Developing the scholarship of pedagogy: pathfinding in adverse settings

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Abstract: The paper looks at the feasibility and value of the scholarship of pedagogy (SoP) in an institutional context where it is not a common practice. I will draw on my experience with other colleagues at our university concerning the constraints, shortcomings and achievements of SoP, and use this as a springboard for reflection on its transitional nature as a "pathfinding route" in adverse settings (Shulman, 2004). I will also discuss implications on how we might assess its value, arguing that this assessment should take into account not only its quality as a research-oriented activity, but also its situational relevance. Ultimately, there may be no universal answer to the question "what is valuable SoP?"

Keywords: pedagogy, adverse settings, feasibility, value

I. Introduction.

I came across Shulman's (2004a) metaphors of *pathfollowing* and *pathfinding* as different choices in one's academic career when I was writing a report on a collaborative, multidisciplinary project carried out with a focus on transforming pedagogy at university through classroom-based inquiry (Vieira, Silva, Melo, Moreira, Oliveira, Gomes, Albuquerque, and Sousa, 2004). Shulman's reflection on the risks and challenges of the scholarship of teaching and learning, as a pathfinding route in contexts where research is mostly disciplinary and detached from teaching, resonated with our personal experience in a profound way. We had been assuming the role of teacher-researchers for the first time in our professional history, not knowing exactly what the result of our work would be, yet feeling that it ran counter to dominant academic discourses, practices and values, that is, it went "against the grain" as Shulman puts it. In our contacts with other colleagues, we could sometimes sense their suspicion and skepticism toward inquiry that does not follow the path of mainstream discipline-based research, reminding us of the dangers involved in pedagogy-oriented research, especially in terms of how it may affect your credibility as an academic researcher.

  We have continued working on the scholarship of teaching and learning, here labeled *scholarship of pedagogy* (SoP) since the term "pedagogy" integrates teaching and learning as interrelated activities. We have developed two other projects and are now even more aware of the risks and challenges it involves, but less frightened by them as we became more convinced of the benefits. Our work has also become a bit less marginal, not only due to its growth, but also to the increasing preoccupation with teaching quality in Portuguese universities, mainly instigated by current reforms resulting from the Bologna Process. Nevertheless, SoP is far from being commonplace, and its value is not yet fully understood and acknowledged, as is probably the case in most institutional settings. This is why I decided to take feasibility and value as the main themes of this paper, hoping that my reflection may resonate with the experience of others in

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similar circumstances. Although many institutions around the world have embraced the idea of SoP for a long time, this is far from being a worldwide phenomenon[2]. I believe that we need more accounts of cases where SoP is the exception rather than the rule, so that we may enhance practices not yet established and better appreciate their dilemmas, outcomes and shortcomings, as well as the strategies used to find spaces for manoeuvre.

I will start with some considerations on what we mean by SoP and why it should (not) be developed in our setting, then move on to an overall evaluation of our projects and discuss the issues of SoP feasibility and value. My purpose is not to go into the details and results of our work, but rather to highlight some of its constraints, shortcomings and achievements, presenting it as a case of *transitional pathfinding* in adverse settings, with implications on how we might assess its value. My argument is that the value of SoP may not lie exclusively in its quality as a research-oriented activity, but also in its situational relevance. Actually, circumstances may reduce its research quality in significant ways, but that does not necessarily mean that it is worthless. Ultimately, there may be no universal answer to the question "what is valuable SoP?"

II. What is SoP and why should it (not) be developed?

In order to clarify our understanding of SoP, I will tell a personal story that involves not only me and my students, but also the colleagues with whom I first engaged in it.

In my rather long professional history as a teacher educator in my university[3], I have always advocated an inquiry-based approach to teaching in schools and supported school teachers in using action research to become reflective practitioners in search of context-sensitive, learner-centred pedagogies. I myself have always tried to reflect on my practice and involve my students in evaluating its value and shortcomings. Nevertheless, it was not until 2003 that I began to understand more fully what *becoming a teacher-researcher* means.

