Teaching and Learning

Key Points

• The notion of 'what is quality?' in regard to teaching and learning in higher education is difficult and complex in an environment in which institutions are so varied in their sizes, budgets, missions and objectives.

• There is not a 'one-size-fits-all' solution or formula, and genuinely excellent, transformative teaching occurs right across the spectrum: institutional, disciplinary, demographic and pedagogic.

• High-quality teaching is seen as a key priority for universities and as essential to the students who are partners in the co-creation of knowledge.

• The great challenge is that the 'student learning experience' is now a complex, multi-layered, multi-faceted experience. The students are an extraordinarily heterogeneous mix of prior educational experiences and achievements, social class, cultures and ethnicities. Also, the role of the academic as the sole, authoritative transmitter of knowledge – though it still persists – now sits alongside a host of other pedagogic practices, discourses and cultures.

• The best teaching, whatever form it takes:
  • motivates students to learn by challenging and supporting them to question their preconceptions and models
  • is transformative and enables students to perceive themselves as active agents in their own learning, as the authors of creative solutions and as agents with responsibility for change
  • Context is all. While the values or factors for successful teaching apply across the sector, they become particularly powerful agents for transformative teaching and learning when they are applied in and aligned with the particular mission and context of an institution.
  • The pedagogic discourses and practices of our smaller, regional and specialist institutions are often very distinctive. They reflect the fact that these institutions are genuine learning and social communities, and there are strong, mutual links between the institution and its community.
“Our higher education system is a key building block of our democratic societies. The best teaching and learning environments encourage students to develop confidence in their own creative abilities, strong community engagement and a sense of ethical responsibility allied to the humility that comes from understanding that learning is a lifelong phenomenon that demands a lifelong curiosity and commitment.”

European Commission, 2013, p. 13

Transformative transactions

One of the many questions posed in the ‘McAleese report’ (European Commission, 2013) asks: “What do we mean when we talk of quality teaching and learning in higher education, where… higher education institutions are so varied in their sizes, budgets, missions and objectives?”

It is not an easy question to answer, but it is clear that whatever the answer may be, there is not a ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution or formula, and genuinely excellent, transformative teaching occurs right across the spectrum: institutional, disciplinary, demographic, pedagogic.

However, there is general agreement that the best teaching motivates students to learn by challenging and supporting them to question their preconceptions. It places them in situations where their existing model does not or may not work and in which it matters to them that it may not or does not work. The best teaching is transformative and enables students to perceive themselves as active agents in their own learning, as the authors of creative solutions, and as agents with responsibility for change. That means that students need to be faced with problems and challenges that they know, or at least think they know; problems and challenges that are important and about which they care. The best teaching enables students to engage with new questions that are bigger than the course itself, that have relevance to their own lives and that provoke a lively participation far beyond simply getting through assessment or exams.

Teaching and learning are transactional, relational activities. Both students and university teachers have a significant vested interest in the quality of education, and the graduate who has not only received but has been actively engaged in high-quality teaching and learning is more likely to be adaptable, assured, innovative, entrepreneurial and employable in the broadest sense of the term.

The great challenge for all higher education institutions is that the ‘student learning experience’ is now a complex, multi-layered, multifaceted experience. The students themselves are an extraordinarily heterogeneous mix of prior educational experiences and achievements, social class, cultures and ethnicities, and the old, stereotypical system of lectures, seminars and tutorials no longer holds. Also, the role of the academic as the sole, authoritative transmitter of knowledge – though it still persists – now sits alongside a host of other pedagogic practices, discourses and cultures. They include:

- problem-based learning
- e-learning (synchronous and asynchronous)
- distance and off-site learning
- experiential learning
- work-based learning
• Blended learning
• the ‘flipped classroom’
• studio- and practice-based learning.

Additional complexity is provided by the requirement to ensure that students not only possess sufficient knowledge and understanding of their chosen subject(s), but also that they have acquired the graduate skills and attributes that will enable them to take their place in the job market, forge successful careers and contribute to the economic prosperity of the UK.

Teaching and Learning

Case Study 31:
Real-world experience, wisdom and impact, Ashridge Business School

Ashridge is in the 1% of the 7,000 business schools worldwide that are triple accredited. The School has contributed to the success of thousands of individuals, teams and organisations from every continent by helping to develop their leadership capabilities. Underpinned by the understanding that every customer is different, Ashridge’s learning approaches are designed to help its clients address their specific challenges and to achieve tangible results. All research is focused on tackling real issues and challenges, and the School’s faculty and consultants are recruited from the business world, combining commercial experience with significant academic credentials. Ashridge has created world-class learning environments, facilities, learning resources and support services, and in 2014 Virtual Ashridge won the Learning Technologies category at the Learning Awards. Committed to rigour and relevance and to the highest standards of quality in content, delivery and evaluation, Ashridge has been commended by the QAA for:

• the ‘feedback-hungry’ culture and responsiveness to matters raised by students
• the contribution of the consultancy and scholarly activities of academic staff to the enrichment of the curriculum and the learning experience of students
• the quality of the virtual learning environment for the delivery of learning
• student support for the Masters in Management
• the ethos of reflective practice that characterises the Ashridge learning experience.
Teaching strategies

