

# Brokering between communities of practice: strengthening learning with co-operative practices

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## Abstract

There is a growing trend in Higher Education to separate researchers' and teachers' roles. In the UK, pressure for this comes from the Research Excellence Framework, which demands world class research in return for government funding. An unintended consequence of this forced separation is for Teaching-Focused Academics to (TFAs) become detached from disciplinary research, which may lead to them questioning their suitability to teach at honours and postgraduate level. Similarly, Research-Focused Academics (RFAs) do not develop their knowledge of pedagogy. This presentation looks at how the promotion of brokering could be used to exploit the expertise of both TFAs and RFAs, leading to better research-informed teaching.

In this session, I explore findings from a group of twenty-one UK Life Science Teaching-Focused Academics, and their engagement with the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. One of the central issues for this group of academics was an uneasiness with the knowledge that their disciplinary research skills were becoming outdated, which made them question their continuing ability to teach in a research-intensive university at higher levels (honours and postgraduate). Workloads and roles made it impossible to keep up with disciplinary research as well as pedagogic research. However, the separation of teaching and disciplinary roles has created two parallel Communities of Practice, one teaching-focused, the other research-focused. While Wenger discusses the formation of Communities of Practice, via joint enterprise, shared repertoire and mutual engagement, he also discusses how Communities of Practice can learn from one another. This is done by two means: by the sharing of Boundary Objects, and by the process of brokering. I shall explore how both SoTL and disciplinary research can be viewed as Boundary Objects, and how these can be traded by Teaching-Focused and Research-Focused Academics in order to benefit from one another's expertise. By working together and sharing knowledge, new disciplinary research can be incorporated into undergraduate learning, in a scholarly manner, underpinned by pedagogic research, which can then be evaluated and improved upon.

## Introduction

In recent years, higher education in the UK, and beyond, has seen the separation of teaching and research. This has taken several forms; the rise of the number of adjunct staff (Hall, 2015), termed

“zero-hours lecturers” in the UK (Grove, 2014), or by contractual differentiation, resulting in “teaching-focused” and “research-focused” academics (Probert, 2013). In the UK, in Life Sciences in particular, research has been done to investigate the career progression and opportunities open to teaching-focused academics (Cashmore, 2009a, 2009b). The picture presented is not a happy one, with many universities failing to provide a clear career path for teaching-focused academics, and few collecting statistics on the progression of this particular group.

Career progression aside, there are concerns from within the teaching-focused academic community of the sustainability of a teaching-focused career within higher education. The concerns are well-founded. In order for academics to be able to continue to work in a research-led manner, it is vital that they keep up to date with disciplinary research, including advances in practical skills. This is necessary in order to be able to equip graduates and postgraduates with up-to-date knowledge of their discipline with which to commence their careers. However, a requirement of Teaching-Focused Academics is that they are often *not* required to engage in discipline-specific research, meaning that their skills and knowledge of their discipline becomes dated. With the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in England in 2017 (Johnson, 2015), expertise in pedagogy has now come under scrutiny in the UK Higher Education context, which will have implications for university funding in the future.

This paper looks at the separation of discipline and pedagogy, and how it affects a group of UK Life Science Teaching-Focused Academics. The suggestion from this community itself is that there needs to be a means by which Teaching-Focused Academics refresh their disciplinary expertise. Using Wenger’s (1998) Communities of Practice, the notion of “brokerage” between Teaching-Focused and Research-Focused Academics becomes a possibility. Viewing the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, and disciplinary expertise as Boundary Objects, and Teaching-Focused and Research-Focused Academics as brokers of knowledge, it may be possible to facilitate exchange between the two communities. The practicalities of that exchange, however, remain a challenge, as workloads

and competing pressures for time preclude the facilitation of a space to make that exchange a reality. While the focus of this paper is UK Higher Education, many of the opinions expressed here will resonate with the international community.

## Communities of Practice

Wenger's (1998, p. 73) describes three requirements for a Community of Practice; namely Mutual Engagement, Shared Practice and Joint Enterprise. Events over the past two decades in UK Higher Education have seen the split of the Academic Community of Practice into two: Research-Focused and Teaching-Focused. The priority of the Research-Focused Community of Practice is to maximise gains from disciplinary research. The main driver for this is the Research Excellence Framework (Higher Education Funding Council for England, n.d.). The Research-Focused community engages in teaching, but this is minimised, as are administrative tasks. The priority for the Teaching-Focused Community of Practice is the teaching and associated administrative tasks associated with undergraduate and postgraduate teaching, shifting the load from research-focused colleagues. In addition, Teaching-Focused Academics are expected to engage with the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. Many UK universities now require "Scholarship" from Teaching-Focused Academics, although the detail of this may vary between institutions. The significance of this split in priorities is that the bulk of teaching in Higher Education is done by Teaching-Focused Academics who develop their pedagogic skills at the expense of their disciplinary skills. This causes anxiety in Teaching-Focused Academics whose teaching includes research projects.

