

What makes an excellent lecturer? Academics' perspectives on the discourse of 'teaching excellence' in higher education (0199)

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Taking a critical perspective on the discourse of 'Teaching Excellence' and building on our previous research from the perspectives of students (Su & Wood, 2012), this paper examines what sense academics make of the concept of 'teaching excellence'. In framing our take on this discourse we reject the underlying authoritarian assumptions about performativity inherent in neoliberal policies and instead we argue for 'excellence' to be repositioned within a concept of higher education as a democratic public sphere (Giroux, 2014). It is our contention that teaching practices need to be understood and evaluated in terms of situated context, for 'practice is necessarily *contextualised*. It does not exist apart from a particular setting, a community of activity and a set of social engagements' Boud (2010:29). Drawing on the work of authors such as Giroux (2014), we argue for a rebalancing of performative meta-understandings of 'excellence' in favour of understandings which displace the dominant shallow 'vacuity of excellence' (Collini, 2012) and instead position participatory dialogue and moral purpose at the centre.

This paper draws on empirical data gathered via email interviews with 20 academics in higher education in the particularities of their practice–settings. The research participants were at different stages of their careers, ranging from postdoctoral teaching fellow to full professor. The sample was drawn from post-1992 universities in England which are perceived by some as 'teaching-led' or 'teaching intensive' institutions. In the email interviews, participants were asked to reflect on their perceptions of teaching excellence and to explore whether 'teaching excellence' can be evidenced and 'measured'. Initial findings suggest that there is no shared understanding of what we mean by 'teaching excellence'. To some, it was more to do with one's subject expertise, communication skills and commitment to the students; for others, it was also to do with the internal / external recognition as an 'excellent teacher'. It is almost impossible to 'measure' it. The government's Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) initiative was perceived by many participants as 'problematic' and as something that could potentially reduce the genuine commitment to teaching 'excellence' to an evidence gathering process. One potential consequence of TEF, as perceived by participants, could be the increasing division of academic labour - teachers vs. researchers. However, many participants welcomed the prospect that the TEF may potentially raise the status of teaching.

Drawing on the research findings, we argue for a more expansive and considered conceptualization of 'teaching excellence'. In developing this more expansive view, we assert the importance of a cosmopolitan outlook on teaching quality. Appiah (2007:134) has conceptualised cosmopolitanism as 'starting with what is human in humanity' and perhaps that is to do with forging connections with others and learning together. It is our contention that this cosmopolitan orientation is characteristic of the excellent teacher who, through their everyday teaching practices demonstrates 'openness to others' and moral purpose. We share Nixon's view that any conception of teaching must be cognisant of its moral purpose (Nixon, 2008:91). Sadly, this may not sit easily within the language of policy rhetoric of 'measurables' and

'deliverables'. We argue against a hollow rhetoric of 'teaching excellence', favouring instead the establishment of a stronger connection with the moral purpose of teaching and an openness to learning from colleagues and students.

So in developing a critically informed understanding of teaching excellence, we argue for the significance of a cosmopolitan perspective. This outlook can be seen for example through the relational aspects of practice. Rowland (2008) makes the point that 'the language in which higher education is debated has become disconnected from the ways in which academics commonly feel about their intellectual commitment' and suggests 'it is strange that a phrase such as 'the delivery of learning outcomes' is taken to be serious and meaningful, but not 'inspiring a love of learning'. (p 353). Harris (2011) has argued that by over-privileging economic concerns we divert attention from the purpose of higher education: 'This is not to suggest that education does not, or should not have, an economic value: it is merely argued that there are other values that are equally important. (Harris, 2011:1234). We argue that a cosmopolitan outlook may have a particular contribution to make to a critical understanding of the discourse of teaching excellence.

In conclusion, this paper reports the main findings of an empirical study of academics' perspectives of the concept of 'teaching excellence' in the context of the TEF for higher education. We are critical of measurability and performativity suggested by some to promote teaching excellence. We argue that in the reconceptualisation of 'teaching excellence' we need to pay attention to the ethical aspects of this, and a cosmopolitan outlook may have much to contribute to understandings of what makes an excellent lecturer.

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