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***Review of Learning to Teach in Higher Education and A Handbook for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education***

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## **Review of *Learning to Teach in Higher Education* **and *A Handbook for Teaching and Learning in* ***Higher Education*******

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Good news for new postgraduate teachers: getting students to learn what we want them to learn is a pretty straightforward business! According to Paul Ramsden's *Learning to Teach in Higher Education*, students are good at learning facts, are accomplished problem solvers, are great at passing exams and, contrary to colloquial wisdom, they do actually put time and effort into studying; lecturers have developed banks of strategies to draw on in order to drive knowledge home, and have honed assessment methods which test that learning efficiently; and employers have been generally happy with these arrangements: in a knowledge-based economy, universities have been doing something right in imparting knowledge. Clearly, teaching in Higher Education has been chugging along quite nicely.

That there should be a fundamental qualification, though, comes in the opening epigraph to Ramsden's first chapter: "You cannot be wise without some basis of knowledge; but you may easily acquire knowledge and remain bare of wisdom." That comment was by A.N. Whitehead, and his philosophy informs much of Ramsden's work. One longer quote of his is worth repeating here, since it seems itself highly wise:

The university imparts information, but it imparts it imaginatively [...] A university which fails in this respect has no reason for existence. This atmosphere of excitement, arising from imaginative consideration, transforms knowledge. A fact is no longer a bare fact: it is invested with

all its possibilities. It is no longer a burden on the memory: it is energising as the poet of our dreams, and as the architect of our purposes.

Imagination is not to be divorced from the facts: it is a way of illuminating the facts. (21)

Whitehead wrote these words in 1929; that Ramsden's guide is required in the present day (first published in 1992, it was updated in its second edition in 2003) implies that somewhere in the eighty years since Whitehead a divorce between facts and their contextual relationship to the wider world, between information and the imagination, has either taken place or, more likely, persisted. Higher Education may have taught and assessed students effectively and students may have come out knowing things; the point Ramsden makes today, and Whitehead made previously, is that this is not what universities should be about.

Ramsden presents numerous case studies of students who are adept at absorbing and regurgitating stores of information (formula, quotations, dates) but who, because they are so focused on knowledge in its individual units, are over-dependent on teachers as sources of information and lack the "self-critical awareness of one's own ignorance in a subject that is the only true precursor of further inquiry" (37). However, Ramsden's evidence suggests that students would actually much rather take courses which lead them to an understanding of knowledge as a coherent and connected system (English literature, for example) than simply spend hours in closed studies sucking disparate facts from books and preparing model answers (about Byron and Keats for separate questions on a Romanticism paper, about Amis for a modernism module). If the marriage between knowledge (surface learning) and understanding with the ability to transfer knowledge (deep learning) has broken down, Ramsden argues that it is lecturers rather than students who have failed in the relationship. Whilst acknowledging that there is no best way to teach, he demolishes the myth that in Higher Education good learning is the responsibility of the student, as most vividly evidenced in the perverse view that bad teachers produce better learners

than effective teachers, because they force students to be independent in their study rather than allowing them to be spoon fed.

This placing of the responsibility on lecturers' shoulders presents a paradox, however. Since one might assume that university lecturers were once fired with "knowledge invested with possibilities" such they have pursued their interests beyond the undergraduate level, it is surprising to find that "it is lecturers themselves who are the least enthusiastic of all about the qualities that their students develop" (30). Yet relatively free from rigid, centrally ordained curricula, not needing to spend time controlling bad behaviour (one suspects that this would form a key chapter in any secondary school teacher's handbook; it is almost entirely absent from both of those under review), and with a persistent belief that teaching does matter, there is massive potential in higher education for teaching to make a difference and realise Whitehead's ultimate vision. For the postgraduate teacher, who can read *Learning to Teach* largely absolved from the responsibility for what Ramsden sees as the failures of the past, what might seem a slightly depressing book which undermines the ground on which university teaching has traditionally been conducted, actually reads positively, leaving one with a sense of the possibilities of the future rather than of missed opportunities. Having probably recently pupated from undergraduates, we may not be so desperate to fly through our fields of research that we forget the importance of the inspiring teaching that set us on the research route; we now have at our disposal a full range of training courses and a Higher Education Academy which will encourage us to reflect on how well we are using knowledge as a means to an end rather than the end in itself; new methodologies, particularly ICT, are a button push away; and (although controversial), rather than a body of students we are now confronted with a cohort of "clients," paying full fees and therefore demanding higher standards in return.

The bad news is that taking advantage of these possibilities is probably not going to be made possible through any single handbook of teaching methodologies. Since any guide to teaching risks further entrenching the belief that knowledge

leading to quantifiable results is what students need in Higher Education, and in line with his ethos that it is primarily the will to learn rather than the specific learning itself that matters, Ramsden therefore offers no simple rubric by which teaching can overcome its intrinsic pedagogical obstacle: whilst most books on university teaching focus on methods rather than students' experiences of learning, *Learning to Teach* "looks at teaching from the opposite viewpoint. From this perspective, in the foreground is what students are expected to learn and how they go about learning it. Methods form the background" (120). Although highly lucid and readable, his book does not provide model but superficial answers, but absorbs one in deeper understandings of the complex relationship between teaching and learning. If there is one lesson, it is a very deep one: we must be vigilantly reflexive in everything from course design, through teaching, to assessment, asking not just what students are getting out of it, but how they are getting what they are getting out of it.

