Research and teaching: competing or complementary demands?

John Issitt considers the real, claimed and functional relations between research and teaching and invites the responses of colleagues and students (pages 4-5).

We are increasingly encouraged not to see teaching and research as distinct and oppositional activities, but as complementary and beneficial elements that facilitate a better student experience and, particularly in this ‘research-led’ institution, are key to the excellence of our provision and top ten position. A playful image of a York lecturer is one that combines the skills of a pedagogically sophisticated, innovative and brilliant teacher who keeps students on the edge of their seats, has published several seminal tomes, is just about to receive a Nobel prize, and is banging out groundbreaking RAE-recognised articles at the rate of one a month.

The claim of a meaningful relationship between research and teaching in HE can provoke heated debate. At face value, it is difficult to see how an individual lecturer’s research can be integrated very far into sizeable undergraduate courses that necessarily have to cover specific disciplinary terrain. Some practitioners see both the daily work and the epistemology of the researcher as completely different from that of the teacher. Others however, see teaching and research as expressions of basically the same endeavour – learning. Somehow the lecturer has to encompass both functions and balance their competing demands – no mean feat when faced with large groups of undergraduates on one hand and the RAE on the other.

Can it be done? Is the combined image of a teacher/researcher born of rhetoric or reality? One answer is to see the image as genuine and reconfigure our concepts of the purpose and culture of HE. We now need to see ourselves as part of a new culture of learning in which traditional boundaries between teaching and research are permeable. Instead of seeing HE as comprised simply of the binary of teaching and research, we need to see it as built from the tri-partite relations of teaching, research and learning. And in order to get the best out of it we need a learning culture that celebrates and values both lecturer and student as independent life-long learners and as knowledge generators.

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Personally I am not convinced. Epistemologically there may be some strength in the ‘culture of learning argument’, but as a matter of practice the claim of there being a workable relation between research and teaching seems to me to be at best tokenistic. Some teachers are excellent researchers and vice versa but not everyone can perform both functions. More importantly, the dominant currency of value remains that of research output. In reality, many of us contracted as teachers experience HE culture as one that consistently privileges research at the expense of teaching whilst, rhetorically, claiming both as equal objectives. Career progression, terms and conditions and long-term recognition are determined more by research output than success in the business of teaching and learning – a situation that has not, as far as I can see, fundamentally changed. Similarly, in practice for those who see themselves as researchers, teaching can present an unwelcome extra burden and distraction which they have no wish to ‘balance’ with the rest of their activities.

Furthermore, it is clearly possible for somebody to have a fantastic learning experience and have nothing whatsoever to do with the production of research save to critically evaluate its findings and methodologies – think of the hundreds of thousands of OU students or students at non-research-based institutions. Are we really claiming that a ‘research-led’ learning experience is better than any other? Maybe we are playing just a little fast and loose with the truth in the interest of market position?

The winds of change have clearly brought significant although not universally welcome developments. Teaching excellence is now firmly claimed as grounds for promotion – although we have yet to see whether that claim will actually be realised – do we yet have a professor who has secured their chair primarily through teaching? More and more we have to please the student-as-customer who is increasingly the arbiter of what counts as good teaching – although the jury is out on whether we are actually delivering a better learning experience as a result of all the customer satisfaction surveys – sorry, feedback systems. The core business of teaching now has expectations, standards, quality audits, technologies and all the paraphernalia of performativity that structure our daily lives. Not everyone has experienced these as good developments – is education actually any better than it was 30 years ago and are we really turning out better-educated people now than we were? Um.

There does seem to be something fundamentally wrong with the way research is privileged over teaching.

At the risk of exposing the chip on my shoulder (and possibly endangering my continued employment!), I want to ask whether research is actually a fundamentally more difficult or more worthy activity than teaching and can it thereby justify its elevated status? I do get the impression that much of the literary production that fills our libraries functions more in the interests of securing career profiles in the research industry than it does actually break new ground. From my own experience in both worlds it does seem to me that teaching and all that goes with it is a fundamentally more demanding task than research and actually requires a much wider range of skills. In general I have experienced research as fun and teaching as bloody hard work. No wonder so many of us apply for research leave and relish the moment when the students go home! The dangerous question also crosses my mind from time to time of whether or not in the history of HE, HEFC resources actually designed to support teaching have been ‘redirected’ for the purposes of research? But maybe I better not go there.

There are varied judgements on the relative worth of the effort to fit both research and teaching into the daily practice of contemporary HE. Some look back to halcyon days of intellectual freedom in which research and teaching were not cast so oppositionally, we didn’t have such massive groups or a persistent managerial demand for ‘measureables’. Others welcome the transparency of explicitly stated goals, relish the opportunity to craft their teaching to higher levels of professionalism and find creative ways of integrating their research into their working life.

My own counsel as a historian of ideas is to be a little wary of the pedagogical fashion and hidden drivers in the discourse of the ‘learning culture’, which seem to me to seek to integrate teaching and research into the same coherent, and thereby manageable, project. Such talk does seem plausible and attractive at one level and it does at least generate tasty sound bites. But it may also conflate two fundamentally different human endeavours at a loss to both.
Editorial

In York we are proud of our research credentials. The University’s success in the last RAE is the latest testimony of this and without undermining such a great achievement, this issue of Forum is set to investigate the research-teaching nexus, as we need to make sure that teaching is not sacrificed for the high echelon of research.

