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# Where are they now? In their own words: The impact of taught PGCerts accredited by Advance HE on staff learning and teaching practice and progression

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## Introduction

Research from the last twenty-five years demonstrates an established international precedent for assessing the impact of training courses. These are generally Postgraduate Certificates, such as the University Certificate in Academic Practice (UCAP) and Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP) offered at Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU), on the pedagogic practices of teachers in Higher Education. Numerous studies, including large-scale cross-institutional reviews have shown that the approach taken by higher education teachers affects their students' approach to learning, with a student-centred facilitative approach more likely to engender deep learning and lifelong learning skills (Trigwell *et al.*, 1999). Mulholland *et al.* (2022) highlight the significance of PGCAP courses in enhancing reflective practice and challenging imposter syndrome as well as building communities of practice.

Separately, we also wanted to identify if the UKPSF had had an impact on staff performance and development, given the findings of the Higher Education Academy (2013) which found that the impact was significant for staff in terms of aspiration, underpinning of promotion and probation policy and new ways to promote and discuss learning and teaching practice. By contrast, Van der Sluis (2023) argues that HEA Fellowships are perceived by academic staff as serving managerial rather than academic priorities. So how did our staff feel given the opportunity to voice their thoughts in an anonymous setting?

## Background

At CCCU, as is the case in many higher education institutions in the UK, the UCAP (6-month certificate awarding AHEA) and PGCAP (15-month certificate awarding FHEA) courses are mandatory for all teaching staff with fewer than three years' teaching experience in higher education. While we get good feedback and staff comment on what they have learned while on the course, we wanted to establish what the impact of our taught courses was on teachers' skills and practice in supporting learning (Gibbs and Coffey, 2004) and the impact on confidence and competence of educators (Postareff and Lindblom-Ylänne, 2011). Ahead of course

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review and re-accreditation in 2024, we wanted to ensure we had as much feedback as possible from CCCU staff who had completed their UCAP and PGCAP studies with us since our previous re-accreditation. This felt essential to inform any changes and to decide what elements of best practice we keep in place.

## Method

We identified staff who had completed the UCAP and PGCAP since our 2020 course re-accreditation and who were still in post at CCCU. We had wanted to use a mixed methods approach but were not successful in getting staff to agree to interviews in time for this study and we will be issuing further invitations to participate in both surveys and questionnaires. However, we had 27 survey responses as well as 12 sets of Course Review and 15 sets of Module Review feedback to draw upon and this has already revealed several positive or negative areas that we can work with. We divided findings into key themes and have provided quotes from the surveys and feedback. The surveys were designed in collaboration with our Quality Standards Office ethics team to ensure best practice, phrase questions clearly and unambiguously and consider where to place more sensitive questions in the questionnaire. We recognise that this is not a generalisable sample but wanted to share the findings so that they might inform others in the planning and delivery of PG Certificates in Learning and Teaching.

## Findings: Listening and responding to feedback from staff who studied with us on the UCAP or PGCAP, Part 1, positives

We had a wide range of positive feedback covering enhanced practice, promotion or other opportunities for advancement and improved engagement with their own students, leading to better feedback on modular, course and even National Student Survey levels.

**Personal gains**

There was recognition of clear gains in terms of career enhancement and new responsibilities or opportunities for both the course and the Advance HE Fellowship. Staff commented:

*'I have gained new and useful experience mentoring on the UCAP/PGCAP.'*

*'I have wanted to get the FHEA for such a long time. I'm glad I got the opportunity and that it is a portable membership that is recognised internationally so it's really worth having.'*

*'I knew I wanted to get FHEA and was disappointed that I had to take the mandatory PGCAP at first. However, it's good to have the recognised teaching qualification as well and to have got the FHEA this way. I think it helped me get a better understanding of the UKPSF than if I'd had to apply it without the tutors' support.'*

*'Now I have the PGCAP I have more responsibility and am now working towards SFHEA.'*

*'I have had the opportunity to present my work at internal L&T conferences and external events such as Advance HE workshops.'*

*'Gaining the PGCAP and FHEA means I have been promoted to Senior Lecturer.'*

There was also recognition of how methods and practice from the UCAP/ PGCAP enhanced teaching practice:

*'I have seen a positive change in the way I engage with students. I have better attendance, engagement and feedback from students since I completed the UCAP.'*

*'After changing my teaching practice according to best practice modelled on the PGCAP I was awarded a Golden Apple.'* (The Golden Apple Awards are a Students' Union scheme that enables students to reward academic and support staff who exhibit exceptional teaching/support standards or who are particularly inspiring or influential to a student's development).

*'I have really enhanced my confidence e.g. with group work, assessment literacy and knowing how to deal with academic misconduct.'*

*'I have been using my new knowledge and skills to completely overhaul programmes and courses for major or minor modifications, course review and Ofsted preparation on apprenticeships.'*

*'I notice that in general I have enhanced my reflective thinking at all levels of my teaching and in different contexts.'*

*'The NSS data for our course has really improved since we implemented changes we learned about on the UCAP and PGCAP. Students have noticed a difference.'*

Recognition of impact varied between enhanced knowledge, new opportunities, better feedback from their own students as well as higher levels of confidence.

**Enhanced experience**
There was recognition that the UCAP and PGCAP lead to enhanced practice, changes in understanding, and recognition of the value of revising and building on knowledge of learning and teaching practice.

Staff commented:

*'Having done the PGCAP I have a better understanding of concepts and initiatives such as Closing our Gap and Decolonizing the Curriculum and how to apply them in my own courses.'*

*'Originally, I felt doing the course was a tick box activity but actually I learned a lot. I was pushed out of my comfort zone and got to know a lot of colleagues so it's also a networking opportunity.'*

*'I've decided to apply for the Doctorate in Education now, instead of the PhD (I'd intended to do it in my disciplinary field), as I feel so passionate about learning and teaching.'*

Course participants clearly outlined the benefits of the UCAP and PGCAP and could recognise how the course of study leads to enhanced practice, better feedback and self-knowledge.

## Findings: Listening and responding to student feedback, Part 2, negatives or issues

Not everything was positive, which is not unexpected. The mandatory nature of the course can lead to staff studying with us on the UCAP/PGCAP resenting the time they have to spend when they have other duties and interests competing for their time.

**Timetabling and attendance**
Finding the time to attend and engage with the course was a common theme. Staff commented:

*'There is not enough time put aside for the study on this course.'*

*'I had too much teaching and couldn't attend many sessions.'*

*'The tutor tried to get us to start the assessment earlier, but workload is too heavy.'*

*'I found it difficult to juggle marking and other work with the PGCAP.'*

*'I think the course is useful but unfortunately, I missed a lot of sessions.'*

Naturally, these findings require action. The Academic Development team are now working actively with Heads of School and Faculty Directors of Learning and Teaching to spread the word that staff studying on the Academic Practice Certificates have 80 hours per year allocated in the work allocation model. We have also made sure that provisional timetables are available a year in advance so that this can be taken into account for planning. All staff enrolled on the course are sent Outlook calendar invites and when several are declined, we get in touch to find out what is happening and if it would be better for this staff member to start in the next iteration. We also allow attendance of partial sessions and put inclusive opportunities in where possible. For example, where one student would be unable to attend classes because of prescribed immunosuppressants, we have made sure they are able to attend virtually via mobile phone as HyFlex teaching space is extremely limited. Several sessions are delivered online to provide a blended approach, model best practice in teaching in both face-to-face and virtual environments, and to provide respite to staff who can have up to 60- or 70-mile commutes.

**We can't do it ourselves**
Staff often recognised that the UCAP/PGCAP modelled good practice but did not always feel that they had the time or skills to implement the same in their own practice. Sometimes this was because they felt their own students would react differently. Sometimes they felt that class sizes were an issue or that learning and teaching practice in areas such as inclusivity could not be implemented with their own students.

Staff commented:

*'There are a lot of interesting and useful ideas, but I don't have the time to implement change.'*

*'I really liked the activities you did in the assessment section of the course, but it must have taken you ages to prepare. I don't know how you found the time.'*

*'I don't think the UCAP is relevant to me as I only teach postgraduates.'*

*'[My] students don't like studying and don't see the point of a lot of the taught content.'*

*'The course should be more discipline specific.'*

*'All this stuff about inclusive practice is all very well but teachers aren't given time to do that. At the end of the day, it's about bums on seats. Schools should prepare students for university. Teachers don't have time to fix all the problems when they have large classes.'*

These comments revealed how much work we need to do to help staff help themselves. There is now more time put aside specifically for staff who study with us on the UCAP and PGCAP to reflect on how they can apply what has been taught in sessions to their own practice as well as to adapt ideas, information and theories to their own practice. Staff are now paired up with a peer feedback partner so that they have someone to discuss themes, give and get feedback from and also problem solve. Every effort is made to help staff see how they can apply the activities modelled on the UCAP and PGCAP in their own contexts. We stress that themes such as assessment literacy, inclusivity and reflective practice are relevant at all levels of study and should be applied whether your students are at foundation, undergraduate or postgraduate levels of study.

