What do I say about my university teaching?: Addressing the selection criteria for Griffith Awards for Excellence in Teaching

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Abstract: *Griffith University makes strong reference to "Good teachers, great practice" and to establish and maintain "a high quality learning environment, Griffith University is dedicated to the professional development of its educators and seeks to maintain an environment which recognises and rewards its outstanding teachers whilst supporting teacher collaboration, teamwork and the sharing of good practice" (Griffith University, 2003c). Among the initiatives which Griffith implements, Griffith University students, staff, industry partners or employers of Griffith graduates may nominate individual teachers or teaching teams for Awards for Excellence in Teaching. This paper conveys the writer's response to being nominated for and being awarded the Griffith University Excellence in Teaching Beginning Teacher Award in 2002. Having been nominated, there are the resulting responses drawn from personal and professional reflections required to address the selection criteria. What do I say about my University teaching? What makes my teaching "excellent"? This paper provides some personal insights into providing statements about "The Case for Excellence" and through highlighting "Particular Strengths" in teaching. Specifically, the concepts of developing a sophisticated understanding of pedagogy, a renewal of course design and content, and endeavouring to undertake a long term interest in students beyond the formal University courses in which we teach are highlighted.*

Introduction

During 2002, the writer was awarded the Griffith University Excellence in Teaching Beginning Teacher Award. Having been nominated, there are the resulting responses required to address the selection criteria. What do I say about my University teaching? What makes my teaching "excellent"? Following the presentation of some context of Griffith University's promotion of teaching and, specifically, by referring to the Excellence in Teaching Awards, this paper provides some personal insights into providing statements about "The Case for Excellence" and through highlighting "Examples of Particular Strengths" in teaching. Specifically, the concepts of developing a sophisticated understanding of pedagogy, a renewal of course design and content, and endeavouring to undertake a long term interest in students beyond the formal University courses in which we teach are highlighted.

The context — Griffith University promoting good practice and great teachers

Griffith University's website (Griffith University, 2003a) clearly portrays the prominent position of *teaching and learning*. Indeed, there's the claim that:

> As Australia's leading University in multi-disciplinary education and student-centred learning, Griffith University is committed to enhancing the quality of teaching and learning to further improve student learning experiences and student outcomes. (Griffith University, 2003b)

That claim is reflected in the *Good Practice and Great Teachers* information within the website (Griffith University, 2003c) and is articulated in the *Teaching & Learning@Griffith Information Booklet* (Griffith University, 2003d) which provides "an overview of Griffith University's teaching and learning philosophy, details sources of assistance for educators and introduces staff to important policies and procedures across the broad area of teaching and learning". Considerable emphasis is placed upon *The Griffith Graduate* (see also Griffith University, 2003e), student-centred education, flexible learning, and the role of Griffith University's Teaching and Learning Excellence Committee. Notably, at this

point in the *Teaching & Learning@Griffith Information Booklet* (Griffith University, 2003d, p. 2), it emphasises that "In terms of strategic directions, the first line in the University's mission refers to excellence in teaching". To encourage and reward excellence in teaching, one of the key initiatives is Griffith Awards for Excellence in Teaching.

Griffith University's Awards for Excellence in Teaching

These awards are well publicised throughout Griffith University through Griffith University's website, posters, information in the *Griffith Gazette*, and through a variety of email communications. The awards involve a nomination process whereby nominations of individual teachers or teaching teams may be made by students, staff, industry partners or employers of Griffith graduates familiar with the applicant's teaching. Thus, to a large extent, being recognised relies upon the effort and initiative of someone other than the nominee, nominating the teacher. That nomination also requires the nominee's signature on the Nomination Form to confirm their approval to be nominated. Subsequently, the nominee needs to formulate and submit documentation including a Teaching Portfolio, Statement Addressing the Criteria, and the names of Referees. While I've noted that there have been some modifications to the criteria and the documentation required since 2002, this paper focuses on my approach to addressing the selection criteria, which existed in 2002.

Being nominated: Phases of acceptance and action

Being nominated resulted in a variety of emotions. Being nominated by Professor Peter Renshaw who is my Head of School in the School of Professional Studies was certainly cause for some reflection as well as assurance. After initially dealing with disbelief that anyone would nominate me and in making the decision then to accept the nomination, there emerged a process of identifying the incentives and the costs of proceeding. For example, I accepted the nomination in discussion with the nominator with the caution that I wouldn't proceed if there were any likelihood of the award process being counterproductive for our collaborative approach within our school. I believe that there are some risks here always with any competitive Award processes. I guess that my discussion with my Head of School tended to suggest that this Award process could elevate the importance of teaching, and, if successful, could be positive for our School, our students, for the Gold Coast campus, and for Griffith University. Other potential costs included the prospect of not winning which, given the size of Griffith University and the quality of nominees, was highly probable. Figure 1 provides an attempt to comprehensively conceptualise the phases of acceptance and action of being nominated. Following acceptance of the nomination, there was action required in developing a commitment to entering, and throughout the process of formulating the application there was a struggle to maintain that commitment.