The question is simple: does being a good research university mean we also teach well? As is always the case with simple questions, the answer does not seem to be an easy one. Some of our contributors argue that even to think about them as separate domains would be just out of the question, as they would always need to go hand in hand and this is only a natural outcome of a good academic environment.

However, it is hard to deny that until very recently, research outputs scored a lot more than an academic’s teaching portfolio for the purposes of promotion, for example. Can we really assume that just because some academics excel in their research, they will also be great teachers?

Also, how significant is our research for the enhancement of our students’ learning experience, and what are the nuances of this experience according to the different levels and stages of studying at York?

Bearing these questions in mind, we think it is important to protect the balance between research and teaching, and take additional measures, if necessary. As this issue of Forum argues, what makes York a great university is actually its success in keeping that very fine balance between them.

Alp Özerdem
Editor, Forum magazine

News

New courses at the Centre for Lifelong Learning

The Centre for Lifelong Learning is currently preparing its programme for the 2009/10 academic year, and is pleased to unveil two new accredited programmes in Archaeology and Popular Psychology. The former offers successful students the opportunity for direct progression into the second year of a degree programme, whilst the latter opens up a very popular area of study at the University to the local community – applications for both will be taken from late June. Online learning will also come to the forefront in the upcoming academic year, with Creative Writing now being offered at an accredited level, in addition to a range of ‘learning for pleasure’ modules offered via distance learning. To be added to the mailing list, drop the Centre an email at lifelonglearning@york.ac.uk – in addition to the above, they will once again be offering courses in a diverse array of subjects including local history, music, philosophy and history of art.

E-Learning Development Team in Barcelona!

Funding from the E-Learning Development Team’s 2007 Vice-Chancellor’s Teaching Award was used to enable Richard Walker and Wayne Britcliffe to attend the ‘Blackboard Europe’ conference in Barcelona (6-8 April). The conference attracts participants from European higher education institutions using Blackboard software and represents an excellent opportunity for networking and the exchange of e-learning best practices. Richard and Wayne were able to demonstrate new developments from the University of York, presenting on the use of Blackboard’s community tools to support a showcase site for staff development and delivering a poster session on the use of Yorkshare to provide induction support for new students.

A blog posting on the conference is available here: http://vlesupport.york.ac.uk/webapps/portal/frameset.jsp?tab_id=_218_1

New residential training programme for Postgraduates Who Teach

An intensive residential programme organised by the Graduate Training Unit for new Postgraduates Who Teach (PGWT) has been confirmed for 22-24 September. It will include presentations and workshops from academic staff as well as input from the GTU and PGCAP staff, the Learning Enhancement Team and external input from Professor Phil Race, National Teaching Fellow and Senior Fellow of the HE Academy and author of a range of books on learning and teaching.

The programme is designed for new PGWT, who have had little or no experience in supporting students within HE. It will be open to PGWT from all disciplines and include a number of parallel sessions to reflect the variety of different activities that PGWT are engaged in from small group teaching, demonstrating and marking work.

The 3-day residential programme will be free to participants, funded through Roberts money. Places are limited so departments are asked to put forward students who they will feel will gain most from this opportunity. For further information please contact Karen Clegg in the GTU (kvc500).
Forum invited responses to John Issitt’s lead article from within the University.

Trevor Sheldon, PVC for Learning and Teaching

Dr Issitt raises important questions; we say our teaching is research-led and we parade our research prowess to our taught as well as research students, but is this just so much flannel?

Several arguments have been advanced in support of the idea that teaching best occurs in research active settings (not the same as saying that all teachers should be research active). The intellectual energy which generates and is in turn generated by research stimulates students and gets them excited about learning. Research-led programmes are more likely to be current and connected to what is going on in the field and by academics sharing their research through teaching, students may also feel a greater personal link with the staff and the subject. My research has benefited from involvement in teaching; some of my publications were inspired by student class discussions. Teaching is not just the transmission of knowledge by staff to students. The process of learning is itself creative and students in many of our taught courses conduct their own research and scholarship, stimulated by our teaching, and acquire research skills.

Previous articles in Forum have warned of the dangers of the ‘commodification’ of HE. I believe that by insisting on the connectedness of teaching and research we can more effectively resist these pressures. Research-led teaching is distinctive and ever-changing; it cannot be mass produced and the curriculum continuously evolves in response to changing staff research interests. York academics consistently report that one of the features they most value is the opportunity to teach on topics they research.

The question is not whether we should have research-led teaching but how we ensure that external and internal pressures (such as separate funding and reward regimes) do not drive teaching and research apart. The challenge for us is to create the conditions in which people expect to be actively engaged to some extent in all the main strands of academic work, so supporting a more inclusive and collegial and cohesive organisational culture — a university and not a factory.

Steve Ashby, Lecturer in Medieval Archaeology

University provides a unique context for learning, in which social, cultural and political exploration are encouraged, and in which one is able to engage in depth with a particular (often esoteric) field of interest. In the face of pressure to provide students with transferable skills, university must remain an intellectual experience, rather than a training programme. That is why, however difficult it may seem, however much the call for ‘research-led teaching’ seems like a shallow soundbite with little applicability to the world in which we work, the communication of one’s own excitement about the discipline is of singular importance. And I think it is safe to assume that for the majority of us, our own research excites us. If we find it difficult to relate our research to the broader questions we teach, then that is simply a problem of communication.