## Conclusion

On the whole, the positive comments outweighed the negative and there is a clear sense that the UCAP and PGCAP courses have a positive impact. This can be seen in improved student feedback, promotion and other opportunities. Where negative comments are made, it is often about areas which are beyond the staff's control such as timetabling, being given time to study or being released from teaching in order to attend taught sessions. Although we record the plenary sections of all sessions and provide flipped learning and asynchronous learning opportunities, these cannot replace the experience of being in class and participating with peers. As outlined earlier, we are taking steps to try and encourage management to release staff for the allocated 80 hours per year and providing as much information as we can to help future staff studying with us on the UCAP and PGCAP prepare and plan in advance.

The positive comments are heartening and show that staff can see an impact on their learning and teaching practice and that the UCAP and PGCAP open new opportunities for development and career advancement. Since writing this piece, we have secured additional survey responses and scheduled alumnae interviews; we will be analysing and writing this work up as a more extensive article in the coming months after ensuring that the headline learning points are reflected in our re-accreditation paperwork.

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# Hygieia unbound: Nursing education and the making of the NHS

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As the UK braces for a general election, the NHS is likely to be at the centre of debate. When the NHS turned 75 last year, some commentators imagined it as a patient and speculated on whether it was coming to the end of its natural life (Paton, 2023). With so many graduates from nursing, midwifery, medicine and allied subjects, universities have a vested interest in the NHS. The 'applause for key workers' and widespread rainbow imagery on buses and in windows during the pandemic underlined the NHS as the most cherished feature of the welfare state in Britain, and this has endured over time and between generations. In a HEPI (2023) poll completed by 1000 UK-domiciled, full-time, undergraduate students, 77% of respondents ranked the NHS in their top three policy concerns (significant when compared with the 38% that indicated 'the environment' as a top three concern).

The National Health Services Act 1946 came into effect on 5 July 1948, providing for the establishment of a comprehensive health service for England and Wales (with separate legislation produced for Scotland and Northern Ireland). 75 years later, and recognised as the largest single expansion in education and training in the history of the NHS, NHS England (2023) announced plans to address the chronic shortages in the workforce which have had a significant impact on well-documented longer waiting times for patients as well as motivation within the organisation itself (The King's Fund, 2023). UCAS figures (30 June 2023) released just before the NHS England plans were announced showed that around 44,000 people applied to nursing courses, compared with 52,000 at the same point in the previous year. This picture contrasts sharply with the 'bounce' witnessed during the Covid

pandemic when a much rosier profile on applications to nursing courses was lauded (UCAS, 2021).

Applying a social policy lens, with a focus on England, this article reflects on the organisation and structure of the education and training of nurses as the NHS has evolved. The delivery and content of education and training of nurses has mutated significantly over the decades, reflecting societal demands, the structural and organisational dynamics of the NHS, technological changes and refinement of the regulatory bodies with oversight of nursing development.

## Beginnings of reform

The National Health Services Act was imprinted with a bold vision: to improve the overall physical and mental health of a nation emerging from the rigours of war. The Act can be viewed as an integral component part in a more expansive vision for a welfare state made by Sir William Beveridge in 1942 (the 'Beveridge Report') to tackle the societal 'giants' of want (poverty), ignorance (inadequate education), squalor (poor housing), idleness (unemployment) and, finally, disease (ill-health). In this postwar settlement, Aneurin Bevan (Figure 1), the architect of the NHS and Minister for Health in the 1946-51 Attlee Government, was able to secure a 'universal' and 'free' system of health care: 'free at the point of contact.'



*Figure 1     Aneurin Bevan, Minister of Health, on the first day of the National Health Service, 5 July 1948 at Park Hospital, Davyhulme, near Manchester, by liverpoolhls, is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0*

In fact, nursing, midwifery and health visiting services before 1948 had status, regulation and identity. For instance, the Midwives Act 1902 made it necessary to certify midwives as 'fit for practice' with the establishment of the Central Midwives Board to oversee registration. Similarly, the Nurses Registration Act 1919 ushered in the General Nursing Council (GNC) that established a register of nurses and also distinguished between different specialisms, such as mental health and paediatric nurses. (Incidentally, mental health nursing attracted, in particular, male nurses and was to be a stimulus to the formation of the Society of Male Registered Nurses in 1937.) Overall, the Nurses Registration Act framed a syllabus  with competence at its core – with specified standards that were explicit, defined and measurable (Bradshaw, 2000).

During the inter-war period, the National Council of Nurses and the College of Nursing (which, in 1928, received a royal charter and was renamed 'the Royal College of Nursing' (RCN) in 1939) lobbied for higher standards in nursing education and training. The vocal call to improve standards coincided with the 1932 Lancet Commission on nursing, which considered the status of nursing education without, however, considering any higher education ambitions (the University of Leeds had offered a diploma in nursing since 1921, the first of its kind in Europe).

## A rocky start

Nurse shortages and retention in the NHS have been ever-present concerns. As local voluntary hospitals were brought into national public ownership, in the first post-Act assessment, it was estimated that the 150,000 strong workforce would need a further 48,000 nurses. This was the period of the ration book and also a time when young women were dedicated to raising families in the post-war baby boom (Kynaston, 2008). Education and training were targeted as important elements in both attracting and keeping nurses engaged in the profession. The Nurses Act 1949 enabled the GNC to approve experimental schemes of training for nurses: state registered nurses (SRNs – and recognised today as 'Registered Nurses') and nursing students were thus supplemented by State Enrolled Nurses (SENs) who underwent a more condensed period of training and were restricted in what they were able to do. Nursing schools that were attached to a hospital – which had been in existence for nearly 100 years by this point (Weir, 2000) – remained as the main places where education and training were delivered: three years' training was supplemented by a fourth under supervision in order to be fully recognised as an SRN. 300 hours' classroom-based teaching at a preliminary training school became standardised, courtesy of the 1952 syllabus for general training. The syllabus marked a logical outcome of a series of national discussions on nursing (1942-1950 Nursing Reconstruction Committee) with the final (third) committee report providing an important foundation to further systemic changes during the 1960s.

It is impossible to reflect on the early years of the NHS without acknowledging the efforts and dedication of the migrants who supported the fledgling organisation. HMT Empire Windrush docked at the Port of Tilbury on 21 June 1948, just two weeks before the NHS came into being and, therefore, there is an 'entwined history' (Bonner, 2020). The RCN and GNC worked with the Colonial Office and Ministries of Health and Labour to recruit trainee nurses from 16 colonies: most made their way to Britain from the Caribbean. Last year, the 75th anniversaries of both Windrush and the NHS have offered a sobering perspective on the fate and experiences of these trainee nurses, with many experiencing racism and never progressing from their status as SENs (Ali, 2021). EDI calendar events, like Black History Month, have been instrumental in highlighting particular black pioneers of nursing and nursing education and, therefore, the work of Mary Seacole during the Crimean War, alongside Florence Nightingale, is now known to a much wider audience. In acknowledgement of the contribution of the Windrush generation, the first building

at the University of Huddersfield's (2022) new National Health Innovation Campus was named in honour of Daphne Smith, the NHS's first black hospital matron.

## Matron

Played by Hattie Jacques in the titular 'Carry on Matron' film of 1972, the highlighting of matron is somewhat out of sync in view of the structural changes witnessed in nursing. Jacques had previously played the role of matron in 1959's 'Carry On Nurse', when matrons were highly influential in both the discipline and training of nurses. The demise of the matriarchal role of the matron came about following the recommendations of the Salmon Report in 1967 (the 'modern matron' – or 'super nurse' – would, following public demand, make a comeback in 2000). Salmon was preceded by the RCN's Platt Review in 1964 that recommended minimum educational requirements (five GCE-O Levels and two years' academic study) and that registered and enrolled nurse courses should be imbued with greater diversity and complexity to meet need (e.g. in medicine and surgery) and specialisms (ear, nose and throat, gynaecology, paediatrics, ophthalmology).

