

Is research-informed teaching a sufficient justification for professional education in a university?

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What is it about?

The question in the title comes from my PhD research 'Challenging dominant epistemologies: professional education in dentistry'. I am presently thinking about why various professional subjects are taught in universities. I see that, because of the embedded nature of professional education over many hundreds of years, we tend to accept that the study of subjects such as Law and Medicine, and more recently, Social Work and Dentistry, are legitimate university activities. However, I am asking if the university is the right place for the type of education currently required by these professions.

What makes a university unique, and tends to distinguish it from other tertiary education institutions, is its central focus on its research activity. Those who work in universities are asked to be both discoverers and disseminators of knowledge and because these activities go on at the same educational site, this gives a university its particular context for education. Furthermore the concept of research-led teaching for a university is enshrined in New Zealand law which suggests that the case has broad political and societal acceptance. So what is the place of research-informed teaching in professional education?

From my own experience as a clinical teacher and preliminary research enquiries with colleagues, it appears that the idea of research-informed teaching can seem somewhat esoteric and removed from the realities of daily life. Our roles in clinical practice and the education of future professionals do not seem to depend on our capacity and capability as researchers. Furthermore, there are strong theoretical arguments that research and teaching may not necessarily be connected in a way that benefits teaching (eg Barnett 1992) although I am aware of other work that is unequivocal on this issue.

Why is it important?

The key argument in support of professional university education tends to be that students not only need to be knowledgeable and competent in the skills of the profession but that a professional also has to be a good thinker (a critical and reflective thinker). If this argument holds, then we need to look at the complex relationships between being a research-active teacher and student development of critical thinking.

Such an inquiry not only raises questions about knowledge generation but also about knowledge use for teachers and students (Eraut, 1985). These questions are not only relevant to professional education in universities but to all teachers who teach in areas that they do not research into or who teach without doing research, and it calls into question the very nature of the idea of research itself and how this is conceptualised and enacted in tertiary education.

How the session will be run

The session will use an empirical case study from my research as a stimulus for a group discussion around the questions set out above.

References

Barnett, R. (1992) Linking teaching and research: A critical inquiry. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 63: 619-639.

Eraut, M. (1985) Knowledge creation and knowledge use in professional contexts. *Studies in Higher Education*, 10: 117-133.