

Commentary included in “No apples for teachers”, Feature article by Rebecca Attwood, Times Higher Education, 19 February 2009

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=405400>

GENIUS VALUES TEACHING, SO SHOULD THE REST OF US

A while ago, I opened two centres of excellence in teaching and learning (Cetls) in a research-intensive university. My speech was an encomium to the value and centrality of teaching in universities. That, and my genuine enthusiasm for a research-intensive university opening two Cetls, had, I thought, gone down well.

I was, then, surprised to receive a letter from a professor who had heard me speak castigating me for suggesting that universities were places for teaching. Teaching, I was told, is "what schoolteachers do".

I was guilty of either precipitating or perpetuating "a perceptual shift" that suggested that universities had "an obligation to teach". They apparently do not; they are rather places that should "provide opportunities for learning". The teacher, and by implication the vocation of teaching, had no place in the university.

I pride myself on replying to the letters I receive. I have not, however, replied to this one. The academy has its origins in teaching and in contesting what is known, how it is known, and how knowledge can and should be conveyed.

There were epistemological differences between Plato and Aristotle, between the Academy and the Lyceum: but there were pedagogic differences, too. Moreover, these were teachers who had followers, with pupils who profoundly defined themselves by what they were taught and by whom they were taught.

That experience has characterised the academy for more than two millennia. Lives transformed by university teachers, some great, some humble; some intellectual leaders, some accomplished synthesisers. Students anxious to take a particular person's course; graduates aspire to "study with" - not to have their higher learning in some desiccated way "facilitated by" - a supervisor of repute and standing.

I remember our eldest daughter encountering a truly charismatic university teacher for the first time. "He's so good, Dad, that I get there early and sit in the front row" (he was good looking too!). Suddenly, in the way fine teachers do, new intellectual horizons were opened, the challenge to commit more and to take greater responsibility for learning was implicit in the way he taught and, of course, it elicited a response. Remove this kind of teaching, decentre or devalue it, and you remove a pulsing heart from the life of the university.

Reflecting on what has happened in universities this century, the story is, at least in part, a story of the rediscovery of teaching. Some of it, to be sure, was driven by the advent of fees and an apprehension that students would become more discriminating (I was never sure why anyone feared this: students should be discriminating). Some of it was cast in a mechanistic language that suffused debates on "learning and teaching". I thought, symbolically and actually, we lost much in the subtle inversion of "teaching and learning" as it transposed into "learning and teaching".

Slowly, though, we are revaluing teaching. Teaching and university teachers are better valued: by teaching awards, in promotion and reward procedures, through the work of the Higher Education Academy, and through an acceptance of the legitimacy of student evaluation, partly through the National Student Survey, partly through more locally sensitive processes at institutional, departmental and course level.

Some years ago, as a head of department, I met fierce resistance from some colleagues when I introduced peer observation of teaching. It was as if they thought university teaching was a private act, conducted behind closed doors, by only partially consenting adults. Now such accountability and reflective practice is nearly the norm.

There is still some way to go. Teaching, like all arts, is partly craft, partly professional commitment and partly inspiration. Sometimes, as teachers, we are not on form, some days we are a bit flat, but we are still efficient and competent, and students value that. Some days we can express familiar ideas and traditional concepts with a freshness that excites both students and teacher: as if the familiar was freshly discovered or newly urgent.

We do need to think through issues of contact hours, not just how many, but what kind. We also need to be clearer in what we expect of students, how they move from directed to independent study; how they make best and most rigorous use of the unprecedented intellectual and academic resources available to them. There is a balance between fine teaching and committed student learning: we need to find and articulate that.

But all this is so much better, so much more authentic, so much more exciting, if we have universities animated by teaching and receiving its proper recognition, within the academy.

Recently, in Washington, I realised why I thought my professorial correspondent so profoundly mistaken.

I was buying CDs and I picked up several recordings by the remarkable violinist Hilary Hahn. At 16, she recorded Bach's D minor partita, in a stupendously powerful reading.

She did not, however, draw attention to her genius, but rather dedicated the recording to "her teacher", the great Jascha Brodsky. Brodsky died soon after the recording. Hahn, though now launched on an acclaimed international career, moved to study with another teacher, Jamie Laredo.

I then recalled that, in the last year of his life, Franz Schubert, while exploring remarkable new frontiers in the String Quintet and the last piano sonatas, was taking lessons from Simon Sechter, Vienna's most rigorous teacher of harmony and composition.

Genius values teachers; so should the rest of us.

David Eastwood is chief executive, Higher Education Funding Council for England, and vice-chancellor elect, University of Birmingham.