Towards the end of the decade nurses were also encouraged to consider management training and opportunities – something that would leave a lasting legacy with NHS reorganisation from the mid-1970s (leading to more managers) and a greater number of senior nurses in leading roles at specialist units (e.g. neonatal, cancer) from the late 1990s. This was an important process as it also signalled a significant reduction of the doctor's influence on nurses' training and education.

## Briggs

Social historian Professor Asa Briggs may be best remembered as the author of *Victorian Things*, *Victorian Cities* and *Victorian People* and scholarship on early broadcasting in Britain. Briggs also set a course that marked a significant change for nursing educators, with some in the RCN going so far as to hail his work as 'the first radical reform of nurse education since Nightingale' (Tierny, 2022).

The Briggs Committee on Nursing (1972) proposed major changes to the regulation of the profession (paving the way for the establishment of the UK Central Council (UKCC), morphing into the UK Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting in 1983, and recognised today as the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC)), but this marked the point when the potential of nursing education was viewed differently – as a 'research-based profession' (para. 380). This more expansive take on the education of nurses was supplemented by the view that a greater level of learning should take place in clinical settings. Crucially, Briggs had also opened up conversations on the efficacy of a university-based education for nurses. (Incidentally, the very first university department in nursing in England had just been established at the University of Manchester in 1970.) From the mid-1970s, the number of nursing schools was halved, consolidating delivery in new regional and area structures following Sir Richard Crossman's green paper, *The Future Structures of the NHS*, at the start of the decade.

By the end of the 1970s, nurse educators adapted to a new curriculum, coinciding with the UK's entry into the European Economic Community (EEC) (responding to Directive 77/452/ EEC), that paved the way for mutual recognition of certificates, diplomas and other formal qualifications for nursing. Quinn (1980) noted the enormous challenge to nurse educators, as learners were required to attain knowledge of clinical experience in maternity, community, mental health care and psychiatry.

## Project 2000

During the 1980s, quality assurance for nursing and midwifery courses was overseen by new boards in England that also set guidelines and standards. The first code of conduct was issued by the UKCC in 1983, who went on to release the 'Project 2000' vision three years later. Project 2000, which commenced from 1989/90, refined further Briggs's template for a three-year modular education programme with an 18-month foundation course followed by branch specialisation (adult, children, mental health, learning disability), leading to registration, but raising student nurses' educational award to a higher education diploma. The relationship between university-based delivery of nurse education had been ambivalent for many decades (*cf*. the 1932 Lancet Commission and the Leeds' diploma in nursing), but momentum had shifted to the view of the necessity of nursing courses to be delivered in higher education institutions and to be of diploma and degree level, propelled by the increasing sophistication of medical treatments and clinical care. This recommendation to move away from the apprenticeship system of hospital-based, on-the-job training emerged from the 1985 RCN Commission on Nursing Education. A notable observation of Project 2000, supported by a large-scale English National Board for Nursing commissioned study, was a view that the curriculum prioritised theory over practical skills (Macleod Clark *et al.*, 1997). Hence, and to little surprise, the emphasis on post-registration education from 1995 represented a means of maintaining nurses' competence and enhancing professional development.

## The market

By the start of the 1990s all public bodies (NHS and universities) were touched by a rhetoric that promised a new order of things – both private and public-sector organisations became ensnared by 'the quality revolution'. The Conservative government's 1989 white paper *Working for Patients*, and subsequent publications, like *The Citizen's Charter*, provide insight into their priorities to establish a culture to inform citizens of their entitlements to public services, whilst making it clear to health providers the level and standard of service they could expect. The New Public Management model, a state project for a neoliberal agenda, claimed that only market-based welfare policies could improve the efficiency of healthcare. In examining the transition from the 1980s into the 1990s, Humphreys (1996) argued that it was possible to distinguish two interacting policy processes – NHS reform was determined by the demand side of the education market, while the 'professional nursing establishment' led an alternate process and was primarily informed by the supply side.

By the time of Labour's ascendency in 1997, and the NHS's golden anniversary, steady incremental changes had transformed nursing, from: hospital based to community or primary based practice; generalist to clinical specialist; hands on care to diagnostics and care planning; hierarchical to lateral and flexible careers; incremental progression to competency

and skills-based profession; training to CPD; and CV to personal development portfolio (Buchan and Edwards, 2000). These transformations in culture – accompanied by more profound thinking on educator changes in delivery and planning – would lead to the nursing degree.

## The degree

Wales and Scotland had, in the 1990s, been accustomed to nursing as an all-graduate path. The Department of Health's (2006) *Modernising Nursing Careers* set the ball rolling for the NMC to set out standards for all nurses (in England) to hold a degree-level qualification. A degree-level qualification was rationalised on many grounds, from attraction to nursing as a profession to a recognition that nursing students needed the high-level skills and confidence as they entered the workforce.

The development of a university nursing degree was a relatively straightforward one given that in 1995 all schools of nursing were removed financially, legally and organisationally from the NHS and were fully integrated into HE institutions (Burke, 2006). QAA descriptors of the new bachelor's degree emphasised scholarship (e.g. 'appreciate the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge', 'communicate ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist audiences', 'initiate and carry out projects'). While educators have tried hard to develop nurses to ever-increasing standards, applying innovative technologies (such as high-fidelity simulation) and improving the experience of clinical placements, successive governments have been plagued by meeting the necessary workforce levels for the NHS.

## The context today (and coda)

The current state may be an opportunity rather than a challenge to curriculum delivery – planning for the future by reflecting upon strengths, needs and gaps in current approaches and mitigating against any future negative effects. Agility, flexibility and an openness to new ideas are key, as exemplified by learners embarking on nursing apprenticeship schemes – offered by 11 universities in England. Here, students are able to perform a mix of patient care with general admin duties, under supervision, while spending about a day a week in the classroom learning the theory. Whatever the merits – or otherwise – of such training interventions, they are illustrative of the pathways nurse educators have found in responding to policy and regulatory shifts over the decades and navigating through several other periods of major change. As this paper has attempted to highlight, an increased understanding of how nursing education and its context has continuously evolved and developed in response to social, political, economic and cultural pressures in the NHS, may allow current challenges to be viewed as part of this ongoing process of adaptation.

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## Information for Contributors

# Teaching and WOKE – Suggested handrails for educators in HE

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Most subjects will contain some aspects that educators, and perhaps also students, feel are particularly sensitive. Often however, these areas are also among the more contemporaneous, interesting, engaging and relevant aspects of those subjects. In my specialist subject, sustainability, educators from across all disciplines are increasingly being asked to enter into dialogue with students around issues that touch on social justice (and are therefore sometimes more sensitive) in a way that many perhaps have not had to do before.

At a workshop in the Oxford Brookes University (OBU) 2023 Teaching and Learning Conference, members of the teaching faculty listed what they felt to be some of the more sensitive areas of their different subjects as: gender, sexuality, politics of future making, race, crime and race, sexual health, politics, labour market info, Brexit, diversity, and purpose.

In my educational development role, colleagues regularly talk to me about their concerns and ask me about teaching these more sensitive issues and how to approach them. Many speak of their slightly panicked scramble to shut down in-class conversations and lines of questioning that they deem inappropriate, controversial or incendiary – or just in poor taste given recent or ongoing global events. This is supported by research findings that show teaching faculty tend to avoid topics and subjects that may cause friction in the classroom (see multiple references in Parra *et al.*, 2022).

Some of the more frequent questions include:

- Is it better to allow the (heated) discussion to happen in class where a teacher can oversee and both help facilitate it and build on the points raised for learning, rather than allow it to spill out and take place elsewhere in a more uncontrolled setting where opportunities for shared learning may be lost?
- How to deal with minority groups and 'quiet' students, who may seem to signal tacit agreement? (Certainly they don't seem to disagree with the loud ones.)
- What is a safe space? Surely that means avoiding anything controversial!
- Do we really need trigger warnings if we teach it objectively and without emotion?
- If we give trigger warnings, can we still insist students cover the material in their assessments?

The aim of this article will therefore be to explore how teachers can lead discussions in their subjects that are simultaneously compassionate, woke and also the safe and brave learning spaces that are 'spaces of social change and progress' (Cherry-McDaniel, 2017); and how to help educators feel more confident about doing this, especially those at the start of their teaching careers.

For the purposes of this briefing the word *'woke'* will be defined as per the Merriam-Webster dictionary as meaning: aware of and actively attentive to important societal facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice); but I will also use the term 'woke' as shorthand to refer more widely to (little p) political issues.

