Expertise in teaching considered as scholarly competence

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The self-defeating rhetoric of ""excellence"" – when everyone has to be excellent, no one truly excels – can disguise the importance of competence.

Competence sounds rather a dull quality. But I'll take genuine, properly certified, criterion-referenced, authentically-assessed competence over a spuriously claimed excellence any day.

Doctors and airline pilots are my favourite reference points for considerations of competence and excellence, although flying is becoming a distant memory and an unlikely prospect. Competence, for me, means being good enough – being fit to practice. In the case of doctors, very likely to cure me; in the case of airline pilots, very likely to get me there; and for both doctors and airline pilots, very unlikely to kill me.

The education and training of both doctors and pilots starts with an account of competence. So does the training and certification those who teach in higher education. I start the presentation with some consideration of the teaching standards, using my experience of contributing to earlier versions of these standards. I also explore how specified knowledge and values enrich an account of competence, perhaps bringing us closer to an account of expertise.

But there is a problem with competence, even when informed by knowledge and values. Competence is often, mistakenly, taken to be a static quality. In truth, the world changes – sometimes, as recently, with starting speed. The nature, the meaning, of competence therefore also has to change. How to make this happen? We could constantly fiddle with the standards. Or we could use a more powerful engine for change.

That powerful engine for change; and, I suggest, a further essential component of expertise; is scholarship. I have suggested (Baume, 2016; Popovic and Baume, 2016) a three-step account of scholarship, of what it means to be scholarly, to act in a scholarly way.

1. Use of what is already known about, in our case, about learning and teaching.
2. Take an enquiring, a critical, approach to our own practice; ask hard questions, about what we do, and why, and whether it works, and how we know, and how we could do it better.
3. Undertake publishable research.

I apply this ladder of scholarship to the idea of competence, thereby suggesting a dynamic account of expertise as a necessary quality for those who teach in higher education. For me, expertise includes a commitment to continual, informed, improvement. Without that movement, competent becomes less competent, as the world changes around us, if we do not change.

References