Of course some academics excel in research, while others thrive on teaching. But that doesn’t mean that they don’t all have something original and important to offer their students. York can be proud of its equitable distribution of teaching across its academic staff; I have no patience for the division of labour that I see at other universities. In terms of professional ‘rewards’, the privileging of research activity over teaching seems inevitable; the former lends itself to quantitative and qualitative assessment (however flawed) in a way that the latter does not. We may apply pressure for a more equitable system, but we owe it to ourselves not to use promotional structures as a justification for a focus on ‘fun’, at the expense of ‘bloody hard work’. It is precisely the fact that research is enjoyable that necessitates its incorporation into teaching.

The RAE, NSS, and league tables may foster the development of a research/teaching dichotomy. But that is a reason to protect our ideology of integration. If the philosophy works, we shouldn’t bend to restrictive structures, but develop practices that allow us to reach our goals within this new framework. That is our particular challenge, not the wholesale renegotiation of the relationship between research and teaching.

Laura Payne, third-year undergraduate student, Politics and Sociology

Students at York worked hard to get here, and we did it because York is a well-established university with a reputation for research. We wanted to learn from academics who are leaders in their field. Personally, I think I have. It is rare that I write an essay without having cause to reference my own lecturer’s work. There is something about learning things first hand that excites students; perhaps it is simply proximity, or perhaps the passion that lecturers show for their own work is infectious. In any case, on our part the link between research and teaching is clearly symbiotic. It strikes me as a shame that there is still a debate about this amongst the lecturers themselves. Of course, research and teaching both place demands on an academic’s time, and some may relish one aspect of the job more than the other. But juggling demands is a fact of life, and it is a rare and fortunate person indeed who delights in every aspect of their work equally. The true measure of an academic should not be whether they are a great researcher or a great teacher, but how well they do both.

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Research and teaching: competing or complementary
Research and teaching: competing or complementary demands?

As someone with a background in teaching, I instinctively feel that good teaching has little to do with good research. Teaching is a very definite skill that requires creativity and good communication skills. As higher education has developed into a market place and students have been transformed into consumers, there does have to be greater emphasis on teaching, it is after all what we are mortgaging our futures to pay for.

Despite this initial reaction to the issue, I also recognise that higher education is fundamentally different from compulsory education; it is not simply a matter of being taught a set course but is meant to allow you to engage in intellectual debate over the underlying tenets of that course. For this to happen you need to be taught by those who are conducting and writing the research. The opportunity to interact with the people who are shaping a subject was a key factor in how I chose my undergraduate modules and why I chose my current masters course. Yet it has been my own experience that this is only possible in small seminar groups which are sadly becoming fewer as universities are forced to expand. Lecturers must be good, or at least competent, teachers and researchers, this is the reality of the job description in modern day Britain and there are many who fulfil the role admirably whom others must learn from. The only way that both teaching and research will be adversely affected by combining the two is if those who cannot perform one are not given the support to improve and are merely permitted to continue in their jobs.

Contributions required!

If you are interested in contributing to discussions on learning and teaching then Forum wants to hear from you! We are looking for new contributors to the magazine who want to share their knowledge, views and experiences on current learning and teaching issues. The next two issues of the magazine will focus on ‘managing increasing student numbers’ and ‘interdisciplinarity’, respectively. If you are interested in contributing an article, please contact the editor Alp Özerdem (ao102) for an informal discussion.

New resources for academic skills development

A new project is underway to develop online learning materials that will enable students to develop their academic skills at their own pace. Katy Mann and Clare Wiggins of the Learning Enhancement team are working with Epigeum, who developed the online plagiarism tutorial, to design a series of self-study resources to tackle key areas such as time management, argument-based writing, referencing and presentation skills. There will be 15 tutorials, each with 40 minutes of content, including diagnostic tests and audio/video content as well as interactive exercises for students to work through independently. The process of building the resources will begin in October 2009 and the material will be in place for October 2010. If you have any queries about this project, would like further information or would like to get involved, please contact Katy (cfmb500) or Clare (cw581).
I am a plant developmental biologist. My research is fueled by a love for my subject. I find plant developmental biology beautiful and exciting. What’s more, I am convinced that a deeper understanding of the control systems that regulate plant development is important. I am optimistic that research in this area will continue to reveal general biological principles and to lead to applications in agriculture and more widely. I feel extremely privileged to be able to work in this field. Given these views, how can I be anything other than enthusiastic about teaching? To me, teaching and research are inextricably linked through their common root in passion for knowledge. It is this passion for knowledge on which universities are built, naturally encompassing both the generation of knowledge and its propagation.

It is of course possible to be an excellent researcher without teaching, or to be an excellent teacher without being actively engaged in research. Both teaching and research are demanding activities and both come with plenty of administration. This has led some to suggest that an increasing divide between research and teaching is inevitable, because it is not possible for individual academics to maintain high quality activity in both. There are two serious problems with this argument. Firstly, it is simply not true. There are plenty of people who do both highly successfully and who find teaching and research to be genuinely synergistic and mutually beneficial activities. Secondly, the idea that in order to maximise the quality of teaching and research they must be separated is, in my view, a fundamental attack on the entire concept of a university.