'Trigger warnings' are when lecturers warn students in advance that sensitive material will be covered so that those who wish to leave can do so.

## What is the problem?

> *'You never know when a piano's going to fall on your head when you're walking down the street. Nor who will push it.'* (Lady Lynn Forester de Rothschild @ Davos 2022)

The Higher Education Policy Institute write in their overview of recent trends that there seems to be a greater keenness of students to limit what their peers and lecturers can say or do within the law: 'The changes that have occurred are overwhelmingly in one direction – towards more support for restricting freedom of expression on campus. Moreover, the scale of the changes are often stark' (HEPI, 2022). Some of their findings are listed below:

- Nearly a quarter (of students) (23%) believe their university should go further to protect students against harmful speech
- Students have become less liberal in their approach to freedom of expression in recent years
- The proportion of students who think academics should be fired if they 'teach material that heavily offends some students' is 36% (that's double the 15% in 2016)
- Only 7% of students in 2022 believed that trigger warnings were unnecessary in HE.

HE educators are mostly aware of this trend, though the actual numbers have surprised even experienced colleagues, and many feel the need to be very cautious given some of the news coverage around careers ending because of these issues. The lack of articulation of expectations, compounded by the fear of what happens if a student complains, are possibly factors here: HEA-accredited teacher training courses often do not directly address this (see e.g. Verduzco-Baker, 2018).

There may be marked differences between new and experienced teachers in terms of their ability and confidence in holding brave spaces that allow shared enquiries and hold space for students to experience discomfort and uncertainty as part of their learning. Arao and Clemens (2013), for example, suggest there is often a conflation of safety with comfort, and that which constitutes a brave space is also inherently subjective.

There are big cultural differences here too – the idea of the classroom as a brave space, as spaces for shared enquiry, as

democratic spaces – many of these ideas are inherently Anglo-Saxon and western-centric ideals of higher education and differ significantly also elsewhere in Europe. Teaching faculty (and also many students) may not recognise those forms of classrooms, either from their own cultures or their own previous educational experience. What we are asking them to do may therefore be entirely alien and inherently uncomfortable. Students also may complain that being uncomfortable and having to engage with discussions with their peers is not part of their expectations of taking a taught course at university. These are some of the conversations arising at OBU, and most likely also elsewhere.

We must note here, too, that students more often challenge the authority and expertise of teachers who are women, people of colour, young and/or queer, transgender, or nonbinary gender (Chesler and Young, 2013). Overlay on this the discipline being taught, and the internationality of the students and teachers, and it becomes clear that this is anything but a level playing field from the outset. Thinking broadly here, it becomes clear that the whole teaching faculty needs to engage with these issues and hold these learning spaces for students: it should not be left to the passionate minority to single-handedly do so.

Opening the possibilities of learning from in-class friction may mean students learn from: encountering discomfort around an opinion they encounter; their resistance to certain statements; surprise about the various views that co-exist amongst their peers; and collision between others' viewpoints and their own (see e.g. Parra *et al.,* 2022).

The reason for encouraging this exposure of students to friction or discomfort in the classroom is to show that life is inherently going to mean encountering different views and ideas – from a sustainability point of view it's about learning how to coexist in a world where the global population has just reached 8 billion, and the trend towards urbanisation means many students will likely go on to live and work cheek by jowl with others in highly diverse urban areas.

One tenet of democracy is parity between individuals, which by extension means also between their diverse viewpoints. So, if education is about preparing students for life and work, then this learning to lean into friction and discomfort moves from merely being a noble ideal towards being an essential aspect of a higher education pathway.

Teaching into this space is what HE teaching faculty do every day, and most do it exceptionally well. We also know, however, the stress and mental health toll that faculty (and also students) are under. The national charity, Education Support, for example, found that 77% of education staff were suffering from poor mental health and 72% from stress (Jayman *et al.*, 2022; and Wray and Kinman, 2021). The next sections therefore examine the UK legal requirements and guidelines as a way of establishing handrails of good practice, to support teaching faculty in holding learning spaces for woke aspects of mainstream subjects and disciplines.

## What does the law say?
The law currently mostly covers schools, and is designed for the purpose of safeguarding younger children. It

is recognised that advanced academic studies such as those in HE will need to explore more complex issues, including some that are challenging, contemporaneous and controversial. However, HE teachers, especially those at the start of their career or dealing with more complex subjects, may find that the handrails designed for school teaching can help them feel more confident about their HE teaching, and may provide a suitable framework for those starting out in teaching at UK HE institutions.

1) For schools there are legal requirements under the:
- Equality Act 2010 (including the Public Sector Equality Duty for state-funded schools)
- Human Rights Act 1998
- Prevent duty.

2) Schools are also required to actively promote the fundamental British values of:
- Democracy
- The rule of law
- Individual liberty
- Mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs.

3) Schools must additionally prohibit the promotion of partisan political views and should take steps to ensure the balanced presentation of opposing views on political issues when they are brought to the attention of pupils.

'*Political views*' are those expressed with a political purpose, such as to further the interests of a particular partisan group, change the law or change government policy. This could be on a wide range of matters such as economic and social issues at a local, national, or international level.

'*Partisan political views*' are views and opinions held by groups and organisations, which may include campaign groups, lobbyists and charitable organisations.

It is important to note that many ongoing ethical debates and topics will constitute a political issue. This can be the case even when the main political parties and other partisan groups agree on a view, but there is not a wider consensus in public opinion. Instead, there is continued debate, where different legitimate views are expressed.

## Some real examples (from government guidelines)
- Teaching about climate change is subject knowledge, but teaching about possible solutions to climate change are partisan political views, and need to be taught in a balanced manner.
- Teaching about historical events including those which may have constituted political issues at the time they happened, are now only considered as political issues where the subject is relevant to current political issues and debate.
- When teaching about sensitive political issues relating to discrimination, teachers should still be mindful to avoid promoting partisan political views or presenting contested theories as fact. A distinction should be drawn between the shared principle that

discrimination and prejudice are wrong, and partisan political views that go beyond this or advocate political reform.

- The non-violent protest activities routinely employed by Eco-groups are now explicitly covered by the Public Order Act 2023. Exercising circumspection and awareness around developments here is advisable: ensuring balanced views are presented and promoting active citizenship through the normal democratic channels is always a safe position to take.

*'A safe classroom is an openly political one – as opposed to covertly political one. This politically engaged, safe classroom is guided by a trusted teacher who promotes critical thinking about complex issues. A woke teacher.'* (Caldera, 2018)

## What does the law say for HE?

There are legal requirements for everyone under the:

- Public Order Act of 2023: This prohibits the use of threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviours that cause, or are likely to cause, another person harassment, alarm or distress.
- Crime and Disorder Act 1998: This deals with specific racially or religiously aggravated offences, which have higher maximum penalties than the non-aggravated versions of those offences.
- Right to Free Speech: This protects not only expressions that are favourably received but also those that offend, shock or disturb. There are limitations to the right of free speech in the UK – and this includes (i.a):

  1. Intentional harassment, alarm or distress: Intentionally causing a person harassment, alarm, or distress by threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour, or disorderly behaviour, or the display of any writing, sign or other visible representation which is threatening, abusive or insulting, thereby causing that or another person harassment, alarm or distress
  2. Harassment, alarm or distress (*without intent*): Using threatening or abusive words or behaviour, or disorderly behaviour, or displaying any writing, sign or other visible representation which is threatening or abusive, within the hearing or sight of a person likely to be caused harassment, alarm or distress.

HE educators are however protected by the Academic Freedom Act 2023, as it is recognised that HE institutions have a special role in promoting and encouraging vigorous debate, free speech and freedom of enquiry within the law. The protection of academic freedom recognises that academic staff have the right to explore unpopular or controversial subjects and opinions in their teaching even though students may find them challenging. Academic staff must, however, ensure that their teaching delivery does not discriminate against or cause harassment of any student on the grounds of their age, disability, ethnicity, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity status, religion and belief, sex, or sexual orientation.

It is the second part of the right to free speech that causes most concern for HE teachers, *i.e.* that distress or alarm might *inadvertently* occur or be caused in their classroom, and that this may be caused also by other students. Students tend to see seminar rooms as the most difficult spaces – because they typically contain around 30 students selected by the teachers (so perhaps not in their comfortable same-thinking friendship groups). A class of such a size is enough for a diverse range of students and opinions; but unlike a large lecture theatre, there is also sufficient space for individually held opinions and ideas to be exchanged and voiced. In fact, many dynamic teaching activities in such seminar spaces are centred on shared enquiry or active engagement in debate and discussion.