I was then coordinating (since 2002) the collaborative project referred to above, and we had decided to undertake small-scale case studies of pedagogical innovation in our own classes, which was quite innovative in our context[4]. My case study involved a group of 13 experienced language teachers in a postgraduate course, and I took the opportunity to enhance and evaluate professional learning through school-based pedagogical inquiry documented in reflective portfolios. At the same time, I wrote a teaching journal that documented the approach I was implementing. That was the first time I inquired into my own pedagogy in a disciplined way, trying to understand its value and shortcomings through analysing data from the teachers' portfolios and my journal (Vieira, 2005, 2007a/b).

What struck me most at the time was the fact that, although I had been an educational researcher for a long time and had always advocated the use of pedagogical inquiry in schools, I

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[2] For example, Tight's (2003) overview of research into higher education in 406 articles by 668 authors from 48 countries, published in 17 journals outside North America in 2000, shows that inquiry into one's teaching is not a preferred research mode among higher education researchers, even though teaching and learning are prominent themes. In fact, the expression "scholarship of teaching (and learning)" does not even figure in his book's index.

[3] The University of Minho is a teaching and research university in the North of Portugal with about 16.000 students, offering a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, including teacher education in various subject areas. It is organised around schools or institutes (e.g., the Institute of Education and Psychology, where I belong), and these are organised into departments. I have worked in the department of Methodologies of Education since 1984, mainly on reflective teacher education/ supervision and pedagogy for autonomy in schools. My work on SoP has focussed primarily on pedagogies of postgraduate teacher education.

[4] In 2001, the research centre at the Institute of Education and Psychology set up an internal contest for projects focussed on pedagogy at university, since this was considered an understudied area. Our project was the only proposal presented to the centre, which accepted and funded it from 2002 to 2004. It was the first SoP project carried out in the Institute.

still had to learn how to investigate *my* practice. This also meant that I knew much less about being a teacher-researcher than I had previously assumed, which made me question my role as a teacher educator. What I had been missing all along was experiential knowledge, and the case study helped me understand, more clearly than ever before, that *improving the education of others depends on improving my own education*.

This very simple idea lies at the heart of SoP, and it resonated with my colleagues' experience as they conducted their own case studies. We began to realise that we were developing a bottom-up and side-to-side approach to professional growth through inquiry into our students' and our own education. Taking learning seriously, to take Shulman's (2004b) phrase, can not be dissociated from taking teaching seriously, and that means re-examining our pedagogical beliefs and choices.

Since that first experiment I have wondered about, theorised and improved my practice in a more purposeful and systematic way, and I have become more interested in the concept and practices of SoP[5]. By mid-2004, when the project was coming to an end, the team managed to institutionalise higher education research within the Institute of Education and Psychology, by setting up a larger interdepartmental research group that has integrated projects on SoP and other areas. From 2004 to the present date, I have coordinated two more SoP projects involving colleagues from various disciplinary fields[6]. As a result of this work, we have been talking and writing about our teaching experience more extensively than before, moving away from "pedagogical solitude" by making our pedagogical practice "community property" (Shulman, 2004c), and encouraging others to do the same. We have also developed a more critical view of academic work and cultures, and how they both hamper and justify SoP. In sum, pedagogy became a central professional concern and definitely entered our research agenda, even though pedagogical inquiry is not acknowledged and rewarded.

This story illustrates some features of SoP as we have understood it so far:

- It rests on the assumption that pedagogy is a valuable yet understudied activity, therefore it should become a field of inquiry;
- It is, first of all, a self-initiated path to become a better educator, instigated by professional motivations and concerns related to issues of student and teacher development in a given disciplinary field;
- It is also a collective enterprise, not only because students and colleagues become partners in pedagogical dialogue and inquiry, but also because it involves making that inquiry public and open to debate so that others can evaluate and build on it, thus seeking to enable change in institutional cultures and contribute to advances in the teaching profession as a whole;
- It is not something that academic researchers are necessarily ready to undertake, since it moves away from conventional disciplinary inquiry, especially by blurring the frontiers between research and teaching.

