

Scholarly Activity in the context of HE in FE

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Introduction

Within HE in FE, the current and growing interest in scholarly activity has been influenced by concerns to enhance learning and teaching, both at the national policy level, and within colleges (see e.g. HEFCE 03/15 and 03/16). This interest is perhaps best understood as part of wider attempts to create an ethos of higher education in, and by, colleges providing sub-degree and degree level courses.

This document offers definitions of scholarly activity and indicates the kinds of activities that are presently associated with it. It is hoped that the notion of scholarly activity will be both clarified and broadened, and that the examples discussed will provide ways to consider how such activity can be developed and sustained.

Firstly it will be helpful to note the ways in which scholarly activity may be distinguished from research. Whilst all research can usefully be understood as a form of scholarly activity, scholarly activity need not result in the production of new knowledge, or involve undertaking empirical or theoretical investigation, nor does it necessarily lead to publication in academic journals, etc. This should not be taken to imply that these types of outputs are precluded by undertaking scholarly activity, however. One good reason for this is because reflecting on one's teaching practice (which can perhaps be seen as a definitive aspect of scholarly activity) can involve undertaking pedagogic research, and consequently may encompass all those activities associated with subject or field-specific research.

As with so many other terms and ideas that emerge on the national policy agenda for higher and further education, the notion of scholarly activity is prone to changing across time and will have differing connotations according to the context in which it is used. It will also be susceptible to change under the influence of vested interests. For example, in his speech at the first Higher Education Academy conference in 2004, Peter Scott noted that scholarship was previously a term used to differentiate between the type of research in the humanities (where there was generally no need for a specialised, infrastructure of technical apparatus), from that undertaken in the sciences. He also pointed to the more recent, and perhaps less laudable, ways in which research and scholarly activity have been distinguished, in order to differentiate between those who undertake high-status empirical and theoretical work, and those who play catch-up. This alerts colleagues to the ways in which attempts to fix definitions may reflect particular agendas.

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But how might this illuminate theories and practices of scholarly activity in the context of HE in FE provision? And what are the implications for scholarly activity that takes the form of pedagogic research? These and associated questions will be addressed in the following discussion. Firstly it will be helpful to try to illustrate key types of activity in relation to these activities.

Table 1: HE in FE Scholarly Activity

<i>Activity Type</i>	<i>Example of Activity</i>	<i>Discipline Knowledge</i>	<i>Pedagogic Knowledge</i>
Theory driven research	Collecting, interpreting, analysing and disseminating findings, to create new knowledge (or original synthesis of existing knowledge). Emphasis may be on peer review (especially in latter stages, where focus will generally fall on academic journals).	Tsutsui, et al (2002)	Young (2002) Harwood and Harwood (2004)
Policy and practice research	As above, but with applied focus, disseminating primarily to agents of change (e.g. national and, or, regional policy makers, executive level management, etc.).	Burke, J. 2006.	Parry et al - Universal Access and Dual Regimes of Further and Higher Education (2006 - 2008)
Localised studies (changed from 'localised evaluation')	Small scale, localised investigation. May employ action research methods. Aims to understand and, or, change context – e.g. institutionalised policies or individual practice.	The Nottinghamshire Research Observatory (2002)	Chelbi (2005)
Updating/Enriching knowledge	Reading academic journals, professional publications, attending relevant conferences, workshops and seminars. Undertaking higher degrees.	1st Annual Research Conference, The Bournemouth and Poole College	University of Westminster, Post-Graduate Certificate in HE

The above table (which builds on Prosser, 2005) is an example of the ways in which types of research and scholarly activity can be distinguished, within two potentially separable bodies of knowledge – i.e. disciplinary areas and the far more specific field of pedagogy. Although this latter field is perhaps most commonly associated with practice, it gives rise to its own academic research, and produces various levels of empirical and theoretical inquiry. Whilst on one level this is patently obvious, it should be noted that this field does not always receive the same levels of recognition as its neighbours. For example, the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (the means by which the UK government assesses the research outputs of HEIs and apportions funding) will be the first time that pedagogic research can be submitted to subject-specific panels. Previously it was necessary for such research to be handled by the education RAE panel, which meant that institutions that could not make education-specific submissions (because they had no education department, e.g.) would have to forfeit the opportunity to gain recognition for their pedagogic research.

Activity Type

The left hand column designates the various forms of activity that may be undertaken in both the context of disciplinary and pedagogic research. The first level of activity here is termed theory driven research, pointing to a potentially more abstract dimension of inquiry, or investigation taking place at an academic level. Such activity can be understood to lead to the creation of new knowledge, or else will produce an original synthesis of existing knowledge, in order to provide a means of viewing phenomena or material in new ways. It may therefore not be concerned with the practical implications of findings. Also, the academic emphasis at this level will be apparent in relation to the form of dissemination that such research will probably employ – i.e. in peer-reviewed journals.