Note too that in the current climate of massification and the move towards large UG module sizes, it is often precisely these spaces and classes that are entrusted to less experienced GTAs or Associate Lecturers, while the senior lecturer and module leader typically keep hold of the large whole-module lecture delivery. This set-up may not serve either students or teaching faculty well.

## Handrails for your HE teaching

1. Learn about the contemporary areas around your subject and teaching which may be especially sensitive.
2. Learn about the legal guidelines produced for schools so you feel comfortable and knowledgeable about the safe ground that those rules provide in the first instance.
3. Take extra care to ensure you present balance around anything that might be interpreted as a partisan political view.
4. Consider what in your teaching might need trigger warnings and use them.
5. Engaging with a diverse cohort of students in a shared enquiry will probably be rewarding and fun, also for staff; but may feel challenging, especially at first.
6. Remember that authenticity in a shared enquiry can be achieved by being seen to be caring and being accessible instead of feeling that you have to share your own private views.
7. Decide in advance what you will do if a discussion emerges that becomes heated – continue in class with you acting as facilitator, or ask them to continue outside class, perhaps reporting back the following week or preparing their thoughts for an in-class debate the following week.
8. Take responsibility – for *all* that is said/shown to your students – even by third parties. Where feasible, balance controversial speakers with other speakers with different viewpoints.
9. Remember that taking responsibility also includes what is shown to students via the written medium, and that therefore exposure/access to different writers and texts is needed.
10. Provide students with improved information on academic norms, which might include teaching students how to argue and disagree in class, *i.e.* using counter-argument, refutation and central point refutation.

## Conclusion

Expectations for higher education increasingly require

teachers being able to hold an uncomfortable, but not unsafe, learning space for students in order to teach around contemporaneous, political or potentially sensitive issues.

After reading this, hopefully teachers will have a better understanding of what constitutes safe ground, and what student and institutional expectations for best practice may look like. As leaders of education the *where* (*i.e.* in what taught spaces do these discussions take place) and the *who* (who is tasked with holding the space for these discussions) may be aspects to be considered in future planning, and possibly accompanied by some upscaling of skills for GTAs and A/Ls. Holding spaces for learning that are uncomfortable but safe, for students and staff alike, likely requires more advanced teaching and personal development input than many teachers, especially at these grades, are currently being offered.

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# Reflections on the student-led business case competition in promoting students' sustainability awareness

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## Introduction

Business schools today face growing calls to develop responsible, ethical leaders amid rising sustainability challenges (Jack, 2022). This shift can be attributed to initiatives like the UN's Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME), which call for business and management schools to commit to responsible management education (Haertle *et al.*, 2017; Malarski and Berte, 2023; Waddock *et al.*, 2010). Accreditation bodies, such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), have also played a role by urging management schools to adopt sustainable practices (Mousa *et al.*, 2022).

In response, business schools continue pursuing initiatives to embed responsible management principles within core curricula and through extra-curricular activities. While studies show curriculum integration initiatives help to raise student awareness of ethics and social responsibility, critics argue that performative initiatives alone are insufficient to catalyse meaningful mindset and change. To this effect, management education faces criticism for its continued focus on profits and shareholder returns, neglecting businesses' broader social and environmental impacts (Dyllick, 2015; Wright et al., 2013). This narrow approach fails to effectively integrate responsible practices into students'

learning, hindering their ability to navigate the complexities of modern business challenges in sustainable management (Dyllick, 2015).

To bridge the gaps in students' understanding and application of sustainability principles, we introduced an extracurricular student-led business case competition that is led by students and centres around sustainable business practices and working on live projects set by organisations. This initiative aimed to encourage students to develop a deeper understanding of sustainability issues and apply this knowledge to real-world business scenarios.

This article aims to reflect on the student-led business case competition organised

to promote awareness of sustainability among students. It provides insights into the benefits and challenges of integrating sustainability into extracurricular activities, along with guidelines for educators considering similar initiatives to engage students in sustainability initiatives.

## The student-led business case competition

The student-led business case competition involved students analysing real-world business scenarios and formulating solutions to address the challenges described. To enhance student learning on sustainability, a student-led business case competition was organised at postgraduate level in the MSc Management, School of Business and Management at Queen Mary University of London.

The pedagogical strategy behind the competition was to encourage students to think through business cases revolving around sustainability, reflect on the cases and formulate solutions. Sustainability was integrated into the student-led case competition through two main approaches. Firstly, the competition aimed to enhance student awareness and interest in sustainability by centreing on sustainability issues within organisations. Secondly, it fostered authentic learning experiences, allowing students to actively engage in problem identification, formulation, and solution recommendation.

The competition was student-led in that students helped design, plan, and organise the event. Four student champions were involved in the co-creation, planning and implementation of the business case competition. The student champions were responsible for defining what they wanted from the competition, motivating students to participate, providing information to students about the competition, and providing initial training on doing consultancy to their fellow students. They also oversaw the planning of the competition, including marketing, registration and judging.

The competition involved partnerships with diverse organisations, including non-profits, social enterprises, and small and medium enterprises. The organisations were national and international. These organisations supplied a list of business concerns related to sustainability challenges within their company for the students to address. Students self-selected the business cases they wanted to work on based on their interests. Teams were given a four-month period to address and recommend solutions to their chosen business issues.

The students' submissions went through two rounds of evaluation. In the first round, academic judges reviewed all submissions and selected the top groups to advance in the competition. This stage provided feedback without requiring presentations. The second round consisted of advancing teams formally pitching their solutions to a panel including peers, faculty, and partner organisations. Each group received feedback, and the top three teams received vouchers and letters of recommendation.

## Students' reflections on the business case competition

To evaluate the impacts of the extracurricular student-led business case competition, reflective feedback was gathered from participating students. Upon the competition's conclusion, all participants were invited to reflect on their experiences, learning, and development of skills relevant to responsible management. Four student champions who helped plan and organise the competition also gave their reflections.

## Benefits of participating

**Employability and skills development**
On the benefits of participating in the competition, students mentioned that developing employability skills and understanding how to solve business cases in sustainability were motivations for participating:

*'The competition allowed us to gain valuable insights into sustainable business practices and develop our analytical, problem-solving, and teamwork skills.'* (Student champion 4)

*'The business case study competition pushed me to think outside the box. During the process I worked with a team from various backgrounds, this taught me how to work with each of their strengths and develop a sense of teamwork.'* (Competition Group 2 student 2)

*'I thought it would be a great opportunity to overcome stage fright and because it was not assessed and I get to work with my classmates, I decided to participate in the competition.'* (Competition Group 1 student 1)

Linked to enhancing their employability skills, students mentioned the value of building their personal profiles, which allowed them to enhance their *curriculum vitae* (CVs). Participation also resulted in students receiving certificates of participation and letters of recommendation, validating their taking part in the competition:

*'These skills and the winning title added a good amount of weight to my CV. Moreover, the letter of recommendation boosted credibility.'* (Competition Group 4 student 4)

*'I thought to get a personal recommendation letter from Dr Lilian Schofield as well as certificate of participation were great to add to my CV.'* (Competition Group 4 student 3)

Besides the opportunities for employability development, students appreciated the chance to strengthen their ties with the partnering organisation. They also valued receiving direct insights from employers about the organisation and sector interests:

*'Joining the business case competition was more than just a learning experience for me. Not only did it sharpen my professional skills, but it also allowed me to connect with our partnering organisation. Hearing directly from employers about what they are doing and how they are doing it was insightful. That's priceless insight for any student!'* (Competition Group 3 student 4)

**Better understanding of sustainability**
On sustainability as a theme and interest, students were interested in

industry partnerships that facilitate networking opportunities and a commitment to sustainability but also providing access to real-life business problems that they can work on. We worked closely with more than six organisations, each providing a business case related to a sustainable issue they wanted the students to address. This allowed the students to understand various organisational perspectives on sustainability and observe the different approaches organisations take to implement sustainable practices. In this case, students have an understanding of sustainability as a concept and sustainability in different organisational settings:

> 'We studied sustainability as a concept in our classes, but being involved in solving real business cases and understanding how the organisation I worked on its business case looked at sustainability was truly eye-opening. The depth and complexity of these issues surpassed my expectations.' (Competition Group 2 student 2)

> 'Participating in this business case competition has not only given me invaluable insights into what organisations do in sustainability but has also allowed me to collaborate with actual businesses doing it. I worked on a sustainability business case by an international Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO), and it opened my eyes to other definitions of sustainability other than environmental definition.' (Competition Group 5 student 4).

