Response to: Does research conflict with teaching? It depends what you are researching

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I read with interest Richard Arum’s above named article which appeared in THES on July 5th, 2018. It’s a subject close to my heart, as I’ve spent the past eight years researching how academics engage with the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) to improve both their teaching practice and their students’ learning within a research-driven culture.

There are many things that Richard Arum and I agree on. Research drives university culture. This is true in the UK, US, Canada, Australia and beyond. It’s also true that research outputs guarantee an academic a more secure future, although this is changing. And I agree that it is of concern if students are not learning during their time at university. However, I was confused by the assertion that we, as academics, do not enquire into our own practice or our students’ learning.

My own research was inspired by my experiences of being a teaching-focused academic. In 2010 I embarked on a research project to investigate what it was like for academics to ‘engage in scholarship’. It was a small scale study of twenty-one teaching-focused academics at UK universities, all working in Life Sciences. I discovered several things which inform the ongoing debate.

In the UK at least, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) dominates everything. That is obvious for research-focused academics who are ‘in’ REF, but also impacts on teaching-focused academics who are not in REF, in terms of status, promotion prospects, roles and workload. Not being returned in REF is seen as a failure, but REF 2014 explicitly prevented pedagogic research done on one’s own students from being submitted, and Cotton, Kneale and Miller reported in their 2016 that only 9% of education submissions to REF were higher education-related. In terms of promotion, boards often look at publications and external grant funding as evidence. For research-focused academics, especially in life sciences, this is relatively simple to evidence. Conversely, for teaching-focused academics, external funding is more limited, and impact factors for education journals is lower than disciplinary journals, with the result that they are looked down upon by promotion committees more used to looking at papers authored for Nature or Science. In terms of roles and workload, teaching-focused academics take on large teaching and administrative roles which a) free up research-focused academics to conduct disciplinary research while b) limiting the amount of time they can themselves devote to scholarship, or pedagogic research.

In addition to these organisational barriers, there are also cognitive barriers. Kelly, Nesbit and Oliver, Canadian scholars, estimate that it takes ten years to become expert in the field of SoTL, but the effort it takes to become an expert in a second field of study is often overlooked by institutions. My own work in that area and my collaboration with Andrea Webb at the University of British Columbia, shows that there are a series of threshold concepts that have to be negotiated in order to become an expert in SoTL. These include understanding methodologies outside one’s discipline, the tensions of being a novice in a second discipline, and understanding what it means to be “student-centred” and its implications for practice.

While Richard Arum was giving his keynote at THE’s Teaching Excellence Summit in Glasgow, I was attending ESLTIS (Enhancing Student Learning Through Innovation Scholarship) in Bristol. Around a hundred UK higher education teachers and students spent two days sharing practice and discussing their research into improving student learning. Previous to that I attended the Education section of the Society for Experimental Biology’s annual conference and the 43rd Annual Improving University Teaching international conference, where academics from more than twenty nations gathered to talk about their research into teaching and learning in higher education.

Why am I telling you this? I’ve described three meetings, two of which were international, where teachers in higher education come to talk about education. This happens every year. There are so many meetings it’s impossible to go to them all. And yet to a great extent our contributions remain unacknowledged because they don’t fit into the present research-dominant culture. But we are here, and we’re working on it.