Of course, developing SoP is more easily said than done, and contexts of practice clearly affect its feasibility (see Hutchings and Shulman, 2004; Socket, 2000). In our context, there are various reasons why it should be promoted *or* avoided, depending on one's point of view.

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[5] The website of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (http://www.carnegie foundation.org) was particularly useful at the beginning. The chapters of Shulman's paper collection edited by Pat Hutchings (2004) which I refer to in this text were firstly accessed on that website.
[6] Our work is summarised on the website: http//webs.uminho.pt/tpu (TPU stands for the phrase *Transforming Pedagogy at University*, which we have used as the main title of our projects since 2002).

The idea of SoP is quite unfamiliar to the Portuguese academic community in general. To a large extent, "discussions about teaching and learning tend to be fugitive affairs" (Huber, 1999, p. 1), and pedagogy is not yet seen as a worthwhile field of inquiry. Academics teach everyday and value their role as educators, and current curriculum changes within the Bologna Process have led institutional managers to become more committed to innovation and staff development. Yet, research is mostly discipline-based and only one aspect of scholarship, the "scholarship of discovery" (Boyer, 1990), tends to be given institutional and professional credit. Who we are and what we do *as teachers* gets little attention and merit in our academic career, and the relation between teaching and research tends to be either conflictive or null (cf. Hattie and Marsh, 1996; Gottlieb and Keith, 1997; Serow, 2000; Vidal and Quintanilla, 2000).

Scattered research groups have worked on higher education as an emergent cross-disciplinary area, though very seldom with a focus on self-inquiry. As in many other parts of the world, higher education research in Portugal is becoming a specialised territory owned by a few experts, which may explain why its impact on teaching practices and policies is often reduced or null (cf. Teichler, 2000). Furthermore, we have no specialised journals on higher education, no established in-service or postgraduate staff development programmes, and almost no institutional reward systems to enhance classroom innovation and research. Teaching quality is assessed through student feedback and a national system that combines internal and external course evaluation, but all this tends to have little impact on quality improvement, since we lack mechanisms for sustainable professional development.

Given this scenario, we might argue for the need to develop SoP as a strategy that might usefully contribute to changing the present state of affairs. Paradoxically though, it is also this scenario that hampers SoP and even discourages it. Actually, academic work is fraught with conflicting rationalities that make one's choices problematic.

A significant dilemma for any teacher wishing to engage in SoP relates to academic merit and success. In the foreword to a collection of SoP case studies, Shulman (2004a, p. viii) uses a four-fold table to represent (lack of) academic success in terms of "disciplinary and pedagogical virtue", identifying four kinds of scholars (see Table 1). He uses the metaphors of *pathfollowers* and *pathfinders* to refer respectively to "those who behave as most of their disciplinary colleagues expect them to, and those who elect to go against the grain" (p. vii). Engaging in SoP often means going against the grain and becoming a pathfinder, which is not compatible with academic cultures where border crossing among disciplines, peer collaboration and non-disciplinary research tend to be dismissed (see Bergquist and Pawlak, 2008). And even though successful pathfollowing can be seen as a kind of "specialised ignorance" (Santos, 1998), that is, knowing much about little and ignoring everything else, this is exactly what most faculty still cherish and get credit for.

Table 1. Pathfollowing and pathfinding (Shulman, 2004a).

		CONFORMS TO DISCIPLINARY CONVENTION?	
		Yes	No
LEADS TO ACADEMIC ADVANCEMENT?	Yes	Successful Pathfollowers	Successful Pathfinders
	No	Unsuccessful Pathfollowers	Unsuccessful Pathfinders

Shulman (op. cit.) warns us about the risks and extra demands of becoming successful pathfinders in a world where pathfollowing represents the mainstream culture: "While being