**Sustainable knowledge application**

The student champions and participating students reflected the case competition provided a good opportunity for them to co-create and participate by applying their classroom learnings to real-world scenarios and providing a collaborative platform for students to tackle complex business problems:

> 'We conceptualised the MSc Management Case Competition to apply our classroom learnings to real-world scenarios and provide a platform for students to tackle complex business problems collaboratively.' (Student Champion 3)

During their reflection, the students emphasised the significance of utilising the theoretical knowledge they acquired in the classroom and applying it to the competition. They recognised that by putting theory into practice, they could gain a deeper understanding of the concepts and enhance their problem-solving skills. This reflection highlighted the practical relevance of classroom learning and its direct impact on real-world scenarios:

> 'The competition helped us delve deeper into topics like sustainability that we wouldn't usually pursue.' (Competition Group 1 student 1)

> 'My team members and I had to draw on some of the sustainable theories we covered in class. We worked on a project to do with community housing and used our learning from one of the modules we took in the first semester, linking our discussions to the three-dimensional levels of ESG framework (Environment, Social and Governance). This was much more fun than the theory-based assignment.' (Competition Group 1 student 5)

**Student reflection on challenges**

Students highlighted a range of challenges encountered during the competition including collaborating with team members from diverse geographic backgrounds and mindsets, dealing with a slight language barrier, equitably dividing workload responsibilities, and overcoming presentation-related anxiety.

The student champions reflected on their initial challenges and stated that they found it difficult to create an immersive experience that could simulate real-world business and struggled to identify and partner with organisations that

shared their vision and values:

> 'Our initial challenges included creating an immersive experience that simulated real-world business challenges. Additionally, identifying and partnering with organisations that shared our vision and values was another hurdle.' (Student champion 3)

One of the challenges highlighted was the need to balance academic workload with extracurricular activities, while also juggling other responsibilities, such as part-time work. For students, the extra time devoted to competition planning and organisation could diminish student engagement and the quality of work preparations if they become overwhelmed with competing academic obligations:

> 'I found it challenging to organise this case competition while preparing for my coursework, as most of them are due at the same time.' (Competition Group 2 student 2)

Despite these challenges, the student-led business case competition received positive feedback from the students, which led to output such as a student blog published on the programme's website, documenting their experience of the event.

## Academics' reflections

It was also important for us to include our reflections in this reflective piece, especially in relation to the workload, time commitment required in supporting the students and helping organise the competition and building partnership with our partner organisations.

**Workload implication**

Organising and executing a student-led business competition requires extensive time investments from students, staff, and partner organisations, which can be challenging to balance amid workload and other commitments. Reflecting on the competition process, it was a lot of work to get the student champions and students to dedicate time to the competition organisation. Coordinating and overseeing a student-led business competition demands a substantial time commitment from staff, too.

For example, the time dedicated to organising, building partnerships with organisations, and designing a meaningful initiative on sustainability that helps develop students' awareness. The intricate process of putting together the business case competition added an extra layer of complexity to already busy workloads.

**Timing for organising similar activity**
What we learned from facilitating this competition is that careful timing of competition phases needs to be taken into consideration. The competition took place in the second semester to allow the students acclimatise to studying in a new environment in the first term. Planning the competition to run in the second semester worked well to some extent, as students had time to prepare their cases during the first few weeks of the semester. Further, holding the competition during the second term provided an opportunity for students to apply the knowledge and information gained from the modules in the first semester. Organising similar activities could present a timing challenge, as careful consideration needs to be taken of students' busy schedules, including their assignments and core academic commitments. Staff timetabling also needs to be taken into consideration, especially during a heavy teaching or research semester.

**Relationship development with partners**
Apart from the workload involved in preparing for the competition, contacting, and building partnerships with organisations, helping with framing the business cases, and finding a suitable space, a lot of resources and time are needed to make the process run smoothly. Educators who want to adopt extracurricular activities like student-led business case competitions need to think about the resources and the time needed to organise and support the implementation. It may be better to incorporate the competition as part of a compulsory module and make it mandatory for students to participate and reflect on their learning rather than run it as an extracurricular activity. As students mentioned in their reflections, an incentive to participate is not solely on sustainability but the prospects of earning certificates that validate their achievements and demonstrate their competence in tackling real-world

business issues. More needs to be done in strengthening and reflecting on the sustainability theme.

Further, partnering with the organisations that are in the field of sustainability can be challenging. Educators adopting this initiative need to be aware that partners can drop from the competition due to time constraints, too. In our initial plan, we had ten possible organisations we wanted to partner with. Toward the end, we had six partners that provided business cases for the students. Further, in terms of managing time, not all partners could attend the final presentations. Although they were involved in supporting students by answering their questions, it would be beneficial for them to receive feedback from employers.

## Guidelines for educators considering extracurricular activities like student-led business case competitions
The guidance is structured into three distinct levels: one for staff, one for students, and one for partner organisations.

**Staff level**
- *Resource management:* Allocate appropriate resources including time, financial support, physical space, and dedicated staff members.
- *Student involvement:* Recognise students' academic and personal commitments. Consider involving them in planning phases but ensure they can commit without compromising their other academic obligations. Employ teaching assistants to handle logistical tasks like liaising with organisations and booking venues.
- *Curricular integration*: To guarantee student engagement, integrate the competition into a mandatory module. Ensure these modules touch upon sustainability so students are well-prepared for the competition.

**Student level**
- *Incentivisation*: Understand that students value recognition. Offer certificates of participation or other incentives to boost their commitment and participation.
- *Reflection importance*: Emphasise the role of reflection in the competition. Encourage students to

introspect on their experiences, the relevance of sustainability, and the real-world challenges they have addressed. This deepens their comprehension and connection with sustainability.
- *Diversity and inclusion*: Acknowledge the varied backgrounds and constraints of the student body. Not all students can participate in extracurriculars, leading to potential exclusivity. Ensure student representation in competition planning, and actively seek their input and feedback.
- *Guidance and mentorship*: Offer consistent support and guidance. Assign mentors to support the students. Consider tapping into experienced student participants to mentor students without experience.

**Partner organisation level**
- *Task allocation*: Clearly define tasks associated with the competition and establish roles and responsibilities to ensure smooth execution to prevent overburdening the organisation.
- *Clear guidance*: Give clear guidance on how organisations are to work with students, their roles, how to frame sustainability issues for students to work on and provide feedback to the students.
- *Inclusion*: Include organisations in the planning stages so that they know when their involvements are needed.

## Conclusion
Students' reflections show that the business case competition provides a platform for personal and professional development, offering opportunities to build personal profiles, gain learning experiences, conquer stage fright, work with their peers, and receive letters of recommendation and participation certificates, which students found useful and a motivation for participating in the competition.

Furthermore, industry partnerships with sustainability-focused organisations play a pivotal role in enhancing sustainability education within business and management subjects. They provide students with exposure to real-world sustainability challenges, enrich their educational experiences, and offer networking opportunities with professionals committed to sustainability.

These collaborations bridge the gap between theory and practice, equipping students with the skills and knowledge needed to address sustainability issues in the business world.

Considering these insights, educators and institutions should continue to support and promote student engagement in sustainability through initiatives such as business case competitions. However, educators need to be aware of how to overcome some of the potential obstacles that may hinder students from actively participating and engaging with the subject of sustainability.

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# The enduring power of three: Reflections on the benefits of the SEDA triad

**Virna Rossi,** Ravensbourne University London, **Charlotte Stevens,** University of Warwick, and **Ann Tilbury,** Glasgow Caledonian University

## Introduction

*'It's Monday morning and my first day back from leave. As I open Outlook, I sigh, wondering what's happened whilst I've been away, and what lies in wait for me on my return. Then, in my calendar I see a Triad meeting with two of my SEDA friends at 10.30. I smile. This is a meeting I am looking forward to, and one I will find it hard to close.'*

Virna Rossi, Charlotte Stevens and Ann Tilbury completed the Supporting and Leading Educational Change (SLEC) course in 2020, on the eve of the Covid-19 pandemic. The following year, they just happened to be matched in the first round of the SEDA triad to discuss their reports. This initial conversation sparked the beginning of an ongoing, positive, and rewarding professional relationship. Although they have never met in person, Ann, Charlotte and Virna have continued to meet regularly since that first triad, as well as support each other at events and through online exchanges. They decided to take a moment to reflect on their experience, using a number of guiding questions. This article shares those reflections.

