TEACHING
IN HIGHER
EDUCATION

Erik Blair

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

I would recommend this book to anyone thinking about beginning a teaching career in higher education. It provides a highly engaging and accessible style of writing throughout, as Erik communicates how his pedagogical approach places student engagement at the heart of meaningful thinking and learning through collaboration and critical thinking. The chapters explore pedagogy and teaching in a meaningful way, clearly explaining key terms, while the 'little nuggets of wisdom' offer an excellent conduit towards putting these ideas into practice. A great resource to help educators navigate the experiences of working in higher education.

LISA STEPHENSON, COURSE LEADER – MA DRAMA AND CREATIVE WRITING IN EDUCATION, CARNEGIE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY

Independent Thinking on Teaching in Higher Education is an authoritative book that will be of much value to both new and experienced teachers in higher education, sharing theoretically informed and practically rooted advice on how to plan for better student learning. It offers outstanding accessible guidance for good teaching by drawing on ideas and empirical evidence from practice, and provides thoughtful and wide-ranging analysis of the multiple aspects informing good teaching practice.

Essential reading for anyone concerned with, and committed to, offering high-quality learning experiences to their students.

DR NAMRATA RAO, PRINCIPAL LECTURER IN EDUCATION, LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY

This book offers what teachers in higher education want and need: practical support in how to improve their every-day practice. Blair's 'little nuggets of wisdom' give useful tips that can serve as a reminder to those who have been teaching for some time and as a confidence-builder for those who are new to the profession.

Supported by an easy-to-read narrative style, *Independent Thinking on Teaching in Higher Education* is a must for those wishing to give more to their students.

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OLIVIA FLEMING, CO-FOUNDER OF OneHE

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Independent Thinking on Teaching in Higher Education is both philosophical and practical and Erik's voice of experi-ence comes through in a reassuring manner. Also provided is a selection of useful teaching tools for those who are new to teaching in higher education and as well as those who offer training and CPD within higher education institutions.

The author understands very well that the key to success-ful encounters in education at any level is engagement: getting students involved and interested. Erik employs many useful analogies and metaphors in this regard that I imagine will be used again and again as the book comes into common usage.

Ultimately, *Independent Thinking on Teaching in Higher Education* offers a very reassuring guide to the important things to consider as one develops their craft as a teacher in higher education.

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DR REBECCA PATTERSON, SENIOR LECTURER – EDUCATION (DRAMA), FACULTY OF EDUCATION, MANCHESTER METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY

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For my mum – who would have probably
preferred that I had written a nice storybook!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank everyone who helped bring this book to fruition. Various ideas that make up parts of the book have been shared with, commented on and improved by many colleagues and students. There are too many individuals to name personally, but if you have ever been taught by me or if we have ever worked together, then it is highly likely that you have been part of the development of this book.

I am deeply grateful to all at Crown House Publishing for their support and guidance – particularly Beverley, Louise and Emma, who have impressed me with their thorough, professional insights and eye for detail. Every piece of advice they have given has been valuable and is greatly appreciated.

Teaching in higher education is an iterative process that is improved through enactment, feedback and revision. The same is true of writing. Parts of Chapters 1 and 3 have been reworked from some of my earlier blogs and articles, and I would like to thank the University of West London[1], London School of Economics and Political Science[2] and Optimus Education[3] for their kind permission to reuse this work.

There are two individuals who have been a great influence on me and who, without knowing, are always in the background as I write. I would like to thank Don Smith, who is the constant voice of good conscience at my shoulder –

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reminding me about the power of being positive in the teaching environment. And, most importantly, I would like to thank Angela Francis, who keeps me grounded while simultaneously pushing me to be better.

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FIRST THOUGHTS

QUESTION EVERYTHING

One of the many mantras in the teaching world is, 'You shouldn't have to reinvent the wheel', but my favourite is, 'Adopt, adapt, reject'. When reading through this book, feel free to steal ideas that might work for you or tweak things to fit your students – and also feel free to reject anything that doesn't work for you. Conversely, don't be so closed-minded that you instantly dismiss new ideas. One of the most common retorts that teachers make when faced with new material is, 'Yeah, that's fine in theory but it wouldn't work with my class.' Try to open up and give it a go – apply the concept to your group and then make a value assessment.