At the next level, that of policy and practice research, the focus is upon application, and – more specifically – the relevance that findings will have for policy development and the context of practice. Research questions will tend to emerge from pre-existing issues – perhaps from within national or international policy arenas – and dissemination will prioritise policy makers and planners, and, or, organisations seeking to influence policy and practice. Of course, research undertaken with this goal in sight may gain credence from undergoing peer-review processes, and from subsequent publication in academic journals. Dissemination of policy and practice orientated research does not therefore preclude those channels favoured by theory-driven research – it is, rather, a matter of emphasis.

Thirdly are localised studies which will generally be conducted on a smaller scale. As a corollary, such studies will probably have more modest objectives, aiming to address regional or localised issues. They may also be likely to take some form of action research approach, particularly where the study originates

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within an organisation or institution and focuses upon an area of practice or matters of a procedural nature. In other contexts, where some variants of action research may be considered to be less appropriate, (such as the natural sciences), emphases may be placed on small-scale quantitative studies. Suffice to say, approaches to dissemination by localised studies will favour targeting groups or organisations situated around or within the environment in which the research is undertaken.

Finally, updating or enriching existing knowledge refers to the process by which individuals (or small collective bodies) stay abreast of developments and findings. At present, this type of activity is probably the one that receives most attention in policy documents and by institutions. Note that at present, the stress often falls upon 'updating.' It can be argued that dominant notions of scholarly activity are, more or less implicitly, underpinned by the perceived need for teachers to ensure their knowledge is contemporary, in order to meet the demands of more challenging students. However, contemporaneity is perhaps best regarded as but one aspect of this dimension of activity – hence the associated notion of 'enriching.' The point here is that challenging students may make demands on lecturers that cannot be met solely by updating knowledge.

Summarily, the above table constitutes one way to consider a range of prominent levels of activity associated with producing, transferring and strengthening knowledge. It does not represent *the* range, and is thus far from definitive. The contents of each category are tentatively entered, and – in this brief form – can only really serve as a heuristic framework. Also, as should be apparent from the above, there are overlapping areas of activity between categories (e.g. in relation to the dissemination of outputs in the first two categories, etc.). The reader should note too that the use of a table format to represent the categories has created a potentially overly hierarchical framework, which may appear to reinforce the dominance of abstract, academic knowledge over that which is of a more squarely practical nature. This is not, however, the intention and it is hoped that these issues can be placed in some kind of brackets, pending further discussion.

Discipline Knowledge and Pedagogic Knowledge

It can be argued that insufficient attention is paid to the distinction between disciplinary specific knowledge and knowledge relating to pedagogy. Scholarly activity can involve the acquisition of one or both, and may lead to the production and dissemination of both. However, it is necessary to clarify how scholarly activity can be divided into these two areas, and why it may be helpful to distinguish between them.

The above table has sought to provide examples of both kinds of knowledge, at the four levels of activity. Wherever possible these examples have been taken

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from the context of HE in FE, and have sought to cite instances of activity that have directly involved researchers, teachers and practitioners in HE and FE. Regarding Tsutsui et al (2002), this paper (published in the journal *Lasers and Medical Science*) was produced by staff at both the University College London's Centre for Gastroenterology and Nutrition, and Cornwall College. This type of activity appears to be comparatively exceptional in the context of FE, and it is possible to anticipate that college-based staff working at this level will probably be undertaking partnered research projects with colleagues in universities.

In the context of policy and practice research, the example of Burke (2006) provides a further illustration of such partnered activity – this time between Duchy College's Organic Studies Centre and the University of Bristol's Department of Clinical Veterinary Science. Note that this research is funded by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, which gives the project a clear policy orientation. The project aims to produce knowledge of relevance to the organic farming sector, and to improve standards of animal health and welfare.

The work of the Nottinghamshire Research Observatory and West Nottinghamshire College provides one illustration of the third level of activity. Its report of 2002, *Skills and Training in Nottinghamshire Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs) Emerging Issues*, is an analysis of skills needs with a specific focus on rates of training amongst the area's managers and employees. This document makes use of existing literature in the field to inform a largely qualitative study of 100 local employers, thus providing a good example of small-scale, localized investigation.

Pointing to singular instances of work aimed at updating and, or, enriching knowledge is somewhat more difficult, and it is perhaps best to regard this fourth category as comprising ongoing processes. With this in mind, the activity of Bournemouth and Poole College via its annual research conferences should be acknowledged. This provides a forum for colleagues to present papers and share knowledge and information relating to their fields of academic interest and practice, and attracts a diverse range of contributions.

