
What is a good higher education teacher? "Am I what I say I am?"

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Abstract

The Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (LTHE) programme has been in place at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) since 1995; one of the first to be nationally recognised by the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA). Since then it has been revised several times drawing on a range of sources and influences including participant feedback, local and national educational initiatives and research into student learning to keep the curriculum relevant, up to date and appropriately challenging. In 2007 the programme underwent a major review which included mapping the LJMU aims and outcomes to the United Kingdom's Professional Standards Framework that had been published in February 2006. This paper outlines the impact on one participant of one of the changes introduced in 2007. It attempts to demonstrate how an assessment task set at the start of the course influenced a senior lecturer in music from the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts and provided him with a framework for on-going interrogation of his teaching within the wider higher education (HE) context.

Introduction

The underpinning rationale for the LTHE programme is based on the view that the key task of professional higher education teachers is to enable their students to become effective learners. This model of a HE teacher emphasises the parallels between the nature of the professional role and the learning process itself (Kolb, 1984; Gibbs, 1988). The programme encourages participants to continuously research and develop their professional practice. This model of self-critical reflective development (Schon, 1987) is embodied in the programme, both in terms of explicit module content and within the teaching and learning process.

In 2007 the assessment strategy for the LTHE programme was revised. In line with sector developments the team wanted to provide an opportunity for participants to "reflect upon their own learning, performance and/or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development" (Quality Assurance Agency Guidance on Progress Files, 2001, p.8). Our starting point for this was to ask participants to write an opinion piece on their thoughts about what a good HE teacher is. It was hoped that this would then provide a platform for participants' own development throughout the course. This paper outlines the experience of one participant (Keith Mullin) and demonstrates how he used the initial self-assessment piece to structure his learning and development throughout the rest of the course and beyond. Drawing on his early writings about "what is a good HE teacher" Keith finished the course with a piece of pedagogic research that investigated "HE - what

is it good for?" This paper provides the rationale for Keith's approach to the assessment task and where his research took him. The conclusion of the paper provides a critique of the assessment method - one which the team hopes helps participants to structure their learning (as in Keith's case) whilst recognising that not all will tackle it in the same way.

Keith's experience of the assessment task

Post Dearing (1997), New Labour (White Paper, 2003) recommended that all HE teachers acquire a recognised teaching qualification or alternatively, become members of the newly formed Higher Education Academy (HEA). Subsequently higher education institutions (HEIs) responded by either supporting staff through a training process or requesting staff achieve membership of the HEA through a process of written verification; "*am I what I say I am?*"

I started teaching some 20-years ago; however this was interrupted by a successful career in music. It would be 10-years before an opportunity to teach would arrive again, allowing me to apply industry knowledge and experience in educational settings. In 1999, that opportunity arrived via the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts (LIPA), and New Labour's 'New Deal for Musicians' (NDfM 1997) a vocational programme delivered through a process of mentoring aspirant artists by way of career led practical exercise. Owing to the success of its participants, LIPA encouraged a process of sharing practice and interdepartmental integration. Consequently, I began teaching on the music degree, eventually relocating full time to music when NDfM lost its cultural legitimacy, and became about moving participants toward a career flipping burgers as opposed to its original intention of music.

Therefore, in accordance with the aforementioned government recommendations acquiring a recognized teaching qualification became a personal and professional objective. Enrolling on the LTHE at LJMU as opposed to completing the HEA folder of evidence became the preferred option. Possessing an understanding of theory and sharing practice with colleagues from other subject disciplines, seemed infinitely more attractive than completing an unverified reflective portfolio that is hot on content but teaches very little.

Besides there was, and still are, numerous ideas and questions I wanted to explore, I find the subject of contemporary teaching and its cultural placement extraordinarily boring but equally inspiring. The following question established my journey, as the question informed the majority of the work that followed. Protruding like the tip of an unmade iceberg, the depth breadth and overall structure unknown, but determined through process, we were asked '*what is a good H/E teacher*'

My thoughts on the question perhaps took a slightly critical approach, however this was due to the inherent complexities involved when defining a profession that is subject to external and internal pressures, such as, governmental policy, culture, ideology and, internal economic consequence.

We imagine the term teacher as describing a singular activity, an informed individual expertly disseminating knowledge whilst facilitating and encouraging student learning. An educational quest, that progresses toward a singular moment in time whereby the job of teaching and learning is complete. The activity imagined is instruction, at university, teachers teach, students learn, creating an environment that is sympathetic to knowledge transfer, with the occasional eureka moment thrown in for good measure.

