INDEPENDENT
THINKING
ON …

TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

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CHAPTER 1
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 picture. 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 contain 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 (lecturers, 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 prac-

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

tical 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).

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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 pur-pose. 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 bas-ketball 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 struc-tured 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 manuals) suggests with 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

best way of teaching a topic alongside what you think is the best way for your students to learn it.

REMEMBERING INFORMATION IS NOT THE SAME AS USING INFORMATION

Our personal learning experiences often guide how we see our teaching role. Our own teachers may have had a preference for deductive over inductive pedagogy. They may have been inspirational individuals who could capture the attention of their students. They may have been firm but fair. They may have been quiet as a mouse and let the class run riot. Our teachers' pedagogy may have been very obvious to us at the time, such that we might now wish to replicate their teaching style. Or it may be that we were never really aware of their approach to teaching, but we have been immersed in it and now feel that is just the way it is done.

Once we have started to understand why we might be conditioned to teach in a particular way, and considered the different ways we each conceptualise learning, we can begin to do something about it. Through understanding our various pedagogical and personal biases we can start to identify our own previous blind spots. These might include the inability to see the difference between *teaching* and *telling*. This can come about through misremembering our own learning – focusing on the facts, figures and formulas that we now know rather than focusing on how our teachers helped us to learn this information.

Another related blind spot is recognising the difference between *knowledge* and *understanding*. When beginning a teaching career in higher education, many people take a content-led approach. They ask questions such as, 'What do the students need to know?' or 'What is the best order in which to organise the materials?' The reason we ask these questions is because we want to make sure we have fully informed the students, which is terrific. However, by focusing on knowledge retention, rather than on how the students make sense of this new knowledge, we can become overly focused on telling rather than teaching. The trouble with simply seeing learning as a list of information to be remembered is that effective learning involves understanding, and to support this teachers need to make sure that their students are involved in active learning so that they might assimilate this information. Abstract information that is merely 'passed on' to students might not make sense, and if it does not make sense then they are likely to ignore it and move on to other matters. The content-led approach might be time efficient – in that teachers can ensure that everything on the curriculum has been transferred to the students – but unless they are guided to understand this new information, there is a chance that everyone's time has, in fact, been wasted. It is important to think about what we want our students to know, but we also need to consider the processes of learning and of making sense of new material.

Engagement means being involved and interested. Sometimes we learn because we are passionate about something, but this is not always the case. If our students are passionate learners, then our choice of teaching method is less important because they are already driven to learn. It is when our students are not so focused that our teaching choices become even more important. If we move beyond thinking about learning as 'stuff to be

remembered' we can support both of these groups. Students who are passionate about a subject will be further invigorated if they can engage with the material in a way that is meaningful and enhances their critical abilities, and students who are not quite so switched on will have the chance to be challenged if they are presented with new approaches, rather than being asked to do the same old thing but with the expectation of a different outcome.

Without challenge and a focus on critical thinking, teaching in higher education can become content driven and (probably) dull. This is not to say that asking students to be active in their learning will automatically lead to better educational outcomes, but doing and learning are clearly linked. The question for those of us who teach in higher education should be: 'What will I ask students to do in order for them to become critical with the topic?' 'Teaching' is a verb but so is 'learning' – they both involve being active. It is the responsibility of those who teach to create an environment where activities are organised to inspire and stimulate. Our students are clever people; they will become bored and disillusioned if we stick within the norms of our signature pedagogies.

WHAT IS THE POINT OF HIGHER EDUCATION?

As well as attempting to conceptualise their own role, those who teach in higher education might also take a step back and examine what they see as the purpose of higher education. Some might consider their role to be about the transmission of knowledge, some might see themselves as the co-creators of knowledge and others will have a less formulated conception. Many people

assume they know what the word 'education' means and what it is, but do we all share the same definition or is this another beetle in a box?

