

Enhancing Teaching Practice
in **HIGHER EDUCATION**

Edited by **HELEN POKORNY | DIGBY WARREN**



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SAGE Publications Ltd
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Introduction: Teaching in the Changing Landscape of Higher Education

Helen Pokorny and Digby Warren

Education is a vital, demanding, and precious undertaking, and much depends on how well it is done. If it is true to the human being, education must reflect our nature in all its subtlety and complexity. Every human faculty must be taken seriously, including the intellect, emotions, and our capacity for relational, contemplative and bodily knowing ... Educate our students as whole people, and they will bring all of who they are to the demands of being human in private and public life. The present and future well-being of humankind asks nothing less of us. (Palmer and Zajonc, 2010: 152–3).

The changing landscape of higher education

Globally the higher education (HE) sector is experiencing significant challenges and reforms. In the UK a number of policy initiatives have restructured HE from a fully funded system to a market-driven model within a very short period of time. The government White Paper, *Students at the Heart of the System* (BIS, 2011), set an agenda focused on student choice in a 'market context'. Aligned to this shift has been the introduction of a regime of performance indicators on top of an already extensive quality assurance system (QAA, 2012). University statistical data and student survey data are used to tabulate university positions into 'league tables'. Students as fee-payers are encouraged to use this data to make decisions about where and what to study. Alongside this commodification of HE is a call in the White Paper (section 2.7: 27) to 'restore teaching to its proper position, at the centre of every [HE institution's] mission' that is being taken

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forward through the development of a 'Teaching Excellence Framework' which aims to recognise universities offering the highest teaching quality. This will be an outcomes-focused, ranking scheme using a clear set of metrics (Johnson, 2015), albeit that a lack of sophisticated conceptualisations of 'teaching excellence' compounds the issue of developing 'comparative mechanisms' that would allow 'effective cross-institutional benchmarking as an enabling process in response to the need for some institutions to improve their engagement with teaching enhancement' (Gunn and Fisk, 2014: 47). The policies that underpin these changes in HE reflect a neoliberal agenda with competition at its heart and a substantive switch from public to private funding of education through the student loan system. Consequently there is also a renewed policy interest in graduate earnings premiums and graduate employment. This places further emphasis on universities working in partnership with employers and taking responsibility for developing students' employability skills. It reflects global trends as HE

has been increasingly captured by political mandates focusing on market awareness, competitiveness, entrepreneurialism, the reconfiguration of higher education institutions [HEIs] as organizations and their governance models.... HEIs roles and missions are expected to include up-skilling the population and lifelong learning, social inclusion, widening participation, citizenship skills and competences (Magalhães and Veiga, 2013: 64)

with the accent on 'competences' rather than 'knowledge' eroding the 'modern ideal of education' which 'assumes that the exposure of students to knowledge potentially provides emancipatory and transformational features for the individuals involved, providing to society better citizens and specialized workers' (Magalhães and Veiga, 2013: 59).

Within this shifting national context is an ambition to diversify student recruitment and to increase overseas student income. This is a policy objective which has been in tension with UK government initiatives to control immigration. Widening of participation in HE remains an ambition, with the UK committed to doubling the proportion of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds entering HE by 2020 from 2009 levels (Johnson, 2015). In the UK the cap on student numbers has been removed and consequently academics find themselves in a situation in which there is a tremendous strain on resources, while staff:student ratios continue to increase. They are being asked to do more with less, with many competing pressures on their time, including research, and where continuous change is the norm.

One of the emerging agendas is around flexible pedagogies and digital education (Ryan and Tilbury, 2013). Pressures in funding add to pressures

to provide flexibility in learning opportunities, support and assessment (Barnett, 2014). Digital learning is now a feature of all provision from face-to-face to distance learning and all modes of delivery in between. It encompasses the use of technology in the classroom, mobile learning, Virtual Learning Environments (VLE), Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) and open learning (giving students choice over what, when, at what pace, where, and how they learn). However, students' adoption of social media does not always translate into proficiency with educational uses of technology. Thus academics are often required to support students in the use of technology in order to realise the design benefits of a technology enhanced curriculum.

There has also been a reconfiguring of academic work and an increase in the numbers of UK academics on teaching-only contracts and teaching-focused roles. Locke (2014) suggests that these contractual changes may make academic work less attractive as a career and argues for a reconsideration of academic roles and teaching careers that encourage new forms of professionalism to emerge from within the profession itself, with a focus on teaching as a key element of career progression. Similarly Light et al. (2009: 13–14) call for a reclaiming of professionalism as 'ongoing transformation centred in the learning situation' as opposed to a form of professionalism driven by external accountability pressures for 'standardised professional organisation, practice and evaluation procedures'. As evidenced by Gibbs (2010), improved student evaluations of teaching have been found to correspond to improvements in measures of teaching quality (p.26) and the adoption of 'well-understood pedagogical practices that engender student engagement' (p.5) – which can be promoted through investment in professional development of academic staff (p.14).

