

Rethinking the status of teaching and research – What does it mean to be a modern academic?

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The difference in status between teaching and research

The imparity as been discussed in academia for at least 70 years.

- The Lewis Report at MIT (1949).
- Well documented in the higher education research literature.

Our thematic peer group discussions, as preparation for these EUA Learning and Teaching Forums.

- No best practice to report: Worrying or interesting?
- Shared experience: The imparity is found all over Europe, regardless of educational organizations and traditions.



The difference in status between teaching and research

An emerging insight: we might be facing a number of more or less common misconceptions. At least four can be suggested:

1. The existence of the imparity of status is baffling and its roots are difficult to explain.
2. The imparity of status is in itself a simple and well-delimited problem.
3. We can can boost the status of teaching without seeing teaching in a wider context.
4. The distinction between teaching and research follows a natural line of demarcation.



The first misconception

“The existence of the imparity of status is baffling and its roots are difficult to explain.”

In fact, the higher status of research might be a natural effect of the academic system.

We once engaged in an academic career because we were interested in research, not because we dreamed about lecturing undergraduates.

Searching for new knowledge at a scientific frontier is a creative and challenging process. Explaining the basics of disciplinary subject matters to undergraduates is less creative and challenging.



The first misconception

We also want teachers to be researchers, to follow the scientific developments in their fields and to be proficient in research based education.

Still, if teaching is more mundane task, this is no excuse for not being professional in our teaching roles.

Most teachers are also interested in making a good job as a teacher.

There is also an interest in competence development in teaching.



The second misconception

“The imparity of status is in itself a simple and well-delimited problem”

We suggest that we are far from grasping the width and depth of the consequences of the lower status of teaching.

We suggest that this misconception is in itself a result of the imparity – as teaching is ‘less important’, the effects of the imparity have been given little consideration.



The second misconception

Example 1: Scholars' acceptance of criticism against their teaching, compared to acceptance of criticism against their research in a peer-review.

Example 2: The need for academic development units.

- *Can anyone imagine an university where there is a need for an “academic development unity” teaching research methods to professors?*
- *A different way of framing this: Why are these units not generally centres of research excellence if teaching is important at the universities?*



The second misconception

Example 3: Administrative procedures around teaching, not based on accepted scientific knowledge.

- Course evaluations are based on simple surveys while research show that such evaluations have very low validity.
- Course evaluations are sometimes even becoming rituals rather than tools for actual development.

One finding: 69 % of the variable “lecturer ability” is explained by the factor “teacher’s charisma” (Shevlin, Banyard, Davies, and Griffiths, 2000).

And all this is generally accepted by most teachers at universities across Europe.



The third misconception

“We can boost the status of teaching without seeing teaching in a wider context”

Scientific norms and practices are in themselves a very powerful force, particularly in a development process involving scholars.

Attempts to address the imparity ought to follow norms or standards of research if we want it accepted by those who regard research as more important.

If not, we might in fact lower the status of teaching further by misguided attempts to address the imparity.



The third misconception

An example: Researchers are evaluated by what they achieve in terms of results. An excellent researcher has done excellent research.

“Excellent teachers” are as a rule not evaluated on their results, for example in terms of “excellent learning”.

Teachers are usually evaluated on their ability to write reflective on their teaching, and/or on student satisfaction.

In research, quality assurance is based on an internal coherence – the evaluation is part of the system. In teaching, such built-in system of evaluation tend to be rare.



The third misconception

Research is being evaluated by experts, having reached their position through their own research results.

Few such teaching expert positions, based on the respect from peers, exist in higher education (this might in itself be an effect of the lower status).

So why should any scholar redress the imbalance because someone have an opinion on good and bad teachers, unless they respect the evaluator and the evaluation on academic merits?

Instead, we suggest that such evaluations actually can increase the imparity of status.



The third misconception

Another way of expressing, and summing up, the third misconception:

The continuous striving for improvement of knowledge and methods, being an integral part of all research endeavours, is not formally manifested in the practice of teaching.

It might be expected, but it is seldom acknowledged or rewarded in the way it is in research.

We accept the absence of these strivings in a way which never would be accepted in research.



The fourth misconception

“The distinction between teaching and research follows a natural line of demarcation”

Why are we separating teaching and research?

An administrative issue, rather than a natural division of separate tasks?

A division manifested through economic control and needs for accountability on institutional level, rather than a natural division of tasks and responsibilities?



The fourth misconception

For Wilhelm von Humboldt, teaching and research was two sides of the same coin.

Teaching and research were two inseparable parts of being an academic.

Publishing new results or lecturing students were for Humboldt one and the same.

A reasonable position? Both are about communicating scientific findings to people not previously aware of the them, convincing them that the knowledge-claims were sound.



Further considerations: the roles of management and policies

The imparity becomes even more pronounced if institutional management and government policies add incentives that increase the status of research even more.

- By creating incentives for more external financing.
- By not creating incentives to make teaching creative and challenging (for both teachers and students).
- By not giving appropriate resources to teachers to support educational development.



Conclusions and implications

As already stated: Perhaps the difference in status is not such a big problem in itself?

- As long as we can understand the consequences?
- As long as we can handle the negative effects?
 - In terms of educational quality, work-load, respect, use of resources, etc.

If so, the manifestations of the imparity and the effects that are negative must be understood on all relevant levels.

Are institutional management sometimes so embedded in a culture where teaching has lower status that they don't see the problems?



Conclusions and implications

Can we handle the problems by bringing teaching and research closer together – the case for the modern academic?

Can we imagine an academic self-concept in which responsibility for teaching, and the development of teaching practice, is integral to research interest?

➤ Perhaps as a modern variety of Humboldt's ideal, manifested in research-based teaching and learning?

Can the professors – those with the highest academic status in our system – take the lead? Can we support them in such a process?



Silent reflection

Please take 2-3 minutes to note your thoughts (questions, suggestions, comments, etc.) on one (or more) of the following questions:

- What can be done to address the imparity between teaching & research at the **institutional level** (your university, your department)?
- What can be done to address the imparity between teaching & research at **policy level** (state, national, European)
- What can be done to address the imparity between teaching & research at a **cultural level** (interpersonal)

