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# **The potential of research-based learning for the creation of truly inclusive academic communities of practice**

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The academic community in higher education is becoming increasingly fragmented, with arguably the greatest fault line between research and teaching. This paper argues that, through the reinvention of the undergraduate curriculum to focus on student engagement in research and research-type activities, a truly inclusive community of academic practice can be created with consequent benefits to academics, to students and to support staff. The paper arrives at practical guidelines for the organisation and management of students and staff and for the design and layout of academic accommodation.

**Keywords:** Research-based learning - Student Engagement - Academic community - Support staff - Academic accommodation - University management

## **Background**

Dating back to at least Hattie and Marsh's seminal meta-analysis of the relationship between teaching and research (1996), there have been significant recent attempts to reverse the bifurcation of the two activities (Jenkins & Zetter, 2003; Healey, 2005; Jenkins & Healey, 2005; Kreber, 2006; Rowland, 2006; Jenkins, Healey & Zetter, 2007; Healey & Jenkins, 2009). But this idea is not new, and indeed was championed as long ago as the early nineteenth century by Humboldt, who claimed that the purpose of a university for both the teacher and the student is 'a common quest for knowledge'. Lewis Elton (cited in Lueddeke, 2008, 1) suggests that Humboldt had thus successfully 'abolished the problematic nature of the research-teaching link'. The current genesis of this pedagogic movement has been inspired by a number of sources. In the United States, the Boyer Commission (1999) argued for the reinvention of undergraduate education to enable students to become part of an academic community in which every individual is seen as a scholar moving seamlessly between the activities of learning, teaching and research. Working in Australia, Angela Brew (Brew, 2006) has provided a detailed reappraisal of the relationship between research and teaching and made the case for strengthening this relationship, to the benefit of both, through the establishment of inclusive scholarly knowledge-building communities of both staff and students (p. 173). Accepting the arguments of Brew and the Boyer Commission is the starting point for this paper

But as they stand, the Boyer Commission view of the academic community, and Brew's vision of 'inclusive, scholarly knowledge-building communities of practice' (Brew 2006, 180) are both in danger of implying that we currently have homogenous academic communities of practice, which we would argue is very far from the case. It is the thesis of this paper that, with sufficient vision, research-based learning has the potential to both be the catalyst and provide the focus to develop much more homogenous communities, which would have identifiable benefits.

## **The notion of 'the academic community' needs to be more clearly defined**

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In the world of higher education there is an established rhetoric and many claims made about the academic community. But to assess the veracity of what is said we first have to understand more clearly what is meant by an academic community. Given the 'business' of universities, it might seem attractive to turn for help to the concept of 'a learning organisation' from Senge (1990, p. 3):

Learning organizations [are] organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together.

But such a description, with its emphasis on the 'collective' and the notion that there is one 'whole' is unlikely to chime with most academics as a description of the average university today. Many academics are far more likely to side with the views of Palmer (2002, p. 179):

Academic culture is a curious and conflicted thing. On the one hand, it holds out the allure and occasionally the reality of being a 'community of scholars'...On the other hand, it is a culture infamous for fragmentation, isolation, and competitive individualism – a culture in which community sometimes feels harder to come by than in any other institution on the face of the earth.

Another potential source of understanding about community is the theory of communities of practice, which as Smith (2003, p. 1) recognises has become increasingly common in the rhetoric:

The idea that learning involves a deepening process of participation in a community of practice has gained ground in recent years

According to Wenger (1998, p. 72-85) a community of practice has three key dimensions: it is a 'joint enterprise' involving the 'mutual engagement' of its members, who are bound together as a 'social entity' with a shared repertoire of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artefacts, vocabulary, styles, etc) that they have developed over time. These key requirements of joint enterprise, mutual engagement and social entity all seriously beg the question, who do we see as being members of the community. All too often, the concept 'academic community' is used in exclusive ways referring solely to the academic staff of the university. But in addition to the inclusion of students, we would go further and concur with Stefani's (2008, p. 2) totally inclusive view of the community when she asserts:

If university level study is to be a meaningful experience for our students, it is necessary for academic staff, administrators, policy makers and researchers to seek better ways to understand what factors and influences will lead to an institutional culture which promotes and encourages student engagement.

