A Learning and Teaching Strategy consultation discussion paper:  
Developing Excellence at The University of Sheffield

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1. Introduction
As consultations take place within The University of Sheffield in preparation for a new Learning and Teaching Strategy (2016-2021) in the shadow of the publication of the government's green paper "Fulfilling our potential: teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice" [1] this short paper has been commissioned to generate discussion on what developing excellence in the context of learning and teaching might mean to us¹ at The University of Sheffield.

2. Excellence at Sheffield: a personal journey
At Sheffield we tend to think of examples of excellence as nominations for Senate Awards, Student Union awards, faculty learning and teaching awards and applications to the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme; in addition some are invited to speak at the annual Learning and Teaching Conference or to write short case studies as examples of good practice for the Toolkit for Learning and Teaching. These examples of excellence are all exclusive: a small number of awards are made from a pool of applications or nominations that represent a small fraction of those who teach within our institution. These examples do not take into account the steps that the majority of those who teach and support learning take to incrementally improve their practice or show how they improve their practice; what might be seen as inclusive examples of excellence.

In challenging our learners to think outside their comfort zones we need to challenge ourselves. Being an excellent teacher is not, however, simply knowing what the literature says about effective teaching, learning and assessment. Rather it is about a conscious awareness of our own practice, in our own context, and if appropriate, the application of the latest thinking. So how do we develop our own practice; how do we strive towards excellence?

Striving towards excellence is a personal journey. For some, it will mean carrying out a significant piece of work that results in a nomination for an institutional or national award. However, for all of us, striving towards excellence means challenging or stretching what we do in our daily practice, going beyond the norm. It will be different for each one of us. For some, it may mean having our teaching observed by a colleague within the university to help prompt ideas that may improve practice; for others it may mean having a conversation with a colleague to explore new ideas for presenting a curriculum; or an opportunity to try out

¹ The author uses "we" and "our" throughout as the practice referred to is his also.
something that is “new” for your practice. For all, striving towards excellence means that we not only carry out some idea or activity but that we also evidence what we have done, how we did it, why, and the difference it has made to our practice.

The University provides an environment that supports the development of excellence on a daily basis: as individuals, in departments, in faculties, and across the institution. Examples include engaging with a range of continuing professional development activities, Table 1. This is not an exhaustive list and there are many other activities, both formal and informal, that we engage in to support our practice.

Table 1: Examples of CPD activities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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<tr>
<td>participating in meetings, conferences and seminars</td>
<td>use of authentic case-studies and discipline-based examples</td>
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<td>presenting internal and external seminars</td>
<td>learning and teaching leadership</td>
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<td>discussion and networking within the department, faculty, university, sector</td>
<td>extending range and scope of teaching practice – new activities</td>
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<td>observing and reviewing teaching practice</td>
<td>undertaking a formal qualification</td>
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<td>risk taking, and evaluating failure</td>
<td>seeking professional recognition</td>
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<td>mentoring and supervision (including research supervision)</td>
<td>learning from learners (teaching evaluations – formal and informal)</td>
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<td>peer supported review (both within the university and sector – external examiner/QA)</td>
<td>undertaking research and the presentation of papers</td>
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<td>updating, and delivery of teaching</td>
<td>participate in communities of learning</td>
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<td>critical review and preparation of teaching materials</td>
<td>reading and reviewing journal articles</td>
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3. Reflecting on teaching practice

The first step to excellent teaching is making time and space to reflect on our teaching practice. Stephen Brookfield [2] provides four perspectives, or lenses, to help us reflect: encouraging systematic self-reflection, reflection on student feedback, using peers to help us reflect on our practice and engaging with literature, Table 2. Finding time to engage with all four lenses is a challenge and may require a change in the way we work, both individually and in our peer groups (teaching groups, departments and faculties), so that we give ourselves permission to spend time reflecting on our practice – this, after all, is not a luxury but an essential part of our practice.

“If we don’t reflect, we are teaching “in the dark” without knowing if we are effective and if we should modify our teaching.” [3]

Many departments and faculties provide opportunities for teachers to network together and share best practice through teaching circles, discussion groups or lunchtime presentations. Seeking opportunities to discuss teaching practice with colleagues outside our discipline areas can be invaluable too; a teaching issue in one discipline may have been experienced and solved by another in an unrelated subject area. After all, as our Vice-Chancellor wrote:

“teaching excellence is not restricted to a lab or a lecture theatre. It is found throughout our community, it is a mode of being. And it changes how our graduates then think and act in the world for the rest of their lives.” [4]
Table 2: Brookfield’s four lenses for critical reflection (after [2]).