However, this perhaps is the popularised myth, to begin to contemplate the question establishing a prevailing interpretation of the term 'teacher' is required. The teacher's activities go beyond the realms of the classroom, seminar group or one to one. Contemporary teaching is arguably a uniquely composite occupation, by that I mean, when considering the teacher, we are no longer engaged in the sole activity of teaching, that is assuming we ever were. The teacher's role is multi-layered, multi skilled and simultaneously responsible for many aspects of learning, quality assurance, legislation, inclusive of budgetary responsibilities and peripheral pressures that arguably have very little to do with the activity of teaching.

For that reason, the term 'teacher' requires repositioning, what makes a good HE teacher, the individual who can specialise, and educate whilst juggling the many roles and professions that, the modern-day teacher is required to perform. **Therefore, for me a good HE teacher is someone who facilitates a learning culture that students can respond to** a multitude of awe-inspiring rhetoric exists via books and within the internet, which celebrates the magnificence of teaching. Whilst teaching undoubtedly stimulates the imagination and great debate, the profession creates its own identity and myths, teachers are undeniably passionate, creative and gifted in communication methods that encourage students to learn. Whilst the aforementioned qualities to some extent are common traits amongst most teachers, there is now however, performance categories - what society defines as 'good' or 'bad' teaching, with the latter needing fixing, or eliminating? It is equally apparent that bad teaching exists; otherwise, there would be

no need to instruct teachers to develop their existing practice and skills, in order to become 'good' (New Labour, 2003). Whilst this paper accepts the need for sharing practice and development, and that, a significant amount of research into conventional teaching has identified good and bad practice, subsequently informing the profession as to weaknesses and strengths, I would like to argue that through a personal experience of teaching, or empirical research, life and teaching are inherently more complex than a simple 'good' or 'bad' analogy.

Nevertheless, all teachers have a particular philosophy¹; one normally based in a requirement to be good, no one wants to be a bad teacher. Therefore, as teachers we largely obsess about our performance, we question around a set of learned values, good practice guides and recommendations.

When considering the work of Biggs (2003) teaching and learning methods and approaches, inclusive of other employment responsibilities requires a particular skill and energy not always considered by educational theorists. Therefore, the contemporary HE teacher approaches education armed with what went before, whilst supplementing his/her teaching tool kit with new ideas and approaches, which in theory educate and engage students in the modern classroom environment.

The New Labour agenda which now places additional responsibilities upon institutions and teachers, assumes that through dispensing participation responsibilities, setting targets and investing in awareness schemes for the educationally disadvantaged, the social barriers

¹ *Philosophy of Teaching Statement* Robert M. Anthony, Graduate Teaching Associate Department of Sociology, Winner of the Graduate Associate Teaching Award: <http://ftad.osu.edu/portfolio/philosophy/anthony.html> and Henry Jay Becker Margaret M Rei Teaching Learning and Computing: 1998 National Survey, Report 7 Center for Research on Information Technology and Organizations University of California, Irvine and University of Minnesota December 2000

that have previously excluded them will be overcome. The simple assumption is that once the less socially mobile sections of society engage in HE thus replenishing the workforce then the social injustice that society itself creates will be eradicated. This analogy assumes HE teaching can alter the social conditions that create inequality in the first place, a top down philosophy which places unrealistic conditions upon teaching staff.

Consequently, the focus is toward industry, entrepreneurialism, social inclusion and expansion, becoming 'bigger and better' than our competitors, comparable to any other UK industry, and industry being the optimum word. Whilst this 'vision' (Blair, 1998) of the future has credibility and promotes social inclusion, a criticism traditionally levelled at Universities was that, historically University education has excluded those from the poorest sections of society (White Paper, 2003); therefore, inclusion is a righteous pursuit that few would decry.

However, there is very little debate about the effects upon teaching practices that are arguably already fatigued. The renewed focus is toward retraining, and assimilating teachers into a different system by means of skills enhancement. Whilst this may be a positive move for teaching, it is apparent; the working lives of teachers are becoming inherently more complex.

Experiencing greater demands than ever before, in some cases fewer resources with greater responsibility. A University led entrepreneurial culture means, do more with less; it is within 'this environment' the good HE teacher endeavours to encourage understanding, inspire learning and educate students.