Moving now to view the right hand column, i.e. knowledge and research specific to pedagogy, two examples of research with direct relevance to learning and teaching in the HE in FE context can be cited. Young (2002) examines lecturers' perspectives of working in the HE in FE context, and compares their views with those of colleagues in universities. Very succinctly, FEC-based lecturers are seen to have identities characterized by strong commitments to teaching, as distinct from e.g. academics or researchers. Young, Harwood and Harwood (2004) also address the attitudes of HE in FE staff, but look more closely at the learning and teaching context. Their primary aim is to explore the differences in pedagogic styles between those in HE in FE and, conversely, universities. They note that members of staff in the former have to contend with comparatively very high numbers of lecturing hours and having to make abrupt switches from

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teaching at the further level to the sub-degree or degree level. The question arises here of the extent to which these two papers can be slotted into the category of theory driven research. On one level, their practical focus is clearly more suited to the policy and practice category. Their inclusion in this box is thus provisional, and is perhaps indicative of the more general difficulty of attempting to provide a concise format with which to contain and discuss forms of pedagogic knowledge and research.

There is less ambiguity regarding the contents of the next category (Policy and practice research). Parry et al's research (which is part of the ESRC's Teaching Learning Research Programme) *Universal Access and Dual Regimes of Further and Higher Education*, has 3 strands, one of which looks squarely at the learning and teaching contexts of HE in FE. Given that one of the stated aims of the project is to build institutional capacity in relation to the widening of participation and learning and teaching, this project will be of direct relevance to practice. It is also highly likely to have implications for national policy.

Regarding the table's third level of pedagogic knowledge (localized studies), Chelbi (2005) can be cited. This is a report produced by City College Norwich's Research Centre, which addresses vocational routes into HE. It interviews college staff and local employers, and – perhaps more pertinently for the context of learning and teaching – the study conducted a survey of students' attitudes towards this level of provision. It may also be noted in passing that the project was funded by AimHigher Norfolk.

As with examples of updating and enriching knowledge in the context of disciplines, it is more helpful to regard this final pedagogy category as processes orientated, rather than focused on the more tangible outputs of the higher categories. With this in mind, The University of Westminster's Post-Graduate Certificate in HE warrants mention – not only because of its obvious learning and teaching emphasis, but also because it links with surrounding FE colleges. The aim is to provide relevant courses for staff teaching on HE in FE courses provided through the University of Westminster, in order to facilitate progression from the basic Post-Graduate Certificate in Higher Education, and onto its Diploma in Higher Education. There is also the opportunity to continue to a Masters level course.

It should now be apparent that key activities relating to disciplinary knowledge and pedagogic knowledge can run in parallel, and that each can involve various types of research, dissemination and acquisition. More fundamentally, what the above examples demonstrate is that pedagogy constitutes a potentially quite discrete body of knowledge in its own right. Whilst this will be obvious to many, it is arguably a point that deserves wider and deeper recognition. Policy concerns arising in relation to the need to address the quality and standards of HE in FE provision, through encouraging and supporting scholarly activity, may not always

be sufficiently explicit here. This could also apply to contexts of implementation (i.e. the institutional sphere).

It is necessary to conclude that the enhancement of learning and teaching practice can be achieved by increased involvement in one or both contexts – i.e. disciplinary or pedagogic scholarly activity. However, the various activities laid out in the preceding table can be expected to enhance practice and provision in different ways, and it will be necessary to clarify what the goals of undertaking scholarly activity are in any given context. Whilst acquiring greater levels of discipline specific knowledge will be the appropriate goal in some situations, it cannot necessarily be assumed that this will automatically lead to an enhanced ability to convey this knowledge in the context of teaching. At this juncture it may be asked whether the distinction between disciplinary knowledge and pedagogic knowledge is as discrete and stable as has thus far been suggested, and if not, where and how does the separation break down? These and related issues will be addressed in the following section.

Discipline-specific Pedagogic Knowledge

The possibility of pedagogic knowledge specific to a particular discipline appears to undermine the notion that there is any neat, sustainable distinction between pedagogic knowledge and the knowledge of a given discipline. To put it another way, it can be argued that each branch of knowledge requires its own specific pedagogic practices. For example, the teaching of physics will involve familiarizing students with the use of apparatus unique to this field. It is thus evident that appropriate and effective pedagogy will be heavily dependent on the teacher's ability to use this apparatus and – in turn – to demonstrate its use to others. In this sense, pedagogic knowledge and disciplinary knowledge are inseparable and the distinction is conflated. To acquire the latter is a condition of being able to develop and employ the former.