'good enough' may be sufficient for many engaged in traditional research in their discipline, it is probably not going to be sufficient for work in education" (p. ix). He also challenges us to work on a vision of the possible and build a new, more balanced conception of the scholarly career, so that we no longer have to choose between the various facets of academic work. This is certainly an inspiring thought, but very remote from reality in most contexts of practice, where "teaching and research are frequently, even habitually, regarded as rivals: time and status pitting for the 'learning' of one against the 'learning' of the other" (Light, 2003, p. 157). This "pervasive and insidious 'rivalry of learning'" (p. 162) often turns SoP into a marginal, unsystematic, and inconsequential activity. This is something we have been increasingly aware of in our work, feeling that we are swimming against the tide, yet having to swim with it to avoid drowning. We have faced many constraints that affect the feasibility of SoP, and we have had to turn our backs on it more often than we would like, mainly because we are divided between pathfollowing and pathfinding, perhaps running the risk of not being successful enough in either one or the other.

We may therefore add some more ideas to the list of SoP features:

- It is difficult to implement in contexts of practice that undervalue pedagogy and pedagogical inquiry, even though it is most needed in those contexts;
- It takes self-determination and boldness to face its risks and challenges, and also resistance to historical and structural forces that counteract it in significant ways;
- It will most probably entail a tension between conformity to and subversion of mainstream academic practice.

In the next section, I will focus on the feasibility and potential value of SoP by drawing on constraints, shortcomings and achievements of our work, here taken as an example of transitional pathfinding in adverse settings.

III. SoP as a transitional pathfinding process – feasibility and value.

So far, our projects have involved around 30 scholars from different subject areas, and our work can be understood as a developmental approach to SoP, seeking to explore and consolidate it (very slowly, I must say…), particularly by enlarging its scope in terms of the quantity and diversity of pedagogical experiments, and the number of teachers and disciplinary fields involved. Our goals have been: (a) to enhance an inquiry-oriented approach to pedagogy, based on a notion of "quality as transformation"[7], where student enhancement and empowerment are valued (Harvey and Knight 1996; Kreber, 2006; Vieira, 2002), (b) to develop case studies whereby innovative educational methodologies and resources are explored, evaluated and disseminated, and (c) to encourage the constitution of multidisciplinary teams of educational and non-educational faculty for the construction of educational knowledge and the renewal of educational practices.

To a significant extent, our achievements cannot be separated from our shortcomings, since the former relate mostly to how we have tried to face and surpass constraints. Although each pedagogical experiment has specific gains for the teacher and students involved, I will focus here on general aspects of our work on SoP as a collective undertaking, which may be of interest to others working (or wishing to work) along the same lines in adverse settings.

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[7] According to this notion of quality, "Education is a participative process. Students are not products, cusomers, service users or clients – they are participants. Education is not a service *for* a customer (much less a product to be consumed) but an ongoing process of transformation *of* the participant" (Harvey and Knight, 1996, p. 7).

Table 2 summarizes a possible evaluation of our work, based on the research-oriented standards set up by JoSoTL to evaluate the quality of scholarship in general, including SoP: clear goals, adequate preparation, appropriate methods, significant results, effective presentation, and reflective critique[8]. In using these standards, I draw a distinction between two facets of pathfinding in adverse settings:

(a) the first facet refers to the restraining effect (E) of circumstances (C) upon SoP development, that is, the shortcomings resulting from constraints (middle column);

(b) the second facet refers to strategies used and signals potential achievements (right-hand column).

From this perspective, pathfinding can be seen as a transitional process where the feasibility of SoP – as regards its scope, impact and sustainability – is affected by cultural circumstances.

Table 2. Our work: pathfinding as a transitional process.

