

Championing Quality Assurance in University Teaching

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I am interested in Question 5—the extent to which universities do (or could, or should) validate and use the influence of educational “champions” such as award-winning teachers as a resource for encouraging continuous pedagogical development and measures for quality assurance.

The Challenge

Advocating and “championing” institutional commitment to teaching excellence is the responsibility of the whole academic community. We begin, of course, with the professors and students themselves. There is a direct and immediate interest in continuously discovering, renewing, and insisting upon nothing less than the best available arrangements for the most effective teaching and learning. Ideally, no additional initiatives, provisions, or vigilance need be contemplated.

But in fact attention to the quality of the educational experience has already become a responsibility of senior administrative officials (e.g., Vice President: Academic) and other staff (e.g., Educational Development Offices) whose functions expressly include that mandate. Moreover, where there is also a standing committee on teaching and learning, or instructional development, its entire *raison d’être* is presumably the proactive encouragement of knowledge and policies aimed at enhancing the university’s specifically educational mission. Faculty associations or unions also clearly have an interest (however ambivalent) in all aspects of performance assessment. Student associations too, although likewise focused on other things, are presumably in favour of excellent instruction, and do sometimes sponsor forms of recognition for at least the most popular teachers. Campus groups and individuals officially involved in teaching-award programs and nominations are also, in effect, voices promoting more informed criteria for the recognition of successful performance and best practices. Finally, the recipients themselves of such awards (our “champion” teachers? exemplars?) are potentially an institutional resource for modelling or leadership in pedagogy. Provision for quality assurance would seem to be very well in hand.

So much for theory. And in some Canadian universities it does seem to work this way. The single key indicator or variable is perhaps the extent to which all such aspirations, roles, activities, and opportunities are prominently featured in the institution’s projected image of itself, both externally and— even more importantly—internally. Even more bluntly, this often simply means the extent to which they have the active personal endorsement and involvement of the President and other members of the senior academic administration. There are some splendid examples in Canada of such “championing” from the highest levels, where actively supporting and celebrating the quality and advancement of teaching is understood to be directly associated with names, priorities, voices (and *heft*) of a campus’s most obviously influential officials.

Elsewhere, and more commonly, it is not the case. In many instances, an ethos of seriousness about teaching is not discernable in universities’ self-representation, practices, or customs. Reasons for this are often not difficult to identify. Sometimes it is just a habit of benign neglect rather than of deliberate policy: where there isn’t a “problem” of *bad* teaching, “satisfactory” practice can be taken gratefully for granted as good enough? In too many other cases, however, a positive silence about quality assurance in teaching does reflect and powerfully reproduce certain presumptions about what matters (and therefore counts), and what doesn’t, in managing a university. The most apparent of these perspectives – too apparent to require analysis here – is the view that to make any significant gesture, beyond obligatory platitudes, on behalf of high-quality teaching is necessarily a distraction of faculty time and energy from the university’s more important, prestigious, and lucrative research mission. We also

hear that high-quality instruction is not identifiable, comparable, or measurable. Nor is it a factor in the rivalry for resources between (and therefore within) institutions. Neither is assessing and continuously improving the quality of teaching a topic of conversation or shared concern in provincial or federal organizations of university administrators or faculty association representatives. So it's hardly surprising that only the bravest or most progressive are prepared to initiate or encourage a new momentum on their own campuses which is at odds with a safe and familiar official silence about teaching and learning.

My Theme for the Forum

I'll assume, then, that change at universities can or does occur most readily through the influential efforts and choices of local senior administrative and faculty leadership. I'll also assume (less confidently) there might be a willingness at those levels to promote more actively the understanding of quality in educational experience, provided that any necessary change in ethos could be nudged forward at little or no direct political or budgetary cost. In particular, how best might the presence on campus of award-winning educators might be part of that process?

If a university is blessed with "champion" teachers as well as with "champion" researchers, their presence, their example, their advice, and their enlistment on behalf of change are among the resources available to senior academic leaders interested in "championing" quality assurance. To date in Canada we probably must speak more of the potential than the achieved impact of awards programs in that regard. It is true enough that award-winning teachers (including 3M Teaching Fellows) can often confirm that their achievement is initially celebrated on campus, their apparently validated credibility generally acknowledged, and their input or collegial leadership sought in ad hoc ways on those scarce occasions when pedagogy is in the limelight. But this is different from officially and routinely taking strategic advantage of an available resource.

