Editorial 23(2): Special issue: Teaching and learning in higher education: Western Australia's TL Forum

The *Teaching and Learning Forum* series of annual conferences has been conducted since 1992 by the five universities in Perth, Western Australia, namely Curtin University, Edith Cowan University, Murdoch University, The University of Notre Dame Australia, and The University of Western Australia. After 22 years of TL Forums [1], it is timely to present this Special issue of *Issues in Educational Research,* for which the broad purpose is to advance fine examples of the TL Forum's activities, selected from one of its categories, namely full papers accepted via a peer review process.

From TL Forum 2013's full papers, a further development process and an Editorial Subcommittee selection process has led to the articles presented in this Special issue. The Editorial Subcommittee commends the thirteen Special issue articles as an illustrative sample of TL Forum's contribution to the scholarship of teaching and learning [2], its grounding in practice-based or practitioner research [3], its diversity, collegiality and motivations, and its positioning as a link between the perspectives of 'professional development' and 'research'.

To begin with, we can pose a critically reflective question, 'Do these topics in higher education constitute issues in educational research that are sufficiently significant to warrant inclusion in IIER, at what is perhaps the most prominent level, a Special issue?' Whilst longevity, 22 consecutive years, is not by itself sufficient to establish significance, it does indicate that there is an enduring and appealing connection, an apt matching, between TL Forum and the academic contexts and environments in which its presenters and authors are working. There is a rich experience of presentations, writings and discussions that we can share with the wider world. From this proposition, we can pose an 'editorial question' (analogous to a 'research question'!), namely, 'How can we best illustrate and explore the notion of an enduring and appealing connection?'; a notion that we see as a key contribution to satisfying the criterion, 'sufficiently significant'.

Amongst the many ways we could use to characterise a core basis for TL Forum's 'enduring and appealing connection' over the past 22 years, one particular perspective seems to us to be especially apposite. To describe this perspective, consider a hypothetical Likert-style questionnaire item, employing a familiar 5-point scale:

I am both passionate and dispassionate about my teaching (SD, D, N, A, SA)

It is an hypothetical item, as we have not used it in TL Forum evaluation questionnaires. However, we feel that we can state very confidently our expectation that, if we had asked, 'A + SA' would be predominant, over all 22 years of TL Forum to date. Furthermore, we guess that the phrase 'both passionate and dispassionate' would be readily understood by TL Forum participants. Being 'passionate' is illustrated explicitly in several articles in this Special issue, including Morrison-Saunders and Hobson, Moore and Teather (in the author bionotes), and Wolf and Archer. To digress a little, another aspect of being

'passionate' was illustrated recently in an analysis of time and date stamps for submissions of full articles and abstracts for TL Forums 2005-2013 [4]. Being 'passionate' is often evidenced by much work being done outside the normal office hours!

Being 'dispassionate', though not mentioned explicitly in any of this Special issue's articles, is implicit in the frequently illustrated recourse to formal educational research methods, to investigate one's own teaching, in a way that is "devoid of personal feeling or bias; impartial" (*The Macquarie Dictionary*). For example, Ludewig and Ludewig-Rohwer illustrate this aspect when concluding that "even an ideally designed web-based role-play will not necessarily lead to a more effective way of learning, at least not from the students' perspective". Sometimes, or even quite frequently, it is necessary to be 'dispassionate', that is, engage in *critical reflection*, in order to detect and act upon events or outcomes that can lead to improved teaching and learning. Being 'dispassionate', or being a *reflective practitioner* [5], is a vital complement to being 'passionate'. We hope that this perspective will underlie the four topics identified below for *reflecting* upon the TL Forum's significance.

