

SPECIAL FEATURE / CONTRIBUTION SPÉCIALE

Teaching Excellence: A Reaction to the Smith Commission Report and its Effects

D.R. SAMAD,* I.H. FRASER,† T.A. FISH,† & L.D. FRASER^Δ

Abstract

This paper has been written partially in response to the Smith Commission Report, and partially in response to the reactions the report has elicited already. The Smith Commission Report voiced many valid concerns about teaching excellence; however, many of the so-called "innovations" that have been developed in answer to Stuart Smith's call for teaching excellence are, in fact, little different from those techniques implemented under the auspices of the Ontario Universities Program for Institutional Development (OUPID) in the 1960's and early 1970's. This being the case, the authors feel that the most likely result will be a similar lack of success. It is, therefore, our suggestion that an attempt ought to be made to change the infrastructure of the university system so that it supports good teaching and research with equal measure. This, above all else, should lead to real improvements in the quality of teaching.

* The National University of Malaysia

† St. Thomas University, Fredericton, N.B.

Δ PhD student in English, Aberdeen University, Aberdeen Scotland

Résumé

Cette étude a été faite en partie en réponse à la Commission du rapport Smith, et en partie en réponse aux réactions que le rapport a déjà suscitées. La Commission du rapport Smith a exprimé beaucoup d'inquiétude concernant l'excellence en enseignement. Cependant beaucoup des prétendues "innovations" qui ont été développées en réponse à l'appel de Stuart Smith pour l'excellence en enseignement sont, en fait, peu différentes des techniques mises en oeuvre sous les auspices du Programme de développement de l'instruction dans les universités ontariennes (OUPID: Ontario Universities Program for Instructional Development) durant les années 1960 et au début des années 1970; et vont probablement avoir pour résultat le même manque de succès. Les auteurs pensent qu'une tentative devrait être faite pour changer l'infrastructure du système universitaire afin d'encourager et de permettre également le bon enseignement et la recherche. C'est cette tentative, qui avant tout, pourra amener à de véritables améliorations à la qualité de l'enseignement.

The publication of the *Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Canadian University Education* (1991) has occasioned a flurry of activity within Canadian Universities. The author harpooned a system in which "the quality of research publications is more important to the careers of university professors than is the excellence of their teaching" (Smith, 1991, p. 31). Over the last three years, officers and directors of teaching and learning have been appointed; numerous committees, programmes and projects have been established to estimate, improve and oversee the quality of teaching; and localized pamphlets on teaching abound. It has become fashionable to speak of teaching, to "discuss" or "converse" about teaching, and we are treated to a fusillade of adjectives attached to the words, teaching and teacher. There is the good teacher, the great teacher, the terrible teacher, the collaborative teacher, the traditional teacher. We speak of excellence in teaching, outstanding teaching, effective teaching, and Smith writes about modest teaching credentials. Unfortunately, many of these attempts to improve teaching, though well-intentioned, are not at all original; and when we speak of teaching and the teacher a disturbing vagueness prevails.

Despite the fact that the university community seems to have been startled by Smith's conclusions, they are hardly a revelation. Moreover, the activities that his conclusions have spawned were already implemented three decades ago in Ontario, and with limited success. In a paper on the topic Elrick writes:

In the late 1960's and 1970's, there was a call to develop university teaching in Canada... Universities responded by creating centres, projects, and programs which encouraged faculty to use technology..., to attend workshops and seminars, to apply for leave time and travel grants, and... to assess teaching.... Traditional approaches, such as becoming more knowledgeable in one's discipline, were forsaken.... (Elrick, 1990, p. 62)

The most significant difference between then and now is that the Stuart Smith message has now reached most Canadian universities. This is due, in part, to the call for accountability. There is little evidence that these frantically implemented but duplicative activities generated by Smith's conclusions will have any more success than those of the Ontario Universities Program for Institutional Development (OUPID) had back in the 1960's and 70's. There is no sense that we have studied and learned from the past. Baker (1992) gives Smith an " 'F' or perhaps an 'F-' " for research (p. 103). We who have followed and acted blindly do not deserve a better grade. Having said this, however, we owe Smith a debt of gratitude. He has demonstrated the need to re-examine teaching in universities, thereby augmenting the analysis and experimentation undertaken previously.

