

Does it make sense to talk of teaching and learning in higher education?

When studying anything it is important, as Pring(2000) points out, to be clear about the object of study. The same is true of any form of activity; one needs to be clear about what that activity and its purpose is. Barnett (1988) addresses the specific complexities of 'higher education' in noting that the actions of the academic tutors are only loosely coupled to the outcomes for the student. For Barnett this is a necessary condition of higher education's endeavour to enable the emancipation of the student.

In this paper I consider the appropriateness of 'higher education' as a coherent object of either activity or study. Whilst it is self-evidence that it may describe institutions, it is less clear that it in anyway is a suitable way of delineating an arena of practice. Jones (2012) in considering the development of 'intellectual virtues' rightly reflects on the differences between academic communities whose activities, including the initiation of new scholars, are best described in terms of their particular disciplines. This position is reflected in Barnett's paper, but he distinguishes the discipline specific outcomes of study from more global 'shared' outcomes, such as emancipation. In this paper I question whether this distinction is as valid as Barnett assumes. In conclusion I argue that it does not make sense to talk of teaching and learning in 'higher education 'for either practitioners or researchers. Rather the concern is with teaching and learning in specific disciplines or subject areas. What is more I argue that such talk of 'higher education' is problematic for academic identify and supporting teaching and learning. Davies (2013) makes a distinction in relation to schoolteachers between their institutional role and their role within particular areas of activity. I argue that this focus on teaching and learning in higher education, and the central units to support this, reinforce a similar conflation of academics' institutional role and their role in their disciplines. This leads to the rise of *undisciplined* use of a rag bag of teaching techniques, freely dispensed by such central units, by academic tutors which is detrimental to the effective initiation of students into lives as emancipated scholars (in the model proposed by Barnett).

The paper is supported by two critical debates in philosophy of education which are concerned with identifying the 'object' of both research and practice. The first, drawson Davies (2013) and Jones (2012) to argue that we need to distinguish between the institutional role of the academic as part of a higher education institution, and the role they perform in supporting the initiation of the student into their academic discipline or subject area (that is the social practice or practices which are central to their scholarly work). I argue here that there may be tasks which the academic is required to perform on the ground of their institutional affiliation - for example, promoting and enabling citizenship amongst students, or their relational maturation – which are clearly not part of their teaching and learning responsibilities. Davies, following MacIntyre(1985), argues that the role of the teacher is part of all social practices and concerns the initiation of the student into that practice. Confusion arises from the assumption that the term 'teacher' implies more than this role in initiation, such as shared approaches, values or skills. Whilst there is some attempt beyond the school to

use related terms, tutor, coach, mentor, etc, rarely are the similarities and differences between individuals inhabiting such roles in different contexts considered in sufficient detail. I argue that one cannot practice or study 'teaching' in general, only 'teaching' within particular social practices.

The second foundation draws on Chappell's (2012) account of 'objectual knowledge'. He first reviews the contemporary debate on 'varieties of knowledge' and seeks to unify these multiple modes of knowing. Propositional, experiential and technical knowledge ought, he argues, to be viewed as contributing to a more fundamental variety of knowledge, 'objectual knowledge':

When I have objectual knowledge, say of the tree in my garden, what I know is the object, the tree: not some proposition about the tree, or some experience of the tree, or some technique relevant to the tree. Certainly my objectual knowledge of the tree is fertile of, readily apt to produce, other varieties of knowledge of the tree: e.g. that it needs watering (propositional knowledge), what it smells like when it needs watering (experiential knowledge), how to look after it (knowledge-how), and so on. The objectual knowledge of the tree does not consist in these other kinds of knowledge about it. (Chappell, 2012, pp.185-6)

Objectual knowledge is understood as composed of these other varieties, but is more than the sum of its parts. Further it is not amenable to complete specification:

...it is part of the way things are that the seeker after objectual knowledge never completes his quest; there is always more to know about any object, especially any complex and interesting object. (Chappell, 2012, p.186)

I argue that the 'object' of both practice and research in teaching and learning ought to be understood in the light of these distinctions as:

1. a particular feature of specific social practices and
2. a quest to understand the particular object(s) central to the student and academic tutor's field of study.

The aims, actions and reflections of the practitioner-tutor are constrained and informed by the practice(s) and associated object(s). Research either aiming to understand the work of the practitioner, or seeking to inform their practice must do so within the same discourse.

References

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