Scholarship of teaching and learning

Writings on the scholarship of teaching and learning ('SoTL') [2] provide an insightful reference framework for exploring the TL Forum's significance. Concepts of SoTL are promoted widely by the TL Forum's sponsoring universities [6], and are well-represented in Australian based journals (for example, [7]) and in international journals generally [2]. Thus we can expect the TL Forum participants to be familiar with at least the main concern in SoTL, namely improving teaching and learning. However, as Vardi (2011, p. 4) [7] has pointed out, there is a "... need for SoTL practice to move beyond the confines of the classroom and tackle wider institutional constraints and issues of concern". One of these issues is that "requirements for increased output in research have placed further pressure on SoTL to provide a research pathway for teaching only staff... " (Vardi, 2011, p. 4) [7]. Therefore in our Special issue review process we have endeavoured to maintain a *research standard* that is comparable to research articles in peer journals, thus enabling the authors' institutions to count the works under Section "5.4.8.5. Journal Articles—Refereed, Scholarly Journal" in institutional submissions to the Australian Government's "Excellence in Research for Australia" process (ARC, 2011) [8]. "Refereed, Scholarly Journal" is better than counting under Section "5.4.8.7. Conference Publications—Full Paper Refereed" (ARC, 2011) [8], though documenting the significance of the difference between "5.4.8.5" and "5.4.8.7" is beyond the scope of this Editorial.

However, we hasten to add that during its 22 years TL Forum participants have been drawn from both 'research and teaching' and 'teaching only' staff. Although the evidence to date is mainly anecdotal, and the distinction between 'research and teaching' and 'teaching only' staff is fuzzy and fluid, we believe that most of TL Forum's participants have been 'research and teaching' staff, and that for many or even most of these staff their SoTL research has been secondary to their subject area research interests and commitments. TL Forum participants who do not fit neatly into the 'research and teaching' category have been mostly or even predominantly from academic support and services units [9], often co-presenting at TL Forum in collaboration with a 'research and

teaching' academic. To illustrate, six of the thirteen articles in this Special issue have at least one author drawn from academic support and services units or roles (McNaught & Hoyne; Moore & Teather; Morrison-Saunders & Hobson; Scott & van Etten; Spiller & Harris; Steketee & Bate).

Grounding in practitioner research

The next perspective to probe in assessing TL Forum's significance is its grounding in practice-based or practitioner research [3]. The definitions by the European Association for Practitioner Research on Improving Learning (APRIL) are helpful:

> Practice-based research engages practitioners, researchers and policy makers in the research process as problem-definers, evidence gatherers, and interpreters. ... Practitioner research is located in the field of practice-based or applied research and focuses on research about and into their own professional practice. [3]

Although some of TL Forum's protagonists may say that 'students' or 'learners' should be added to the list of those engaged, the particular part of the APRIL's definition that is especially pertinent and attractive here is the phrase, "research about and into their own their own professional practice". This phrase is inclusive with respect to TL Forum's contributors who are working in academic support and services units or roles. In general, these staff are not 'teaching' a particular subject unit or course, being engaged instead in "professional practice", in roles spanning many subjects or courses, such as educational technology services, learning design advice, and academic language and literacy skills development [9]. We have a subjective impression, perhaps one to be explored in a future investigation, that often the best TL Forum presentations and proceedings articles are created by teams of several persons, drawn from faculties or schools, and from academic support and services units. As one might expect, complementary contributions of research skills and knowledge often lead to better articles or presentations.

Diversity, collegiality and motivations

The third perspective upon TL Forum's significance that we discern could use the keywords, diversity, collegiality and motivations. To illustrate, consider two 'tweets' from one of TL Forum 2013's plenary sessions, a panel discussion on the topic of emerging national standards (TLF 2013 was the first Forum to use a *Twitter* feed).

> Judy Schrape @convenientlypar
> #tlforum i like the collegial discussion opportunities better than the regulatory measures that may need to be taken.

> Clare Alderson @clarealderson
> "publish or perish" . . a pressure on university academics that still seems to persist #tlforum

Firstly, the phrase "collegial discussion opportunities" does sum up one aspect of TL Forum's enduring appeal. During its two full days, presenters generally access larger, more diverse and more readily 'engageable' discussion groups than they could access via similar presentation conducted within their own university. Secondly, the phrase "publish or perish" provides a reminder about one of the motivations behind TL Forum participation. Being passionate about one's teaching has to coexist with other motivations, including institutional expectations about research outputs.

