

Presence and Absence: Looking for Teaching and Teaching Development in the Website of a 'Research-led' South African University

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Abstract

This article arises out of a broader study into the contextual influences on the professional development of academics as teachers in higher education in South Africa. Using Fairclough's critical discourse analysis we examine the website of a 'research-led' South African university. We examine the choices made in the use of website space and the presence and absence of texts which refer to teaching or the development of teaching. We compare these choices with those made about portraying other aspects of the university's self-described mission on the website as a proxy for the valuing of teaching. We recognise that marketing spaces cannot be seen to equate to the commitment of institutions, departments or individual academics, but our concern in this project was to understand what publicly accessible claims the university makes about teaching, and whether such claims are borne out by its own self-description. With regard to teaching we found that absences are more frequent than presences, especially in comparison with the way other 'core functions' of the university are presented. Taken together it is difficult to find support for the rhetoric of the valuing of teaching that is conveyed in the university's self-description. We suggest that this lack of valuing of teaching may have an effect on the choices academics make in responding to calls to invest time in developing their teaching.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, research-led, teaching, teaching development, value of teaching.

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Introduction

This paper reports on a project intended to examine how both teaching and the development of teaching are framed within the self-description of one South African university that represents itself as research-led. In a form of internal critique our concern was to understand whether and in what way the University of Cape Town (UCT) makes claims about teaching and its development, and how such rhetoric is borne out within its own publically accessible self-description, the UCT website. In an attempt to locate the public valuing of teaching by the institution, we selected only publically accessible texts that we considered the potential student, parent or non-UCT academic may access².

Methodology

In undertaking this task we are conscious of the limitations inherent in the project itself. We are aware that marketing spaces such as websites cannot be seen to equate to the commitment of institutions, departments or individual academics: neither social events nor social structure determine agency. We recognise, with Fairclough, that discourse is in a dialectical relation with social practice. That said, ‘representations enter and shape social processes and practices’ (Fairclough, 2004: 206) and ‘the ideas and meanings held by individuals ... [are regarded] ... as equally real to physical objects and processes’ (Maxwell, 2012: vii – viii).

Given the transient nature of representations on websites we elected to take texts available on a single day³. We recognise that had we chosen another date it is possible we would have reached other conclusions. However during the extended period of developing this article we note that the content and positioning of the text we were analysing remained substantially unchanged.

² This would exclude texts that are password protected or only available on an intranet.

³ Arbitrarily chosen as the 17th August 2011, but most recently accessed on the 18th March 2015 with almost all relevant content and position unchanged

Reducing still further the range of evidence, we elected to look no further than ‘three clicks down’. We chose not to trawl through departmental webpages and sites, but rather assumed that what the university most wanted others to know it would seek to make readily accessible. We attempted to bracket our knowledge of UCT discourses that would enable us to decode links from the website as applying obliquely to teaching and teaching development. Instead our focus was drawn to terms that we considered obvious in their intent to an outsider.

We examine the choices made in the use of website space and the location and content of texts which refer to either teaching or teaching development. We compare the choices made with reference to other aspects of the university’s mission, and use these as a proxy for assessing the valuing of teaching and teaching development by the institution.

Using Fairclough’s (2004) critical discourse analysis we looked for presences and absences in the semiotic representations of teaching and teaching development. ‘Presences’ and ‘absences’ are understood here both in

- the paradigmatic sense of ‘relations of choice, ...[that]... draw attention to what is actually present, and what might have been present but is not – significant absences...’ (Fairclough, 2004: 37), and
- the sense of ‘... “*determinate absence*”, absence as experienced as lack, as need, as want’ (Bhaskar, 2002: 38 – emphasis in the original).

Theory

Fairclough’s *Analysing Discourse*⁴, in particular, his form of critical discourse analysis (CDA) located within realist social theory (2004: 14), provided the theoretical basis for the analysis of the selected texts. Understanding discourse within a realist perspective recognises that while discourse as ‘ways of representing aspects of the world’ (Fairclough 2004: 124) impacts on the real world, it is at the same time constrained by

⁴ Note that all references to this text are based on the e-book version published in 2004. This is an electronic version of Fairclough 2004, with the same title, and also published by Routledge.

the real world (Fairclough, Jessop & Sayer, 2002: 4). As with critical realist social theories, Fairclough's CDA is concerned with relations between objects: in this instance discourse, including semiotics, and social practice (Fairclough, 2004: 205). Fairclough developed his approach with the intention of 'analysing texts with a view to their social effects' (2004: 11). We follow Fairclough's intent in *Analysing Discourse* in order to understand

how social agents make or 'texture' texts by setting up relations between their elements. This means that my [our] approach to text analysis will move further toward the production of texts than towards the reception and interpretation of texts (2004: 12).