On a more fundamental level, the roots of a discipline may give rise to particular approaches to pedagogy (Brew, 1999), which again lead to serious complications when trying to conceive of a separate (and, or, general) body of pedagogic knowledge that can be transplanted onto a given field. The difference between the views of knowledge held by the hard sciences and the social sciences may illustrate this point. If in general the former tend to be underpinned by realist ideas (in which knowledge is, e.g., 'discovered'), its accompanying pedagogy may consequently be conceived in terms of a process by which knowledge is accumulated and relayed, held and conveyed, transmitted and absorbed, etc. Knowledge consequently takes on something of a thing-like quality, gathered up in 'heaps' (by research and scholarship), and passed on via teaching. By contrast, in the social sciences there may be more willingness to regard knowledge as constructed – socially, culturally, collectively, and so forth (Becher and Trowler, 2001). Subsequently, knowledge's thing-like qualities diminish and

pedagogy may be thought of as more of a facilitative process (Brew, 1999). At any rate, it becomes possible to understand how separate areas of knowledge can give rise to pedagogic practices that are uniquely inflected by the particularities of that discipline or field. In turn, this appears to militate against trying to treat disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge as separate – for if each branch creates its own approach to teaching, it does not seem possible to speak of a generalized area that is applicable to all.

This, however, is a somewhat overly strong conclusion to draw from the fact that there are discipline and field specific aspects of pedagogy. It does not seem possible to rule out the existence of pedagogic knowledge and practices that will be shared by some – and perhaps most – branches of knowledge. One simple example may relate to good practice relating to small group teaching, which will be relevant to other disciplines that make use of the seminar format. It is similarly possible to imagine that the use of electronic and digital resources (whether in a 'blended' sense or as a means of providing distance learning) will entail practitioners encountering shared issues – perhaps with respect to common difficulties experienced by learners, or in relation to beta-testing new developments in soft-ware, etc. In the absence of more illustrative cases, it is hoped that these examples give some idea of the ways in which pedagogic knowledge can be generalized, and is thus not necessarily specific to a particular field or discipline. These and related issues, such as the way in which notions of scholarly activity more closely map onto discipline and pedagogic knowledge, will be addressed more thoroughly in the following section.

Discipline knowledge, pedagogic knowledge and teaching practice – some relationships

Although studies show that academics generally believe there is a more or less strong link between discipline-specific research and teaching (Halsey 1992, Kremer 1990), empirical evidence from attempts to test the relationship tend to conclude that there is no positive connection (Hattie and Marsh, 1996). However, it may be noted that institutions (and departments) that perform well in the Research Assessment Exercise also tend to gain strong results in subject reviews – suggesting the possibility of a link between research and teaching. Immediately though, crucial caveats must be entered here. As Peter Scott noted in his Academy speech (Scott, 2004 - cf also Jenkins 2000, Hughes and Tight 1995), it is more convincing to think that such correlations are explained by the presence of other factors - such as research-orientated HEIs possessing more resources, and their ability to attract stronger students. In certain contexts, it is very difficult to dispute that undertaking research translates to the enhancement of teaching practice. For instance, sociologists conducting empirical studies may use this experience to reflect upon the strengths and weaknesses of approaches to research whilst teaching methods courses. Of course, it may be argued that such links are something of an exception - but it does point to the likelihood that

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the potential to link research and teaching will in part be dependent on subject and disciplinary factors.

What, then, is the nature of the link between teaching and discipline (and field) specific research? Perhaps the most that can be said at present is that establishing and sustaining positive connections will be at least partly reliant upon context – particular with respect to discipline, field and subject. Such links may also be reliant up on the use of certain approaches to pedagogy (Elton, 2001), where knowledge is understood more in terms of a constructed phenomena rather than a pre-existent, quantifiable substance.

This in turn raises the issue the link between pedagogic knowledge and teaching practice. Glib though it undoubtedly seems, it is markedly less problematic to postulate links between these two spheres. After all, links between theory and practice appear far more likely to emerge when the knowledge in question relates directly to the field of practice in question. Perhaps one of the reasons why so many academics assume a link between disciplinary research and teaching is because they elide the distinction between knowledge in (and of) their field and knowledge and research relating to pedagogy. In any case, it would probably not be too much of an overstatement to say that it is only in the last decade or so that HE policy has begun to make explicit acknowledgement of a separate body of knowledge relating to pedagogy. The Dearing Report encouraged wider recognition of teaching and learning, and sought to elevate its position in relation to research. The report was, of course, a highly influential factor for the creation of the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, which has subsequently been incorporated into the Higher Education Academy.