## How did you get here?

*Charlotte:* I am part of the Academic Development Centre at the University of Warwick. However, my educational development journey began at the Open University when I joined a team dedicated to providing support and development opportunities for the university's associate lecturers.

Gaining the SEDA fellowship was a milestone for me. During the SLEC course, much time was spent interacting and sharing with others via an online forum, a space devoted to sharing ideas and developing practice. It was not long before a sense of community began to evolve, and I felt first-hand the immediate value of being part of this new group. It was enriching to learn about educational development in its various guises and from different perspectives; it helped me find my place in this new world. This was a community of practice in its most authentic form, with a shared sense of place, interest, and purpose (Wenger *et al.*, 2011).

Unsurprisingly, I felt I made connections that were built to last; yet, as is often the case, real lives got in the way. Then the first triad happened, and I met with Ann and Virna.

*Ann:* My journey into educational development started when I joined the University of the Highlands and Islands in 2010. Joining the University was a leap into the unknown: I had limited experience of educational development and the sector as a whole – apart from early in my career, at Birkbeck College, University of London, my 'professional tribe' was the broad church of learning and development. Through continued study, including a PGCert in Tertiary and Higher Education, and recognition as Fellow and then Senior Fellow of the HEA, I found myself increasingly keen to explore the theory and engage in the practice of educational development. Undertaking the SEDA SLEC programme in

2019/20 was the ideal opportunity to take this forward in the context of a formal programme of study.

The shared reflective process of the SLEC programme provided an excellent learning experience and revealed the many roles and perspectives within the field of educational development. As the course finished, I closed my books and assumed the connections I had made would dissipate over time. Except that the SLEC programme had something called triad meetings and I had the great fortune to be assigned with Virna and Charlotte in the first year.

*Virna:* I have been the PGCert Course Leader at Ravensbourne University London since 2016.

Over the past seven years, my professional journey has been nothing short of transformative. In 2019/20, I embarked on the SLEC course, an experience that proved to be inspirational in so many ways. I enjoyed being part of the community of learning, especially as I had felt professionally isolated within my small institution. Little did I know that as the course concluded, a new challenge, the Covid-19 pandemic, would arise, necessitating me to tap into *all* available resources and networks to navigate the demands of teaching and learning with compassion in a time of crisis. Yet, the true legacy of that course wasn't just the knowledge acquired but the enduring triad collaboration it spawned.

## What are the qualities of a successful triad?

### Trust
*Charlotte:* From the outset, there has been trust. Our meetings have provided a space in which we can discuss our professional practice as critical friends. They also provide a space in which we can be ourselves. We all share. Ideas, practice, reflections. There are stories, there are hopes, there are dreams. There is laughter. And we seek to change the world; well, maybe just a bit.

*Ann:* Yes, definitely trust which came from a shared aspiration to develop our professional practice beyond the SEDA course. In the beginning, there was a bit of 'forming' (Tuckman, 1965); we established how we wanted it to work and explored what we might want to achieve. We were tentative, respectful of each other's spaces, there were some probably unsaid ground rules – the focus was professional practice – if we strayed into more personal issues, it was cautiously and in the context of the development of our professional practice. We were also curious – the triad conversations were great opportunities to explore educational development in detail.

### Empathy
*Charlotte:* Empathy is key. We circle around each other's experiences, accomplishments, opportunities and challenges. We try on each other's shoes. We apply our knowledge and differing perspectives to each other's situations and suggest a direction of travel.

*Ann:* I agree, empathy is particularly important; recognising and bearing witness to the challenges faced by Virna and Charlotte provided a larger context, to understand my own challenges and for us to develop an understanding of our experiences beyond an individual perspective, to a professional and sectoral perspective.

*Virna:* Academic roles can be isolating and stressful due to many factors, especially having to wear many hats. Ann and Charlotte have definitely helped me be more resilient, thanks to their ability to empathise with the stressors unique to academic life. They have also been very supportive during the upheaval caused by my numerous relocations amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Mutual support**
*Virna:* I believe triads work well when there is a balance of *giving* and receiving support. For me, our triad exchange has been very supportive, especially during the Covid pandemic. We freely gave and received each other's encouragement and support. As it operates independently of our respective institutions, roles, and locations, it feels supportive but not involved in our day-to-day jobs.

*Ann:* Mutual support has been invaluable. In 2022, I left a learning and teaching role after 12 years in one institution and could have ended my educational development practice. In particular, I was disappointed that scholarly writing would not be a priority in my new role. Sharing this reflection during a triad meeting, Charlotte and Virna's feedback was insightful and encouraging, sharing how they have integrated scholarship into their professional practice. This helped me hold on to my educational development tribe and professional practice in my new role.

*Charlotte:* And that support extends beyond our meetings too. I have a vivid memory of nervously joining an online symposium I was presenting at in 2022, only to spot Ann in the Teams crowd with her camera on! It felt like having an old friend in the room.

## What are the benefits of collective reflective practice?
*Charlotte:* I always look forward to our meetings. Ann, Virna and I are very different people, with different lives, and at different places in our careers, but that doesn't matter; in fact, it's a benefit. Being on the same SEDA journey meant that we started at the same point, so we know where to begin. We bring our distinct experiences and practices to the virtual table, along with the bonus of our shared connection.

Over the years our informal chats have given rise to sideways conversations. We learn from each other, whether it's how to become an external examiner, create rich pictures, or how to evaluate an event. Through Virna, I have learnt about the trials and tribulations of publishing from an author's perspective; through Ann I have gained a valuable insight into the Aurora programme.

*Ann:* Like Charlotte, I really look forward to our triad meetings – there's a sparkle about them that always makes me smile. Virna is so often bubbling with delight, 'you'll never guess what' about an initiative she has been working on; Charlotte will share news or pick up from our last meeting, and, as she describes it, she smiles, laughs and just exudes a positive outlook. These discussions extend our learning communities by sharing news of conferences, events, people and places.

*Virna:* In professional growth, I've found that meaningful conversations, integral to collective reflective learning, are vital.

On the PGCert course I lead, I organise triad study sets for such dialogues, promoting shared reflection. This approach, inspired by my own experience as a student placed in a study triad on my master's programme, contrasts with the more enduring triad collaboration formed on the SEDA course. This ongoing triad, reflecting diverse backgrounds from various UK locations, serves as a mini-network within our larger SEDA community, enhancing our mutual professional development. These interactions, which remind me of Granovetter's 'Strength of Weak Ties' theory, open us to new perspectives and opportunities, making our triad a dynamic tool for professional enrichment.

## How has this process empowered you?

*Ann:* What gives the triad such value, is our shared commitment to honing our educational development practice: stretching ourselves into those uncomfortable spaces where learning happens. In my own practice, I often refer to the four zones of success. Our triad helps me to stay in my 'growth zone'. Not only do we share our aspirations and set new goals, Charlotte and Virna brim with an enthusiasm for learning – just do it…they say, and I am struck by how wonderful an approach this is and how it reminds me of the deep value of learning.

*Charlotte:* Though they may not realise this, both Ann and Virna have encouraged me to realise my potential (Wenger *et al.,* 2011). Ann, who has a wealth of experience in the recruitment process, assisted me in preparing for a big interview. Through Virna, I have learnt the art of networking, the importance of looking outside. She has made me realise that learning takes place in different contexts and through different media. We should never shy away from opportunities. We should be bold and brave, and never be afraid of asking.

*Virna:* For me, professional reflection is most meaningful when it's a spontaneous, unforced process that arises organically. As I listen to Ann and Charlotte discussing their professional contexts and activities, it triggers deeper contemplation about my own role and activities. I become acutely aware of the opportunities my role affords, as well as its inherent limitations.

I find much value in discussing my professional journey with peers who possess sector knowledge without being privy to the specifics of my institution (or my personal life). This dynamic provides them with the advantageous perspective of the knowledgeable outsider.

I owe Charlotte a significant debt of gratitude for her meticulous review of my book's introduction; her thoughtful feedback proved invaluable. Ann, with her rich experience spanning various roles and institutions, always adds a unique perspective that I hold in high regard.

## What advice would you give to others starting out on this journey?

*Charlotte:* Reflective practice is one of the keystones of educational development (SEDA, 2023). What the SEDA triad has offered me is the opportunity to engage in 'reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983) with the addition of an external lens, providing a richer, more expansive, experience. My advice would be to make time for reflection and get to know your SEDA colleagues.