A 'text' in Fairclough's usage is an event. As an event a text is the emergent semiotic outcome of the dialectical relations between language, relations between the potential things that can or may be said thus enabling or constraining certain possibilities, and orders of discourse.

Orders of discourse refer to 'the *social* organisation and control of linguistic variation' (Fairclough, 2004: 24, emphasis in the original). Orders of discourse are stratified into three linguistic elements: discourses, genres, and styles (2004: 25). These analytically distinct, but dialectically related, elements present reasonably 'durable ways of acting, representing and identifying' (Fairclough, 2004: 29). In this paper our primary concern is to make connections 'between the concrete social event [the text] and the more abstract social practices by asking, which genres, discourses, and styles are drawn upon here, and how the different genres, discourses and styles are articulated together in the text?' Fairclough (2004: 28).

Our particular focus is on the way teaching and teaching development was represented on the UCT website to a maximum of 3 clicks down on the chosen day. Before proceeding to the texts and their analysis we wish to consider the problematic concept of 'authorship'. Although he finds it needlessly complex, Fairclough acknowledges Goffman's stratified understanding of 'the author' into the

- "principal" whose position is represented in the text
- "author" the one who strings together the words
- "animator" the one who "makes the marks on paper" (Goffman, 1981 in Fairclough, 2004: 12)

In this paper our usage will be restricted in the main to ‘the author’. However it is useful to recognise that ‘principal’, ‘author’ and ‘animator’ are each hidden from view, residing behind a ‘University of Cape Town’ copyright footer⁵. A few exceptions include the ‘Welcome to UCT’ text, which represents the ‘principal’ and the ‘author’ as the Vice Chancellor of the university. Even in this instance, however, the text itself suggests the ‘principal’ is the visible-yet-invisible social structure ‘UCT’, here represented as both subject and object of the text. The Vice Chancellor’s presence is mediated through a formal photograph and a type-written attribution. The ‘animator’ is completely invisible.

This stratified understanding of authorship helps remind us that the text we encounter in the website is mediated through a ‘genre chain’ (Fairclough, 2004: 31). Mission statements, for example, may begin their life in the genre of an agenda item of a meeting, then evolve through the genres of academic proposal and debate, further mediated in the genre of a discussion document. Discussions during and after a meeting or at another meeting may result in a revised discussion document, and so on. They are mediated via a range of events before becoming the event or text in which we as readers participate.

Furthermore website texts are effectively ‘assemblies of different texts involving different genres’ which Fairclough refers to as ‘formats’ (2004: 69). A format is multimodal and includes ‘genres... taken from other technologies... as well as genres which have developed as part of technological change’ (2004: 77). Examples could be: PDF versions of documents; video clips; podcasts; photostreams on Flickr®, or photographs on the website itself.

A further element of the format is that the ‘author’, however understood, has limited control over the sequencing of the text by the reader. At the same time the freedom of the reader is limited by the constraints and enablements emerging from the interaction between their personal projects and the properties of the website. For example, if we look for a tour guide of Cape Town on a university website, the probability is that our project would be constrained by the lack of appropriate

⁵ © University of Cape Town 2011. All rights reserved.

information in this website. If however, we are considering registering at the university for a degree, our project should be enabled and constrained by our choices as reader in navigating this website, the particular ‘perceived affordances’ of the webpages, and our access to the ‘conventions’ of web browsing (Norman, 1999: 39 – 40).

A glance at similar ‘events’

In preparation for our analysis of our event, the UCT website, we decided to explore the websites of regional universities to establish a sense of the way our regional competitors represent themselves.

The websites of the regional universities bore several similarities. Aside from simple similarity in web design, each focused primarily on research achievements, attempted to ensure that images were representative of diversity, and declared their networked presence through a series of links to social networking opportunities (Facebook®; Flickr®; LinkedIn®; YouTube®). The website of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (2011) mirrored the conventional web design found at the other universities, both in layout and content. The University of the Western Cape (2011) placed much less emphasis on research on its web presence, and located ‘Teaching and Learning’ clearly first among its ‘Strategic Areas’. Regionally, the University of Stellenbosch (2011) stood out by positioning a clear link to ‘Teaching and Learning’ on their homepage. The other regional universities buried this core responsibility under Faculties or other tabs.