This book is structured around five chapters which explore specific aspects of teaching in higher education. Collectively, these chapters conveniently cover the three areas measured in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF): teaching quality, the learning environment, and the educational and professional outcomes achieved by students.[1] The first chapter investigates the nature of higher education – focusing on what we might consider to be the role and function of higher education and the task of teaching within such an environment. Chapter 2 examines the structure of higher education – particularly the structure of teaching within higher education – and highlights the benefit of having a structured approach to planning and practice. Chapter 3 offers insight into the various ways

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1   See https://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/student-advice/where-to-study/teaching-excellence-framework-tef.

that information flows around the teaching environment and how we can map this flow to better support student engagement and interaction. Chapter 4 focuses on using observation as a tool for teaching enhancement and emphasises that this can be done in a collegial and developmental way. Finally, Chapter 5 highlights the role of reflection and reflective practice – exploring how this is best done in a balanced and structured manner.

At the end of each chapter there are some 'little nuggets of wisdom'. These nuggets cover a wide variety of topics – some are presented as ideas that you can quickly implement in your teaching practice and some are there to stimulate your thinking. There is no one answer presented here; instead, the emphasis is on engagement and reflection. But remember: don't accept what I say just because I have written it down. Please don't hesitate to question my suggestions, but also aim to be open to new ideas.

You may already be asking questions about the word 'teaching' itself. In this book, I have been quite deliberate in discussing teaching in higher education rather than the range of higher education activities undertaken by academic staff. There are many student-facing, educational roles in higher education. Some colleagues are employed as professors, some are tutors, some are readers, some are fellows, some have titles as long as their arm and many have titles that don't really explain what they do at all. This book is aimed at all those who teach in higher education. Recognising that this is a long (and ever growing) list of professionals, and because of the nature of this book, I have preferred to concentrate on what people *do* rather than their job titles.

For example, many people employed in higher education are employed as a *lecturer* and this can lead to some

confusion, especially for novice lecturers. The word suggests that what you will be doing is *lecturing,* but that is a rather old-fashioned perspective because to deliver a lecture is a rather specific activity. You may be employed as a lecturer, but try to think about that as your job title rather than as a description of what you do. Individuals who are employed as lecturers undertake many different tasks (as discussed in Chapter 1), but I have focused on one particular task – teaching. Consequently, 'lecturer' is a description of what someone is employed to be, but 'teaching' is what they are employed to do.

For this reason, in this book I refer to the individual doing this teaching as a 'teacher', in order to place the concept of teaching front and centre where I feel it belongs. Some colleagues might be irked by this and regard the term a slight to their academic status; however, that is not my intention. I recognise that all those who teach in higher education have to juggle many different responsibilities. I am simply drawing out one of those roles, teaching, in an effort to shine a light on something that is central to the student learning experience.

It is this emphasis on teaching as an act of doing that is at the heart of this book. The focus is on how we take complicated ideas, theories and concepts and organise them in such a way that they are accessible (and useful) to students – that is, teaching in higher education as a fundamentally person-centred activity.

OPENING THE BEETLE BOX

Before we examine teaching in higher education, we need to think about who it is that does the teaching. By and large, this person is employed as a lecturer, but lecturers are not the only people who teach in higher education – there are also tutors, graduate teaching assistants, fellows, readers and professors, as well as other colleagues who work with students to develop specific skills (both technical and academic). Becoming someone who teaches in higher education (whatever your role or job title might be) 'is not a simple matter, with almost a decade required to prepare an individual for even an entry-level role'.[1] With so much effort involved, it might be worthwhile to find out just what is expected of those who teach in higher education. A quick internet search using terms such as 'lecturer', 'reader' or 'academic support tutor' will provide a surface definition, but this description is likely to be limited in scope – focusing on the duties and responsibilities of someone working in higher education.

In this chapter, I will dig below surface definitions and start to explore the interaction of various personal and professional demarcations. In doing so, I hope to move the conversation beyond a discussion of what someone who teaches in higher education is employed to do and focus on what they actually do.

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1   H. Coates and L. Goedegbuure, Recasting the Academic Workforce: Why the Attractiveness of the Academic Profession Needs to Be Increased and Eight Strategies for How to Go About This from an Australian Perspective. *Higher Education*, 64 (2012): 875–889 at 876.