Figure 1: Being Nominated: Phases of acceptance and action

Phases of acceptance and action	Personal questions and issues
Dealing with disbelief	Why would anyone nominate me?
↓	
Decision making	Should I accept the nomination?
↓	
Developing a commitment to entering	
Why enter? - Identifying the incentives	• Personal Incentives - Opportunity to synthesise personal theoretical underpinning of teaching approach - Awards - Medal - Professional Development Grant - Opportunity to appreciate family support • School Incentives – Raise the school profile – Opportunity to appreciate team support – Positive effect for our students of symbolically portraying the importance of teaching • Faculty incentives – Faculty recognition • Griffith University incentives - Raise the profile of teaching in the University
↓	
Why not to enter? - Worrying about the costs	• Individual award vs team approach • Application writing • Negative consequences of winning • Consequences of not winning
↓	
Formulating the application	
How?	• Unpacking the criteria • Understanding the constraints; e.g. number of criteria and the maximum number of pages
When?	• Finding quality time to write, reflect and redraft ideas
What?	• Identifying the 'Case for Excellence' and 'Examples of Particular Strengths'
↓	
Maintaining the commitment	Will I complete the application on time? Have I formulated a quality application?

What do I say about my University teaching? What makes my teaching "excellent"?: Addressing the selection criteria

Following a careful consideration of the selection criteria, I approached the task by addressing each criterion under two sub-headings; *viz. The Case for Excellence* and *Examples of Particular Strengths* (Finger, 2002a). Throughout the process of formulating the application, I needed to identify what I believed was most important in my approach to University teaching. What did I enact which I felt was important to promote good teaching and learning? Three themes that I identified that I valued and I'd like to highlight here are the importance of a sophisticated understanding of pedagogy, the renewal of course design and content, and an authentic, credible, long term interest in students beyond the formal University courses.

A sophisticated understanding of pedagogy

While there's insufficient space here to convey detail about all of the ten criteria, a deep understanding of pedagogy underlies all of the criteria for excellence in teaching. A specific example is provided here in relation to the criterion related to *Selection Criterion 1: Interest and enthusiasm for undertaking teaching and for promoting student learning*.

In addressing *The Case for Excellence,* I reflected upon my entire lifetime of educational experiences ranging from my early learning difficulties as a non-reader in the early years of primary schooling, to the differences made by an inspirational teacher in Grades 4 and 5, to my extensive experience as a physical education specialist, primary school teacher, Deputy Principal and Acting Principal in small and large schools, as a tutor at the University of Queensland and at Griffith University, as well as my lecturing since my appointment at Griffith University in 1999. Evidence from multiple sources was used to support the claims. Evidence included appraisement by Department of Education, Queensland inspectors and subsequent State moderation ranking processes, leadership in promoting excellence in teaching and learning at classroom, school, district and system levels, student evaluations and testimonials, and independent evaluations of my University teaching.

My background, teaching experience and research have contributed to strong conceptualisations of what constitutes *effective teaching and learning* and *excellence in teaching and learning*. That strong knowledge base provided the platform for my teaching at Griffith University. The *principles of effective teaching and learning* which underpin my teaching approaches are to understand the learner, to understand the learning process, to provide a supportive and challenging environment, to establish worthwhile learning partnerships, and to shape and respond to a variety of social and cultural contexts. That platform has been enhanced more recently by my improved understanding of *productive pedagogies* (see The State of Queensland,Department of Education, 2002). In relation to this, the following dimensions are highly relevant and guide the conduct of learning experiences:

- Deep knowledge - Do the lectures/tutorials cover operational fields in any depth, detail or level of specificity?
- Deep understanding - Does the work and responses of the students demonstrate a deep understanding of concepts and ideas?
- Substantive conversation – Does tutorial talk lead to sustained conversational dialogue between students, and between teacher and students, to create or negotiate understanding of subject matter?

In providing *Examples of Particular Strengths*, small case studies further supported *The Case for Excellence*. Students as future teachers need to develop a repertoire of teaching strategies and these are modelled in lectures and tutorials. Strategies such as *Listen, Think, Pair, Share*, *Forced Relationships*, *Synectics*, *Two Dimensional Matrix*, *Artefact Strategy*, and *Cooperative Conflict Resolution* (for more information on these, see Windaroo State School, 2003), and *Bloom's Taxonomy*, *Jigsaw*, *Questioning Strategies*, and *Timelines and Sequence Charts* (see Broward County Public School, 2003). It's important not only to talk about these but also to do them. Student testimonials provided powerful evidence here to support claims for promoting student learning, e.g.:

> I wish to commend you on your positive teaching style. There is a general feeling amongst many students taking part in this subject that your teaching style has a positive effect on the outcomes of our achievements. Thank you once again.