All higher education institutions now have explicit teaching and learning strategies that normally reflect – to a greater or lesser extent – most, if not all, of the following principles:

- that teaching and learning are fundamental core missions of universities and colleges
- that active student involvement is essential in governance, curricular design, development and review, quality assurance and review procedures
- that the preference of research over teaching in defining academic merit needs rebalancing
- that academic staff are employed not just to teach, but to teach well, to a high professional standard
- that it is a key responsibility of institutions to ensure their academic staff are well trained and qualified as professional teachers and not just qualified in a particular academic subject
- that this responsibility extends to ensuring new staff have a teaching qualification or equivalent on entry or have access to credible teacher training courses in the early years of their career
- that this responsibility extends to providing opportunities for continuous professional career development as a professional teacher and not just as a subject- or discipline-specific academic
- that it is a key responsibility of academic staff to ensure they are qualified to teach and able to teach well
- that this responsibility extends over their entire career from start to finish so that they remain up-to-date and proficient in the very best pedagogical practices and all that excellence in teaching requires.

adapted from European Commission, 2013
While institutional teaching and learning strategies vary depending on the core mission and values of a particular institution (for example, large, multi-disciplinary or small specialist, research-intensive or vocational/professional focus), there is a general understanding that high-quality teaching is of key importance and essential to the students who are partners in the co-creation of knowledge. These strategies reflect higher education’s important and unique transformative role in society, and the obligations and responsibilities that accompany that role. The key learning, teaching and assessment strategic objectives of York St John University, one of the smaller, multi-faculty universities, provide a typical example:

- Provide high-quality, research-informed teaching.
- Provide an academic portfolio that is challenging, exciting and attractive to students.
- Provide an innovative curriculum that is inclusive and supportive of diversity.
- Ensure students have successful academic transitions into, across and out of higher education.
- Promote a collaborative learning environment that encourages staff and students to engage in dialogue.
- Promote an emphasis on assessment for learning whilst maintaining the quality of assessment of learning.
- Continuously enhance students’ engagement with their studies and extra-curricular opportunities.
- Embed employability and enterprise skills through work-based learning opportunities and employer-informed curricula.
- Make best use of technology-enhanced learning tools.
- Provide high-quality development opportunities to enable staff to deliver exceptional learning, teaching and assessment practices.

(York St. John, 2014)

Writing from the perspective of a highly specialised institution, Professor David Llewellyn’s ‘six factors for a successful university teacher’ in his own specialist institution (see Case Study 33) could and should apply to any lecturer, no matter what their discipline or institution. But context is all, and while the values or factors for successful teaching may well apply across the pedagogic board, they become particularly powerful agents for transformative teaching and learning when they are applied in and aligned with the particular context of a discipline, faculty or institution.

The language and tone of Llewellyn’s six factors – informal, personal and passionate - reveal something very particular and distinct about our smaller institutions. It is a language and tone far removed from the ‘corporate’ or ‘management-speak’ that has come to dominate the strategic and operational discourses of higher education. They reflect the fact that these institutions are genuine communities in which most, if not all, individuals know everyone else. In these institutions the students and staff constitute both a learning and social community, and there are strong, mutual links between the institution and its community.
“We are engaged with each other, we celebrate with each other, we eat with each other (no staff rooms), we drink with each other; there isn’t an institutional facility we don’t communally share.”

Mark Featherstone-Witty, CEO, LIPA

A diverse fellowship of diverse excellence

In June 2014, Dr Anya Perera was awarded a National Teaching Fellowship (NTF). Now in its 15th year, the NTF Scheme “celebrates outstanding achievement in learning and teaching in higher education” (HEA, 2015). Dr Perera was the third member of staff of Writtle College to receive the prestigious award, which is awarded to just 55 individuals every year from across the entire HE sector. It marked a remarkable achievement for a small institution of c. 1,000 students, specialising in land-based, design and sport courses at various levels including postgraduate. Dr Perera was recognised for her passion for enhancing student learning in a way that inspires and facilitates adjustment to higher education study, and she said: “This award is a reflection of the importance that Writtle College places on providing inspiring educational opportunities of the highest quality, as well as the supportive community we have on campus”.

The success of Dr Perera and her Writtle College colleagues in the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme is not an isolated example of national recognition for teaching excellence in a small institution. There are currently 649 NTFs representing more than 40 disciplines, and they represent an extraordinarily rich and diverse set of institutions, disciplines and, significantly, innovative and successful pedagogic practices. But there is a unity in that diversity, in that all National Teaching Fellows – no matter how, what and where they teach – meet three criteria:  

1. Show passion for the subject, consistently, but with the sensitivity to know that not everyone feels the way you do about your chosen field. Find ways to bring reluctant learners on board – they could react positively to the attention, and you could be surprised by the results.

2. Remain connected to the ‘real world’ through research, collaboration with industry, the professions or the wider community, depending on the subject area. Students appreciate a lecturer who is able to translate practice into theory, and vice versa, as long as their ‘real-world’ experience is up to date. This is particularly important when courses involve an industry placement because students may be quick to tell you that the experience ‘out there’ was different.

