

Expertise in teaching considered as effective 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, in the UK at least, 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.

We need to add something. It should be obvious, but it isn't, so I'll add it. It's not just enough to be competent, to be able to do things. It's also important to be effective, to achieve what we are setting out to achieve. So, to competence, we must add effectiveness.

We can usefully add more. Teaching as a professional activity, not just a collection of skills, even of skills which we practice effectively. I think there also has to be a set of values – another word would be principles – underpinning our practice. Some are suggested in the presentation. And, beyond that, there is a case to be made that some knowledge also needs to underpin our practice. As long as the values are more than things we say, and as long as knowledge is more than things we know. Values and knowledge only matter insofar as they inform our practice.

Competence, effectiveness, values and knowledge are all bringing us closer to a useful account of expertise in teaching in higher education

But there is another problem with competence, even when it is effective and when it is informed by knowledge and values. Competence is often, mistakenly, taken to be a static quality. In truth, the world changes – sometimes, as recently, with startling 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.

We can apply this ladder of scholarship to the idea of effective, values informed, knowledge informed, 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. Not all the truth need to get to the third step of the ladder of scholarship. But I feel very strongly that they need to be comfortable on each of the first two rungs.

References

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Popovic, C. and Baume, D., 2016. 1 Introduction: some issues in academic development. In: D. Baume and C. Popovic, ed., *Advancing practice in academic development*, 1st ed. London: Routledge, p.1.