To take these points in turn, combining top quality teaching and research is most certainly more than just possible. The benefits of being actively engaged in both teaching and research are many and various, and in some ways actually help with the time pressure. I have consistently found that my teaching contributes to my research. Teaching outside one’s immediate research focus provides a much-needed imperative to read and think more widely. The design and delivery of the teaching programme drives close interactions and discussions with colleagues from across the discipline, and into adjacent disciplines. Many active and productive research collaborations have started this way. Finding better ways to communicate and explain key concepts to students inspires different ways of thinking about familiar topics. A new and revitalising batch of students arrives each year, with a new set of off-the-wall questions you never would have thought of yourself.

In the other direction my research quite clearly benefits my teaching. Being active in research makes it is easier to keep teaching material up to date. More importantly perhaps, research-oriented teaching is very helpful in moving students forward from their tendency to focus on ‘facts’ toward the appropriate emphasis on the synthesis of understanding from evidence. Studying in a research-active environment, undergraduate students can gain first-hand research experience, for example by conducting their final-year research projects embedded in my research team. An added benefit here is that my research students can gain teaching experience by helping to supervise them.

These kinds of lists are easy to make, but I don’t think they are the main issue. To support the teaching-research link by enumerating the benefits to teaching from research, and the benefits to research from teaching misses the point. It is a classic case of confusing causation and correlation. Good teaching does not cause good research and good research does not cause good teaching. They go together because both good teaching and good research are caused by the same thing – an enthusiasm for one’s subject. To separate them would be to separate song writing from singing, or cooking from eating. Of course there are excellent practitioners who specialise in one or the other, but an environment in which both are happening together and in which most of the community is engaged in both enhances everyone’s experience.

The teaching-research link is under threat from those who claim that excellence is only possible by specialising in one or the other. In my opinion this view is worse than just wrong. As I discussed above, universities should be communities founded on a passion for knowledge. The teaching-research link is axiomatic for such institutions. I find the idea of a system based entirely on research institutes and further education colleges profoundly disturbing. My enthusiasm for science drives both my research and my teaching, as well as my interests in public engagement with science and career development for scientists. Working and studying in a university community with others who share these interests is extremely fulfilling. Research Institutes and teaching-only institutions simply do not have the same atmosphere for staff or for students.

When I was a first-year undergraduate, I learned basic microbiology skills in a large practical class with several hundred students. My demonstrator was a man in a baggy blue jumper who was very enthusiastic and engaged. He answered all my questions with great gusto and was more than willing to stay beyond the end of the three hour session to mop up stragglers. He has since won the Nobel Prize. This was a number of years ago now and of course the time pressure in academia is ratcheting ever upward. But to respond by driving a wedge between teaching and research is the Judgment of Solomon.
Postgraduate tutors and demonstrators might be said to have a unique perspective on the research-teaching nexus. Primarily viewed as researchers, many also take on significant teaching loads on areas that may or may not be directly related to their area of expertise. At the same time though, they are also receiving tuition and their more recent experience as undergraduates means they are in a good position to evaluate the quality of the teaching that goes on around them. For the postgraduates, teaching and research are pursuits that require different skills and motivations. ‘Teaching and research are not as closely related as perhaps we would like them to be’, commented one student from the Department of Politics. For a participant from Maths, teaching is a way of sharing knowledge with society, while research is motivated by more personal reasons. Most people in the group could remember a lecturer who was so focused on their research (at which they excelled) that their teaching skills suffered. ‘Personally, I tend to give more focus to my teaching than to my research as little direct impact on their research. The one exception here is in the importance of communication skills for both areas. ‘Teaching is good practice for when you need to explain your own research at conferences’, commented one Computer Science student. Another added that teaching had helped him learn to communicate more authoritatively, which benefitted his research. Apart from this, though, teaching was seen as having little direct impact on their research.

On the other hand, they were very clear that having a teacher who is actively involved in research can bring great benefits to learners. ‘Students who are interested in their lecturer’s research can be more motivated to learn course material’, was one comment from a Computer Science postgraduate. For one research student, ‘Doing innovative research can feed into teaching because it can lead students into more interesting areas. Students tend to pick up things from lectures that they find interesting and do dissertations on them – because they are being taught by people doing research and designing innovative courses.’ And for another, ‘If you can communicate the subject well it makes a big difference. You can produce students who will become good researchers.’

Teaching on their research area can be a positive experience both for postgraduate tutors and undergraduate students. ‘Only one seminar I led was directly related to my research and it was the best seminar I have ever taught’, said a third-year Politics postgraduate with substantial teaching experience. ‘It was also a popular choice of essay question and the highest essay mark in the class was on that topic.’ ‘It can be inspirational for students knowing they are being taught by leaders in their field’, added a first-year Maths research student. They recognise that their own role might be seen as problematic here. As one Politics postgraduate commented, ‘Students are attracted to modules run by leaders in their field but often they get a postgraduate teaching them instead and you can understand that they might feel let down by this.’