Of course, in practice, it is inevitable that members of the 'universal' academic community will fragment into groups and there are probably three main kinds of criteria that govern this fragmentation: discipline criteria, institutional criteria and functional criteria. As Becher (1989) describes using his concept of 'academic tribes', the academic community has always been fragmented along disciplinary lines, with academics acknowledging they have more allegiance to their disciplinary community than to their institutional community. Whilst some adjustments have resulted from the effect of modern communications, the grouping of members of the academic community by institution is borne out of logistical necessity. Our major concern here, though, is not so much with discipline or institutional fragmentation but with fragmentation by function – academic staff are both separated into managers, researchers, lecturers, etc. and separated from support staff and from students. And the concern is that, however disciplinary/institutional communities are formed, within those communities this fragmentation by function cuts across any possibility of a notion of 'joint enterprise' or 'mutual engagement'. It is our conclusion, therefore, that this negates universities from becoming genuine academic communities of practice, or from being true 'learning organisations', and this fragmentation is replicated across the academic community at large.

## **The fragmentation of the academic community**

Recently, the academic community in higher education has arguably become even more fragmented with the formation of groups of staff which are all increasingly turning inwards on themselves. It is recognised that professors, researchers, lecturers, support staff, doctoral research students, Masters students and undergraduate students have come under mounting pressure to focus on the attainment of their respective performance targets, which have come with 'an increase in accountability and an emphasis on economy [in] HE' (Becher & Trowler, 2001, p. 6). As a consequence, different groups in the academic community have become ever more isolated from one another and, of the various divisions which have appeared, possibly the most profound fault line is the one between research and teaching. As Rowland (2006, 61) has observed:

...even though there is broad agreement that different areas of higher education practice should work in harness, in fact staff juggle with the experience of teaching, research and management pulling in conflicting directions.

Thus, with greater difficulties of combining teaching and research, ever larger numbers of academics in university schools and departments have found themselves making the choice between one activity or the other. One of the most damaging consequences of this bifurcation between teaching and research is that students inevitably become increasingly distanced from the activity of research. So the notion of a true academic community of practice has remained an aspiration that is increasingly difficult to fulfil despite the enthusiastic adoption of the rhetoric of community by institutions of higher education. Many universities have included the principle of the academic community in their mission statements and academic strategies with policies to, in particular, bring together teaching and research. Yet the reality of the day-to-day functioning of many academic communities remains very different as recognised in 1998 by Gerhard Gasper, former president of Stanford University (cited in Lueddeke, 2008, p. 2):

...the link between the two realms, in many universities around the world, has not been attained

And in the UK, it has been suggested by Lucas (2007, p. 18) that significant factors behind this failure are government policy and the funding mechanism:

UK government policy and funding of higher education has driven, and continues to drive, a wedge between the dual activities of research and teaching both across and within institutions

Robertson (2007, p. 542), in New Zealand, actually goes further arguing:

...government policies are encouraging the 'drift' apart of research and teaching to the extent that some authors now characterise the two activities as antagonists

The "massification" of higher education, compounded by drastic cuts in the unit of resource, has also arguably played its part (Becher & Trowler, 2001, p. 4, 6), with the subsequent move to an increasingly industrial model in which universities function more like factory production-lines than academic cloisters. This is a concern which has finally reached government with the observation from the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (2008) that:

Increased student numbers could result in bigger, more impersonal university environments

Whatever the exact origins of the bifurcation between teaching and research it is accepted that their relationship is now in urgent need of examination with Rowland (2006, p. 69) concluding:

In addressing the fault line between teaching and research, academic development requires a more fundamental debate about the relationships between the two. As a start, this debate should help us to reconceptualize such terms as 'research-led teaching', the 'discipline' and 'scholarship'...