DISCIPLINARY ROOTS

Say the word 'learning' and you might get a mental pic-
ture. Most people can come up with their own definition
of learning, although this is often narrow and prejudiced
by personal experience. However, language can change its
meaning according to context, therefore the meaning of
the word 'learning' is likely to depend on who is using it
and the specific conditions in which they find themselves.
In his analysis of private and public language, Wittgenstein
tells a story of two boys, each with a matchbox containing
what he calls a 'beetle'.[2] They agree never to look inside
each other's matchbox and also agree that they both con-
tain a beetle. In this analogy, we see that the thing that is
'beetle' is private to each boy and that the term only has
meaning on account of its public use. It does not actually
matter what is in the box – the word 'beetle' now means
'the thing inside the box'. In a similar way, individuals (lec-
turers, students and the public at large) discuss the thing
inside their head that they call 'teaching'.

Language is also context-bound: the setting for
Wittgenstein's example was a game played by two boys,
but two zoologists working in the tropical rainforests of
Trinidad and Tobago would have a different understanding
of 'beetle'. Likewise, the word 'teaching' also has a private
meaning, but we can only communicate with others
when they share a similar understanding of the word. In
this way, language is private-shared – no one person can
decide on the 'true' meaning of any term. However, while
we might all have our own meanings, in practice they are
often not so different and can overlap with the meanings
of others. This vast Venn diagram of meaning holds a

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2   L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), §293.

practical truth about what 'teaching' actually is (even if this agreed definition is hard to conceptualise or verbalise).

Teaching in higher education is a personally negotiated experience. Individuals will have taken different journeys to arrive at their present situation and will be uniquely shaped by those experiences. However, working within a shared institutional system tends to have a normative effect. Foucault suggests that 'we live inside a set of relations',[3] so any discussion of meaning or interpretation also needs to consider communicated norms within the context of higher education. These norms are the result of, among other things, governmental and institutional directives, student expectations, graduate outcomes, departmental and disciplinary cultures and the assorted needs of various stakeholders. Teaching in the 'supercomplexity' of modern higher education is therefore about much more than simply being an expert within a certain field.[4]

Understanding what it means to teach in this environment involves problematising how we conceptualise learning, examining what we think education is for, questioning our own identity as conduits to knowledge and reflecting on our individual biases. In so doing, we allow the significance of everyday academic roles and regular teaching/learning activities to be examined afresh. Everyone who teaches in higher education has their own approach to teaching, and because everyone who teaches in higher education has had a personal experience of being taught, almost everyone has their own understanding of what it means to teach in this environment (and almost everyone has something to say about teaching).

3   M. Foucault, Of Other Spaces [tr. J. Miskowiec]. *Diacritics*, 16(1) (1986): 22–27 at 23.

4   R. Barnett, *Realising the University in an Age of Supercomplexity* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2000).

However, teaching in higher education is not just one easily defined activity. Many individuals develop their conception of their role by engaging with pre-formed ideas about how their subject should be taught and learned – an understanding rooted in their experience of disciplinary learning. These discipline-specific thoughts can be both conscious and unconscious but they tend to be limited in their scope – focusing on the story of how one individual became an expert in one particular aspect of one particular discipline. Furthermore, the philosophical underpinnings of our pedagogy are often individual and disciplinary rather than institutional or universal.

As well as engaging with the knowledge base, those teaching in higher education may have learned the methods, modes and practices of their subject in various ways. For some, their pedagogical approach has been carefully constructed through the scrutiny of educational theory, the critical reading of educational literature and reflective practice. Many develop their practice by studying towards formal higher education qualifications. But there are also a great many people in higher education who developed their teaching practice tacitly and built their understanding of their role through direct on-the-job experience. No matter which route an individual has taken, it is their destination (the higher education institution that employs them) that defines the requirements of their role. These requirements are often outlined in job descriptions, but the tasks actually undertaken when teaching in higher education can also be rather nebulous and difficult to capture. Once we begin to examine the everyday routines of the role, we can begin to capture what it means to be a teacher and from there we can start to scrutinise the rationale behind our activities.