Being a leading researcher in the field certainly isn’t essential. ‘Popular courses are those run by someone with good teaching skills, who are better at explaining things and who get more involved in supporting students.’ And it doesn’t need to be someone who is active in research. ‘Some of the best lectures I have been to were delivered by someone who works in industry – they can bring new insight into teaching.’ Staff members who are primarily interested in teaching bring many advantages to the students taking their modules. ‘There is a danger that people who are more focused on their research might not remember the difficulties of learning certain things,’ commented a Maths postgraduate. ‘Often the basic principles of the discipline can seem trivial to people with many years’ experience but can be difficult for the students to get to grips with.’

So how can the University support its teachers and help them develop their teaching skills? Several students commented on the need for more training opportunities from their departments and the Graduate Training Unit. In addition, ‘we need more rewards for excellence in teaching’, argued one student. The others agreed. ‘If we don’t reward good teaching, we won’t get good teachers.’
Academics from the social sciences have never been so useful. The linking of theory and practice has become a popular mantra and it appears that the embarrassing reputation of functional irrelevance has finally been discarded. The coupling of theory and practice stems from a range of interlinked factors. Certainly the widespread interest in evidence-based policy over the last 10-15 years has proven influential since it has brought numerous opportunities for researchers to interface with policy makers and practitioners. Equally there have been justifications for academics to engage, especially considering the continuous encouragement to demonstrate impact and esteem indicators. At the same time, it appears that academia offers unique incentives and a respectable career break for policy gurus, veterans of the field and even former politicians to reflect and recharge.

It is not surprising then that the bridging of practice and theory has filtered through to teaching. Notions of research-led teaching have emerged gradually mainly as a way to manage the two core demands of the job. Drawing upon field research and other insights into policy and practice has now become a common device for teaching undergraduate and postgraduate students. It has also proven an expedient response to the calls for more employable students and university degrees that matter in the ‘real world’. Demonstrating familiarity with the field has also been helpful in the push to establish niche courses for the stream of mid-career professionals seeking university qualifications.

Therefore, teaching in the social sciences by reflecting on trends in practice makes sense to us for a variety of pedagogical and professional reasons. As a research fellow with regular teaching commitments, determining how the two can be combined has become a central component of my work. It is important to explore briefly the validity of some of the assumptions and also consider the limitations of the research-teaching nexus.

The appeal and risks of the field

When sitting in the seminar room or the lecture theatre with the theory, thinking about the arena of practice and the world outside is undoubtedly appealing. Regardless of your area, the ability to demonstrate the relevance of your lecture to policy and practice will increase the value of your ‘take home’ message and make your teaching engaging. More significantly, in my experience the ability to connect with recent developments in the field creates a valuable learning experience.

As a researcher of contemporary war, its impact on societies and the mechanisms that we use to respond, it has been essential to incorporate my field research in Afghanistan, Indonesia, Northern Ireland, and Sierra Leone in my teaching. Such insight has helped to engage with students since the presentation of findings builds upon familiarity of the relevant theory, makes students aware of the latest shifts in policy and notions of best practice, and reinforces that knowledge is deeply contested and debated. The ability to demonstrate first hand expertise of the field also brings credibility as a teacher and can be useful in connecting with those students who have extensive experience and perhaps even surprise those who are sceptical that listening to academics can actually have practical value. Taking the lead to illustrate the learning benefits of critically assessing practice can then encourage more experienced students to share their expertise. This not only enhances their understanding of the subject but also adds to the overall learning experience of the group.

More specifically, I have found that the use of empirical case studies in lectures presents rare insights for students. Micro-level case studies generated by my research are unique and thus allow in-depth perspectives on the broader issues surveyed by the text books. Case studies are creative and imaginative and tend to provoke spontaneous thinking, fresh ideas and innovative ways of understanding theoretical problems. Case studies also encourage students to slow down their thinking and form a complementary activity to the relatively fast-paced tasks of scanning numerous articles and chapters. In sum, case studies grounded in practice help accommodate different learning styles. At a minimum, investigating and presenting case studies requires a high level of eagerness and I have found that this can instil greater enthusiasm among students for their subject.

Nevertheless, linking theory and practice is certainly not a risk-free approach to teaching. Research will inevitably be too specialist when it remains in its purest form. In this sense, I have found it essential though time-consuming to make the findings learner-friendly. This task centres on finding a balance between maintaining the uniqueness of your latest project while not appearing too narrow. Students will be unfamiliar with your case study so the need to explain and contextualise always risks that your lecture becomes swamped in narrative and cluttered with too many background details. Postgraduates and undergraduates will naturally have very different expectations and interests in this respect which ought to be considered.

Skills for research and skills for teaching

When my teaching draws upon field research, I find that skills are developed in two main ways. On the one hand, demonstrating how research is done – identifying a problem, constructing an initial explanation, finding information, conducting analysis and testing theory followed by conclusions – helps to equip students who are preparing to join and compete in the knowledge-based economy. For example, many of my students aspire to work in the field of post-war recovery and development for the many intergovernmental and
nongovernmental organisations. The ability to monitor interventions and policy more broadly and to communicate research will invariably form essential or at least desirable skills criteria for new positions so understanding the approach and methods of empirical research has appeal and relevance that reaches far beyond the degree or Masters.