Arriving at the event: the UCT homepage

The UCT homepage on the chosen date consisted mainly of news items and notices that gave prominence to some of the achievements of its community. In the light of the snapshot adopted it would distort the analysis to focus on the ‘Notices’ column, or even on the specifics of the featured news stories. The latter, however, reflect a set of choices that were made from among those that could have been made by the anonymous and hidden principal(s). The news items mainly reflected achievement in the domain of research: interestingly both link university research to issues of infrastructural development and collaboration with state and industry.

The navigation tabs reflected further choices. The placement of ‘Faculties and Departments’ as the second tab could – in an institutional, managerial discourse – arguably present a focus on teaching. ‘Research’ is given prominence as the third tab and is linked to ‘Libraries’ – a link which reflects libraries as research spaces rather than learning or teaching spaces.

In the UCT event: discourses found

In this section we analyse the UCT event and describe key discourses found and discuss these discourses in relation to the representation of teaching and teaching development at UCT.

The Discourse of ‘Prime Location’

In contrast to the news story genre that features on the homepage, a ‘prime location’ discourse emerges from the ‘Welcome’ page text, one click down. The university makes much of the location of ‘its spectacular Groote Schuur campus on Rhodes’ Estate on the slopes of Devil’s Peak...’ (UCT, 2011)⁶. It continues to represent UCT as ‘renowned for its striking beauty, with its campus located at the foot of Table Mountain's Devil's Peak, with panoramic views of much of Cape Town’. This text neglects to place the location of UCT within its wider and very visible context: overlooking the affluent Southern Suburbs and across the Cape Flats, which houses some of the poorest, most crime-ridden suburbs and informal settlements in the country. The irony of UCT’s location on the estate of Cecil John Rhodes, colonialist par excellence, with its back to the mountain and overlooking the dire consequences of colonialism and apartheid, appears lost in the realtor-like prime location discourse.

Two clicks down from the home page is the mission statement containing text proclaiming UCT’s ‘distinct vantage point in Africa’, which aligns with and supports the ‘prime location’ discourse. In particular, UCT

⁶ By the 18th March 2015 this text had been removed from the website but still appeared in other public documents and brochures.

aspires to become a premier academic meeting point between South Africa, the rest of Africa and the world. Taking advantage of expanding global networks and our distinct vantage point in Africa, we are committed, through innovative research and scholarship, to grapple with the key issues of our natural and social worlds (*Our Mission*, UCT, 2011).

The Discourse of a Research-led University

The ‘Research’ label appears in the third tab across the top of the homepage and the university’s research achievements are highlighted in the news stores and notices that populate that page.

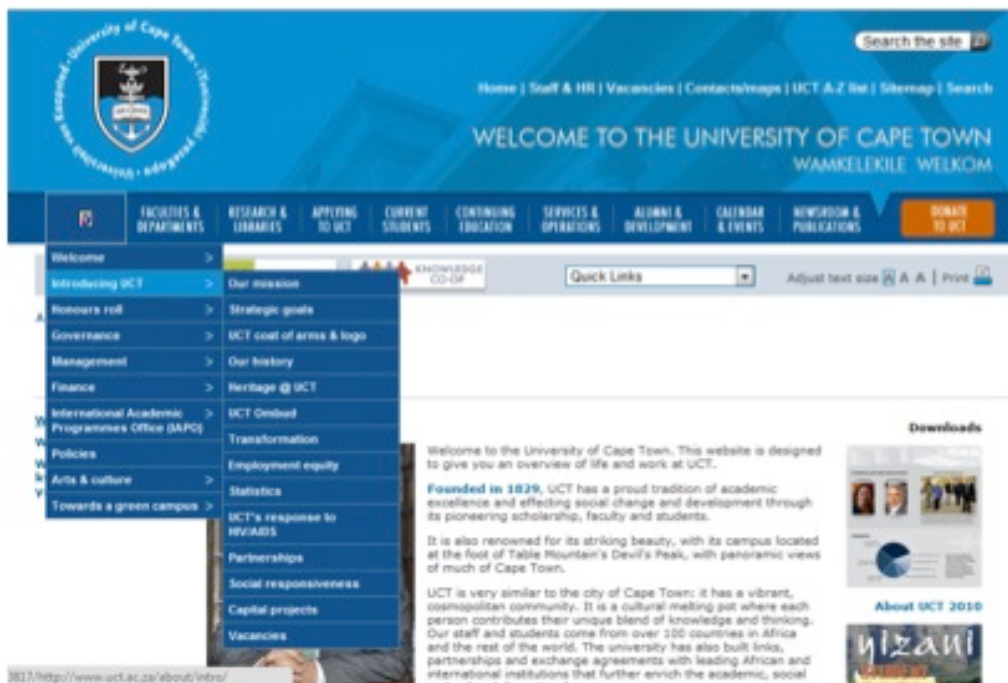


Figure 1: ‘Welcome to UCT’ drop-down tabs (www.uct.ac.za). [17 August 2011]