Qualitative standards of scholarship (JoSoTL)**	Constraints and shortcomings… [Circumstances (C) and Effects (E)]	Achievements… [Development Strategies]
Clear goals All scholars must be clear about the goals of their scholarship. What is the purpose of the scholarship and are the goals clearly stated?	(C) Lack of tradition in SoP may lead to (E) low sense of direction, difficulties in problem-framing, technical view of educational problems, and fuzziness of SoP goals (C) Diversity of conceptual/ experiential backgrounds (as regards pedagogy and research) and a tradition of pedagogical solitude may lead to (E) lack of unity/ coherence among different case studies	Collaboration to find common ground and a shared sense of direction/ purpose (through dialogue, support, feedback, peer observation, joint paper presentation/ writing…) Discussion of conceptual/ ethical assumptions and choices as regards pedagogic quality (e.g., learner/centred pedagogical principles)
Adequate preparation All scholars have the background knowledge and skills to successfully investigate the problem. Does the scholar have the prerequisite skills to thoroughly investigate the problem?	(C) Lack of (time to invest in) pedagogical knowledge and research skills (especially from non-educational scholars) may lead to (E) communication problems between educational and non-educational experts, over-reliance from the latter on the former for guidance, and low self-confidence/ ability to undertake pedagogical inquiry	Joint reflective sessions/ seminars on pedagogical issues and research strategies Supportive environment and opportunities to share experiences and materials Readings on higher education and SoP
Appropriate methods Scholarship must be carried out in a competent manner for results to have credibility. Did the scholar use the appropriate procedures to investigate the problem?	(C) Lack of (time to invest in) pedagogical knowledge and research skills (especially from non-educational scholars) may lead to (E) over-reliance on well-established teaching/research practice within different disciplinary fields and inability to design creative teaching/research methodologies that are responsive to the complexity of educational problems	Joint reflective sessions/ seminars on pedagogical issues and research strategies Effort to design pedagogical inquiry that is responsive to relevant educational concerns Developing teaching and research skills as an outcome of pedagogical inquiry Keeping open to diverse, more and less sophisticated forms of inquiry

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[8] The editorial board of JoSoTL (*The Journal of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*) present these standards in the Guidelines for Reviewers (http://www.iupui.edu/~josotl/review_guide.htm). They are taken from the book *Scholarship Assessed: Evaluation of the Professoriate*, by Charles Glassick, Mary Huber, and Gene Maeroff (1997, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass). I came across the standards when I was searching for information about the Journal before submitting this paper, and I decided to apply them to our work.

Significant results One of the most critical criteria in judging the quality of scholarship is whether scholarship can be used as the building blocks of knowledge in the field. Scholarship may not always result in "significant" results but to have quality the results must inform scholars in the field. Does the scholarship help build the knowledge base in the field?	(C) Conflict between the demands of SoP, disciplinary research agendas and teaching/ management workload may lead to (E) research/ writing delays, insufficient exploration of data, and limited conclusions (C) Lack of time and opportunities to share research results and undertake comparative analyses of case studies may lead to (E) limited understanding of the nature and impact of SoP	Context-sensitive pedagogical innovation Analysis of pedagogical experiments in terms of potential value for teacher and student development Focus on the implications of teaching/ research methodologies for future practice (continuity) Supportive environment and opportunities to share experiences and results Dissemination and supportive peer review/ critique
Effective presentation To have quality it is essential that scholarship be accessible to the intellectual or professional community. There are many forums that provide opportunities for the review and critique by colleagues with each medium having different criteria for effectiveness. Does the scholarship meet the standards or quality for the medium in which it is presented?	(C) Lack of tradition and forums in SoP may lead to (E) low confidence in the credibility of SoP, lack of appropriate presentation/ writing abilities, avoidance of public dissemination, production of low quality reports (e.g., too descriptive), and reduced dissemination and internationalisation	Dissemination in educational conferences, especially through collaborative paper presentation and writing Valuing different dissemination media and discourse genres, even though this means not publishing in peer reviewed journals and sacrificing academic prestige
Reflective critique All scholarship must create an opportunity for collegial critique but it is also essential for the scholar to reflect on the scholarship and learn from the results. Insightful reflection is a necessary step in quality scholarship. Is there evidence that the scholar has learned from the experience and can apply this knowledge to future problems?	(C) Lack of tradition and experience in SoP, lack of multiple frames of reference to analyse pedagogy, and insufficient involvement in peer review and dissemination of SoP may lead to (E) low levels of criticality in terms of interpreting experience and drawing implications for future work on SoP	Joint reflective sessions/ seminars on pedagogical issues and research strategies Dissemination, especially through collaborative paper presentation and writing Focus on the implications of teaching/ research methodologies for future practice (continuity) Readings on higher education and SoP

[** Source: JoSoTL Guidelines for Reviewers in http://www.iupui.edu/~josotl/review_guide.htm]

The circumstances of our work certainly reduce its quality as regards research-oriented standards for assessing scholarship, and we are far from being a community of "successful pathfinders". However, my analysis also calls into question the universal validity of those criteria by introducing the idea of SoP as a transitional process, and therefore a notion of *value as situational relevance,* which presupposes that the assessment of SoP quality must entail an understanding of contexts of practice, since these largely determine its feasibility and potential outcomes.