For the researcher, teaching brings very familiar skills. I have found that my grasp of a project is undoubtedly improved through presenting the findings or reflecting upon the nature of the original problem in lectures and seminars. There is also a close relationship between knowing how to present robust analysis and conclusions in a final research report and the ability to design and achieve clear learning outcomes. Communication skills are critical throughout both teaching and research, and one tends to motivate thinking in the other.

Although skills overlap, research and teaching are also very different and for valid reasons. In particular, research into practice tends to prioritise the recognition and validation of a given problem and thrives on independent and critical thinking. These skills can be relevant to teaching but the ability to create learning opportunities for students requires more of a broadening out by engaging directly with the key debates and covering multiple strands of knowledge. In sum, the main difference here between research and teaching skills is one of generating theory versus synthesising theory. Doing both is of course expected but has at times proven difficult in my experience, especially when you are tempted to introduce exciting new preliminary research findings into a lecture.

Drawing upon research into policy and practice is a popular teaching device. It generates several unique learning opportunities and it is also expedient when we consider the demands of the job. In my experience, the field of post-war recovery and development is particularly well-suited because of the expectations for ‘real-world’ skills. Overall I have found that case studies are powerful tools in creating interest and fresh thinking. Nevertheless, this approach also poses some obstacles that require close attention from both research and teaching perspectives. It is in the search for these tensions and discovering how to resolve them that perhaps makes this work most interesting.

Money well spent

As the current round of HEFCE funding ends, Forum looks at how £272,000 has been used by departments to enhance learning and teaching.

Since October 2007, the Learning and Teaching Projects Fund (LTPF) has awarded grants of up to £5000 in support of innovative or developmental learning, teaching and assessment projects. The funded projects have varied widely in their aims and objectives, from those creating specific resources for use within their department, such as Nicola McDonald’s online database of Middle English popular romances and Katherine Selby’s environmental virtual fieldtrip, to those piloting projects with a wider applicability, such as Andy Pomfret’s research into online maths support programmes, which is aiding in the development of support for students using maths and stats at York.

Several LTPF projects focused on core strategic areas such as assessment and feedback, academic skills, and inclusivity and diversity. Robert McMurray, York Management School, received £2840 to evaluate the ways students learn and how teaching, assessment and feedback can be better aligned with that learning. The project has endeavoured to gain a better understanding of the range of individual learning experiences among undergraduates and to develop a new teaching approach designed to enhance student learning through appealing to multiple learning motivations, styles and contexts.

Since March 2007, the Rapid Response Fund has provided up to £3000 for activities that would make an immediate impact upon learning and teaching within a department. As there is no project requirement for the allocation of this money, most applications have been for the purchase of equipment. For instance, the Department of History of Art received £2528 to purchase PCs and flatbed scanners to enable staff and students to scan pictures or download digitised images. Others received money to support the creation of resources designed to address particular learning and teaching priorities, such as academic skills. For example, the Department of Psychology received £398.42 in order to film presentations given by first-year undergraduate students as part of their compulsory Scientific Skills for Psychologists module. Katie Slocombe explained, ‘The aim of this exercise was to encourage reflection on and improvement of their presenting styles. The results show that the exercise has been successful for the majority of students, with 73% saying that they will present more effectively in future.’

Other initiatives have succeeded in linking teaching with research, to the benefit of taught students. A joint bid from the Departments of Archaeology and Theatre, Film and Television, with the Centre for Medieval Studies, received £9000 for five PI-3000 photogrammetry software licenses, which creates 3D models from digital photographs of objects and locations. As well as being employed to teach surveying techniques, it has been used by a third-year dissertation student to create a virtual reconstruction of the fragmented shrines of St William from York Minster, and by an MA student from the Centre for Medieval Studies to capture details of the Romanesque Minster undercroft. In addition, the Department of Theatre, Film and Television have used the software to create locations that can be composited with filming shot on a sound stage.

In the Department of Educational Studies an award of £2665 bought camcorders, voice recorders and digital telephone call recorders that were used by taught Masters students to carry out empirical research projects. The equipment had a direct impact on the projects. Emma Marsden commented, ‘More students, we felt, were able to collect data using methods other than questionnaires. For example, there was an apparent increase in interviews with practitioners.’

From July, there will be a change in the way that HEFCE funding is allocated and the details of how this will affect the LTPF and RRF are still being worked out. In the meantime, watch this space!
The Secret Diary of a Biochemistry Teaching Fellow, Aged 38 3/4

Set Chong considers the merits and pitfalls of a teach-only University career.

Monday 17 November

In order to improve my teaching, I have decided to keep a diary. This is not a stroke of genius on my part, but an idea I owe to the good folks of PGCAP. Originally, the purpose of keeping a diary was to keep a detailed written account of my teaching, one that I can later reflect on and use to improve. I have decided that this is not the right approach for me. I lack the time or the patience to detail my daily activities in the form of a diary. I much prefer to annotate my handouts with notes such as ‘this slide did not work – CHANGE!’ Or ‘need to move this slide before slide 7’. This method is less than perfect, as by the next year (when I need the notes and handouts again), I often cannot remember why slide X did not work and what sort of ‘change’ it needed. This leaves me with little opportunity to reflect and therefore some of the problems are repeated once more. I have decided that this is acceptable as long as I make immediately any major changes that are needed. Basically, it is a risk I am willing to take to keep my sanity.

