The Scholarship of Teaching: Oxymoron or BulFs-Eye?1

JoLaine R. Draugalis
College of Pharmacy, The University of Arizona, P.O. Box 210207, Tucson AZ 85721-0207

Every faculty member can achieve a scholarship of teaching but we have been misled as to what constitutes this scholarship primarily due to tradition accompanied by a faulty measurement system. E. Grady Boque has said, “what we know is always servant to what we believe.” I used the term “scholarship of teaching” several years ago and the reply from a colleague was, “How could you use those two words in the same sentence?”, suggesting an oxymoron!

Our primary duty compels us as faculty members to demonstrate a scholarship of teaching, that is the ability to communicate the knowledge of our discipline, remembering that communication requires that the message be understood, not just delivered. According to Shulman, expert teachers need pedagogical knowledge, knowledge of how to teach in addition to the what to teach of content knowledge.2 Pedagogical knowledge is both general such as how to motivate students, how to effectively manage a classroom or conduct a discussion session, test construction principles, and the like as well as specific to what is being taught such as how to explicate particular concepts or model behaviors unique to a given discipline; for instance, taking a patient drug history in the practice setting, structural activity relationships in medicinal chemistry, or construct validity in research design.

What should it mean to be a university teacher?, Canada’s Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education began distributing a treatise, “Ethical Principles for College and University Teaching” in 1996(1). Obviously, a set of guidelines rather than a series of mandates, the document contains nine principles. The number one principle mentioned is Content Competence, directing the university teacher to “maintain a high level of subject matter knowledge and ensure that course content is current, accurate, representative, and appropriate to the position of the course within the student’s program of studies.”

Principle number 2 addresses various aspects of pedagogical competence including, “a pedagogically competent teacher communicates the objectives of the course to students.” How often have we all provided learning objectives in a perfunctory manner on the first day of class, never to return to them in any meaningful way?

My colleague, Dr. Marion Slack, and I use an approach to instructional design described by Gagne and Briggs(2,3). In this approach, an instructional objective is written from the learning outcome we desire and the objective serves as the basis for developing the instructional materials and methods and examination items. We teach concepts with specific content serving to illustrate a particular concept. Therefore the examination will be similarly structured to test a particular cognitive skill, such as classification, with the student required to differentiate, rather than regurgitate; thereby honoring the stated learning objective.

The remaining ethical principles are titled: dealing with sensitive topics; student development; dual relationships with students; confidentiality; respect for colleagues; respect for institution; and valid assessment of students. We would find it disturbing to find grammatical errors, typos, and inattention to detail present in a grant proposal or abstract submission.

Isn’t it ironic that we occasionally fail to hold classroom examinations and other student assessments to the same standard? Seemingly, failure to abide by these ethical principles may color the scholarship of teaching and may result in “educational malpractice,” a phrase coined during a discussion with a former graduate student.

Some of the same things that make research efforts scholarly (and most certainly, not all are) make teaching efforts scholarly. For instance: a plan with clear goals, a reasoned and effective approach, a careful selection of methods, regard for measurement issues, concern for outcomes/end products (i.e., student learning in the case of teaching), evaluation components, and scrutiny by peers.

Boyer pointed out outstanding teachers who exhibit a creativity in their teaching that although not thought of as research, certainly can be defined as scholarly when they analyze, synthesize, and present material in new and effective ways(4). A particularly succinct definition of “schol-
arship” was provided by the Commission to Implement Change in Pharmaceutical Education: “Scholarship is the advancement of knowledge(5). Obviously there are a variety of ways to advance knowledge. The Commission reaffirmed that knowledge is of little value unless it is disseminated.

However, dissemination can be accomplished in various ways. One method suggested was through effective teaching. Publication, although a possible manifestation, is not a requirement in possessing a scholarship of teaching. It is sometimes easier to define something by saying what it is not. One need not conduct educational research to possess a scholarship of teaching. Every faculty member is a potential teaching scholar but may not know how to do so; are doing so, but don’t know how to measure; or are doing so, but measuring erroneously or insufficiently.

All those with instructional responsibilities should be skilled in teaching which leads to a scholarship of teaching, but that needs to be distinguished from an educational researcher. Educational researchers are educated and trained in the theory and practice of education and their research efforts provide frameworks for teaching scholars. Their work does carry a dissemination via publication expectation.

For instance, an educational researcher specializing in test development and psychometric principles may develop a means of evaluating test items using a form of item analysis. The researcher disseminates information on the new index. Another type of scholar may take this discovery and create a software program and accompanying documentation to enable teachers to use the technique in their classrooms. Both of these types of scholarship are generalizable and are subject to traditional peer review.