All this may seem slightly philosophical for a postgraduate reader, although given the book's lucidity it provides a positive and provocative prompt to theorise teaching from the outset of a career (it is surely harder to reflect on the weaknesses of a course of ten years than it is to restructure one tutorial). Whilst course design or learning objectives are outside the remit of most postgraduates, much of the commentary on the importance of directing these towards student learning rather than teaching, and the importance of reflecting on their effectiveness in every administrative and academic context, can be translated down to the relevant level of the small tutorial group and essay marking. Further, from the point of view of a postgraduate in a particular discipline (in our case, English) the benefit is that (again, true to the ideology contained within it) because they are a general philosophy the values the book attempts to inculcate are truly transferable across all disciplines. Nevertheless, confronted for the first time with a class of eager faces looking expectantly at them, new postgraduate teaching assistants will no doubt want something more concrete at their backs before entering the tutorial chamber for the first time.

Help comes in the form of *A Handbook for Teaching and Learning*, an edited collection which, published in a second edition in 2006 and focused on the British university system, is both temporally and geographically relevant. Though it regularly cites Ramsden's work along with others in his mode, *A Handbook for Teaching and Learning* is less orientated around theory and more on practice and methods. Divided into 25 specific chapters by different authors covering subjects such as "Encouraging Student Motivation," "An Introduction to VLEs" and "Teaching and Learning in Small Groups," it is easy to pick and choose those sections which are most relevant to the postgraduate, and ignore those which are intended for those with responsibilities for quality control or course design. With box-outs inviting one to consider examples from personal experience (including recent experience as a learner) and to translate the approaches to them, and by again drawing heavily on case studies, the book can be cherry picked for the pieces of information or teaching ideas that might be most pertinent to the new teacher for whom, the introduction tells us, the *Handbook* is primarily intended. For example, given research into attention spans, a lecture (and a tutorial as well) should either involve student participation or an explicit switch of focus every ten or fifteen minutes, whilst ideas presented at the start or end of a session are better retained than those in the middle (81); student motivation is affected dramatically by the presence of the glass ceiling between the upper second and first class bands, so there is a case for giving positive feedback about how a student can break through it (70); there is convincing statistical evidence that markers tend to be identifiable hawks (harsh) or doves (lenient), and theatrical (use extreme marks) or restrained (use a narrow range of marks), and sensing that one fits into these categories prompts one to reflect on one's own practice (53). All this is a valuable armoury of evidence to be borne in any of the activities in which a postgraduate teacher is likely to be engaged.

However, whilst the evidence may be clearly and decisively presented, direct responses to it are made less readily accessible. Given the diversity of subjects, methods and responsibilities in Higher Education, the *Handbook* offers no one

path to best practice (other than to be self-reflexive and student-focused), and there are only a small set of approaches that might be applicable for any one subject or postgraduate teacher. For example, the list of eighteen different ways of organising small groups in the chapter on that topic (which is probably the single most pertinent one for the postgraduate teacher) captivates with its terms (the fishbowl, the snowball, and, intriguingly, the tutorless group), but leaves one feeling slightly helpless, since it is probably only the tutorial and a couple of others which might be employed at the earliest stage of teaching (98-9). More generally, certain pieces of quantitative evidence the handbook presents seem to argue decisively for change, but it fails to suggest how this might happen in a specific subject. For example, the statistic that female students outperform male students in essay questions, whilst the reverse is the case for multiple choice or short answer exams (45-6), seems to argue convincingly for a move away from using just one method of assessment. But however much I reflected on English Literature, I could not think of a viable alternative to the long essay question in our field. Ironically, *A Handbook for Teaching and Learning* validates Ramsden's view that defining individual teaching methodologies from the perspective of, and for the use of, teachers will lead only to a superficial changes in Higher Education, if any at all. Despite its practicable layout, unlike Ramsden's deeply incisive interdisciplinary work this is a general guide, and though well-worth dipping into as a synopsis of the vast body of existing literature on teaching practice, for the average postgraduate entering their first tutorials it is no substitute for the Higher Education Academy's individual Subject Centres for specific activities and advice of direct relevance. At the earliest stage of teaching, *A Handbook* is probably best-placed in the library, though as one progresses, it may well find a valued place on personal bookshelves.

Given the limited scope of the typical postgraduate teacher choosing to read both or either book, it might be tempting to take on board the facts, figures, surveys and case studies, but then shrug resignedly, since it is near impossible to do much practical in response to them anyway. A fundamental misinterpretation of these

books, their historical background and their case studies would lead one to believe that Higher Education works quite well, and that teaching and learning will continue to happen, whatever we do. But there is another way of interpreting this message. The activity of scholarship which has allowed traditionally research-focused universities to educate fairly well in the past as a happy by-product, should now provide a really solid foundation for thinking about education with the same rigour and interest as we do with our traditional fields of research. Although the evidence presented by *A Handbook for Teaching and Learning* and *Learning to Teach* may seem difficult to redirect in the day-to-day activity of the postgraduate teacher, it can be made applicable provided we pursue teaching with the same engagement as we do our research, bearing in mind Whitehead's demand that we interpret bare facts imaginatively.

### **Works Cited**

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