### **Students will benefit from an inclusive research-based academic community**

Alongside the persuasive pedagogic and theoretical arguments favouring academic communities of practice there are some very practical benefits to students which support a transition to a more inclusive university culture. With greater exposure to the intellectual and research culture that higher education has to offer students will enjoy an improved learning experience and Kuh (2008, p. 21) maintains that 'high-impact activities' are the key to student engagement and success. But currently, as Broadfoot argues, '...we are giving them an instrumentalist and unrewarding experience. Everyone is extremely focused on examinations and getting good results.'... 'We need everybody to love learning, because we want them to carry on.' (Broadfoot, quoted by Shepherd 2008, p. 10). And there is evidence that undergraduate students would welcome the opportunity to engage in research (Smith & Rust, 2007), rather than continuing to feel alienated from research as reported by Turner, Wuetherick and Healey (2008). Evidenced from very large scale studies, social interaction between students, and between students and staff, is the most significant predictor of students' success (Astin, 1997). However, in the current system, time and space for such interactions is actually diminishing (Squire & Johnson, 2000).

It is also important to emphasise that there will be a change in the teacher-student relationship, and it is again apposite to quote Humboldt (cited by Elton, 2008, p. 1):

the teacher is ...not there for the sake of the student, but both have their justification in the service of scholarship.

Teachers and students will need to share a more equal partnership, with the same goals. In line with this view, McWilliam (2008) has recently argued that we are now in need of another paradigm shift in our view of the role of the lecturer. She argues that we have already progressively moved from the 'sage-on-the-stage' to the 'guide-on-the-side', but that now is the time for a further change to what she calls the 'meddler-in-the-middle'. This new role 'positions the teacher and student as mutually involved in assembling and dis-assembling cultural products. It re-positions teacher and student as co-directors and co-editors of their social world' (p. 263).

### **Support staff will benefit from an inclusive research-based academic community**

The role of support staff in the academic community has been long overlooked and long undervalued as evidenced by the recent critical observations of Feldman (2008, p. 26):

Technicians, often highly experienced and knowledgeable, are still regarded as second-class citizens.

and Newman (2008, p. 16):

There is a class divide between clerical staff and academics in higher education, according to most of the sector's secretaries.

Allen-Collinson (2009) has explored the role of research administrators and found an emerging recognition of their role, as well as a blurring of the demarcation from academic researchers. However, most support staff are still almost completely defined by their function within the

university and their job descriptions rarely need to be distinguishable from those in any other large organisation.

Administrative, secretarial and technical staff are highly qualified and experienced. They often have degrees themselves and some may be simultaneously registered as students whilst working in their support role. They will commonly have had an experience of the world of employment which is wider than that of many of their academic counterparts.

Support staff should be valued and they need to be valued through their ability to be *academic* administrators, *academic* secretaries and *academic* technicians. In other words, recruiting support staff should not merely be a matter of transferring an individual from another large organisation because the role in a university should be highly distinctive and specialised and, crucially, valued. This means that support staff should be trained and skilled in much more than what appear to be the routine essentials of their job. They will need an academic interest and understanding of the subject area in which they are employed and will need to use this knowledge within their community of practice. In addition, they will require inter-personal and perhaps tutoring and even counselling skills to work in support of students. They will need to work alongside researchers and alongside students and, importantly, should take on a major role in facilitating interaction between researchers and students.

In our experience, many support staff have taken up their roles not expecting, or even wanting, to have anything to do with students – and it is apposite to note that it is exceptional for support staff job-descriptions to make any mention of students. However, we would argue that anyone who is recruited to an academic community of the future should anticipate engagement both with students and with the subject in which they are working.

