

an unconscious level – emotions of a perceived superiority over others, particularly when the learner has come from a background in which conflict has been rife.

What is the tutor to do with such information? While an encyclopaedic knowledge, of course, of each learner's personal background and cultural history is impossible, an awareness of the same is beneficial. Up to a point the tutor may contain a good deal of learner anxiety; but this can never be the sole reason for the tutor's position – or even the primary one. If a tutor is to serve as a container for anxiety and a way of diffusing potential tension when intrinsically racist incidents are in embryo, there is less chance of the development of a

truly successful language course. So one question that springs to mind at the culmination of this short paper is this: Do we need to be better aware of the links between pedagogy and the containment of learner anxiety?

This is our talking point for the rest of this session.

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## Standing Up for Teaching: The 'Crime' of Striving for Excellence

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### Abstract

In recent years a proliferation of local and national teaching awards has occurred in many countries. The new language of excellence has led institutions and policy-makers to embrace teaching awards. Although these award schemes harbour competing and coexisting drivers and appeal to different stakeholders for different reasons, they have helped to raise the profile and importance of teaching in higher education. At the same time, the idea of recognising individuals as excellent teachers remains distasteful to many educators. Awards remain controversial as they compete with traditional ideals of egalitarianism which dominate the education profession. In the backdrop of lingering controversy, this short opinion paper reflects on the costs of standing up for teaching after applying for and

successfully winning a National Award for Sustained Excellence in Teaching. Using an acronym it describes the CRIME of excellence and makes the case for teaching awards criteria to recognise critical forms of scholarship. While definitions of excellence will always be contestable it argues that teaching awards are not mutually exclusive from an individual ethos of striving for continuous improvement. The paper concludes that the education profession does a great disservice to the status of teaching if we shame and snipe away at those judged by peers as our best.

### Introduction

Over the last decade it has become increasingly common to recognise and celebrate teaching excellence. Although

methodologically fraught, the most obvious form of recognition is teaching awards that identify our so-called best and most talented teachers. I am reliably informed that a number of such awards exist in the United Kingdom. However, many of these awards remain controversial, which is evident in the popular media by the reaction of people to the proliferation of 'rate my teacher' type websites. On the other hand, a number of more credible award schemes exist in many countries and the recognition of teaching excellence has become an increasingly serious business. In New Zealand, for example, since the inception of Ako Aotearoa (National Centre for Excellence in Tertiary Teaching) the national teaching awards have grown in significance.

In the backdrop of these awards, and from a safe distance from the United Kingdom, this article reflects on the sceptical and often unspoken side of teaching excellence. The intention is to raise a potentially unpopular topic that may not be spoken about in the current discourse around academic development in the United Kingdom. As a recipient of a National Award for Sustained Excellence in Tertiary Teaching, and member of the Ako Aotearoa Academy of Teaching Excellence, I discuss the CRIME of excellence. In this regard, the word 'crime' is used as an acronym that describes the responses from colleagues as well as the internal struggles which many awardees grapple with after receiving award recognition.

The paper has two purposes: (i) to challenge elitist and misinformed objections to teaching awards irrespective of country, and (ii) to deepen and broaden traditional conceptions of teaching excellence. It argues that a personal commitment to excellence, regardless of the definition, and a critical

understanding of the scholarship of teaching and learning are crucial to building a systemic culture of continuous enhancement.

### **Badge of Shame**

Starting on a personal note, a colleague recently introduced me to a small group of visiting academics as a past recipient of a national teaching award. Although factual, the introduction was laced with a thick sarcastic edge which spoke volumes about the contestable nature of teaching excellence. Arguably, the encoded undertone to the introduction would not have been present if I had received a prestigious award for the quality of my research. There is even a sense in which winning an award for good teaching is like wearing a badge of shame that says your research is second-rate.

In danger of sounding a little bitter and paranoid, this is unlikely to be the first or last time that a colleague takes an opportunity to subtly undermine my national teaching award. This is not the first award that I have received for teaching and other national awardees have shared similar stories. This type of response from a minority of colleagues appears to be something that comes with the recognition of teaching excellence. Of course, this begs the question: why is this?

### **Finding the Courage**

The simple explanation, with no doubt an element of truth, is the Tall Poppy Syndrome. However, there is a lot more to the crime of teaching excellence than the politics of envy where a handful of colleagues seek to undermine your personal success.

The root of the problem is deep-seated and cultural. It exists well before you even prepare your teaching portfolio for an award

application. University academics need a certain amount of *courage* when preparing an application for a teaching award, as seeking personal recognition cuts across the grain of the collegial nature of teaching. Importantly, excellence does not occur in a vacuum and the individual teacher needs to carefully weigh up the risks of public recognition, especially when those around them, and the supportive culture in which they work, influence the quality of their performance.

