

Scholarship in its Own Right

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In higher education, the two core academic responsibilities are teaching and research. Though most academics do both, some are engaged to do one or the other, contractually. Those not required to do research are still expected, at a minimum, to remain current in their field. Yet many go beyond this, making contributions to their field and/or to the wider field of pedagogy. Given the academic nature of working at the level of higher education, this seems entirely appropriate. There is a need for better understanding and acceptance of the important academic work that professional educators do outside of classroom teaching. This is especially true when compared with the well-established and well-defined activity known as *research*, which comes with clear expectations and methods. A basic step towards better understanding and acceptance is a clear and well understood label. I would like to suggest that the term *scholarship* is appropriate, and more, that there is a need for recognition of scholarship in its own right, as distinct from the notion of scholarship of teaching and learning, or SoTL.

The term *scholar* is used in a wide range of ways, often broadly synonymous with *academic*. Yet within the context of university-level teaching, scholarship has been defined more specifically, as pedagogically-oriented academic exploration which is made 'public, peer-reviewed and critiqued and exchanged with members of our professional communities so they, in turn, can build on our work' (Shulman, 2000). By definition, this may sound like a simile for research, but it isn't because motivation, orientation and therefore output differ enough to render the activity as distinct. While research is usually motivated by theory in attempt to better understand or to add to an existing body of knowledge, scholarship is motivated by the practice of teaching with the aim of improving learning. Though grounded in existing theory, a scholarship question is a question about teaching and learning, not theory per se. As discussed in Whong (2022), it is not surprising that this fundamental difference in orientation of the question itself then leads to meaningful differences in the answer in terms of orientation – and also in findings. Moreover, some scholarly work takes the form of learning objects and/or teaching materials. While this can be seen to be like research in (at

least) two ways: i) it is original or innovative, and ii) if it is sound scholarship, it aligns with existing theory – clearly, teaching materials do not equate with research.

How, then, can scholarship be said to differ from SoTL, or scholarship of pedagogy, the term favoured by Henard and Roseveare (2012). In a useful literature review commissioned by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in the UK, Fanghanel et al (2016) draw from the same tradition as Shulman (2000). Yet they refer to scholarship as still ‘a relatively ill-defined concept, to capture activities related to enhancement of, and reflection on, practice in higher education’ (p. 6). Indeed, the commissioning of the piece by the HEA suggests that scholarship as a concept is still ill-defined. The focus throughout that literature review is on academics who explore their teaching through scholarly inquiry. My aim here is to suggest that there is a fundamental difference that distinguishes scholarship from SoTL. The Fanghanel et al review explores the work of academics within subject disciplines, some of whom also have a research remit, but many of whom do not. Interestingly, in the entire 55-page review of SoTL, there isn’t a single mention of or allusion to a large set of professional educators in higher education: language practitioners.

The work of language educators fills a distinct niche in higher education around the world. Language practitioners include two types of specialists, those who teach: i) language for specific purpose, usually either academic or professional and ii) language for proficiency development. In both cases, the ‘subject’ of the teaching – language in terms of formal linguistic properties – is not the primary learning objective. Instead, despite actively using their high levels of expertise in the language and in linguistics, language practitioners make explicit efforts to minimize the focus on formal linguistic properties and associated metalanguage in particular. Incidentally, it is this orientation which underlies the use of the label *practitioner* in language education. Language educators ‘practice’ language, in the sense of doing or modelling language, as an inherent feature of their teaching. While educators in other subject areas may also be practitioners in their field, in language education this inescapable.

Another fundamental difference between language educators and other professional educators in higher education is the requirement for qualification that includes some formal pedagogic training, if not an outright teaching qualification. It is also the norm that language educators are not expected to hold a research degree. Having worked in our sector for many years, I know that one concern when hiring language practitioners who do hold a PhD is the question of whether the candidate is a good teacher. Language practitioners are professional educators with high levels of pedagogic expertise; for those with formal training in research it will often be training in education research. Indeed, this difference motivates criticism by Kanuka (2011) that because most academics who engage in SoTL are not specialists in education research, their contributions should not be seen as education research.

Lastly, for a large proportion of language educators, the orientation of the language they teach is within the specific context of one (or more) academic subjects. Indeed, many practitioners develop secondary knowledge in an academic subject area through teaching the language of that subject. In other words, the professional orientation of language educators distinguishes them from academics in other subjects. It is therefore not surprising if the orientation of the scholarly work of language practitioners is also distinct.

In short, there is a case for the appropriation of the term *scholarship* in its own right, to refer to the pedagogically-oriented output produced by language practitioners with pedagogic expertise. Indeed, as argued in Whong (forthcoming) for those who teach academic language in particular, it is important that they 'practice' academic writing as a product of systematic, academic, peer-reviewed exploration. And by putting it in the public domain, their scholarship can be used by others while also forming the basis of further innovation and development. A dedicated label – Scholarship – recognizes the valuable academic contributions that language practitioners make, paving the way for appropriate levels of social capital in the academic community.

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