The importance of professionalism in teaching in HE is gaining acknowledgement internationally. For example, the European Science Foundation (2012) sees it as central to the integration and regionalisation of European HE and to supporting student mobility within the Bologna process. In Australia, there are national debates and moves towards 'academic professionalisation' (ACPET, 2013), led by the Office of Learning and Teaching that has funded a project to develop a national framework 'to raise the professionalism of higher education teaching' (OLT, 2012).

In the UK, the Professional Standards Framework for Teaching and Supporting Learning (UKPSF, 2011) provides a nationally recognised framework for bestowing professional recognition within HE teaching and learning support through a comprehensive set of professional standards and guidelines for HE providers and leaders.

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The UKPSF outlines the ‘dimensions’ of professional practice within HE teaching and learning support as:

- areas of activity undertaken by teachers and support staff;
- core knowledge needed to carry out these activities at the appropriate level;
- professional values that individuals performing these activities should exemplify (UKPSF, 2011).

Although developments at the macro level influence how we think about the purpose of, and shape, HE work in local contexts, Smith (2010: 727) reassures that ‘whilst the language and rhetoric of contemporary higher education may feel inhospitable, the gaps in which to exercise autonomy still remain’. Fanghanel (2012: 2) similarly argues that lecturers ‘operate in a space that needs to accommodate the demands of market-oriented practices, and yet contain the aspirations academics have for themselves and for their students, and their passion for knowledge ...’. She sees within the academy ‘a rich, critical and empowering potential that can be harnessed to develop approaches to educating students and practising research that address the complexities of today’s world’ (p.14). The changes imposed on us may lead to interesting questions about who we are as educators, what we value and what we know, as well as what we can no longer take for granted and need to think about afresh. As Tennant et al. argue,

academics can find space for their own agency in the midst of system wide and institutional policies and practices that serve to frame, as well as delimit and constrain, what counts as good academic work in teaching and research ... [and] that academics can develop a sense of agency through a reflexive engagement with the circumstances in which they find themselves (2010:1).

The purpose of this book

Thus the purpose of this book is to support colleagues involved in HE teaching and support of learning to engage with current challenges, enhance their educational practice and scholarship and to reflect on their choice of identity as an HE educator – one that fits with their own professional values and articulation of their professional practice. There are a number of cross-cutting themes, one of which is developing resilience and care for our students and their learning, our colleagues and ourselves. ‘Care is a resilient value that, despite the pressures, remains fundamental to many in academic life’ (Smith, 2010: 722). It also resonates with the notion of

authenticity in teaching, which ‘involves our caring about the subject balanced and enriched by our caring about what is in the important interest of students’ (Kreber, 2007: 3). Other related themes that permeate the chapters are diversity, relationships, dialogue and enquiry. Students enter HE with a wide range of personal biographies, experiences and cultural capital, and developing relational, dialogic approaches to teaching and assessment practice provides the potential for developing shared perspectives and joint understanding of learning goals and processes. It also opens up creative spaces for changing practices and shifting some of the familiar ways of working. The authors aim both to stimulate new ideas and also to provide support for established ways of working. In foregrounding relationships, the authors also remind us that teaching is an affective process and pay attention to the role of emotions – our own and students – as part of the educational experience (Moore and Kuol, 2007).

The book also addresses as cross-cutting themes the ‘dimensions’ of the UKPSF. The chapters consider, from different perspectives, the UKPSF ‘Areas of Activity’ which are broadly:

- learning design and planning;
- teaching/supporting learning;
- assessment and feedback;
- planning effective learning environments;
- continuing professional development.

The book provides an overview of key concepts, models and practices that underpin these areas and relate to UKPSF ‘core knowledge’ requirements including:

- how students learn;
- methods for teaching and assessing;
- learning technologies;
- evaluation of teaching;
- quality assurance and quality enhancement.

The UKPSF professional values around respect, equality and promoting participation in learning permeate the scholarship, research and professional practice from which ideas are drawn.

For lecturers seeking professional recognition, through either accredited courses or experience-based applications, the UKPSF dimensions need to be demonstrated through the successful incorporation of scholarship and/or the findings of pedagogic research. Hence the book aims to:

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- empower educators to empower students;
- provide an overview of key concepts models and practices to inspire and support teaching;
- challenge assumptions and outline different approaches to practice;
- support professional development, scholarship and the articulation of ones' own pedagogy and professional values, identity and practice.

Based on extensive secondary research and the authors' own direct experience in HE teaching and/or provision of professional development, the book chapters provide exemplars of practice embedded in the scholarly literature, offering busy academics accessible ideas and a wide range of references from the field. The book uses short case studies and vignettes to illustrate these ideas and practices, and includes relevant guiding principles. Each chapter also has a short list of further reading/web resources (all URLs verified prior to publication) and a set of questions for readers to reflect on their own professional practice and development.