It is unfeasible to discuss teaching and what makes a teacher good without considering the

environment and culture we practice within, this largely dictates how we perform. Moreover, whilst strategy can be applied to counter a shift in culture, what makes a good HE teacher good? My philosophy is as follows, if I can inspire and fan the flames of learning, encourage students to question, and open doors that learners can move through, and make possible a spirit that craves understanding, and during the process develop a knowledge of who they are, well that is what I consider makes a HE teacher good.

Completing the LTHE allowed for a significant exploration of my practice, journeying through assessment strategies, and applying theory creatively within the music discipline. Nonetheless the question always returned, defining my approach and affirming the purpose, accompanying me toward my independent research paper. Consequently, investigating contemporary HE in context of the issues discussed through the first task became the focal point. Thus creating an overall theme that linked 'what is a good HE teacher' to, 'HE what is it good for?' Moreover, the final paper explores the purposes of education in the knowledge economy, drawing on the work of educational scholars like Illich (1971) and Peters (2007).

The purpose of the follow up paper was, to research how government intervention in HE has affected the teaching role. There are numerous reports and research papers² that delve into countless subjects that focus on learning change and the value of education. However, very little research examines governmental reform introduced during the last ten years, from a perspective of, how those reforms have affected the role and working lives of HE teachers.

² *New Ways of Learning - New Ways of Teaching* journal article by Mary K. Heuwinkel; *Childhood Education*, Vol 73, 1996 and Biggs, J. (1999) *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* (pp.165-203). Buckingham: SRHE and OU Press

The contemporary teacher is arguably experiencing significant change; the teaching role as it is understood, or perceived has certainly progressed and in some may argue improved. However, in an era of mounting responsibility, accountability and structural renewal, what new demands has change imposed upon the teaching role? My follow up research paper initially outlined the history behind government legislation, by investigating New Labour's rationale for reform; nonetheless it was not possible to examine the entire history. Moreover, the research in some respects is a snapshot of significant moments that relate to effects upon the role of teaching. Secondly, a series of interviews of teachers currently working in HE informed the paper. All interviews were conducted independently of each other, the purpose being to avoid interviewees being influenced by the opinions colleagues may express, and thereby adopting that opinion. The interviews were directed by a series of questions designed to obtain opinion, questions that relate to roles, teaching, and how reforms have affected the working lives of teachers, positively or otherwise.

Whilst many forewarn and foster debate about the current trends in HE or contest the changes going on around them, it is apparent to those engaged in delivering the reforms New Labour introduced that transformation is already upon us. Problems faced by academic staff in 'maintaining standards' when faced with increasing student numbers and under funding are currently being raised (Times Higher Education, 2008). Attributing the increasing pressures on academic staff to the 'rise of mass higher education', or alternatively the debate at Bristol University, whereby there is disparity regarding the allocation of contact hours, with Dentistry students receiving 20-hours per week as opposed to History students receiving 5 (Times Higher Education, 2008). What is

apparent, students are demanding value for money as predicted by Biggs (2003), and according to the Times Higher Education (2008) that value is perceived 'in hours and the type of teaching they [students] receive (ibid, 2008).

The intention of the research paper was to think locally, examining the day to day, as well as focusing on additional pressures reforms have placed upon the teacher. When considering the wider it is evident the effects go beyond rudimentary notions of locality. Higher Education has changed significantly, and will continue to change, and therefore prompts a new question, what will the university educator of the future look like.

Concerns alluded to in the paper, reflect the working realities faced by lecturers and course leaders from three universities, and whilst it does not claim to represent the sector in its entirety, keeping abreast of journals and educational news are enough to highlight emerging problems in HEIs. Moreover, when considering the experiences of said changes by the research participants it could be argued the reforms, in part, are negatively affecting the teaching and the teaching role.

All participants discussed the erosion of working conditions, brought about through their university's attempts to grapple with legislation, funding issues, Quality Assurance Agency, expansion, widening participation, and industry relevant curriculum designed to create a product that is attractive to the customer. Consequently, contemporary teaching encompasses a multitude of responsibilities and accountabilities, arguably without the autonomy fostered through independent research, with some universities stating academic research is not part of their purpose, declaring themselves solely vocational. My paper suggests HE is moving towards fragmentation, the two tier system with some

universities becoming vocationally focused, whilst others research focused. Moreover, that economics and the education individuals can afford may affect the type of employment that can be accessed, reinforcing the inequality reforms were designed to address.