Tuesday 18 November

I thought that perhaps, I could use this diary as a therapeutic tool where pen and paper replace a therapist’s couch to talk through all my work-related problems. This might have worked had it not been for the fact that I am genuinely happy at work. I like being a teaching fellow. Being a teaching fellow means different things to different people. Even within my Department (Biology) I see that people’s expectations of my role can vary from colleague to colleague. Fortunately the vast majority of my colleagues are extremely supportive. Without some of them it would have been almost impossible to navigate successfully my way through the pitfalls of university teaching.

I also like my job because I enjoy interacting with students. On reflection, I am semi-surprised but rather unabashed to report that I don’t miss the research aspects of academic life. I got to be a teach-only member of staff when I had a child and I decided that I did not want to do research part-time. Teaching seemed to lend itself beautifully to a part-time post. I must admit that at first this felt like a big compromise. In hindsight, it was a perfect move. It turns out that I am good at teaching and it suits me better than research ever did. I am by nature impatient and the fact that I used to spend a large portion of my time preparing for an experiment, or dealing with mediocre results, frustrated me. Rewards in teaching are much more immediate. For the most part my work-related problems are small enough that they don’t even hike up my blood pressure. No need for therapy yet.

Wednesday 19 November

I just delivered a rather unsuccessful lecture to a group of highly expectant second-years. As a teaching fellow, it is not uncommon that I teach areas that (at least at the start) I know little more about than the students whom I teach, for example statistics. Although, after having taught statistics for a few years, I now consider it the highlight of my teaching and have become something of a local statistical expert extraordinaire! This is a self-appointed title; no one in his/her right mind would actually call me that! Anyway, it is safe to say that the learning curve can be, and often is, quite steep.

But today’s lecture was about something I know quite a lot about. The urge to include everything I know in one lecture was overwhelming. While writing this lecture, I found myself emotionally attached to most of the topics in the field and deemed them too important to miss. So I excitedly presented in one lecture what logically should have been spread over at least five, in a string of run-on sentences (this is a side-effect of my excitement – too wired up to think about forming grammatically-correct sentences).

Thursday 20 November

One side-effect of interacting with the youth is a constant reminder of being old. I think it is important to be able to relate to my students, but this is not an easy task, as I am now old enough that my preferred radio station is any that has the words ‘smooth’ or ‘mellow’ in their title. I try to understand however that a student turning up to my lecture only to pick up a handout and leave immediately is merely doing so because it is hard to fit learning into the middle of a very busy schedule of having a good time. So the ‘grab-and-go’ service I provide is an important part of a modern university education and my lectures, practicals and workshops cut into important student social activities. In fact a few merely email me to obtain the handout without any attempts at punctuation or even signing their names. I must admit that I oblige. I have come to realise that as long as the students learn the information, the method of delivery is immaterial.

As a result, instead of leading my students to drink from the fountain of knowledge, I subjected them to supping from a fire-hose. Therefore, they were mostly slumped unconscious over their desks, albeit metaphorically drenched.

As a teaching fellow much of my time is dedicated to interacting with students. This is important. Most of my students are excellent: motivated, enthusiastic and often extremely bright. As effective as
Tales from the classroom...

Dr Kate Giles, Department of Archaeology and winner of a 2008 Vice-Chancellor’s Teaching Award

Four years ago, I was asked to run a session on the links between research and teaching for YCAP (now PGCAP). At the time, I admit that I was slightly cynical. I had just submitted an unsuccessful application for studying medieval guildhalls to the AHRC and like many young lecturers, I felt that although I spent the majority of my time preparing teaching and supervising students, all that was really going to count, in the shadow of the RAE and in any future promotion applications, was research. The only advice I could therefore give was based on my experience within the Department of Archaeology, where staff have always been encouraged not simply to integrate research into teaching but also to use teaching to further research.

Shortly after that session, I was contacted by Professor Ronnie Mulryne of Warwick University. As a member of the AHRC panel, he had seen my application, and he wanted to know whether I would be willing to write a conservation management plan for the King Edward VI Grammar School, Stratford-upon-Avon. The school occupies one of the finest guildhalls in the country but was also used in the 16th century for performances by the travelling companies of players. Indeed, the young William Shakespeare may well have watched his first plays within the guildhall.

Out of this work came another project – to study and reconstruct the wall paintings in the nearby guild chapel. These paintings were covered over and defaced by none other than Shakespeare’s father, John, in 1563/4. However, drawings of them survived and this led to the development of a dissertation topic concerned with reconstructing the original appearance of the chapel. The challenge was taken up by one of our MA students and co-supervised by our departmental Computer Officer. Together, the three of us converged on Stratford and spent two days surveying the building and working in the archives. There is nothing like fieldwork for creating a collaborative environment in which ideas can be knocked backwards and forwards. This was the case with our survey, and this discussion then continued in supervisions and emails once we returned to York. As a result, Geoff not only built a fantastic VR model, but raised profound questions about the scheme and patronage of the paintings – issues which went way beyond our original vision for the project. These ideas have already informed a journal article and a new research grant application. However, they have also made us realise how – in the right hands – VR technology can be a research tool, which is something we have incorporated into our teaching and research practice. This may seem an obvious thing to say, but collaborating with students as fellow researchers on a topic of mutual interest created one of the most satisfying teaching, learning and research experiences of my career to date.