*It's negative in terms of, I think it's a bit unfair, because some of the tasks that we're asked to do are very much research-related tasks. Like taking on project students, like marking projects, I think that's, you know, it's far easier for somebody to do that who's writing papers all the time, who has PhD students, who has Masters students, so it's very time consuming as well, and, I think, unfair. It's almost like they're telling you you're not allowed to do research, BUT, if a lecturer who's doing research, asks you to mark projects, you've got to mark projects. If they ask you to run projects, you've got to run projects. It seems to be when it suits. 113*

As Teaching-Focused Academics take on more teaching in order to allow research-focused colleagues to concentrate on disciplinary research, there is a tension created by their distance from disciplinary research. The tension can be so great, that it leads them to reassess their suitability for university teaching at higher levels, as they have to leave their disciplinary research careers behind, due to pressures of workload.

*You have this teaching job, so do your teaching but also carry on with your [disciplinary] research. And then, unfortunately that just wasn't tenable, because I had such a heavy teaching workload that I wasn't able to actually carry on with my [disciplinary] research... we all had to be interviewed for our jobs and I was actually in a management position at the time and I was interviewed by people from the university but also one of the heads of school, who's a very good friend of mine, and the question he asked me in the interview was – how will you, as a teaching and scholarship person maintain your link with [the discipline] to be able to teach it, to final year undergraduate students at a [research intensive] university. And I almost stood up and walked out the room because I just thought, well you know that I am distant to that, and if that's the criteria for me getting my job, then I don't really deserve my job, because I don't do [disciplinary] research and I can't keep up to date with the literature because I'm trying to develop my literature base in educational technology, and it's impossible, I believe, for an academic to have a two discipline profile, so that was the kind of point, actually, it was a really big point in my life where I went – I can't do this any more, because I don't actually think that I can teach [the discipline] at that level any more. I can teach first and second year textbook stuff absolutely fine and I can talk about [what] I've understood but any time a new thing comes out, a new technique, a new piece of ware, I can't keep up with it, but a university like mine, it's absolutely essential that everybody is completely up to date with that field of research, so I think that's the biggest tension facing teaching only or teaching and scholarship staff in our kind of fields, because they all struggle with it and they're all scared to admit it. 102*

While Teaching-Focused Academics are aware that the currency of their disciplinary knowledge and skills is on the wane, they are developing their pedagogic expertise. This is unique to Teaching-Focused Academics, as Research-Focused Academics concentrate on disciplinary research. However, in the UK, attention is about to be refocused on Teaching and Learning, with the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (Johnson, 2015). It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the detail of TEF here, and much of the detail is still to be worked out. However, this refocusing of attention on teaching and learning will have an impact on Higher Education in the UK. Research-Focused Academics, who have been encouraged to offload their teaching and administration duties to teaching-focused colleagues, and whose remaining teaching may be confined to didactic lecturing

and graduate supervision, may now find themselves at a disadvantage, having not developed their pedagogic expertise.

### Brokering relationships

While Wenger (1998) is often quoted for Communities of Practice and how they are formed, there is more to his theory which is useful when considering the current position of the Teaching-Focused and Research-Focused Academic Communities of Practice. While tensions and contradictions influenced in the UK by the Research Excellence Framework have separated the two academic communities, Wenger asserts that Communities of Practice do not exist in isolation, but interact with one another, via Boundary Objects, or Brokerage instigated by the individuals within the adjacent communities (Wenger, 1998, p. 105; 255).

Wenger's idea of exchange between Communities of Practice via Boundary objects and brokerage is particularly relevant to the situation Teaching-Focused and Research-Focused Academics find themselves in. The Boundary Objects which can be exchanged between the two communities are SoTL and new disciplinary knowledge. The brokers of this exchange are the Academics themselves, who must find a mechanism to do so. The need for this kind of exchange was identified by Teaching-Focused Academics in this study.

*And in an ideal world I would love to be able to take a sabbatical once in a while and go back into the lab and just get back up to speed. In practice, I can't see how that works, sadly. But that would be an ideal situation, really, for someone who is no longer doing their own, you know, active research. 110*

While going back into the laboratory to refresh disciplinary skills is a desire of Teaching-Focused Academics, and should also be a priority of a research-led university, in practice it is acknowledged that there are barriers to this becoming a reality. There are practicalities of workload and competing pressures of time for academics, both teaching-focused and research-focused. It is also possible that, despite Teaching-Focused Academics' realisation of the need for refreshing disciplinary skills, the

same realisation may not yet have dawned on their research-focused colleagues. Therefore any brokerage would be one-sided.

### Proposition: Teaching-Focused and Research-Focused Exchange

Given that Teaching-Focused Academics have identified the discipline knowledge gap and the need for brokerage, the question remains of how to tackle the issue of allowing both Teaching-Focused and Research-Focused Academics to exchange expertise. The exchange itself is mutually beneficial, for both staff and students. However, this kind of exchange appears not to happen, and Academics are separated into one of two camps. In order to facilitate exchange of expertise, there are a number of things which have to change. Although not exhaustive, these include: acknowledgement of workload to take into account the need for exchange between Research- and Teaching-Focused Academics; recognition of one another's expertise, both in disciplinary and pedagogic terms; a possible reduction in the importance placed on disciplinary research and a re-think of teaching, research and administration duties for all academics. I end with two questions for discussion.

*In practical terms, how likely is it that this kind of pedagogic/disciplinary exchange will happen?*

*What could be done to facilitate such exchanges?*

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