Whilst reform is arguably right, and aspiring to educate a people a venerable cause, restructuring HE to suit performance values dictated by market forces, raises profound questions concerning both education and its purpose. The environment that teachers now occupy, for some, is no longer concerned with the pursuit of knowledge, 'knowing why', but driven towards a hunt for finance, national benchmarks and industry recognisable quality. Operating similar to any business, using the language of business, producing skill commodities consumed through privatised educational utilities, and ultimately moving toward an education like water, on tap, anytime anywhere. Whilst for the teacher it would seem, arguably the most valuable of commodities, enduring layer upon layer of additional responsibility, their concerns go unnoticed, unheard, while policy-makers and managerial aspirants peruse the righteous road to transformed.

So just what is a good HE teacher?

Critique of the assessment method

In the above example we see one response to the assessment question set. Each answer to this question is unique. As perhaps expected participants on the course, although, drawn from university staff can exhibit the same aspects of any group of HE students. Some do view the undertaking of the assessment very strategically. They wish to view model answers and may submit just enough work in order to pass this particular element.

Each cohort contains a variety of staff. All of them are 'student facing' meaning having some role in helping students learn. Their different job

roles, in the main, enhance the variety of perspectives during the sessions.

They include technicians; skills support officers as well as more traditional lecturing staff. The diversity of roles reflects the changing nature of HE that Keith refers to. Many have come to the course willingly; some having to persuade, very determinedly, their line management that this will be useful to them. Small percentages are coming to this reluctantly, but it is safe to say that all have particular predetermined viewpoints on what the course represents as an institutional device, and what it will mean to them on an individual level. They will also have expectations on what will be involved, how useful it will be to them personally and what level of commitment they have to it.

Some learning support staff come to the course having had to fight to be allowed to attend. It is usually regarded as not necessary, although more recently there has been a change. Some levels of management in have been more supportive recognising the benefits of such a programme to the overall student experience.

We have not directly explored (as a programme team) the reasons why there has been this change in management. For this paper, we will hypothesise that this is the beginning of a different recognition of the role that support teams play in learning and teaching practice.

Obviously this group benefit greatly from the course, the deeper understanding allows them to conceptualise and deliver their teaching duties to a high level.

Some of these participants tend to struggle with some of the more academic aspects of the course. Many are graduates and or have worked in industry. They are all highly qualified in their particular skill and have a significant tacit understanding of how people learn.

It is inescapable that the process of engaging with the course will cause this group to reassess what it is that they are doing. Not just in terms of how they teach and encourage learning, but their wider role in delivery. Many are subjugated by the academic staff from any level of input into assessment design and practice and more formal aspects of delivery. There are many social, cultural and structural reasons for this subjugation not least financial and contractual. These can't be explored within the limits of this paper. Needless to say, this subjugation leads to different levels of frustration for some course participants.

All participants on the course have a level of agency within their working environment. Some may control modules or programmes and work within supportive management structures giving them autonomy to change large aspects of these. The support teams however will know from experience the effective levels of agency available to them.

The term '*agency*' in sociology refers to the amount and range of action an individual or group can make within their social environment (Bilton, 1996). The idea is explored within academic life by Land (2001) and most recently by Canaan and Shumar (2008).

Rogers (2003) and Aldrich (1979) explore the process by which change develops and is transmitted within organisations. They see organisations as live organisms in a Darwinian evolutionary environment. In order for them to prosper they need to adapt to the changing environment. The levels of agency at both an individual and group level predict the amount of innovation that can be produced by the organisation. The process is over simplified here but the point is that structured organisations that suppress agency can miss out on discovering beneficial improvements that are '*alive*' rather than calcified.

Conclusion and final thoughts

Asking all participants to explore "*what is a good HE teacher*" may disadvantage those participants who are in the roles discussed above. Keith, for a variety of reasons including the broad role he has at LIPA, was able to turn the question around, critique it and use it as a basis for the remaining assessment tasks on the LTHE. Others may adopt a more literal and strategic approach providing an answer drawn from the plethora of literature about good teaching rather than challenging the underlying sub text. The programme team needs to continually review the method to ensure that it is appropriate and inclusive. The course also needs to continue to improve its profile and status so that all line managers recognise the benefits to their staff and subsequently the student experience.

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