I have no idea whether our grant application will be successful this time. However, this project has demonstrated the potential of a recursive relationship between research and teaching and given me renewed enthusiasm for both of these areas of my work.

Publications
The results of Geoff’s project can be found at www.thearnott.com. Geoff’s company, Heritage Technology can be found at: www.heritagetechnology.co.uk

Friday 21 November

I have taken a few minutes today to reflect on the likely path of my career progression as a teaching fellow. The University has published a series of criteria for the career progression of teaching staff. My Department encourages teaching fellows not just to play a supporting role, but to undertake a whole range of teaching around their specialist areas. I have been able to develop a strong portfolio of activities, which is important for career progression. There are also a number of schemes both at the University and nationally that support excellence in teaching. So far I have been fortunate in receiving departmental and university support so that I can develop more innovative teaching. These awards have encouraged me to think about how I could develop a programme of research focused on issues related to life sciences education. Perhaps the rate-limiting step for the next stage of my career will be to obtain a national-level award. So all I need to do is reduce my entropy!

lectures are in delivering information to a large group of students, they do not leave much scope for getting to know the students and their potential. It is mainly while interacting with my students in practicals, workshops and tutorials that I realise how awesome the task of teaching them truly is.

Tutorials are my particular favourite. In Biology, each member of staff meets with a group of four students almost every week each term to discuss a specific subject relating to life sciences. They are the most exciting, and at the same time challenging, part of my teaching. They are exciting because I get to know and interact with a handful of students over the term while discussing science. They are challenging because I never know which direction the conversation will go in. I think the key to running a successful tutorial is to be able to handle the inevitable awkward silences. I cannot. As a result I ask and answer the question in almost the same breath – I sometimes even answer my next three questions as well, in an attempt to overcome the awkwardness of the silence! I am also still mastering the art of asking questions that provide enough information for the students to work out the problem for themselves without giving away the punch line. This is very hard!

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Managing the demands of research and teaching

Rob Aitken, Department of Politics, gives a Chair of Board of Studies’ perspective.

It is easy to only see a synergy between teaching and research in the latter stages of the undergraduate programme when students take option modules on lecturers’ specialist areas of research. Lecturers generally enjoy teaching on topics they are researching and engage students in ongoing debates in the literature. Students benefit from lecturers’ knowledge of the cutting edge of research in the field and enthusiasm for their subject. However, a close link between research and teaching can, and should, be more systematically embedded throughout the curriculum.

One of the main challenges in designing and delivering an undergraduate curriculum at York is to persuade incoming undergraduate students who were high achievers at school that they need to develop new skills and approaches to learning to succeed at university level. Many students were top of their class throughout school and feel they already have all the study skills they need. Even mentioning study skills often makes students turn off. However, students need to develop new skills in order to find and evaluate academically credible sources, form intellectual judgements, construct arguments, use the literature to support their argument, etcetera. They need to understand the rationale for locating their arguments in the existing debates and referencing sources as a way of supporting ongoing debates but stress that to do so they need to make the effort to learn the rules of academic scholarship. This is not to say that academic practice can only be taught by researchers who are at the cutting-edge of contemporary research in their field, but that a reflection on, and experience of, research can facilitate this process of learning and teaching. The synergy between research and teaching in the first year depends on those delivering the first-year programme articulating a coherent message about academic practice and supporting this with feedback on student performance that encourages the acquisition of academic skills. This presents challenges to boards of studies who must design effective support for academic skills acquisition into the curriculum and for academics who must lead a team of staff and Postgraduates Who Teach to deliver the modules.

While close links between teaching and research are beneficial to the curriculum, boards of studies face practical problems in managing the demands of research and teaching. In a ‘research-led’ university like York, departments often prioritise research. The pressure to gain successful research income means that successful researchers may need to be relieved of part or all of their teaching to concentrate on research, sometimes at short notice. Many departments provide researchers with a period of teaching-free research leave every two or three years. This requires colleagues to cover teaching and the administrative responsibilities associated with teaching. Finding teaching cover is a difficult juggling act balancing staff availability and expertise to maintain the quality of the student experience.

Individual academics, while generally committed to teaching well, have to confront the reality that their careers are judged primarily in terms of their research. The University has made considerable progress in raising the profile of teaching and its importance in applications for promotion to Senior Lecturer. However, applications for jobs elsewhere will be judged primarily on research rather than teaching excellence or innovation. So unless an academic has decided to remain at York for life, research is the primary consideration in career planning.

Department priorities and individual career planning do not impede academics teaching well on a day-to-day basis, but make it harder to persuade them to invest time and energy in curriculum (re) design and innovation in learning and teaching. There can be a sense of inertia, a desire to continue with established practices rather than to reflect on students’ learning experience and rethink approaches to learning and teaching. Overall there are considerable benefits to be gained from embedding research and scholarship into the curriculum both for the student experience and staff satisfaction. However, this does require a reflection on the student learning experience and a willingness to innovate. The number of established academics who regularly take part in learning and teaching development activities is limited. Engaging in continuing professional development related to learning and teaching has unfortunately tended to be seen as something that a few enthusiasts do rather than as a normal part of an academic career.