Different schools of thought have sprung up around education but two of the most prominent are traditional and progressive teaching. Traditionalists believe that education should be about teaching for specific or extrinsic aims, often concerned with an individual's function or role in society. All the desks face forward and the person at the front of the room is there to instruct. The students work in silence and they raise their hands to answer questions, not to ask them. Within higher education, the students are taught answers, not processes. Traditional education is about raising individuals who will work for the common good.

In contrast, progressive thinkers believe that education should be about enlightenment, that it has broad aims and is intrinsically worthwhile, that it is about enabling students to grow and meet their true potential. Progressive higher education is connected with self-development, self-fulfilment, self-actualisation and supporting the various aspects of an individual that make them unique.

Both approaches have positives and negatives. Traditional education focuses on developing systems of doing, so it is often criticised for being routine or even boring. However, it is less likely to be corrupted by ideals and is more likely to lead to student employment. Progressive education aims to develop systems of thought that are open-ended and personal. However, if we encourage people to think for themselves, then we must be ready for them to draw conclusions that we may not like.

Beyond all this, we might wish to consider what our students want from education. Attending higher education to learn to be a lawyer, film-maker or economist might

involve some narrow activities during which first principles and key skills are taught. Many students appreciate this tangible learning. Others might want to be stretched, to feel inspired and to grow as thinkers. The truth is probably somewhere in-between: students want to learn facts, figures, theories and formulas, but they also want to develop critical thinking skills. This blend of knowledge and understanding will initially make them more employable, but it will also support them to feel able to define their own career path later on. It is the responsibility of those who teach in higher education to support this development, rather than try to impose their own understanding of the nature and role of knowledge – their epistemological perspective. One of the first tasks in higher education teaching, therefore, involves personally negotiating what higher education is, trying to be cognisant of what others might think higher education is, learning to position yourself within this context, and working out how to create a system of learning that does not just repeat the previous system because we can't think of anything better to do.

UNDERSTANDING THE IDENTITIES OF THOSE WHO TEACH AND THOSE WHO LEARN

Humans are social beings who gather together for mutual support, safety and stimulation. Students and those who teach them are also social beings grouped in our own unique ways. These groups are likely to be formed through common interests, needs or desires and created in a socially organic manner. They are also enhanced by identification within a field, such that new professors of English tend to think and act in the same ways as the aged mem-

bers of their departments. Geologists congregate with other geologists, all thinking geologically. Physicists orbit each other and form specific connections. Those teaching media studies learn to speak through the language of the image.

The philosopher Julian Baggini discusses such groups of people as 'hefts': social groups that are formed through shared ways of being. The term 'heft' comes from the Cumbrian farming practice whereby sheep are not fenced in but learn through the habits of older sheep not to leave their territory:

A heft is the unfenced area sheep learn to keep themselves within. This was originally taught to them by shepherds, but as time goes by, they pass it on to each other and need no shepherding. Sheep who learn this are called hefted, and in much the same way, so are people. Their territorial boundaries are more complicated and flexible, but they too rarely stray beyond them, without a shepherd, even though there are no fences keeping them in. Individualism is a great myth. All that has really happened is that we have dispensed with the sheepdogs and have become hefted.[5]

The codes of a specific heft are shared through transmitted patterns of behaviours (memes) whereby concepts are passed from person to person and replicated at a conscious and unconscious level. Baggini discusses hefts in relation to the socio-cultural identity of adults, but nowhere is the hefting of humans more obvious than in late adolescence and early adulthood – the stage when many are ready to enter higher education. Codes are developed through behaviour, ritual and expression and provide students with a social context which offers safety, codes of being and a place to be themselves. From all this we see

5   J. Baggini, *Welcome to Everytown: A Journey Into the English Mind* (London: Granta, 2008), p. 150.

that a student's identity is constructed by their experiences. Understanding student identity, and understanding how those who teach in higher education develop their own hefted identities, can help us to see that teaching and learning are not objective activities that are undertaken in a social vacuum. Teaching and learning in higher education are very human activities, so thinking about students as individuals who are constantly being invented and reinvented by their circumstances can help us to develop a pedagogy that is based in the realities of being human. Once we start to explore the codes that make us who we are, we can begin to teach in a way that considers how a person might receive a piece of information.