There have been significant increases in the numbers of staff in central support units (and therefore even further distanced from the academic community than those in academic departments) – e.g librarians, computer technicians, counsellors, those in human resources, the registry, estates, and corporate services. There is now a need for these roles, too, to be brought into the *academic* mainstream instead of looking in from the outside. Members of human resources could teach in business studies or public administration, for example, counsellors could teach in psychology, librarians in publishing, computer technicians in maths, stats and computing, estates staff in land management, and corporate services in business and marketing. All of these individuals have vital and important skills and experience they can bring to academic teaching and research and to the tutoring and development of students.

In the genuine research-based academic community it is the role of support staff which needs to see the greatest changes. Indeed the demarcation between support staff and researchers and teachers should vanish with job descriptions which combine administrative and technical work with tutoring, small group teaching, and research assistance. There are, of course, at least two groups of support staff who, as well as increasing their own academic role, will also need to be centrally involved in gradually implementing the suggestions we are proposing. First, Human Resources units will have to identify the nature and extent of changes in the job descriptions of posts and develop policies and practices to recruit the ‘new breed’ of candidates to fill support staff positions. Second, Learning and Teaching units will have to develop training schemes to enhance the abilities of support staff to contribute to the research-based education of students. It is in these ways that support staff can be integrated fully as equal members of the academic community and thus lose their second-class citizenship.

### **Academics will benefit from an inclusive research-based academic community**

A true academic community of practice should comprise a group of staff and students brought together because of a focus on a subject or discipline rather than a focus on a function such as teaching or research or learning. The subject focus will produce a number of benefits.

Hitherto many departments have had different organisational structures for teaching and research so that the balance between the two activities has needed to be managed by the individual. If the balance between teaching and research can be managed within a group, the result should be better and more equitable workloads.

As a consequence of better balanced workloads more teaching staff should be able to become research-active and more research staff should become teaching-active. With greater opportunity for research, teaching staff should be able to improve the quality of their teaching, and with greater opportunity for teaching, research staff should be able to improve the quality of their research (but, of course, the distinction between teaching staff and research staff will be all but redundant). It is also worth noting that a recent international study of research-intensive academic departments with excellent teaching ratings found high levels of student involvement to be the one common feature of all the departments studied (Gibbs, 2007).

There is also Robertson's assertion that, 'Being an academic is about a way of thinking and acting in the world – about a way of being, based on an attitude of critical enquiry.' .... 'It could be argued that the intra-individual coherence [*authors emphasis*] in academics' experiences of research, teaching, learning and knowledge is key to what makes higher education distinctive, and what makes academic work both satisfying and compelling.' (Robertson, 2007, p. 551)

### **Academic communities will need new arrangements for management and accommodation**

Acceptance of the principle of a true academic community of practice has clear implications for the management and structure of institutions. As Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel and Hutching (2008, p. 127) argue, 'Intellectual community is not simply a matter of ambiance, and it does not happen by accident or by magic. Work is required.'

We have already identified the need to abandon the demarcation between academic and support staff, possibly including the development of academic roles for central services staff. Each and every member of an institution of higher education will need to be arranged into groupings where the focus is on subject or discipline rather than on function. And it is important that they are reminded that all members of universities are members of the academic community. A consequence of these new management structures will be the need for fresh arrangements for physical accommodation which embrace the following kinds of guiding principles:

1. organise all staff and all students into manageable subject or discipline groupings for all learning, teaching, research and administration.
2. provide a mix of necessary accommodation for subject groupings with clusters of (in no particular order) teaching rooms, offices for staff, learning spaces, specialist rooms, exhibition spaces, meeting rooms, local 'watering holes', etc. in what might be described as disciplinary 'villages'.
3. include generous informal spaces for each accommodation grouping to facilitate face-to-face communication amongst staff and students and "incidental learning" (Brown & Duguid, 2000, p. 72)
4. use colour, furnishings, displays etc to provide each subject grouping's accommodation with a strong sense of place and its own academic identity.
5. as has already been experimented with in the US, residences should also be used for teaching and learning purposes, thus strengthening cohort identity and encouraging student peer support in residential learning communities (Edwards & Sweeton, 2000)