> Glenn, you have been a breath of fresh air for me in my degree. You bring a school's background and real teaching experiences as well as an academic approach to the course. From a personal point of view, I felt that you cared for my learning and [were] always [there] to push me to the next level and demonstrate new and challenging ideas in teaching technology.

The renewal of course design and content

This related directly to *Selection Criterion 3: Ability to Organise Course Material and Present it Cogently and Imaginatively; Selection Criterion 4: Command of Subject Matter, including the Incorporation in Teaching of Recent Developments in the Field;*

Selection Criterion 5: Innovation in the Design and Delivery of Content and Course Materials; and *Selection Criterion 7: Provision of Appropriate Assessment, Including the Provision of Worthwhile Feedback to Students of their Learning*. Griffith University exudes a sense of innovation and since my appointment, I have led and been involved in the development of new courses and programs, as well as revising courses to reflect contemporary research, technological and curriculum developments. To some extent, there's a sense of anticipation in predicting the next wave of change. For example, well before all courses were required to have a web presence, I had developed websites in conjunction with Griffith Flexible Learning Services (GFLS) for my courses. The paper by Finger and Torrisi (2000) presented at the Australian Computers in Education Conference in Melbourne (see Curriculum Vitae, Teaching Publications) documented an analysis of some of the experiences of those initiatives.

An example of my particular strength here has been my convenorship of the Learning Technology Major for students in the Bachelor of Education (Primary). The Learning Technology Major provides exposure to students of the potential of online learning. As a consequence, applications and affordances of the new technologies are built into the course design and delivery. There is an appropriate mix of web enhanced and web supported course materials. Importantly, students see the importance of the redefinition of Information Technology (IT) with a largely traditional "library" model of information delivery to Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) to the potential affordances of online learning available through increased connectivity.

I have consistently stressed to students the importance of planning for teaching and assessment. The role of assessment should match the objectives of the course, should be clearly outlined, and assessment feedback should be timely and appropriate. A range of innovative assessment tasks is designed to ensure that students link their learning with the acquisition of deep knowledge and deep understanding in order that their metacognitive thinking enhances their own thinking about their learning. Assessment includes design challenges, essays, lesson presentations involving productive pedagogies, resource registers, reflective journals, ICT skills and curriculum applications portfolios, Internet Reports and presentations, developing and authoring interactive multimedia products, and designing and producing websites. Anticipated evidence is clearly stated, explicit criteria sheets are provided, and feedback is provided to students at lectures and tutorials, and to each student through extensive comments on the criteria feedback sheets.

Teaching publications and the ways in which my research agenda has informed my teaching was emphasised. Recent developments in ICTs in education form the focus of my research interests and my research publications therefore have implications for improving teaching and learning. Thus, some examples of recent projects, consultancies, book chapters (e.g. Finger, 2002b), refereed journal articles (e.g. Russell, Finger & Russell, 2000; Finger & Trinidad, 2002), and refereed Conference papers and presentations (e.g. Finger & Rotolo, 2001a; Finger & Penney, 2001b; Finger, 2000; Finger & Torrisi, 2000; and Finger, Russell & Russell, 1999) were referred to.

Developing an authentic, credible, long term interest in students beyond the formal university courses

In particular, this relates to *Selection Criterion 6: Participation in the Effective and Sympathetic Guidance and Advising of Students* but also goes well beyond that criterion to a more holistic approach to developing a long term relationship with students. One of the most professionally rewarding dimensions of my teaching is to be able to take a medium-term to long-term view of our student teachers' development from student teacher to co-teacher in the Internship to their becoming an establishing teacher and contributing to the teaching profession. It's often difficult to see beyond the daily "now" activities of teaching, research and service demands to connect with students and

develop notions of a learning journey. Specifically, my responsibility focuses upon leading students through an ICTs journey conceptualised in terms of stages labelled as minimum, developmental, innovator and leader. However, getting to know students needs to go well beyond the ICT skills and knowledge they come with and acquire. It's about having the substantive conversations with them about approaches to integrating ICTs, developing design challenges and solutions, reflecting upon their own experiences and learning, and then extending these. The courses that students undertake with me are seen as platforms for building upon as they proceed with their learning journeys.

Conclusion

The importance of excellence in teaching and learning in Universities is often stated in policy. Attempts to operationalise this through recognition and rewards such as the Griffith Awards for Excellence in Teaching are tangible ways that this can be promoted. This paper has provided some insights into my reflections of being nominated for the Beginning Teacher category of those awards in 2002.

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