HEFTED SUCCESS

Success is not only a measure of output and it is not always judged externally by educators, through exams, grades and so on. Some hefts will have broad goals and some might embrace nihilistic ambitions; either way, the group will have a general idea of what being successful means to them. These goals will cover hefted expectations of fitting in and hefted targets of what is expected of an individual (in and out of higher education). Gaining approval from others and being part of something bigger seems to offer a certain cachet and is a visual signal that you have been accepted. As educators, we might hope that crossing the threshold into higher education would consist of entry into a new heft – that of 'student'. But hefting is not a rapid process, so those who enter higher education to study will take time to feel that they belong in the student heft.

Ryan suggests that there are three ways that students are influenced by their kindred peers: information exchange,

modelling behaviours and the reinforcement of norms and values.[6] These interactions influence individual heft members as they instinctively mirror and counterfeit the actions, speech and expectations of other members. Different hefts influence and reinforce different definitions of success, set out through social interactions within the group, and while these definitions will still need to be balanced against an individual's desire to get a good degree and earn a good living, they are still at play during much of the learning experience itself.

The difficulty within higher education is that outcomes tend to be tightly prescribed and the institutional definition of success tends to be tied to academic attainment. Higher education is suited to the delivery of specific outcomes – such as degrees, certificates, diplomas and doctorates – which are quantitatively assessed. The pressure on those who teach in higher education is therefore to get students to complete their studies with the best qualification possible, rather than to consider the worth of the learning experience. However, students' learning journeys tend to be more nuanced than this would suggest. They might be navigating personal, social and/or financial problems. They might be trying to fit in with new peers. They might be experiencing love for the first time (or being heart-broken for the first time). All of this is part of their wider learning experience and will impact on their studies, but very little of this is taken into account by the higher education institution itself.

It can seem weird that, after working hard to earn the right to enter higher education, some students seem to switch off. Many early career lecturers imagine that their students will be highly organised, focused and driven to be success-

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6   A. M. Ryan, Peer Groups as a Context for the Socialization of Adolescents' Motivation, Engagement, and Achievement in School. *Educational Psychologist*, 25(2) (2000): 101–111.

ful. But the fact is that education is only one aspect of a student's personhood and they will be maintaining many identities and balancing many roles. Students may choose to go into higher education but their background will continue to affect them once they enter. Some young people might feel like imposters in an institution that is not really for them. This might be based on socio-economics, family background or previous educational experiences. The fact that all students who enter higher education have got there on merit is hard for some people to accept because they have been impacted by various elements in their lives to feel about themselves in a certain way. Those who teach in higher education should not be blind to differences that present themselves: between students and their peers, between students and staff. Difference is not something we should try to get over; it needs to be valued.

It is very hard for those teaching in higher education to counter students' established life narratives, but one of the starting points is not to feel that our own story is a blueprint for others. Those of us who become teachers have been lucky in our educational lives. Not necessarily from the start – this 'luck' probably hasn't come without effort and sacrifice – but as we enter higher education, ready to teach others, we find ourselves in a very privileged position. But my educational journey is personal to me – it has been affected by a number of specific factors and so it is not easily generalisable.

When a colleague says something like, 'When I was their age ...' I tend to roll my eyes. If there was one easy answer to any of our problems, then none of us would have problems. Those who teach in higher education have been successful but the methodology of our success may not be universal. Perhaps the key lesson is to realise that our students may not have had any interaction with the factors that have guided us, so instead of expecting them to

follow the same route we did, we need to understand their actual circumstances and work to establish how we might best help them. We can think of this as a person-centred pedagogy, where we place the individual at the centre of their own learning and work with them to identify the skills they need to develop in order to best access learning.