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<tr>
<th>Lens</th>
<th>Outline</th>
<th>Examples of activities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self Lens</td>
<td>The teacher focusses on their own experiences revealing aspects of their practice that may need developing</td>
<td>A portfolio of teaching practice which may include your teaching philosophy, examples of sessions, evaluations, feedback and reflections</td>
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<td>Student Lens</td>
<td>Feedback from students gives powerful insight into how students are learning and can lead to immediate adjustments to teaching practice if the feedback is sought as part of an ongoing dialogue.</td>
<td>Student evaluation surveys (your own tend to be more helpful than the formal end-of-module surveys); quick classroom evaluation techniques such as ‘the muddiest point’; student focus groups; speaking to students after a teaching session.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peer Lens</td>
<td>Peer review and observation of teaching practice can provide invaluable feedback by highlighting bad habits we might not be aware of, creative solutions to issues we might have in our teaching, as well as support and reassurance.</td>
<td>Peer review of teaching session plans / module plans / learning materials; discussion with peers; peer observation of teaching; (resources available from: <a href="http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/lets/cpd/coed">http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/lets/cpd/coed</a>)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Literature Lens</td>
<td>Engaging with literature provides the vocabulary for teaching practice to enable us to have more effective conversations with others about our teaching practice. Engaging with literature often happens in tandem with one of the other lenses above.</td>
<td>Whilst some will want to engage with the theories of learning and teaching, others will want to engage with literature based in their own discipline areas that focuses on, for example, strategies for feedback, teaching groups in a laboratory or particular difficulties. Putting key words into Google Scholar provides a good starting point. This work may lead to changes in teaching practice that could then be presented at the Learning and Teaching Conference and/or published as a paper, leading to helping others with their practice.</td>
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4. Enhancing our approach to developing excellence

Although many staff strive towards excellence concern is frequently raised about insufficient time and recognition for these activities so it is important to help staff feel authorised to undertake development towards excellence in teaching and engender a culture where excellent teaching is valued.

For the future we might consider Departmental Champions for Learning and Teaching and/or a University Centre for Learning and Teaching to provide a visible and accessible support for all who teach and support students in their learning.

However we approach striving towards excellence in developing our own practice, we should consider these questions:

- which ideas are most appropriate to support my learners?
- which ideas may help challenge and stretch me in my practice?
- how will I know when I have achieved what I set out to achieve?
how will I be able to evidence what I did, how I did it, why I did it that way, and the difference it has made to my practice?
how will I be able to share my experiences with others?

We may wish to use the dimensions of practice in the UK Professional Standards Framework to help us explore and develop our practice [5], which may also lead to professional recognition for our teaching practice. We can usefully use the SRDS process to prompt thinking about what areas we might wish to develop or explore in the coming year, identifying areas for professional development as required, and opportunities to share the outcome with others. However, we may need to consider how to encourage all reviewers to value team objectives. As our own individual teaching practice grows, our own personal examples of excellence become incorporated into the new norm: what, then, will be the next area we will look at developing? In following this process we will always be striving towards excellence. Whilst some may be rewarded through institution or national awards, professional recognition or through pay and reward, we will all be rewarded through enhancing the experience of our learners. All our evidence will build into something that as an institution we can demonstrate to whoever might wish to see that striving for teaching excellence is at the heart of what we do at Sheffield.

Many of these ideas are not, of course, new. In a report produced for The Carnegie Foundation, Ernest Boyer proposed four “scholarships”. On the scholarship of teaching, Boyer wrote [6]:

“Great teachers create a common ground of intellectual commitment. They stimulate active, not passive, learning and encourage students to be critical, creative thinkers, with the capacity to go on learning after their [university] days are over. Further, good teaching means that [teachers], as scholars, are also learners... Through reading, through classroom discussion, and surely through comments and questions posed by students, [teachers] themselves will be pushed in creative new directions. In the end, inspired teaching keeps the flame of scholarship alive.”

5. Postscript: excellence in academic practice?

Healey [7] argues that teaching excellence needs to be seen as part of a whole: bringing together the different identities we have as academics, particularly as researchers, and as teachers. Too many of the ways universities and funding streams are organised separate these identities. We need to find more ways to bring research and teaching together to develop the synergies between them and to strive not just for excellent research and excellent teaching, but primarily for excellent academic practice. With the government arguing that teaching should be seen to be as important as research perhaps our next step is to think about how we develop excellent academic practice at Sheffield – but that will need to be the subject for future discussion.

For further professional development support and to find out more about the Learning and Teaching Professional Recognition Scheme leading to HEA fellowship please visit: http://shef.ac.uk/lets/cpd
References


About the Author

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