As we have already discussed, an individual's educational journey and experiences will have coloured how they see

their teaching role. For some this will mean that they find themselves teaching as they were taught, while others may want to rebel and try new approaches. Those who teach in higher education tend to have studied a particular topic (whether that is physics, economics, film-making or academic writing skills) and their studies are likely to have been embedded in a particular teaching format or 'signature pedagogy'. (A signature pedagogy is the typical way that a specific discipline is taught.) These stereotypical approaches relate to the pedagogy of the subject and to the resources used. For example, it is customary for law to be taught using rote learning and the Socratic approach (where carefully constructed questions lead to logical answers); it is typical for basketball to be taught on the court rather than in a classroom; and if we were to take up parachute jumping, then we would almost certainly expect to get in an aeroplane at some point. Before we even arrive in a higher education learning environment, we need to think about how we have been conditioned by our previous learning.

TEACHER-LED VS. STUDENT-LED PEDAGOGY

Broadly, there are two things we can do in response to our educational conditioning: we can comply or we can rebel. The first is easy and probably doesn't take too much thinking; however, we will simply perpetuate the system. If you were not happy with the way you were taught when you attended higher education, then you need to start rebelling now! Realistically, this might not be the right time to start a revolution, so our rebellion may need to be smaller and more aligned to academic norms. We can begin by being more reflective and more critical – not simply reproducing

the established ways but questioning their validity and purpose. Whenever I meet someone who has memorised a poem by heart I am generally unimpressed – remembering lengthy stanzas of poetry is clearly not easy, but it is the application of this learning that is important to me. So, our first reflective acts of rebellion should involve examining the utility of some of the ways our subjects are taught – whether they are taught in a certain way because that is the only possible way to teach them or because of convention. If you can see alternative ways of teaching your topic, then explore these further.

Imagine we were teaching an introductory class on basketball and the focus of the class is how to get the ball into the hoop. There are two main teaching methods we could apply: a *deductive* pedagogy or an *inductive* pedagogy. The deductive approach tends to be teacher-led. It starts with definitions, descriptions and demonstrations. (The way I remember this is that the word 'deductive' starts with the letters 'd' and 'e', as do define, describe and demonstrate.) We would gather the class around and carefully talk them through the various stages of standing, aiming, throwing and scoring a basket. After this structured demonstration, the group would go and practise these skills, and then we would bring them all together in a final plenary during which we would review what they have done and what they have learned.

If we were to adopt an inductive approach, we would start by giving the students two things: (1) the problem we want them to solve and (2) the criteria for success. We would explain that we want them to get the ball in the hoop and that they should find the most consistent method for doing so. We would then send them off to experiment. Our role would be to oversee and take notes, but to be ready to act or to be on hand for any questions that may arise. After experimenting, we would draw the group

together and review their success/failure. We would then ask the students to relate what the literature (or coaching manual) suggests to what we, as a class, found to be the most successful approach. Where there are discrepancies we would explore these, and where there are consistencies we would examine why we think that certain approaches worked best. (I remember what 'inductive pedagogy' is because it starts with the word 'in' – and this method usually involves students getting stuck in.)

Both deductive and inductive methods have their strengths and weaknesses, and it is more than likely that our teaching will use a blend of the two. The point is that there is usually at least one other way to teach a topic. If we were to apply deductive and inductive pedagogical methods to the teaching of academic writing – something that most of us in higher education have to teach to some degree – then we might decide to show students what to do (deductive) or we might get them to look at instances of good and bad academic writing and work out some key rules for themselves (inductive). In medicine, we might explain the skeletal features of the human body or we might give each student a bone and ask them to work as a team to recreate the entire skeleton. When teaching film-making, we might talk students through the shots of famous directors, explaining their significance, structure and staging, or we might give each student a five-minute clip and ask them to analyse the narrative structure and share five key points with their peers.

Ultimately, these shouldn't be either/or approaches – the most appropriate learning techniques will probably require you to use a mixture of both inductive and deductive pedagogies. But the decisions behind choosing one approach over another at any given point should not be based on what is 'normally' done, but what you think is the

A REFRESHING AND INVIGORATING EXPLORATION OF WHAT REALLY MATTERS AND WHAT REALLY WORKS IN HIGHER EDUCATION TEACHING.

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Ultimately, *Independent Thinking on Teaching in Higher Education* embraces teaching and learning as personal and human activities – and encourages deeper, more meaningful reflection on how the art of teaching can best be applied in your own particular teaching environment.

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