Concluding comments - A broader view of scholarly activity?

If at present scholarly activity in the context of HE in FE tends to be associated with subject updating and related tasks, it is necessary to consider some ways in which it may encompass other work. This should not be taken to imply that FECs currently do not undertake a wide range of scholarly activity, nor that there is no evidence to suggest that colleges with HE in FE provision have an overly constrained view of scholarship, research and pedagogic practice, etc. Indeed, examples of new and appropriately diverse developments can be identified, some of which have been cited in the preceding discussion. It is arguably appropriate, however, to posit the need for a more far-reaching shift in how scholarly activity is understood and practiced – at the national policy level, within HEIs, and amongst managers and practitioners.

As HE in FE provision grows, it is apparent that pressures to engage in scholarly activity have increased. It is similarly apparent that the further education sector is itself very diverse – consequently different models and approaches to scholarly activity will be required. Of course, it must be stressed that expanding, deepening

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and increasing levels of such activity will require additional time and funding. In certain crucial ways, the HE in FE agenda is directly linked to the broader policy goal of widening participation and it should be stressed that this goal cannot be achieved in the absence of adequate investment. At a time when, finally, the drawbridge of higher education is being lowered, and working class people (plus others who have historically been excluded) are being positioned as potential entrants, it is apparent that these new opportunities must be fully realized. An inferior experience at the higher level can not be permitted to suffice. In this sense then, contemporary conceptualizations of scholarly activity should be linked to this broader context of change and progress. The question remains, however – i.e. how scholarly activity can be developed and sustained. The following concluding points are intended to indicate and summarise some of the ways in which this may take place – and, more pertinently, how different levels of activity may be encouraged.

Firstly, it may be possible to strengthen links between universities and FECs. Partnered approaches to scholarly activity will help to share expertise and experience, and to build capacity at an ever more general level. Where HEIs provide courses to enable staff to develop pedagogic skills, to enhance provision of degree and sub-degree courses delivered in FECs, it may be possible to expand opportunities for those same staff to acquire higher levels of subject-specific expertise. This would involve opening routes into subject-specific higher degrees, promoting these opportunities to HE in FE staff and increasing awareness amongst colleagues of the various ways in which scholarly activity can be undertaken. It may be possible to offer waivers, with preferences for those who complete certificate or diploma level courses.

Partnered approaches may also help to enable activities situated in the upper categories of activity (see table). As seen above, Duchy College Cornwall links with the University of Bristol to conduct research in disciplinary areas such as veterinary science and agriculture. Obviously, the creation and maintenance of such links will tend to flourish where colleges have pre-existing areas of expertise and interest – which in part stem from local traditions and histories. Thus is in the case of Duchy College, its rural location and accompanying agronomic orientation has been capitalized upon in the context of research. It should perhaps also be noted that regional factors will influence range and depth of activity in relation to FECs' attempts to develop research and scholarship capabilities. The South West, for instance, is in some senses unique, in that proximity to HEIs does not compare favourably to other parts of the UK. The desire to forge a culture of research to serve local participants might be greater than it would be elsewhere. But, regardless of the precise nature of the impetuses here, it is apparent that collaborative ventures in the context of discipline-specific activity can enhance the FECs' capacities.

The establishing of research cultures in some FECs has also undoubtedly helped to encourage further scholarly activity. Perhaps the most prominent and well-

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developed example here is that of the City College Norwich's Research Centre. As was noted earlier, the Centre undertakes a range of empirical work in various fields. In terms of scope, this tends to be small-scale and of an evaluative nature, and with respect to the distinction between subject-specific research and pedagogic research, the emphasis probably falls on the former. Such capacity can therefore elevate the scholarly activity of participants to the category of localized studies, and may have the potential to lead to larger-scale policy research, where appropriate. It must be acknowledged, however, that research cultures need not be conceived and created in terms of discipline specificity. One of the central arguments in the previous discussions has sought to assert the distinctiveness of the field of pedagogy (with its own theoretical developments, debates and knowledge-bases). Succinctly then, colleges may also seek to develop capacity through the field of pedagogy. At present, York College illustrates such moves. Using a combination of methods, including action research, its activities seek to develop learning and teaching by involving staff in pedagogic research, and through the dissemination of findings to colleagues in the college.

It is hoped that the above discussion has helped to clarify and expand the notion of scholarly activity, and that the examples of practice and institutional development will provide some insight into current progress in this context. Inevitably, further research will be required to explore the ways in which scholarly activity can best be developed as HE in FE provision expands.

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