Although not based on disciplinary communities, in terms of the possibility for informal encounters between staff, students, and support staff, what we are arguing for is very similar to the communities which for centuries the Oxbridge colleges have tried to create, but within the restrictions and limitations of the current mass H.E sector. Whatever the exact management and accommodation arrangements they settle on universities will need to embark on the kind of agenda

established at the University of Alberta in 2003 where the linkage between teaching and research for undergraduate students embraced a commitment to 'conceptualise the integration of teaching and research; develop linkages in the learning environment and facilitate the integration of teaching and research through professional development, adequate resources, administrative structure, celebration and evaluation' (cited in Luedekke 2006, p. 6).

Walker et al (2008, p. 127) point out there will also be the need to manage the involvement of students:

A department with a healthy intellectual community is marked by the level to which students are engaged in all of the activities of the department: serving on committees, hosting outside scholars, planning events, mentoring more junior students, and shaping policy. These activities are, in turn, routes into the larger discourse and as Michael Oakeshott (1962, p. 198) once called it, an 'unrehearsed intellectual adventure' that defines the department, and the field, as a community.

To this list we should now also add the uncomfortable middle management role in which many academics have found themselves in today's university. The true community of practice that we advocate is at odds with the 'thrusting management style' referred to by Tahir (2008, p. 33), who goes on to say that in universities now:

We're occupying two cultures: one that is supposed to be collegiate, where everyone pitches in, but also another, where there are targets, planning statements and strategies

It is inescapable that the university still needs to compete and survive and to demonstrate this through performance indicators and the like. This has required a sharp and even aggressive management structure but it is precisely this kind of structure which is one of the greatest obstacles to the creation of a collegiate academic community of practice which is attractive to prospective students and staff.

It is critical, though, that senior managers appreciate that an impressive university image is not in itself enough to attract and retain prospective members. Grand entrances, large lecture halls, banks of computers, swanky refectories and impressive libraries are not enough to make staff, still less students, feel at home. A working atmosphere at a human scale is also required where all kinds of individuals can mix in a stimulating environment that focuses on their subject interest.

This demands a review as fundamental as the one carried out by Ryan (2001) and our suggestion is that we need to create 'communities' or 'colleges' or 'streets' or 'houses' of academics which have a far greater ability to informally run themselves. The current academic units are wasteful of human time and resources: they are heavy with managers, strategies, reports, procedures, forms, budgets. All of this time and all of these human resources need to be reorganised and put back into academia. This is the challenge: we should all of us be academics now and universities ignore this imperative at their peril.

## **Conclusion**

It is concluded that, whilst most and probably all institutions of higher education aspire to the ideal of inclusive academic communities of practice, there is still a great deal to be done to realise this objective. And we are not naïve enough to believe that progress will be straightforward since we recognise there are numerous practical issues that need to be addressed, such as resources, changing power-relationships and, not least, how to persuade colleagues to change.

However, in the academic community teaching and research need to be seen as equal partners with researchers benefiting from being in the classroom as much as students benefiting from exposure to high-class investigation. More than that, the bifurcation between the activities of learning and research needs to be removed to create a community of practice where all academics



are seen as scholars. The catalyst for creating these communities of practice should be the introduction of the idea of research to all stages of the undergraduate curriculum. Students welcome the idea of a research culture and many are capable of producing worthwhile research output.

The implication of a truly inclusive community of practice is that universities will be organised into groupings that are based more on academic interest than on institutional function. Lecturers will be able to manage more effectively the teaching/research balance, support staff will be afforded parity of status and become full members of the community, as will students, who will enjoy an enhanced learning experience. These groupings will require accommodation which offers greater physical identity for subjects and includes informal spaces to facilitate interaction.

To understand more fully the dynamics of a successful academic community a fresh research initiative is required and this should focus on the very concept of a community rather than on the separate activities of teaching and research.

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