CASTL Technical Report No. 6-05

Judging Excellence in University Teaching: Preliminary Observations on Assumptions of the Academy

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About CASTL

The Center for Advancing the Study of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) was established in 1998 in the Department of Foundations and Leadership at Duquesne University School of Education. CASTL engages in research programs dedicated to understanding, advancing and disseminating evidence-based study of the teaching-learning process.

**Mission and Goals**

The Center for Advancing the Study of Teaching and Learning promotes systematic and intentional inquiry into the teaching-learning process and, through careful and collegial study of learning-centered environments, seeks to advance the understanding and dissemination of evidence-based study of the teaching-learning process in service of all learners.

To promote its mission, CASTL intentionally pursues the following goals:

- Promote socially just, learning-centered environments that bring excellence and equity to all learners;
- Foster systematic and intentional inquiry into the beliefs that educators hold about educational theory and research and effective practice;
- Honor research, theory, and practice as legitimate and complementary sources of knowledge regarding the teaching-learning process;
- Elevate professional learning and educational practice to the level of scholarship;
- Advance the conceptual framework of leadership as learning;
- Develop a knowledge network fueled by researchers, theorists and practitioners who contribute to advancing the study of the teaching-learning process;
- Establish and perpetuate an international community of teacher-scholars representing a variety of teaching and learning environments;
- Promote and coordinate communication within a network of educational institutions and organizations that collaborate in the recruitment and education of teacher-scholars;
- Create a culture of professional learning based on research situated in schools and in other learning environments;
- Examine and develop methodologies by which the teaching-learning process is studied;
- Advocate for the enhancement of the teaching-learning process in service of all learners; and
- Share what is learned about the teaching-learning process.
This report is one of a series from our ongoing research effort to advance the study of teaching and learning. If you have any questions or comments on this report, or if you would like to find out more about the activities of CASTL, contact:

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Abstract

Teaching is one of the two primary areas of performance on which university faculty members are evaluated. In the context of tenure and promotion decisions, teaching performance becomes a key element in high-stakes evaluation; arguably, the highest stakes in an academic career. Preliminary observations of policy statements governing the evaluation of teaching (e.g., faculty handbooks) and of evaluative statements made by those charged with judging a candidate’s teaching record were made. The observations were used to argue that underlying assumptions can be revealed and, once revealed, critically evaluated. Pilot results suggest that a promising program of research on teaching in higher education can be undertaken.
“It ain’t so much the things we don’t know that get us in trouble.  
It’s the things we know that just ain’t so.”
—Artemus Ward

The purpose of the technical report that follows is to present preliminary observations and, based on those observations, a preliminary analysis of assumptions underlying high-stakes judgments of teaching in higher education. In particular, the technical report raises three questions:

1. What assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning are revealed in the policies and procedures of tenure and promotion?

2. What is accepted in tenure and promotion evaluations as evidence of excellent teaching?

3. How do the assumptions about teaching that operate in tenure and promotion decisions compare to what is known empirically about excellent teaching in universities?

As academicians gain experience and are recognized for their teaching, scholarship, and service, they acquire tenure and with it, the responsibilities to judge the accomplishments of other, more junior colleagues, who seek to achieve the same recognition and, presumably, secure their careers. Tenure decisions are high-stakes decisions and teaching performance is part of the decision that determines whether one may continue one’s academic career path. We must address the validity of such decisions in terms of their consequences (Messick, 1992).

Based on our experience and anecdotal observations as academics who have negotiated the tenure and promotion process ourselves and have been appointed to tenure and promotion committees at various levels up to and including 8 years on a university tenure and promotion committee, we have observed that those who exercise the responsibility for making high-stakes judgments about teaching do not always exhibit sound assumptions about the teaching-learning process. At the very least, the assumptions that underlie some of their evaluative pronouncements are not consistent with the research on the teaching-learning process as it operates in higher education. An examination of peer observations of teaching or the judgments and justifications of evaluators reveal interesting, if not curious, beliefs about the nature of teaching and learning. Too many members of tenure and promotion committees have seen claims of excellent teaching justified with no more than statements such as “The overheads could be clearly seen and the instructor could be clearly heard from the back row of the lecture hall.”

Higher education is being held to ever-higher standards of accountability, accountability that includes the quality of teaching offered at its institutions. What we claim to be excellent teaching depends on what we accept as evidence for excellent teaching. By focusing on the high-stakes judgments that are made about teaching and then comparing the bases of those judgments with what is revealed in the empirical literature of teaching in higher education, we can better account for the learning that accrues from one of our primary functions in the academy, viz. teaching.