HEFTED EXPECTATIONS

Individual expectations of success (self-efficacy) allow students to judge their likely ability to perform a task. This personal perspective is influenced by a number of situational variables, and one of the most significant in strengthening efficacy is provided by socially similar others.[7] Here we find heft members influencing the validity of a fellow heftee's beliefs through displays of attitudes and attributes. Bandura reports that the impact of others on 'beliefs of personal efficacy is strongly influenced by perceived similarity to the models. The greater the assumed similarity, the more persuasive.'[8] When it comes to self-efficacy, it makes sense for students to compare themselves to other students who share their code of being rather than staff. This is the underpinning value of group work: not simply to get a task done, but for students to learn from each other about alternate ways of thinking and completing a task.

The modelled behaviours of fellow heft members affect a student's beliefs about whether they are capable (or incapable) of meeting the expectations of the curriculum or

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7   See D. H. Schunk, Self-Efficacy and Academic Motivation. *Educational Psychologist*, 26(3–4) (1991): 207–231.

8   A. Bandura, Exercise of Personal and Collective Efficacy in Changing Societies. In A. Bandura (ed.) *Self-Efficacy in Changing Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 1–45 at p. 3.

the learning outcomes of a seminar. This could lead to two main outcomes: either the student might find that their perspective is shared by significant others and is thus validated, or they might discover that other heft members hold alternative perspectives and they may be influenced by these views. An example of this might be a heft member who originally believes that she can't perform a task being convinced that it is, after all, possible by observing a fellow heft member accomplish the same task. (This example shows a positive outcome of increased self-efficacy through interaction with a socially significant other, but the converse is also just as likely.)

The current curricular measure of success in higher education is defined through end-point grades and degree classification. However, because of their past experiences and their present-day situations, some students will not be able to attain the highest degrees. Even with hard work and dedication, their individual circumstances might work against them. Therefore, the institutional definition of success is bound to let some people down: if all students were to embrace this narrow idea of success, then we would have many individuals essentially agreeing to work hard within a system that will eventually label them as underachieving (which is just another word for failure). Why would someone agree to join such a system? Surely, it is better for an individual's self-esteem to set targets that are achievable and specific to their own interests. Luckily, while not all students will graduate with a 2:1 or first-class degree, they should still be able to leave higher education feeling satisfied that, despite the odds, they have achieved something important.

It is not just academic 'underachievers' who might find it difficult to sign up to the curricular model of success. Many talented students become disaffected by the curriculum, and their passion for their subject is diminished as it

starts to grate against a narrow target-driven syllabus. Hefts don't suffer this restricted consideration of success: within a heft there is a social dynamic and individuals can be part of the process of constructing a model that sets its own unique outcomes, and since the social dynamic of any group is always in flux such targets are rarely rigid and often intangible. Unlike the institutional model of success, which is imposed on students and leads to certain failure for some, peers within a heft can develop a model of achievement for all members of the group. Thus, a student can have a rich and satisfying experience in higher education by using the available resources to develop individual projects outside their taught course. For example, a student might learn sufficient business skills to become an entrepreneur and only use the institution as a de facto office space, or they might become engaged with a political group or drop out because they have been offered a recording contract.

THERE ARE NO SIMPLE ANSWERS

A higher education institution is one of the few places that different hefts (student and teacher) come together under one roof, but it does not have a single identity and is made up of a collection of hefts. Within higher education we see subject-specific hefts where, for example, the codes of the history department might not reflect those of the biology department. These codes are exposed through geographic location, models of discipline, classroom displays, ethos and academic success rates. These departmental identities draw specific student hefts to specific subjects, which only serve to augment the departmental identity. McKinnon suggests that 'we are all thrice hefted, inti-

mately immersed in environment, social relations and our own physicality and subjectivity'.[9] The fragmented nature of a higher educational institution emphasises these per-sonalised situational factors.

Students are not alone in belonging to specific groups and many older groups also exhibit specific characteristics.[10] Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that those who teach in higher education are also members of various hefts. Ultimately, there are a range of student hefts with a range of expectations. These hefts find themselves learning in an environment that is hefted by subjects which are taught by individuals who are influenced by their own past and present hefts. All this takes place within a framework that offers only a narrow definition of success. When we consider that all this occurs in a context of hormones, relationships, new beginnings, debt and growing personal responsibility, it is surprising that students, by and large, do as well as they do. But is there more that can be done to support these hefted individuals?

