

## The current impact agenda could consider the impact of inspirational teaching, not just research

by Blog Admin

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*Some academics are unhappy with the focus of the research impact agenda and have questioned the new framework and criteria. **John Parkinson** writes that it could benefit from looking also at the potential of teaching to connect with and inspire students, rather than focusing solely on the impact of research.*



The idea that the research impact agenda is measuring the wrong things is hardly new. Academics have been complaining about this for years. But there is another kind of mistake being made, and that is to focus on *research*. For most of us, the significant impact we have on ideas in the public sphere is not through our research outputs, but through our *teaching*.

I confess I rather sleep-walked my way through my undergraduate studies in Anthropology and English – it was an era and a context (mid-1980s New Zealand) where few of today's pressures applied. Nonetheless, I had some inspirational teachers and some key ideas stuck with me: the importance of cultural and historical context, epistemological debates, an understanding of pre- and early-Modern values. These ideas informed much of what I did over a dozen years in the commercial world, before returning to academia. As a professional communicator, my studies helped me work across culture and class in culturally-diverse New Zealand. Indeed, I was part of a generation of New Zealanders who woke up to cultural value and tried – with some success – to bury the colonial sensibilities of the past.

I am sure I am not alone in this. We can all point to inspirational teachers who could hold a huge lecture theatre in rapt attention. Many of us have also had the enormous pleasure of discovering that we have had a similar impact on our own students, sometimes after many years out in the so-called real world, and sometimes in the most surprising ways – a chance comment in the corridor, a response to a seminar question, or a throwaway line to an audience of hundreds.

Is any of that captured by the current impact agenda? Clearly not. But my concern is that many of the academic responses are also focusing on the impacts of standard research outputs when that is not necessarily the most important channel through which our ideas reach wider society. We are constantly told that the best teaching is informed by the best research, but in our own responses to HEFCE and other bodies we frequently fall into the trap of compartmentalising our outputs and our impact, and thus downplaying one of the most important things we do to reach others.

Perversely, this silo-thinking reinforces a political discourse that treats universities as “higher education” instead of centres of scholarship and learning, something that underlies the vacuous distinction between teaching and research institutions. It helps perpetuate the myth that we have two jobs, one of which is “customer focused” and the other which is just some self-indulgent thing we do when the students all go on holiday.

How has that myth arisen? I suggest it is because we have failed to realise that the link is not obvious to our students. Academics, especially in the humanities and social sciences, have generally failed to show even our own students that there is a link between research, teaching and learning.

It still astonishes me when third-year undergraduates wonder why I am too busy to answer their emails instantly, especially when I'm “not teaching”. Part of me thinks that they think of me as some glorified call centre operative; but another part of me is well aware that their failure is my failure, a failure to

communicate what I do; as well as a collective academic failure. If we get so upset about governments' inability to understand the academic enterprise, then it is to an important degree our own fault. We taught these people; we had them for at least three years, sometimes more, and in all that time we failed to communicate what it is we do. And that is, I suggest, at least part of the reason why we face a government that appears not to understand what "learning" is.

I am going to be taking every opportunity I can to explain the nature of the academic enterprise to my students next year. I live in hope that it will have some impact.

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