I would then suggest that we need to look at the issue of value by taking into account three questions related to the context where SoP takes place: (a) Is SoP contrary to mainstream academic work as regards both teaching and research, that is, is an inquiry-based approach to pedagogy a form of "going against the grain"?, (b) Is SoP new to the teacher who engages in it, that is, does it involve a significant personal transformation in her/his teaching and research experience?, and (c) Is the impact of SoP felt beyond individual practice, that is, does SoP help

to build a knowledge base in the field, informing others of relevant educational issues and practices, and enhancing the teaching profession as a whole?

If we accept that these questions (the last of which was already suggested by Shulman, 2004a) are important to determine the situational relevance of SoP, then we would say that its value depends on how it relates to (a) the dominant culture(s) of the academy (value as cultural subversion/ innovation), (b) the teacher's history (value as professional transformation), and (c) the advancement of SoP itself as a field of inquiry (value as the enhancement of the teaching profession, both theoretically and pragmatically). Table 3 presents the situational relevance of SoP along these three value dimensions, in adverse and favourable institutional settings.

Table 3. Situational relevance of SoP.

	ADVERSE SETTINGS	FAVOURABLE SETTINGS
CULTURAL SUBVERSION/ INNOVATION	Yes	No
PROFESSIONAL TRANSFORMATION	Yes	Mostly for novices
ENHANCEMENT OF THE TEACHING PROFESSION	Probably not	Yes

From this perspective, unsuccessful pathfinding as defined by Shulman is not necessarily a sign of invaluable SoP: it may be a sign of situationally valuable SoP, whose quality is determined by (and cannot be assessed without reference to) its feasibility. In fact, its value may lie exactly in the struggle to make it possible in contexts that disempower practitioners to pursue it, so that the state of affairs is eventually transformed.

Contributing to the enhancement of SoP in the academy is certainly difficult when pedagogy is not acknowledged as a legitimate field of inquiry. The impact of our work on disciplinary communities depends on whether we manage to disseminate it among our peers and involve them in SoP-like initiatives. This is extremely hard to achieve when pedagogy is not a priority of the professoriate. One of our team members points out: "The relevance of peers, particularly from the same scientific area, is very low: I'm not sure about other areas, but I have to admit that, even though some tiny interest in educational issues can be found here and there, in most situations each teacher sees her/himself as someone who 'has always taught good lessons and will always do so'. Discussion of pedagogical matters as well as the participation in pedagogical development sessions are considered to be a waste of time, even more since they do not count in anyone's CV" (J.A., personal reflection).

Before teaching is seen as an integral part of inquiry in *any* disciplinary field, the idea of generalized SoP remains an ideal. Shulman (2004d) points out several models for campus support of SoP through the constitution of what he calls "teaching academies". He further contends that "it may make perfectly good sense to shape an approach that does not presume to be 'institutionalized' in the usual sense of the word but that takes advantage of pockets of interest and potential" (op. cit., p. 212), an approach which he labels "the distributed teaching academy". I can identify emergent signs of this in our university, where groups of teachers in different schools and departments have carried out interesting research and staff development initiatives[9].

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[9] For example, curriculum innovation projects in the medical and science schools; the implementation of project-led education in engineering courses; the use of action research in pre-service teacher supervision in schools; programmes on study skills training for first year students organised by colleagues in the psychology department; staff development courses on learner-centred methodologies sponsored by the rectory office; materials design projects to support and evaluate innovation on campus; and our own approach to classroom-based inquiry in a multidisciplinary setting.