Clearly, since we are dealing with human beings, there is no simple answer and no magic wand. Being hefted is not a bad thing – fitting in with a group of similar people can be a fantastic feeling. The difficulty arises when a heft finds itself in an environment that does not share its ideas, ideals or expectations. Perhaps, in an effort to address how we might support hefted individuals, we should start by considering what students want from higher education. Instead of focusing on uniformity of outcome, higher edu-cation institutions could concentrate on the need for students to feel that their goals are worthy. The hefted

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9   K. M. McKinnon, Adoration of the Mystic Lamb. In C. Gigliotti (ed.), *Leonardo's Choice: Genetic Technologies and Animals* (London: Springer, 2009), pp. 215–234 at p. 231.

10 See L. A. Gavin and W. Furman, Age Difference in Adolescents' Perceptions of Their Peer Groups. *Developmental Psychology*, 25(5) (1989): 827–834 at 827.

nature of higher education means that it is possible to offer support across a wide range of interests, both curricular and extra-curricular. Some student hefts will be drawn to photography or drama; some will enjoy sport, art, craft or design; some will wish to volunteer in the local community; some will want to be MCs or DJs. None of these goals should be seen as being 'outside' of higher education and none of these goals should be considered any more or less valuable than academic success. Higher education institutions are ideally placed to enhance students' self-efficacy, but there is a need for a philosophical change in the criteria for success. Instead of narrow institutional data-driven outcomes being imposed on students, we might consider a model of higher education that allows students to feel successful because they have achieved in the areas that are important to them.

Teaching in higher education is not just about what happens in the classroom or lecture hall. It is also about understanding the role we have in enhancing someone's future. Some development will be academic and some will be social – both matter! Teaching in higher education means reflecting on our role as conduits of knowledge and as co-creators of understanding. The curriculum is often planned with a generic student in mind, but, like all of us, students are complicated individuals. It is not possible for us to teach *every* student according to their needs, but it is possible to appreciate that there is a range of student needs out there. In practice, this means getting to know your students as individuals, learning about the lives of as many students as possible, listening to 'excuses' without assuming they are playing the game, and constantly reflecting on how your students will learn rather than what you will teach.

When you start teaching in a new higher education institution, you only have a couple of years before you start to

fit in. This has its pros and cons. It is reassuring when you work out the ins and outs of your role, when you build good relationships with colleagues, when you start to know your way around institutional policies and proce-dures, and when you feel like your teaching is making a difference. The downside is that you stop asking questions about your environment. If we place ourselves in our stu-dents' shoes, however, we quickly learn that they are asking questions of the higher education environment all the time, and each new cohort enters higher education with their own questions. Fitting in takes us further from the student experience and further from understanding how they might be negotiating this new environment. In order to counter our own institutionalisation, we need to try and see the world through the eyes of our students – talking to them, listening to what they have to say, valuing their perspectives.

It is important to question everything and to move away from the idea that simply because we teach something, then it will be learned. Learning is an active meaning-mak-ing process which is undertaken through a hefted framework of understanding. If our teaching practice is based on a model of simply passing on information, then we ignore the unique qualities of our students. It is essen-tial that we help them to understand the literature, theories and first principles of our subject, but in order to create new knowledge (one of the core jobs of higher edu-cation), we also need to ask them to filter this through their own experiences by giving them learning activities that challenge them to make sense of facts in relation to their own perspective.