Two clicks further one finds UCT’s statement of Strategic Goals (Figure 1) with the full document available one further click down. The research-led discourse features prominently in the University’s Strategic Plan (2010 – 2014).

The strategic plan for the University of Cape Town highlights the interventions we believe we need to make in order to develop UCT in particular ways over the next five to 10 years. The six key strategic goals are:

1. Internationalising UCT via an Afropolitan Niche

2. Transformation of UCT Towards Non-Racialism - Redress, Diversity, Inclusiveness and the Recognition of African Voices
3. Working Towards a Desired Size and Shape for UCT
4. A Vision for the Development of Research at UCT: Greater Impact, Greater Engagement
5. Enhancing the Quality and Profile of UCT's Graduates
6. Expanding and Enhancing UCT's Contribution to South Africa's Development Challenges (UCT, 2011a)

It is in the Strategic Plan (Goal 4) that UCT spells out an understanding of research-led in a way that directly links research to globalisation discourses. Here again research and the market place are closely linked, while teaching, although named as a 'core business', is located as a marginal discourse:

The designation 'research-led' signifies that we accept the obligation of being one of the core sites in South Africa that aims to make the country competitive in the global knowledge economy and to educate its future leaders. To be such a university encompasses primarily two things:

First, it presupposes that the quality of the research that it does must be excellent, as measured by its impact and, secondly, it requires that research informs everything that it does, especially the other areas of its core business, namely teaching and socially responsive work (UCT, 2011b: 10)

Goal 4's strategies (item 2.1 in the document) appear to explain 'research-led' further, but contains a guarded admission that research-led discourse and teaching as a social practice do not mesh easily:

To be a research-led university, our research must inform our teaching. All UCT students must experience the importance of creating new knowledge by virtue of the fact that their teachers infuse their courses with the results of their research. We must multiply the incentives for research to be fed into all levels of teaching and for encouraging research by all students. In this regard it is important to revisit the documents on the linkage between research and teaching that have been developed in UCT in the recent past, in order to develop a comprehensive strategy for integrating research into teaching (UCT, 2011b: 11)

UCT's pride in its self-description as being 'research-led' reflects elements of the 'knowledge economy' and 'globalisation' discourses and underpins UCT's claim to 'excellence'. The assertion is that it is UCT's researchers, not academics, teachers, staff, or any other of a range of appropriate terms, who teach:

UCT's reputation for excellence is underpinned by its distinctive research, led by its distinguished faculty, many of whom are world-leaders in their field. Our researchers also teach and so ensure that our undergraduate and postgraduate students benefit directly from the latest scholarly work and discoveries (UCT, 2011e)

Looking for a Teaching Discourse

The UCT website made no explicit reference to teaching or teaching development on its homepage. Teaching and teaching development are thus marked by their absence at this level. Bar the sixth tab, labelled 'Continuing Education', the remaining choices made about website real-estate reflect the management, administrative and marketing discourses of the university. The absence of both teaching and teaching development is apparent even in the items selected from the second and third-level drop-down menus leading from the 'Welcome to UCT' page (Figure 1). These menus appear to represent a focus on history and engagement with self-defined current issues. The discourse evident in these menus shares textual elements exemplifying the neo-liberal discourses of internationalisation, transformation and social responsiveness described by Fairclough, Jessop and Sayer (2002: 8-9).

The first substantial reference to teaching is found in UCT's Mission Statement (*About the university > Introducing UCT > Our Mission*) two clicks down from the homepage. Here UCT describes itself as an institution that aims to:

produce graduates whose qualifications are internationally recognised and locally applicable, underpinned by values of engaged citizenship and social justice. UCT will promote diversity and transformation within our institution and beyond, including growing the next generation of academics (UCT, 2011).

