proclaiming research-led-teaching whether internal approval of a research bid requires evidence of how it will lead teaching, I often get blank or even scornful looks. When I ask people in teaching and learning offices whether validation processes seek to identify how research has an impact on teaching, the same blankness spreads across their faces. It is not a requirement for approval; it is not audited for re-approval. It is not explored by QAA in England as a quality criterion - though the Scots do.

The final negative is: if research leads teaching, teaching must follow research, and not, by implication, the needs of students nor the expectations of employers. However, the role of universities has gone beyond preparing the teachers and professors of the future to feed only themselves. That was true in the 1960s, but the rise of new graduate professions and the massification of provision mean that it is true no longer. Many academic staff now gain their authority from recent and relevant experience in the field for which they are helping students to prepare, whether in acting, architecture or archaeology. The reflective professional is as valid a source of expertise as the researcher academic. Employers comment on graduate skills and lack of preparedness; bodies representing research users criticise the nature of the discourse in publications, which deters those beyond the ivory towers and prevents learning, or knowledge transfer as we now call it.

So, the claim to an essential, universal link between research and teaching is dangerous rhetoric.

Of course, I do not want to deny a rich potential symbiosis between research and teaching. I use my own research in my teaching, and many of my students provide data that feeds into my understanding of my research fields. Note that: 'feeds', not 'leads', a key difference in the nature of the articulation.

At its extreme, a research-led-teaching policy would mean teaching staff only teaching topics where they are engaged in research and can provide primary data. An obvious nonsense. We cannot cover the whole field and have to rely on secondary data from others. The scholarship of bringing a critical perspective to differing views on a topic is key to developing such skills in students. It is the

approach of the researcher, seeking to test a claim, a hypothesis, an assertion, a policy statement from a politician claiming to pursue evidence based policy (another fiction). Equally, I encourage students to pursue a topic by a critical literature review, so that research processes are part of what I teach. That develops a skill for lifelong learning, based on critical enquiry and healthy scepticism.

Let me offer one example of a researcher approach to such student approaches. I was observing a session by a new tutor – young, male – who was covering work on child development, drawing on work by the Newsomes in Nottingham. One student – mid-30s, female – commented that two of her three children fell closely into the Newsomes' typology; the third did not. She suggested reasons for this. The tutor response was to say 'Oh, that is just an anecdote; the Newsomes were presenting research'. I spoke to him afterwards about acknowledging student contributions positively, acknowledging other forms of learning and pointing out that the Newsomes' 'research' was based on a (largish) sample of 'anecdotes' of the kind he had just dismissed.

Of course, despite their rhetoric, many employers do not want challenging employees who use such skills of enquiry, critique and challenge. I once surveyed students on a postgraduate Diploma in Management Studies, sponsored in a regular block-booking by an employer with awards for employee development support – an Investor in People. I asked how far they could implement the learning from the course. Not at all, was the modal reply: there was a resistance to new, disruptive ideas. 'No new paradigms here'. So money was spent on training and development, but it was a wasted investment. The pity is that this applies to universities, too. When I explore how far they are learning organisations, staff do not score them highly – usually below the 40 per cent pass mark they apply to learners. So, research-led teaching is a dangerous myth; research fed teaching will be good. So will research-led policy... on research and teaching and assessment.

References

Times Higher Education, 24 September 2009: 11.

Biography

Ian McNay is Professor Emeritus, Higher Education and Management in the School of Education & Training.