There are a number of award schemes that reward and recognise excellent teachers. As well as the prestigious National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS) there are numerous institutional ‘in-house’ Teaching Fellow schemes and the Student-Led Teaching Award scheme run by the NUS and the HEA.
3. Be available to students, not just immediately after lectures, but at other times when they need advice or support. We are all busy, but the ability to spend a few moments really finding out how a student is doing will reap rewards for you and for them.

4. Show willingness to keep learning about the practice of teaching, not just in relation to new technology, but also in trying out new methods to interact with students in the classroom or in approaches to assessment. Making use of institutional groups, training activities or seeking opportunities to learn from colleagues in other institutions will all help.

5. Listen and respond to student feedback. You may have to learn to not fear the inevitable comment that is less than positive, but to change your approach where necessary.

6. Finally, make sure that you are equipping your students to handle change by encouraging independent learning and their inability to reason and question. The challenges they will face over their lifetime will require the skills, not just a sound base of knowledge.

To address the above points, talk to other lecturers and find out where you can access help and support. It is often available within the institution but you may simply need to be pointed in the right direction. Lecturers who work with their colleagues in this way get to know their students and investing in their practice makes a real difference to their institution. Their success may not be guaranteed, but at least they will be laying the right foundations to get themselves noticed as someone who cares about their teaching and the difference it can make to their students.

Llewellyn, 2014

- individual excellence: evidence of enhancing and transforming the student learning experience commensurate with the individual’s context and the opportunities afforded by it
- raising the profile of excellence: evidence of supporting colleagues and influencing support for student learning; demonstrating impact and engagement beyond the nominee’s immediate academic or professional role
- developing excellence: evidence of the nominee’s commitment to her/his ongoing professional development with regard to teaching and learning and/or learning support.

An important element in the success and impact of the NTF Scheme is that, although it rewards individuals working in single institutions, it also creates a vibrant and dynamic ‘community of excellence’, enabling a flow and exchange of ideas, experiences and practices that inform and enhance learning and teaching not only across the sector but also place teaching firmly in the forum of policy and public debate. In the case of those NTFs working in the smaller and specialist institutions, the scheme has enabled them to share their unique expertise and experience (see Case Study 34) on the national stage but also, importantly, to bring back to their institutions the many exciting and innovative ideas and initiatives that are occurring throughout the sector.

“The most important impact of the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme is that it brings ideas and debates about the parameters and quality of teaching and learning in HE into the public domain. The sector’s annual celebration of the ‘HE Teaching Oscars’ attracts public attention, demonstrating that the most imaginative and inspiring teaching is valued and encouraged in HE. A powerful and very important message!”

Professor Gweno Williams, NTF, York St John University
Case Study 34:
Tim Roberts, National Teaching Fellow, Conservatoire for Dance and Drama, National Centre for Circus Arts

Tim was appointed a National Teaching Fellow in 2012. He is the HE Course Director at the National Centre for Circus Arts (part of CDD), and over the last 12 years has developed the UK’s only progressive HE programme for circus arts. This consists of a Foundation degree in Circus Arts, a top-up BA (Hons) Degree in Circus Arts and a Postgraduate Certificate in Circus Arts.

Tim’s interest, as well as his expertise, lies in the creation of high-quality circus arts education at HE level and the role that it can play in the development of a sector as a whole. For example, graduates from the programme have not only gone on to create innovative contemporary circus performances, but also populate every aspect of the circus sector, from teaching in youth activities to creating companies and administrating other circus events. Tim’s connections with the circus arts sector has also led to increased employment opportunities for circus arts graduates in the UK, several of whom are now touring across the country and in international companies. Circus arts have long been considered an art form on the margins of society but Tim firmly believes that through high-quality teaching, and the advantages that the HE sector provides, it can find a place again at the heart of the cultural landscape of the UK.

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Case Study 35:
The Hub at the Institute of Contemporary Music Performance (ICMP): an overview

The Hub is the Institute’s interface between what happens in the classroom/studio and industry. Run by a team of music industry professionals and dedicated to providing a practical, contextual and tailored careers service, the Hub supports and enhances student learning opportunities through planned and strategic activities to which all Institute students have access. The Hub provides careers and artist development opportunities from the moment a student enrolls. All of the Hub’s career support, information, advice and guidance are underpinned and informed by the Institute’s curriculum and specifically tailored to students’ needs.

The wealth of experience and industry connectivity complements the students’ studies, offering access to a network of industry professionals. This partnership with industry enhances learning opportunities and supports students’ transition into their chosen profession. Hub activities include: supporting the student-managed, in-house record label, Dyne Road Recordings; offering live performance opportunities and specialist music events; hosting artist and repertoire consultancy sessions with industry professionals; delivering Next Steps Careers Days and Next Steps Sessions; brokering music industry internship opportunities; offering corporate work opportunities; facilitating teaching and mentorship opportunities; and organising singer/songwriter feedback days.

The Hub was commended in the Institute’s 2015 QAA Higher Education Review.