In the Mission Statement teaching is obliquely alluded to as the 'production' of graduates. However innovation and scholarship are implicitly linked to research. This

Mission statement is repeated in much of UCT's outward facing textual representation of itself. An example is found one more click down in the PDF version of the brochure entitled ABOUT UCT: A brief introduction to the University of Cape Town (UCT, 2011d). Within this publication UCT represents itself as the 'oldest teaching university in South Africa founded as the South African College in 1829' (UCT, 2011d).

UCT avoids the well-worn 'student experience' discourse within its Mission Statement, offering instead a more holistic vision of an 'educational experience'. The second of eleven bullet points in the mission statement asserts that the university will strive to provide this 'educational experience' through 'inspired and dedicated teaching and learning'. This latter phrase represents an explicit commitment to teaching development at UCT but runs the risk of collapsing two different social and individual practices: teaching does not necessarily involve learning, and learning can happen quite independently of teaching.

The further text to represent teaching, albeit it only obliquely, in UCT's website was found three clicks down situated on the edge of the scope of this project. This text presents a partial description of the Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED) on the page '*About the university > Introducing UCT > Our history > Introduction*' (UCT, 2011c). These three clicks are illustrated in Figure 1 above. The following extract is taken from the text that appears on this page:

UCT's success can be measured by the scope of study it offers and the calibre of its graduates. The university has six faculties – Commerce, Engineering and the Built Environment, Law, Health Sciences, Humanities and Sciences – which are supported by UCT's Centre for Higher Education Development, which addresses students' teaching and learning needs.

Among its more than 100 000 alumni are the late Professor Christian Barnard, the world-renowned heart surgeon, and three Nobel laureates, Sir Aaron King, the late Professor Alan Macleod Cormack and JM Coetzee.

UCT also has more than 60 specialist research units that provide supervision for postgraduate work and is home to more than a quarter of South Africa's A rated researchers – academics who are considered leaders in their fields. (*Aspiring to Academic Excellence*, UCT, 2011c)

The above description is partial in that its deficit discourse locates the problems of teaching and learning as residing in student needs only and appears to leave CHED

responsible for teaching and learning. Teaching development remains an absence. Thereafter the strong presence of the research discourse is evident.

A strong framing of teaching within a research discourse is further evident in the explicit references to teaching and teaching development found in the Strategic Plan Document under Strategy 6 of ‘Goal Five: Enhancing the Quality and Profile of UCT’s Graduates’ (UCT, 2011b: 11):

We will place a particular emphasis on encouraging innovation in relation to *developing research-ready* attitudes in students, developing teaching methods based on *research-informed* learning theories and the application of new technologies to the teaching environment (UCT, 2011b: 13, emphasis added).

The discourse of ‘managing difference’ – a space for teaching and teaching development?

At the same time teaching and teaching development also emerges as part of a discourse of ‘managing difference’. In Goal One (Internationalising UCT via an Afropolitan niche) this emergence is evident with the reference to the need to ‘ensure that staff development includes skills for teaching diverse student bodies as well as significant international exposure as a regular part of career development’ (UCT, 2011b: 2 & 3). Under the same goal, Strategy 3 (Internationalise Graduate Attributes) repeats the intention ‘to encourage staff as part of their career development to develop the skills for teaching diverse and intercultural student groups’.

Goal Two, strategy 2 (Strengthening student support to improve course success and throughput rates), further links teaching development with the discourse of ‘managing difference’:

While the performance gap between black and white students has diminished in recent years, significant challenges remain to redress continuing imbalances. ... This requires supporting staff in learning how to teach differently to new generations of students. ... academics require support in honing their teaching skills to multicultural and multilingual environments (UCT, 2011b: 6)

Under Goal 3 (Working towards a desired size and shape for UCT), the discourse of ‘managing difference’ remains evident in another example of ‘difference’ found under strategy 2 (To ensure critical mass in all UG classes). Here again the suggestion of technicist approaches to solving teaching challenges is evident:

We will also seek to explore alternative teaching models for working with large classes, including the expanded use of ICTs to enhance interactivity and engagement in large classes such as discussion and chat forums, wikis, blogs and other shared spaces. ICTs will also be used to complement tutorials and provide feedback to students (UCT, 2011b: 8).

It must however be noted that this goal follows from the primary strategy which reflects UCT’s priority for growth areas in the future, of ‘Increasing numbers in the research-oriented postgraduate qualifications’ (UCT, 2011b).