An introduction to the chapters

Chapter 2: Course and Learning Design and Evaluation – Digby Warren explores different concepts and paradigms of 'curriculum' and various models and methods for course and learning design and curriculum evaluation, with varied examples and references to sources where good case studies from a range of disciplines can be found. The chapter is premised on the holistic notion of 'curriculum' as a contextualised practice that encompasses knowledge domain, educational values and principles, teaching, learning, assessment and evaluation.

Chapter 3: Teaching by Leading and Managing Learning Environments – Steven Cranfield considers how different environments or settings within which students are asked or required to learn, such as large groups, small groups and laboratory and practice settings, have an impact on how they approach their learning and hence on the design and delivery of teaching. He provides an overview of underpinning principles and concepts before exploring their application in practice.

Chapter 4: Assessment for Learning – Helen Pokorny draws on key concepts around the development of a shared frame of reference within assessment communities, to explore approaches to assessment and feedback design and assessment standards. Plagiarism is considered from a socio-cultural perspective and conceptualised as a topic to be addressed through the learning process as much as through the quality assurance process.

Specific attention is given to developing effective groupwork assessment and the assessment of prior experiential learning, as these are significant areas of assessment practice which have their own particular pedagogical issues and practices.

Chapter 5: Blended Learning – Charl Fregona, with Agata Sadza adding a resonant case study, explores the options and issues presented by developments in elearning. This chapter considers students' experiences of digital technologies and expectations of elearning and the need for learners to develop critical research skills and 'digital scholarship'. Different approaches to and models for blended learning design are outlined, along with pedagogical strategies for promoting and supporting student participation in blended and online learning.

Chapter 6: Student Engagement – Kathy Harrington, Sandra Sinfield and Tom Burns draw on material from the substantial and diverse field of student engagement to chart a path of particular relevance to any university teacher who takes an interest in thinking about and finding fresh ways to enable students' engagement with learning, both within and alongside the curriculum. They focus directly on the interface between teaching and learning, and on the relationship between teachers and students as a vehicle for engagement in all its diversity, providing principles and practices to foster engaged teaching and learning, and examples of engagement within and alongside the curriculum.

Chapter 7: Embracing Student Diversity – Susannah McKee and Matt Scandrett examine practical ways in which we might actively embrace diversity for positive change in student experience for all members of the university community through inclusive teaching, whilst recognising that students vary in any number of ways and should be seen first and foremost as individuals. They consider ways of encouraging a sense of belonging and developing an inclusive curriculum and classroom, and of thinking through issues around the student lifecycle and assessment.

Chapter 8: Engaging with Academic Writing and Discourse – Julian Ingle examines some of the challenges of teaching academic writing in HE, as well as the difficulties students encounter when learning how to write in their disciplines or subject areas. Taking a multilayered view of university-level writing and the ways it can be understood, the argument of this chapter is that teaching and learning about writing are most effective when situated within the discipline. He considers students' attitudes to writing and provides accounts of practice that illustrate how some of the challenges can be addressed. He also considers how and why we might expand and use the resources and range of texts available to students and staff.

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Chapter 9: Effective Supervision – Dave Griffiths and Digby Warren consider the complexities of academic supervision that operate at a variety of academic levels, arguing that at the core of the process is an interpersonal relationship that has the potential to enable and validate learning or, conversely, to hinder and subdue it. Their chapter outlines what this complexity means for the practice and process of academic supervision, explores some new perspectives on the different elements that constitute the process, and suggests some practical responses to the many challenges generated by the complexity of supervision today.

Chapter 10: Work-related and Professional Learning – Sibyl Coldham and Pauline Armsby outline a range of approaches to developing work-relevant skills, attributes and practices, looking at the openings they offer in terms of developing students' confidence in, and experience of, work processes during their university study. They explore key learning design and assessment strategies used in the various approaches, drawing on literature from workplace learning and practice, as well as HE and employability. To illustrate different approaches they draw on examples from a range of disciplines, their own experience and offer links to substantial case study repositories as further reading.

Chapter 11: Professional Development – Jennifer Bright, Rebecca Eliahoo and Helen Pokorny consider that professional growth and development occurs through increased experience of teaching and ongoing evaluation and examination of one's practice in this role. It is therefore wider than participating in workshops and courses and is concerned with examining the cycle of teaching and assessing from different standpoints both individually and collaboratively. In this chapter they consider a range of approaches to professional development including mentoring practice, approaches to peer review of teaching, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) and the role of 'mindfulness' in professional development and HE teaching.

All of the authors are HE educators of long standing and all find their inspiration from working with colleagues and students to address the challenges of teaching today. It is from this process of collegiality and sharing of ideas that this book is born.

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