This last point highlights the importance of awards that recognise teaching excellence on a team and/or programme-wide basis. Such award schemes help to address the contextualized nature of teaching and ensure that everyone involved can celebrate in the success of their collective achievements. Although a cliché, in teaching the sum of the whole is always greater than the contribution of the individual parts. This is a key point often overlooked in high profile teaching award schemes.

### **Bracing for Recriminations**

If teaching is inherently collegial, this raises the question of what motivates an individual teacher to seek a personal award. Undoubtedly the popular perception is that awardees are strongly ego driven. However, this explanation appears far from the truth as genuine motivation to raise the status and value of teaching is the common characteristic and standout feature of members of the New Zealand Academy of Tertiary Teaching Excellence—that is, the group of previous national award winners. Indeed, the sincerity and sheer passion of Academy members for the value of teaching is a humbling experience. By way of personal evidence my own teaching portfolio still begins with the following sentence: ‘Put simply, teaching matters’.

Although no one is likely to openly attack the value of teaching, the reality is that national awardees need to be prepared for *recriminations*. In my own case, a disgruntled member of faculty reportedly complained to colleagues:

‘How can he claim to be an excellent teacher when he does not even have any real students?’

This person was referring to the fact that most of my teaching was for students learning at a distance. Sadly, this view reflects a deep-seated suspicion of distance education as an inferior form of teaching and learning. Of course we know from the literature that well designed distance education, which actively engages students, is equal to, or better than, other forms of teaching (Zhao, Lei, Lai & Tan, 2005). Put bluntly, historical biases against new open, blended and flexible forms of learning have no place in today’s increasingly diverse and global higher education environment.

Access to education is a basic human right. The provision of quality open, blended and flexible learning is crucial to providing higher education for *all* citizens. Indeed, new forms of flexible learning are no longer an alternative way of teaching but increasingly the delivery mode of preference—that is, the new normal. Today’s students demand greater flexibility as they juggle careers, family and other commitments. People retraining or undertaking postgraduate qualifications to support their careers often have no alternative. This point cannot be ignored, especially as the basic principle of learning design is to develop courses that meet students’ needs. Arguably, good teachers adopt the motto of students first. Thus, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century the ability to design and deliver

flexible learning in ways that engage learners is an important criterion of teaching excellence.

### **Confronting the Innuendo**

Of course, the above claim assumes that teaching excellence exists. In other words, there is such a thing as 'excellence'. It needs to be acknowledged that the definition of excellence is inherently problematic as it depends on who defines the concept and what criteria they adopt, which explains to some degree why many rank-and-file educators regard the concept of teaching excellence as repugnant and distasteful.

In some cases, this distaste surfaces in a kind of subtle *innuendo* that implies teaching awardees are impostors. They are masquerading as some type of super teacher when their colleagues know better. Ironically, it appears that a sense of being an impostor is the second characteristic shared by members of the New Zealand Academy of Tertiary Teaching Excellence. A common response from members to their personal recognition as an excellent teacher is, 'Why me? I'm not that special'.

Speaking from experience, the 'Impostor Syndrome' can lead to feelings of shame and embarrassment and may explain why few awardees challenge those undermining their credentials as excellent teachers.

On a more scholarly note, definitions of teaching excellence have always been contestable. For this reason, some authors avoid definitions (Sherman, *et al.*, 1987). If teaching excellence is conceptualized in narrow instrumentalist terms as a checklist of observable behaviours, rather than an intellectual activity within a long tradition of critical scholarship, then a healthy dose of

suspicion is well justified. After all excellence is context and discipline bound and inherently difficult to measure (Skelton, 2005). As Skelton (2005) points out, excellence is both situationally and historically contingent, and in some cultures associated primarily with the transmission of authoritative knowledge. In this sense, we need to acknowledge that dominant and preferred understandings of excellence can preclude a consideration of marginalized 'voices' and teaching awards criteria may be presented as 'natural' and 'common sense', disguising what underlying interests they serve (Skelton, 2005).

This line of argument also raises the debate in the literature over the distinction between excellent teaching, scholarly teaching, and the scholarship of teaching and learning. While some aspects of this debate remain unresolved, Skelton adds greater conceptual clarity to competing definitions of excellent teachers by describing four 'ideal' types of teaching excellence: Traditional, Performative, Psychologized and Critical.

Traditional conceptions of excellence are associated with the view that the best teachers work in the best institutions, adopting time-honoured instructional approaches. In the university sector, these are often known as Sandstone or Ivy League institutions. The second ideal of excellence reflects the language of performativity where good teachers are judged by their ability to prepare new types of learners and agile workers with relevant knowledge and skill for today's global economy. In this sense, excellent teachers are good educational workers rather than critical thinkers and public intellectuals. Psychologised conceptions of excellence, the third category, also have a contemporary quality, which is characterized by student-centred approaches,

constructivist ideas and the so-called new ways of learning. Notably, Skelton (2005) claims this view of excellence dominates the current literature.

