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THE PRS SUBJECT CENTRE: FOUR YEARS ON

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At the AAPT International Workshop/Conference at Alverno College in 2000, I was invited to give a presentation on the recently established Philosophical and Religious Studies Centre of the Learning and Teaching Support Network. My presentation was published in *AAPT News*, 24/1, Spring 2001, pp.3–8.

In the UK, there had never previously been a forum for publishing articles or conducting discussions specifically concerned with teaching philosophy. In those early days, I naively expected that there would be scores of philosophers scattered throughout the UK eager to share their ideas about teaching philosophy, and to publicise their innovative methods of teaching and assessment. This turned out not to be the case. Although we now have a growing resource of articles and reviews in our journal *Discourse* and on our website, these are mostly the outcomes of projects we have funded with grants of up to about \$5k. We still have difficulty persuading people to write for us voluntarily, or to attend workshops and conferences — much more difficulty than subject centres covering other disciplines. It is worth considering possible reasons for this:

- Philosophers tend to be cats rather than dogs — we do our own thing rather than working in teams. We give of our own personalities in our teaching, and we are sceptical whether we can learn from others, or whether others can learn from us. We are prone to the ‘not invented here’ syndrome — when taking over a course, we prefer to start from first principles, rather than adopting materials which have been prepared by others.
- We may be more conservative in our teaching methods than other disciplines. We use tried and tested teaching methods with a history of two and a half thousand years, and philosophy provides fewer opportunities for innovative methods such as problem-based learning, or websites with jazzy graphics, videos, or interactive tests. In the UK, all philosophy departments were recently visited by teams of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, and its overview report mentioned very few examples of innovative practice.

More generally, there are special factors in the UK which militate against research into teaching issues and the free exchange of ideas:

- Although all UK universities (bar one) are mainly funded by the Government, much of the funding follows student numbers. So there is enough of a free market for departments to be reticent about giving away the commercial secrets which put them ahead of their competitors in terms of the quality of student learning.
- In addition to funding for teaching, there is funding for research. The funding for research is determined by a formula, of which the main components are (a) the number of research-active academic staff, and (b) a departmental quality rating. The quality rating is the outcome of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), which takes place every 6 years. Every member of every department submits up to 4 items published during the relevant period, and their quality is assessed by a

panel of subject specialists. Each department is given an overall score, on a bizarre scale of 1, 2, 3a, 3b, 4, 5, 5*, 6*. Departments rated below 4 get nothing, those rated 4 get a small amount, and the rest get progressively more. If a department gets a higher or lower rating from one RAE to the next, this can mean a funding difference of hundreds of thousands of dollars a year for the following 6 years. (There are going to be a number of changes in the next RAE, due in 2008, but the broad principles remain the same.) Naturally, with so much money at stake, there is huge pressure on staff to concentrate on research at the expense of teaching, since there is no direct financial reward for improving the quality of teaching. As it happens, publications on teaching can be submitted for the RAE, but there is widespread scepticism that panels will take them seriously.

- The RAE has intensified the idea, which took root in the UK around the middle of the 20th century, that the primary function of a university is its research function. Before that, the life of the institution focussed on the teaching of undergraduates, and research was an optional and unfunded extra. Now it is virtually the other way round. Unlike the USA, the teaching of philosophy is almost exclusively confined to research universities; and the few colleges where it is taught aspire to eventual university status — so there is still the pressure to pursue research at the expense of teaching. We simply do not have a critical mass of college teachers whose primary vocation is teaching.
- Although there has recently been an exponential growth in educational development units, academics in general and philosophers in particular are hostile to their approach to improving the quality of teaching. They are equally hostile to managerial attempts to standardise methods of teaching and assessment, and to external inspection regimes. Despite our attempts to get the message across that the Subject Centre is all about helping departments to improve their teaching in ways that are specific to philosophy and without any prescription, we are still perceived in many quarters as somehow associated with these hostile agencies.

So our original aim, to create a culture in which it is normal practice to exchange ideas about teaching just as we already do about research, has faced many obstacles. We are gradually making an impact, but we still have a long way to go.

The most recent development is that the old Learning and Teaching Support Network has been absorbed into a larger, more prestigious, and better funded institution called the Higher Education Academy (to be launched in October 2004). We hope that this will mark a change of gear in the journey towards parity of status for excellence in teaching.

One final point of comparison with the USA is that of sheer numbers. If you calculate the proportion of members of the APA who are sufficiently interested in teaching to join the AAPT as well, it comes out at about 2% after 30-odd years of existence. In the UK there are about 600 professional philosophers, and the Subject Centre has been going for less than 5 years. If we had identified 2% as teaching activists, the resulting number would be 12. I think we can do better than that!

The events we have organised so far have been on relatively specialised topics, such as teaching logic, the use of computers in the teaching of philosophy, and techniques for

getting students to read difficult texts. We feel we are now in a position to celebrate our fifth anniversary with a major international conference at which any topic relevant to the teaching of philosophy will be welcome. Our provisional target is an attendance of 100, and we would be delighted to have as many participants from the USA and elsewhere as are able to join us.