A scholarship of teaching would be demonstrated when a professor uses the software program to conduct item analysis on their classroom examinations in order to provide feedback to students about their performance, to provide evidence to himself or herself about student difficulties, as a means of scanning for curriculum improvement, and as a means of continuous instructor and course improvement via item revision and generation of new examination items.

The professor’s use of these methods can also be considered by department chairs and promotion and tenure committees when evaluating the candidate’s teaching. Particularly illuminating would be a candidate’s narrative (based on both qualitative and quantitative data) about changes and improvements made over time as an outgrowth of using the particular method.

Another example - a professor is not satisfied with his or her end of the course evaluations. Based on this data, the individual pursues development opportunities on cooperative learning techniques through a university teaching center and the next time the class is offered makes changes in the delivery method, let’s say a mini-discussion is inserted into each class period. The instructor would comment on the results of the modification in his or her next annual evaluation document.

Faculty members must be held accountable for their teaching and in turn must be appropriately evaluated and rewarded for such activities. Do we believe however that our current methods are suitable to evaluate the teaching contributions of faculty? We would be missing the mark with the present system as it is not a perfect peer review process with mismatches such as simply counting dollars, publications, or citations and assuming a ratio level of measurement; for example, a buck is a buck is a buck; two publications is twice as good as one publication; or nine hours of student contact is three times as productive as three hours of student contact.

We are enamored with counting, labeling, and assuming more is better; as one of my former students said, they are merely numbers. Affixing a number to something although comforting to some, can be inaccurate and misleading, or as I like to call it, misplaced precision. Can we give what we do more meaning than reducing it all to numbers of this, numbers of that, et cetera? We delude ourselves by believing we currently use a reliable and valid (fair?) system.

This quantity versus quality issue was brought home to me last year when I was introduced by a moderator whom I had never met before. I had submitted my curriculum vitae (CV) to this individual as part of the requirements for bestowing continuing education credits to attendees. When I was introduced it went something like this: Our first speaker is Dr. JoLaNe Draugalis from The University of Arizona, she has 44 peer-reviewed publications, nine book chapters, and numerous contributed and invited national presentations. If only there were a category for pairs of shoes. I don’t number my publications, so the individual had to count them. Had I been asked to write an introduction, this would certainly not be what I would have said, particularly to a group of pharmacists.

And since I had been asked to do this educational session due to my supposed ability to teach inferential statistical techniques, a topic distasteful to some and thought useless by many practitioners, it would seem other descriptors would be more appropriate. Perchance, teaching experience and expertise?, both of which are presently evidenced on my CV.

Perhaps part of the problem was that the moderator felt more comfortable with using the traditional measures of productivity gleaned from a curriculum vitae. Institutions are struggling with how to conduct peer review of teaching and naturally this will require a dedication of time and effort.

One thing for sure, one or two classroom visitations by colleagues does not constitute a peer review of an individual’s teaching. Most promising seems to be a teaching portfolio of sorts - a description of one’s strengths and accomplishments. The challenge is what to include to appropriately tell the tale yet guard against the tendency to include everything. Some suggested elements include: a statement of teaching responsibilities and one’s teaching philosophy, syllabi, examples of exams and assignments, innovations, evaluations, honors. Much of this information could be incorporated into a traditional CV and/or in a promotion and tenure document.

Before we in the academy had a focus on outcomes (a la Standards 2000, Center for the Advancement of Pharmaceutical Education educational outcomes and the like specific to pharmacy education as well as other initiatives generic to higher education), the traditional measures cited previously were inadequate but are now clearly invalid to properly evaluate the scholarship of teaching. Teaching is definitely more than the processes of provid-
Another not so unintended consequence of a school filled with teaching scholars would be the more positive relationships with students throughout their program of study, which seemingly would carry over to alumni and practitioner relationships, in the forms of ambassadorship, continued educational interactions, such as participation in continuing education programs and certificate programs, and giving. This would be good for the individual pharmacists, the institution, and the profession.

In his recent book, Academic Duty, Donald Kennedy, the former president of Stanford University, and a current member of its faculty examines teaching, graduate training, research and their ethical context in the research university (8). In examining categories of academic misconduct he suggests that any profound efforts toward reform will hinge on more rigorous standards of academic responsibility to constituents such as students, the university, and the public and that these standards must be embraced by both faculty and administration. The first sentence of Chapter 3 - “To Teach” reads: “Responsibility to students is at the very core of the university’s mission and of the faculty’s academic duty.” As we work toward solutions as to how to appropriately evaluate and reward the scholarship of teaching it would behoove us to keep this admonition in mind.

So rather than an oxymoron, the scholarship of teaching is right on target and central to attaining the desired outcome of enhanced student learning, hence a bull’s-eye.

References