Fourth, in contrast, teaching according to the critical perspective is inescapably political and at odds with both the traditional emphasis on the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake and the application of it for economic gain. It also goes beyond narrow psychologised conceptions of excellence which take little or no account of the political context. Teaching excellence from the critical perspective seeks to emancipate learners through access to knowledge that challenges prevailing assumptions and structures. It equips the learner with dispositions that allow them to act as transformative agents of change. This view of excellence emphasizes:

‘...the broader purposes of higher education and the underlying values that inform teachers’ work. According to this view, teaching cannot simply be reduced to technical or practical matters; it inevitably involves moral questions about what it means to be educated’ (Skelton, 2005, p.34).

To quote Fullan (1993, p.12), ‘Scratch a good teacher and you will find a moral purpose.’ Although anecdotal, on moral and ethical grounds, I can testify to the validity of the criteria and peer review process for selecting the New Zealand National Tertiary Teaching Excellence Awards. The 12 other Massey University awardees, more than any other university, have outstanding critical backgrounds working in areas as diverse as Science, Business, Literature, Politics and Development Studies. My colleagues all share the scholarly tradition of being critic and conscience of society, and a predisposition to

critique appears the third standout feature of the group that I am fortunate enough to belong as a member of the National Academy.

### **Channelling the Mistrust**

Admittedly, to be perfectly honest, I share a certain degree of *mistrust* of teaching awards. There is a danger of the ‘pedagogy of the impressed’ where innovations with a strong new digital technology flavour privilege other definitions of teaching excellence. A simple analysis of many awardees’ backgrounds, including my own as an Apple Distinguished Educator, reveals the extent to which definitions of teaching excellence has been dominated by those at the leading-edge of technology innovation. While there is convincing evidence that e-learning, under the right conditions, can promote achievement and create opportunities for higher levels of student engagement, poor teaching can be concealed by the glitz and glamour of new technology. A critical perspective is required to ensure learning, teaching, assessment and curriculum design remains to the forefront of thinking, and we must never forget that technology-related innovation is a subset of teaching excellence. Put another way, excellent teachers all share some common characteristics regardless of their discipline background. In this sense, excellence is a shared mindset rather than merely a propensity to innovate just because technology exists. The lesson is that if you want to be an excellent teacher, then you have to learn how to think and act like a critically minded educator.

### **Beyond Elitism**

Teaching awards are rare. After all that is what makes them prestigious. So, when grappling with concerns and accusations of *elitism*, and in moments of self-doubt, I often rely on a more basic definition of teaching

excellence. This definition recognises excellence as a moving target where I am always striving to be my personal best. Instead of excellence being a competitive concept measured against other teachers, this view locates the definition with the individual, as we are all capable of improving on our previous best performance.

Using a running analogy, my personal excellence is equivalent to the best time it has taken me to run five miles. In this respect, I am always trying to find a new edge to help me improve on my best time. This analogy recognises that we do not all begin with the same natural running ability and that the real challenge of achieving the goal of teaching excellence is personal. In this respect, excellence is an ethos and habit of mind where you should always be striving to improve on your previous best efforts. It is also a life-long goal as the day teachers stop trying to improve on their teaching is the day they should start thinking about another occupation.

Importantly, teachers do not have to strive for continuous improvement on their own as extending the above analogy, diet, the right equipment, good coaching and a strong support team scaffolds the performance of both amateur and elite athletes. This is where journals, professional associations and units and groups dedicated to supporting quality teaching have a key role to play. It follows that scholar teachers will actively seek out, participate in, and take advantage of wider professional networks.

### Conclusion

In summary, teaching awards have become a fixture of the higher education landscape. However, we have yet to fully resolve the distaste, controversy and egalitarian tensions

around identifying individuals for their teaching excellence. Despite being judged by a panel of peers, the next round of local or national award winners, irrespective of country, is likely to suffer from the CRIME of teaching excellence. While teaching excellence is a thorny concept, the education profession does a great disservice to the status of teaching if we shame and snipe away at those who stand up for it. Instead of casting aspersions over the credentials of teaching awardees, the sceptics would be better served by working constructively to identify teachers with a truly critical orientation and personal commitment to quality and the scholarship of teaching and learning. Of course, the wider goal is to value and encourage all teachers to maintain a living portfolio of their teaching as a routine part of critical reflection—a hallmark of the scholar teacher. This goal shifts the focus away from celebrating individually excellent teachers to building a systemic and sustainable culture of continuous improvement, in which:

**'Excellence is the gradual result of always striving to do better'**

(Pat Riley, award winning NBA coach).

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