I will suggest that this happens too rarely, and even more rarely in ways likely to make any effective difference in institutional culture or in the actual quality of learning experiences and outcomes. At the Forum we could perhaps focus together on two modest contexts of opportunity needlessly lost:

1. Equally celebrating accomplishment in teaching and in research.
2. Attending equally to teaching and to research in tenure and promotion review.

Both of these are occasions when an institution's behaviour most shows its true colours as regards the serious valuing of education, and when the ideological "tone" (if not substance) is already controlled (and might most readily be altered) simply by the conduct adopted by senior administrative and academic leadership. My theme is that credible local champions and exemplars of universities' specifically educational mission are the ideal and conveniently available resource for any institution genuinely interested in practical ways of fostering quality in that mission. Whether most administrative and academic officials are even remotely interested in making any actual difference (as opposed to window dressing) in quality and/or institutional culture is of course another matter entirely. But, if so . . .

Suggestion 1: Raising the Profile of Good Teaching

In this first context, Forum participants should share and compare some examples of habitual discrepancies in local institutional customs and choices (easily remedied), as well as more complex anomalies in Canada, such as, e.g., (a) there is virtually no high-quality Teaching counterpart to the government or corporate funding and institutional lionizing of innumerable Research Chairs, (b) virtually no pedagogical component in otherwise exhaustively nit-picking reviews of the quality of graduate programs, and possibly (c) the resistance of most faculty unions to serious evaluation of instructional quality.

Leadership in commitment to publically exhibiting inclusive balance of teaching and research performance is in many situations the simple and inexpensive administrative means to university-level adjustments in ethos. For example, senior academic officials do have at their disposal articulate champions and award winners to feature equally often in equally supported and publicized

interdisciplinary presentations, demonstrations, honorific events, website themes, program profiling, and so forth. Only the few most cynical objectors could say that these awards lack validity or credibility, or insist that “satisfactory” teaching should be good enough. An enhanced campus culture of education, of regular celebration of teaching excellence, of attending to exactly what pedagogies make for exemplars or credible “champions,” and of investment in better methodologies for student evaluation of teachers, would eventually engage distrustful faculty unions too in supporting quality and improvement rather than defending the lack lustre. External policies and scrutinizing pressures are harder to influence, but the united voice of senior academic officials, armed with innovative accomplishments in (and living examples of) teaching excellence, could promote some balance or inclusiveness in the priorities and performance indicators of national and provincial ministries and other external agencies. At some risk of being accused of cynicism myself, I’ll also point out that few “public relations” initiatives aimed at students, alumni, families, and the wider community could be more intelligible and welcome than making and keeping a promise of great teaching. But the importance of very good teaching, beyond a basic standard of competent professionalism, will not be on the radar screen unless institutional leaders want it there. If they do want it, they can have it with little trouble or cost.

Suggestion 2: Appointment, Tenure, and Promotion Agendas

In this second context, I similarly observe that administrative leaders professing to be interested in change and quality are already well situated to readily influence expectations about the agenda and spirit of tenure and promotion committee meetings. Among other things, simply insisting that equal time (and equal hair-splitting) be devoted to candidates’ records in teaching and in research. “Champions” and award winners could be routinely invited to help develop (or serve as models for) intelligible procedures, criteria, and discourse for assessing instructional performance, dossiers, and scholarship of teaching. More formally, an obvious common ground and clear signal would be commitment to negotiating clauses in faculty collective agreements that provide unambiguously for promotion to full professor primarily on the basis of demonstrably outstanding teaching. An appointed or elected “champion” might even attend promotion decision meetings to assist further (as in the case of employment equity observers) and to help balance the otherwise often exclusively research-oriented authority of deans and directors of research. Even earlier, new and less experienced (or struggling) faculty could be assigned to “champions” or award-winning teachers for mentoring, and this effort (by both the mentor and the mentee) recognized in positive ways.

My two modest suggestions are not enough in themselves. There are many other exciting possibilities too, and indeed many great policies already in place in this country and abroad. I am eager to hear others’ ideas, perspectives, experiences, and critiques.