The questions driving the report require that assumptions be identified. Assumptions could be identified by examining published criteria for judging teaching and judgments of teaching performance made by evaluators. In order to reveal underlying assumptions of the nature of teaching and learning, the framework of an argument, as promulgated by Booth, Colomb, & Williams (2003) can be employed.
The published criteria or indicators of excellent teaching—such as those published in faculty handbooks—can be treated as sources of evidence that would be accepted as warrants for claims of “excellent teaching”. Although the criteria or indicators are not themselves evidence, they indicate the kind of evidence that would be accepted institutionally in support of a claim for excellent teaching. Thus, the published criteria function in tenure and promotion decisions as “unspoken warrants”.

**Mode of Inquiry**

Simply stated, the mode of inquiry includes examining claims, evidence and warrants that are represented in institutional policies and procedures as well as the claims, evidence, and warrants represented in the evaluative judgments of peer reviewers and members of university tenure and promotion committees. Using the elements of argument, assumptions that operate in judging teaching—in the high stakes context of tenure and promotion decisions—can be constructed.

**Data Sources**

In order to identify assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning that underlie evaluations of teaching, two data sources need to be consulted. First, tenure and promotion policies and procedures (in Faculty Handbooks or other official documents) need to be examined for the criteria for judging the quality of teaching in an applicant’s application for tenure and/or promotion. (The initial examination should be confined to those institutions that require significant achievement in both teaching and scholarship. The tension that exists between teaching and scholarship as areas for assessment creates a heightened sensitivity to teaching judgments. Later research that investigates the tenure and promotion policies in primarily undergraduate teaching institutions, as well as the evaluative judgments of faculty in those institutions, may prove to be an interesting point of comparison.) Second, evaluative comments on teaching submitted with candidates’ applications for tenure and/or promotion and the commentary of members of university tenure and promotion committees as it deliberated cases of teaching need to be examined. (The identity of the evaluators providing the evaluative comments—both written and spoken—must be held confidential.)

The published criteria and the evaluative statements of those charged with judging teaching quality will supply information on how teaching is judged to be excellent and, thus, address the first two questions motivating the preliminary study. The third question is: How do the assumptions about teaching that operate in tenure and promotion decisions compare to what is known empirically about excellent teaching in universities? In order to address the question, it becomes necessary to develop a set of assumptions about the nature of the teaching-learning process in higher education that are theoretically sound and empirically supported. These theoretically sound and empirically supported assumptions are derived from examining several key sources including Shulman’s essays on higher education (2004), Huber’s (2004) case studies of teaching innovators, and especially Bain’s long-term study of excellence in college and university teaching (2004).

**Preliminary Observations and Implications for Research**

Based on anecdotal observation by the authors of evaluators’ judgments regarding teaching records and the reasoning that led to those judgments, it seems reasonable to parse such judgments in order to identify the various elements of an argument. Once parsed, it seems reasonable to then evaluate, i.e., to place value on, the argument’s soundness.
In reflecting on judgments of evaluators that we have observed—either written evaluations by peer reviewers and members of department, college, and university committees or evaluative utterances of members of tenure and promotion committees in the course of deliberating a particular case of teaching—claims are clearly made. At some point in the written or spoken evaluative comments, evaluators make a claim as to whether the performance observed or the case being considered is excellent or not. Having determined a claim of the excellence, it then becomes a matter of determining the reasons and evidence that were cited by the evaluator in support of his or her claim. Having identified the claim as well as the supporting reasons and evidence, warrants can be identified. Warrants reveal underlying assumptions regarding the nature of teaching and learning.

Based on an earlier effort (McCown, 2005), a comparative analysis was done in an effort to “pilot test” a potential research study. We compared policy statements in several faculty handbooks—many available online—as well as evaluative statements that we have observed against assumptions based on the theory and research of the learning sciences. Table 1 presents underlying assumptions regarding the nature of teaching and learning. The assumptions were revealed via the “argument analysis” described above. Table 1 identifies assumptions that were revealed based on policy statements from faculty handbooks and evaluative statements by members of tenure and promotion committees that we have observed. The assumptions underlying statements of policy and evaluative practice are compared with relevant assumptions that are supported by theory and research on teaching in higher education.