THREE CHALLENGES

1 **Try to see the world through the students' perspective.** When you enter an empty classroom try sitting in some student chairs. Are the chairs comfy? Will the light be shining in their eyes? Will they be able to see their classmates? Will they have a good view of the board you will be working on? Seeing the world through their eyes is a two-part process: it will involve understanding their outlook on life and learning, and understanding their everyday lived experiences. Put yourself in their shoes mentally and physically and try to gain some insight into what learning looks like from their perspective, rather than conceptualising learning as something emitted from the front of the room. Try to remember how different your world is from that of your students. Teaching is much more than the transmission of knowledge. Your job is to inspire, intrigue, motivate, initiate, facilitate and celebrate. Taking time out to sit where they sit and imagine what their experience of learning might feel like may help you to develop a sense of kinship. Rather than regarding students as the recipients of wisdom, aim to consider them as active co-conspirators in the development of knowledge.

2 **Try to focus on the learning process rather than the teaching process.** Instead of asking, 'What will *I* teach?', try asking, 'What will *they* learn?' This simple twist will help to keep you focused on the importance of student engagement. For proactive, on-task and interacting students, focus on helping them to develop critical thinking skills rather than simply throwing facts at them. If teaching is overly deductive then students won't get a chance to make sense of things from their own perspective. Remember that

learning is a verb – a doing word. Instead of telling students that they need to know something, try giving them three positive reasons for learning it. Try to make sure that your students are active learners rather than passive recipients. Our job is not to simply tell students facts and figures but to give them the skills to pick apart the information we share with them – so don't stuff your class full of content. In the age of the internet, facts and figures are less important than skills, attitudes and critical thinking. If we cut down on teacher-talk we might leave more space for learning. When teachers talk less, students talk more. Teachers who focus on providing content reduce student autonomy because they learn to constantly refer back to the teacher for the 'right' answer.

3 **Try to be measured in the amount of learning support you offer.** When you over-help someone they can become over-reliant on you. Consider under-helping your students – making them work for it. When we spoon-feed information to students, we do the work for them. We rob them of the benefits of rigorous learning. We rob them of effort. We rob them of productive struggle. We rob them of opportunities to develop grit, perseverance and resilience. Give students support, but also give them challenge and let them find their own answers. Instead of showing students how to do something, ask them to discover three possible ways to do it. Then ask them to work together with their peers to find the 'best' way. It is more important for students to think about questions than simply recite their teacher's answer. Students need to be reminded that it is okay to try new approaches and that making mistakes is an important part of learning. Education is not the gift of knowledge, it's the gift of enquiry. Getting students

active and interactive increases the likelihood of engagement and helps them to take ownership of their own learning. So, fight the urge to intervene. Stay in the background – ready to support when needed – and focus on giving the students problems to work through for themselves.

LITTLE NUGGETS OF WISDOM

TEACHING

- The 'right' pedagogy is the one that is right for your students.

- Pedagogy isn't simply how you teach; it's how you think about the movement from 'knowing something' to 'knowing more'.

- Part of your job is to make difficult knowledge seem achievable with effort.

- Successful learning is not just about a student's commitment to learn; it's also about your commitment to give them something worth learning.

- You are not teaching if no one is learning

LEARNING

- There is a huge conceptual difference between 'the students in my class' and 'the learning in my class'.

- Learning and knowing are not the same thing – and nor are teaching and telling.

- Students may not be well versed in pedagogy but they know innately many critical things about what supports the learning process.

- All student tasks have two outcomes: what was found (the answer) and what was learned (the skills developed as a result of doing the task). Focus on the latter.

- Everything in education is in the present continuous tense: nothing will ever be truly *learned* as we are all still learning. Students won't suddenly just become autonomous learners – they need us to create an environment of empowerment.

KNOWING

- Knowledge isn't black and white – it's grey. Anyone who claims to know the full answer is deluded. Anyone who claims to know nothing is also wrong.

- Try not to mistake 'knowing what' for 'knowing how'. And remember that real learning involves 'knowing why'.

- In the best classrooms everyone feels comfortable enough to admit to not knowing the answer to a question.

- Never assume that you are the cleverest person in the room. Whether you are teaching 5-year-olds or 50-year-olds, there is always a nugget of wisdom waiting to be discovered.

- Abstract knowledge isn't much use without the development of skills and understanding.