In spite of the renewed focus on teaching in universities, there remains a paucity of analysis on this subject. There is very little published on effective university teaching, especially when compared to the preponderance of material published on effective high school and grade-school teaching (Triosi, 1983). The little that has been written about university teaching tends to ignore fundamental issues. The spaces that have been reserved for discussions, debates and dialogues on teaching run the danger of being usurped by anecdotes from articulate and dominant personalities or by ideological debates concerning innovative teaching (eg. self-paced and collaborative) versus traditional teaching. Smith (1991), in his own way, has added fuel to this debate: "Still it is a general feature of universities that, the vast majority of the time, a person is standing in front of a room of students and lecturing to them. In this respect, things have not changed in a century or more" (p. 47). Incidentally, much of what passes for innovation has been around for more than two decades and much of what has been labelled traditional has evolved technically and substantially. The terms, we believe, often represent a fallacious distinction.

It has, as mentioned, become trendy to sit around and debate the ins and outs of teaching methods and philosophies. What seems to identify the outstanding teacher is the use of the newest and most unique bells and whistles that are regarded as key ingredients of outstanding teaching. In other words, it is not the

teacher that is the focus, but rather the method that the teacher employs. This "method madness" appears to dominate these debates to the point that the teacher is very rarely mentioned.

One possible reason for the lack of focus on the teacher is that there seems to be a common belief that a great method will overcome any inadequacies the teacher may have. If one follows this path to its logical conclusion, teachers are essentially replacable and interchangeable and, therefore, hiring should be based on research expertise (knowledge) rather than teaching (the conveyance of knowledge). If one looks at the marketplace for academics, this does seem to be the case. Advertisements almost always emphasize the research area and ask for evidence of research prowess, but often merely pay lip service to teaching if, indeed, it is mentioned at all. An examination of the August-September '94 issue of *University Affairs* revealed that approximately 64% of 191 advertisements for positions mentioned anything about teaching, whereas approximately 86% made reference to research area(s) (the ones that didn't were either advertisements concerning administrative positions, positions in Education and the Fine Arts or limited term appointments). Of those that mentioned teaching, 51% of the advertisements mentioned the desire for both research and teaching prowess, 40% paid lip-service to teaching (i.e., "the candidate will be expected to teach" or "some involvement in teaching is required"), and only, 9% put the importance of teaching experience ahead of research (most of these resulted from the cases in which research wasn't mentioned such as Education, the Fine Arts and limited term positions). Furthermore, perhaps for fiscal reasons, it has become commonplace for administrations to replace veteran teachers on sabbatical with new, untested recruits. These replacements often have little or no teaching experience, and as the advertisements suggest, are often not asked to supply any evidence of teaching prowess. Smith (1991) writes: "The PhD degree is a degree in research... There is nothing to guarantee that the PhD recipient has demonstrated skill in teaching" (p. 59). These new recruits often teach courses unrelated to their area of expertise and are, moreover, frequently assigned introductory courses where the more experienced teacher might be a greater asset to the novice student. The focus on research also applies to the recruitment of senior faculty because, more often than not, their research record is *the* critical ingredient in the hiring decision. In reading the advertisements it becomes clear to the prospective candidate that in order to be considered for a position, they should focus on developing a strong research program. Teaching, therefore, becomes of limited concern.

Elrick (1990) argues that OUPID failed because universities did not extend academic and university values in a manner that fostered real improvements in university teaching. Smith (1991) was concerned that the infrastructure in universities did not promote teaching. We believe that available evidence indicates that little or nothing has changed, and that we have not learned from past experience. The only way to ensure that real and significant improvement in teaching takes place at the university level is if teaching takes precedence in department meetings, in course assignments, in the offices of administrators, in collective agreements, in standards for promotion and tenure, in hiring practices; and, most importantly, *in university budgets*. This is the real bottom line.

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