Table 1. A preliminary sample of underlying assumptions based on an “argument analysis” of policy and evaluators’ statements compared to assumptions supported in the literature.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Underlying Assumptions (A Preliminary Sample)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Policy Statements</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Teaching occurs in classrooms</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Teaching is presentation</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Accountable for instruction</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Theory/Empirical</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teaching occurs in a variety of contexts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teaching is reflected in learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Accountable for learning</td>
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| **Evaluative Statements**                     |
| • Teaching is an end in itself               |
| • Rigor limits student success               |
| • Teaching is telling                        |
| **Theory/Empirical**                         |
| • Teaching is a means to learning            |
| • Rigor expands student success              |
| • Learning is a shared enterprise            |
Given the fact that the observations reported here are preliminary—and provided in an effort to initiate more formal study, data collection, and analysis—the following conclusions are preliminary. They, along with additional exemplars that will be collected in forthcoming studies, will certainly raise questions that will motivate continuing research examining the assumptions that operate institutionally to define excellent teaching. One intriguing observation, one that may inform future research, is summarized below for each research question.

In examining published criteria for indicators of excellence in teaching, that which could be used to warrant evidence was revealed. One of the assumptions constructed from institutionally specified evidence of what constitutes excellent teaching is that teaching occurs primarily in classrooms. While this may be true in most cases, it limits the context of teaching, both temporally and physically. The literature would argue that much of teaching—especially excellent teaching—attaches to activities outside the classroom (even for traditionally designed and delivered courses). Planning, reflection, and especially assessment activities that occur outside the classroom time and place can be powerful contributors to learning.

Based on experiential anecdotes, examining the evaluative comments of peer reviewers of teaching or committee members considering a presented case of teaching will reveal an assumption that could be stated as follows: Teachers are more accountable for instruction than for learning. Certainly not all, but a majority of claims of excellent teaching cite instructional behaviors as evidence without reference to student learning. The assumption—as constructed from the preliminary observations mentioned in this report—reflects the learning vs. instruction distinction that was made by Barr & Tagg (1995) among others. Judging teaching solely on the basis of what a teacher does, rather than the learning outcomes that teaching facilitates, reflects not only the assumptions that many academicians seem to make, but also assumptions that operate in the culture of many institutions of higher education. One question for future study is: As institutions are held more and more accountable, will the focus change from what a teacher does in a classroom to the learning a teacher facilitates in others?

There is much rhetoric that suggests the change has already occurred. The preliminary findings of this report suggest the possibility that we are still organized and still operate as institutions of instruction rather than institutions of learning (c.f., Barr & Tagg, 1995).

In a substantial proportion of evaluative comments that have been observed when judging teaching in the context of tenure and promotion, evidence has been presented but not warranted. In such cases, if the evidence cited was clearly connected to published criteria, a valid (though unspoken) warrant was granted. In those cases where the evidence was not warranted and where there were not clear connections to the published institutional criteria, the assumptions that would be necessary to warrant the evidence were constructed. This particular analysis reveals some richly documented paths for future study. For example, one peer reviewer claimed that a particular episode of teaching was excellent because the instructor in an introductory course clarified (for the peer observer) a methodological conundrum with which the peer observer had long struggled. The same observer also noted that the students were unable to follow the same explanation that delighted the observer. This raises the question whose learning is the object of the teaching? If one is teaching a class of freshman and the only one who benefits from a conceptual explication is a fellow professor, then how effective has the teaching been? Is this excellent teaching or is it excellent conceptualization? Is the episode properly taken as evidence of superior disciplinary knowledge and reasoning? Is it
also evidence of excellent teaching? Such questions of context will clearly be the subject of future research.

The preliminary observations reported here, and the research studies to which they will hopefully lead, signify an important line of scholarly inquiry. The Academy has always been interested in the quality of teaching in its institutions. However, the judgments that the Academy makes about the quality of teaching have grown from primarily disciplinary perspectives rather than consultation of the empirical literature that underlies the teaching-learning process.

In recent years, the work of Boyer (1990), Shulman (1999) and others at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching have focused considerable resources and energy on issues of teaching in higher education. In so doing the empirical literature underlying the teaching learning process is coming more and more into play at institutional levels. Faculty development efforts on campuses are using the research literature about the teaching learning process to inform faculty members from a variety of disciplines.

Despite the increased attention to the science of teaching and learning, the policies and procedures of most academic institutions and the judgments they foster still seem to reflect misunderstandings of teaching and learning. By examining the judgments of those charged by their universities to judge the quality of teaching, it becomes possible to determine the assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning that are operating in those universities. Once documented, faulty assumptions can become a powerful tool for faculty development in teaching and for critical reflection on the values reflected in institutional cultures.

If we can begin, in higher education, to focus more clearly on evidence of learning to support our claims of excellent teaching, we will be in a better position to begin addressing the validity of policies and procedures that govern the evaluation of teaching in both higher education and K-12 settings. In particular, we see a program of research that addresses the kinds of evidence that should be used to hold both scholastic and academic institutions accountable for the learning they foster. The preliminary observations shared in this technical report may provide a lens for considering the nature of the connection between instructional behaviors and student learning.
References