Although the diversity of TL Forum is best illustrated by reference to the online *Proceedings* for each Forum, the 13 articles in this Special issue provide a good representation of its diversity. The Special issue contains articles from all five Western Australian universities, and one New Zealand university (Spiller & Harris); from a wide range of discipline contexts including multi-disciplinary contexts (Morrison-Saunders & Hobson; Spiller & Harris; Teh & Paull); and from diverse organisational contexts, as indicated above in the mention of participation by authors in academic support and services units or roles.

TL Forum linking professional development and research

The fourth and concluding topic for this discussion on TL Forum's significance is its positioning as a link between the perspectives of 'professional development' and 'research'. To begin, consider the following quotation about the role of educational research.

> ... apart from improvements in the efficiency of educational practices and policies and helping to decide between alternatives under current ways of thinking, educational research itself ought to have an educative function. Its findings, concepts, and approaches should help change the policy maker and the practitioner as much as they help change particular policies and particular practices. ... Teachers and policy makers alike owe their skills and knowledge, in part, to the origin of the ideas they use in educational research. The challenge is to use research more comprehensively as a basis for, and as a process of, professional education and development. (Evans, 1987) [10]

This quotation from Glen Evans, though written many years ago, and situated in the context of schools sector teacher education, is relevant for contemporary TL Forum activities and this Special issue. We see that one key challenge for TL Forum, and for many similar academic conferences and for academic journals, is to "use research more comprehensively as a basis for, and as a process of, professional education and development". Whilst universities around the world have acquired vast experience in using research as a basis for professional education and development, through awarding higher degrees by research, our TL Forum experience suggests that, in the context of seeking to improve university teaching and learning, we should accord more attention to the idea behind the phrase "... educational research itself ought to have an educative function ... help change the policy maker and the practitioner..." [10].

To put this concept into a less abstract form, we believe that TL Forum has helped to *change the practitioner* through its role in sharing and communicating *research* into *my teaching* or into *my professional practice*. By itself, *research* is only one part the TL Forum's contribution; equally important is *change the practitioner*, that is facilitate attractive and effective academic staff development or 'professional development'.

One TL Forum related example of explicit linking of 'professional development' and 'research' is The University of Western Australia's *Postgraduate Student Internship Scheme*, which assists doctoral research students to develop teaching skills in their fields [11]:

> Participating students are encouraged to publish the results of a research project into an aspect of teaching and learning practice at the annual WA Teaching and Learning Forum. [11]

Setting *research publication* as one of the end goals for a professional development process concerned with the improvement of teaching and learning is of course only one of many strategies that may be deployed as motivations. For example, in this Special issue Parker, Maor and Herrington discuss the designing of an online course as the core goal in an online professional development program. Numerous other strategies may be found in the wider literature, for example in a recent IIER article Dobozy (2012) [12] advanced a professional development model that emphasises social constructivist principles, as illustrated by the *Learning in Higher Education* symposium series, which may enable advances upon the standard conference model.

As many of TL Forum's contributors are working in academic support and services units or roles, often or even mostly engaged in professional development roles, ideas about how to best link professional development and research very likely will continue to evolve and diversify. Research may be defined somewhat narrowly, as in the ARC's definition that focuses on research as *new knowledge given to society*: "the creation of new knowledge and/or the use of existing knowledge in a new and creative way so as to generate new concepts, methodologies and understandings" [8: p.12]. Alternatively, the concept of research may be viewed more broadly, to encompass also the purpose of *professional development for the researchers*. We hope that this Special issue adds some weight, however modestly, to the 'multi-purposing' of research, especially in the context of scholarship of teaching and learning issues, practitioner research, and the collegiality and diversity of a Forum that has been sustained over 22 years during an era of rapid changes in higher education.