However, more effort needs to be invested in making these rather scattered initiatives more connected, visible and accessible before we can start talking about a "model".

III. Back to basics – what does pedagogy really entail?

As I come to the end of my paper and reflect on my professional experience, my mind keeps wrestling with this disquieting, back-to-basics question: *"what does pedagogy really entail?"* After all, the value of SoP also depends on the nature of pedagogy itself.

Reflective practitioners know that they often have to sacrifice rigour if they want their action to be situationally relevant, and that teaching often requires artistry to "make new sense of uncertain, unique, or conflicted situations" (Schön, 1997, p. 35). This means that professional reflection-in-action is at least as important as the reflection for/on action that is more typical of disciplined inquiry. It further means that an epistemology of practice cannot be reduced to disciplined inquiry and can never be fully captured by it. As van Manen (1990) suggests, pedagogy is ineffable, and if we take descriptions and conceptualisations of reality as reality itself, we will probably fail to seek and understand the deep significance of pedagogical encounters that such descriptions and conceptualisations often conceal (p. 149).

The ineffability of pedagogy limits our claims to certainty as regards research results: these only tell us part of the story. Even if we agree that SoP is mostly about pedagogical inquiry, dissemination and public scrutiny, we must also realise that its value lies in ontological, axiological and praxiological aspects of education that are not measurable or even liable to be studied in a disciplined manner. From this perspective, the situational relevance of SoP also entails the unexamined experience of teachers and students as they work together to make sense of the pedagogical encounter. Therefore, when we emphasise a research-based notion of SoP as distinct from scholarly or excellent teaching, we are perhaps dismissing important facets of pedagogy and casting SoP into just another measure of research activity, as suggested by Bowden (2007; see also Kreber, 2006, and Silva, 1999).

The view of pedagogy as a multifaceted and, to a certain extent, incomprehensible phenomenon may appear to reduce the worth of SoP. On the contrary, I believe it turns SoP into a moral and political imperative – if pedagogy entails continuous (self-)questioning on what is *good* education, then it must become a field for continuous inquiry. What this inquiry tells us about pedagogy is another matter: perhaps it does not tell us everything about teachers' and students' ways of knowing, acting and being, the three pillars of engagement in higher education (Barnett and Coate, 2005).

V. Final remarks.

Ultimately, there may be no straightforward, universal answer to the question "what is valuable SoP?". Its value depends not only on its quality as a research-oriented activity, but also on how it relates to contextual factors, and it entails a consideration of the complexity and ineffability of pedagogy. Paradoxically or not, this state of "fuzziness" as regards the value of SoP is itself a result from trying to make sense of it.

Whatever form SoP assumes, one thing at least seems to be common to those who commit themselves to it – the hope for a better future in higher education. Fulfilling this hope affects our identity as academics and entails learning to deal with uncertainty as we embark on an exploratory journey that builds on our past histories as (mostly pathfollowing) teachers and

researchers, taking us in a more promising (hopefully pathfinding) direction. It is this transitional process that makes the journey purposeful. This suggests the need to investigate local cultures closely and the extent to which scholars reproduce and/ or subvert them, as a potentially fruitful path*understanding* strategy.

Reflecting about our work and the work of others on SoP, I feel tempted to use Shulman's statement in reference to the Carnegie scholars that "one of our central premises is that change is directed toward visions of the valued, the possible, the desirable and the imaginable" (Shulman, 2002, p. 6). However, educational visions and agendas in institutional settings are potentially related to multiple frames of reference and directed towards diverse, even competing purposes: "The ethos of the university, therefore, cannot be pure. The university knows, deep down, that its fundamental value structure is flawed" (Barnett, 1997, p. 15). As Bergquist and Pawlak (2008) suggest, we may need to learn to appreciate the different and often conflicting cultures of the academy, and develop an "ironic understanding" of those cultures through engaging critically with their paradoxes, thus developing a capacity for "transformative growth" (p. 228). This may well be one of the greatest challenges SoP practitioners face today.

Acknowledgements

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