Annual teaching and learning reports: lost and found

The official UCT Annual Teaching and Learning Reports are conspicuous by their absence up until three clicks down from the homepage and their location is not intuitive. These documents fall outside the remit of this paper as, unlike the UCT Annual Research Reports which are available three clicks down on the Research Office website, the Teaching and Learning Reports are buried inside the Institutional Planning Unit website (See Figure 2) on the fifth click down accessed via the homepage tab labelled ‘Services and Operations’.



Figure 2: <http://www.uct.ac.za/services/ip/iu/reporting/teaching/> [17 August 2011]

Teaching does not appear anywhere in the navigation bar, but the Teaching and Learning reports appear as the final item in the navigation links on the left. Note too, how teaching and learning is framed within the discourse of Quality Assurance, and not as a category on its own. The university nonetheless recognises

that efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning across the institution are more likely to succeed if there is an appropriate enabling institutional environment. We are therefore committed to academic teaching development and rewarding teaching and learning *alongside research*. We will create a policy and infrastructure environment that provides *research-based* spaces for experimentation.... (UCT, 2011b: 13, emphasis added)

Within this extract there is reassurance given that efforts to improve teaching will not be at the expense of research and that such efforts will be ‘research-based’ and therefore incorporated into a broader research discourse.

Orders of discourse

Given the dominance of the research discourse and its association with elements of globalisation and the knowledge economy discourses, it would appear that the overarching order of discourse evident given the absences and presences of teaching and teaching development on the UCT webpage on the 17th August 2011, is that of ‘*economic calculation*’, a concept which Sue Clegg (2008) has named as shaping academic identities. In short Clegg claims that the steady rise of managerialism has followed the ‘recasting’ of research and teaching as serving the needs of the market economy (Clegg, 2008: 20). Indeed the discourse of the University’s strategic plan uses a taken-for-granted language of economic imperatives, noting that ‘The plan takes as given that the *core business of the institution*, viz research, teaching and learning, will continue...’ (UCT, 2011b: 1, emphasis added). As one of the consequence of this economic imperative, research and teaching are pried further apart as their drivers are different and changing (Clegg, 2008: 20). Ironically, as both elements of the life of the university are pulled apart by different market drivers, so universities expend resources on claiming their connection: something that was not necessary until the gap between research and teaching was developed by the very market model itself.

Into this order of discourse, or perhaps emerging from it, the discourses identified in the ‘three-clicks-down’ survey of a single time-slice of the UCT website, fit comfortably:

- the *production* of graduates for the marketplace and to meet the needs of the economy;
- the realtor-like *prime location* discourse coupled with the *student experience* discourse conveys a sense of the hospitality industry;
- the *research-led* discourse, by its very existence, divides teaching from learning, despite the claims that ‘it is our researchers who teach’.

The location of teaching and teaching development, where these terms occur, within the *management of difference* discourse, at first glance does not belong in the ‘economic calculation’ order of discourse. However Boughey, writing about the ways South African universities have sought to ‘manage’ diversity, reminds us that behind the management of diversity lie strong political and economic imperatives (2002, 2007).

The absence of teaching and teaching development within the self-representation of UCT up until 3 clicks down on its website forms part of the institutional climate within which academic staff position themselves in relation to the dominant discourses. It reinforces a sense of what is valued in planning an academic career trajectory and works against decisions being taken to invest in teaching development.

Conclusion

In this ‘thin-slice’ examination of a university’s website on one day to ‘3 clicks down’, we found that at the level of genres and discourses, teaching and teaching development are both determinate and paradigmatic absences in comparison with the representation of the other core business of the university, namely research. The public face texts considered reflect the fundamental ideological position of the selected university as research-led (UCT, 2011). The discourse of the valuing of teaching appears as a ‘marginal, or oppositional’ (Fairclough, 2004: 207) discourse to the dominant discourse of research. The order of discourse that emerges appears to be one of ‘economic

calculation', serving to place different priorities before academics in their role as knowledge professionals: research driven by utilitarian impulses, and teaching driven by efficiency. Taken together, we suggest that – given that semiosis⁷ is causal (Fairclough, 2004: 8 – 9; Fairclough, Jessop & Sayer, 2002: 2) – this may have an effect on the choices academics make in responding to calls to invest time in developing their teaching, indeed to their identity as academics (Clegg, 2008).

Author bionotes

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Kevin Williams retired in 2014 from the Centre for Innovation in Learning and Teaching, part of the Centre for Higher Education Development at UCT. He spent the previous 20 years working in student support and then staff development, initially at Rhodes University and since 2007, at UCT.

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⁷ Understood as 'the intersubjective production of meaning' (Fairclough, Jessop & Sayer 2002:2)

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