From the very large volume of correspondence for TL Forum 2013 and this Special issue, we have selected two tweet-like quotations to be the concluding words (from two different authors, who shall remain anonymous):

> As an inexperienced researcher and academic who has never had a paper published, could you please give me a clue as to whether my paper is anywhere close to the mark? [Ed: Answer was "Yes"]

As for the editorial I would like to see some of the "collegiality" of the forum captured, and the nurturing environment of the forum... not as a warm fuzzy thing but as a sound underpinning of striving for quality in teaching and learning [Ed: Agreed, wholeheartedly]

TL Forum Editorial Subcommittee, IIER Special issue

Roger Atkinson and Clare McBeath
IIER Special issue Editors

Anne Coffey
University of Notre Dame Australia

Sarah Etherington
Murdoch University

Pamela Martin-Lynch
TL Forum 2013 Co-Chair, Murdoch University

Catherine Moore
Edith Cowan University

Angus Morrison-Saunders
Murdoch University

Sid Nair
The University of Western Australia

Megan Paull
Murdoch University

Rob Phillips
TL Forum 2013 Co-Chair, Murdoch University

References

1. TL Forum. *Proceedings.*
   http://ctl.curtin.edu.au/professional_development/conferences/tlf/tlf-pubs.cfm
2. SoTL, as defined by the content of various journals and societies, including:
   a. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* (JoSOTL) http://josotl.indiana.edu
   b. International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning (ISSOTL).
      http://www.issotl.org/
   c. *Teaching & Learning Inquiry: The ISSOTL Journal*
      http://www.jstor.org/page/journal/teachlearninqu/about.html
   d. *Practice and Evidence of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education.*
      http://www.pestlhe.org.uk/index.php/pestlhe/index
   e. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning.*
      http://academics.georgiasouthern.edu/ijsotl/
   f. *Transformative Dialogues: Teaching and Learning Journal.*
      http://www.kwantlen.ca/TD.html
   g. *Journal of the NUS Teaching Academy* (JNUSTA).
      http://www.nus.edu.sg/teachingacademy/jnusta/
3. 'Practice-based research' and 'practitioner research' as defined by the European Association for Practitioner Research on Improving Learning. Mission statement.
   http://www.eapril.org/AboutEAPRIL/WhatisEAPRIL
4. Atkinson, R. J. (2013). "Burning the midnight oil": Time and date stamps on email for a conference publishing activity. *HERDSA News*, 35(1). http://www.roger-atkinson.id.au/pubs/herdsa-news/35-1.html
5. The title *The Reflective Practitioner* was adopted for TL Forum 2005, although there was an editorial oversight in omitting the citation of Donald Schön's 1983 book, *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action.*
   http://ctl.curtin.edu.au/professional_development/conferences/tlf/tlf2005/editorial.html

6. For illustrative examples of SoTL advocated in the Western Australian universities context, see:
    http://intranet.ecu.edu.au/learning/for-academic-staff/the-little-red-book/scholarship-of-teaching-and-learning
    http://ctl.curtin.edu.au/awards_grants/scholarship_teaching_learning.cfm
    http://our.murdoch.edu.au/Educational-Development/Scholarship-of-T-and-L/
    http://www.catlyst.catl.uwa.edu.au/catlyst/archive/2009/32/feature_articles/researching_teaching

7. Vardi, I. (2011). The changing relationship between the scholarship of teaching (and learning) and universities. In Special issue: Scholarship of teaching and learning. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 30(1), 1-7. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2011.536968

8. ARC (Australian Research Council) (2011). *ERA 2012 Submission Guidelines*. Canberra: Australian Government.
    http://www.arc.gov.au/pdf/era12/ERA2012_SubmissionGuidelines.pdf

9. The Western Australian university academic support and services units include:
    Centre for Learning and Development, Edith Cowan University;
    Curtin Teaching and Learning, Curtin University;
    Centre for University Teaching and Learning, Murdoch University;
    Academic Enabling and Support Centre, The University of Notre Dame Australia; and
    Centre for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning, The University of Western Australia.

10. Evans, G. (1987). Response to the J. A. Robinson Memorial Lecture delivered by G. F. Berkeley. *Queensland Researcher*, 3(2), 36-39. http://www.iier.org.au/qjer/qr3/evans.html

11. Postgraduate Teaching Internship Scheme, The University of Western Australia.
    http://www.teachingandlearning.uwa.edu.au/students/postgraduates/internship
    Intern publications. http://www.catl.uwa.edu.au/publications/intern

12. Dobozy, E. (2012). Learning in Higher Education symposia: A new professional development model for university educators. *Issues In Educational Research*, 22(3), 228-245. http://www.iier.org.au/iier22/dobozy.html

Teaching and Learning Forum 2013