*Ann:* I would thoroughly recommended exploring the opportunity the SEDA triad offers and to stick with it beyond the tentative first few meetings: the reflection over time, the sharing of the lived experience of learning and the encouragement to move and stay in the growth zone…finding purpose; conquering objectives, setting new goals and of course celebrating successes which Virna and Charlotte and I have done.

*Virna:* Embrace the opportunity to engage in extended, sustained interactions with your triad colleagues, viewing it not as a mere 'chore' but as a gateway to forming supportive, external, critical friendships. This collaborative approach allows you to trace and discuss each other's professional paths, fostering a deeper understanding of your own unique context in the process. My multi-year exchange with Charlotte and Ann serves as a testament to this; it has been both inspirational and enlightening. Engaging with their evolving careers and personal journeys has not only offered valuable insights but also created a reflective space for me to analyse and further develop my own career trajectory. Such interactions are invaluable, providing a rich tapestry of shared experiences and perspectives that can significantly enhance your professional growth and understanding.

## What does the future hold?

*Charlotte:* I know a little of my colleagues' longer-term plans, but in the short term, there is more of the same. I am interested in developing creative approaches to reflective practice, so I may introduce these ideas to Ann and Virna. Co-writing this article has been a new venture for us, and something which came naturally out of our conversations, so perhaps there is scope to develop this further, to explore the benefits of collective reflective practice in different ways.

*Ann:* I hope Virna, Charlotte and I continue with our triad, long after the programme's recommended timescales. For me, it is the sharing of these similarities and differences, watching how they inform our respective professional practice, that has provided such a rich learning experience. Of course, I'm hoping we will have the opportunity to meet in person sometime in the future, but as we have discussed, the virtual setting of our triad has been instrumental in our learning journey. That we have achieved so much is a testament to the value of virtual learning collaboration.

*Virna:* Well, who knows? With this article we are stepping into more formal SoTL activities together. This might be the first step towards further professional outputs, perhaps presenting a paper together, or developing a theory or model of collective reflective practice. Or perhaps we just keep our triad 'low key', as an ongoing safe space with our regular meetings. Either way, it will be great to keep the triad going so we can keep growing and sharing together.

## Final thoughts

It is important to acknowledge that the dynamics of collaborative reflection in triad settings among higher education practitioners do not always work as well as in our experience. The success of these small groups often hinges on a complex interplay of personalities; there is a certain spark that ignites when the right mix of individuals come together, creating a

synergy that fosters meaningful exchanges. This spark, a blend of empathy and understanding, cultivates a sense of solidarity, particularly crucial when navigating the often unpredictable terrain of higher education life. Within the safe confines of these triads, colleagues can share not only the adversities they face but also the joyful milestones of their careers, despite their varied professional circumstances.

This environment allows for forward-looking, positive discussions that are not only reflective but also expansive, opening up new avenues for professional development and innovation. In essence, these collaborative triads are more than just a feature of staff development courses; they are a testament to the enduring power of shared learning experiences and collective wisdom in shaping a more resilient and dynamic academic future.

Based on our experiences, we would like to share these suggestions:

- Encourage all to think about the benefits of 'extending' their triad exchange (either formed during the SEDA course or at the first report iteration)
- Encourage those who have benefited from extended triads to collate and publish their learning as a further professional learning activity.

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# Universal Design and the emotional dimension of learning

**Kevin L. Merry,** De Montfort University

## Introduction

In his 2005 book, *An Intelligent Look at Emotional Intelligence*, Guy Claxton stated that learning and emotion are intrinsically linked. The process of learning is a deeply emotional one, and emotions sit at the heart of learning experiences. For example, because learning is underpinned by the potential for both achievement and failure, the propensity for heightened emotions is augmented. Adjectives such as 'frustrated', 'disappointed', 'exhilarated', 'thrilled', and 'excited' may all be associated with learning at given times, and possibly represent states known to anyone who has ever engaged in a learning experience. As such, we can all recognise the emotional component of learning.

Recognising and acting upon the emotional dimension of learning possibly represents what we've come to define as 'Emotional Intelligence' (EI), which in the broadest sense is the ability to acknowledge and handle emotions in yourself and in others (Goleman, 1996). EI is the often unrecognised and neglected third ingredient required for effective teaching, alongside subject knowledge and teaching skills (Mortiboys, 2013). Subsequently, a possible endeavour for teachers is to advance their EI skills to supplement the pedagogic and subject expertise they already possess. However, for the vast majority of HE teachers, there is perhaps a lack of awareness of the need to develop their EI skills (Mortiboys, 2013).

## Emotional variability

Our emotional responses to anything are essentially self-constructed, based on our beliefs, previous experiences, and memories *etc*. Therefore, learners will vary in relation to how they respond to learning, and as such they won't all respond in the same way to learning situations. Furthermore, individual learners will respond emotionally to different learning situations in different ways, and so we can predict that learner emotional responses to learning will be dynamic. A key concept underpinning Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is 'learner variability' – all the things that make learners different from each other (CAST, 2018). The emotional response to learning is a source of learner variability, though it's a source that we rarely pay attention to.

### Thought experiment

Imagine a child in a maths class who is asked by the teacher to solve an algebraic equation on the whiteboard in front of the whole class. The child may perceive the task as threatening, since failure to solve the equation correctly may result in humiliation for the child among their peers. If the child has faced public humiliation in similar circumstances before, then the feeling of anxiety associated with the emotion would be potentially heightened. This example shows how previous learning experiences influence the

emotions a learner experiences in the classroom. It also demonstrates emotional variability because some learners would not perceive solving an algebraic equation in front of the class as threatening or become anxious because of it. As such, an important step in developing emotionally intelligent teaching is to recognise that the learning environments that we create will naturally elicit emotional responses from our learners (Mortiboys, 2013). Some of those responses will be positive. However, some will be negative. From a UDL perspective this is critical, because UDL is about reducing or removing barriers within the learning environment. Creating a learning environment that consistently elicits negative emotional responses is essentially adding barriers to learning.

## Basic emotions

There are four basic types of emotion: 1) happiness; 2) sadness; 3) fear; and 4) anger (Gu *et al.*, 2019). To support effective learning, we would want to increase the level of happiness among our learners and reduce the level of sadness, fear and anger our learners experience when learning. The four basic emotions are associated with three core effects: 1) *reward*, which is a precursor to happiness; 2) *punishment*, a precursor to sadness, and; 3) *stress*, a precursor to fear and anger (Gu *et al.*, 2019) (Figure 1). Where in the learning environments that you create, do learners experience reward, punishment, and stress? Reflecting on this question is another useful step in developing a teaching approach that considers the emotional dimension of learning.
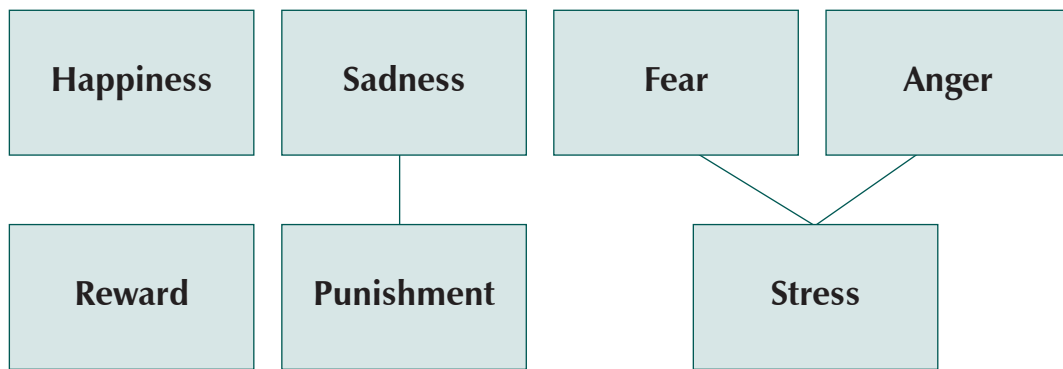


Figure 1  The four basic emotions and their antecedents

## Designing with emotion in mind

When thinking about the emotional dimension of the learning environments you create, it is helpful to use Meyer, Rose and Gordon's (2014) approach to intentional learning design (Figure 2.) which consists of: 1) outcomes; 2) assessments; 3) methods; 4) materials. Each of these four areas could arouse particular emotional responses in learners, and so from an emotional perspective, it is useful to assess each area for sources of reward, punishment and stress.
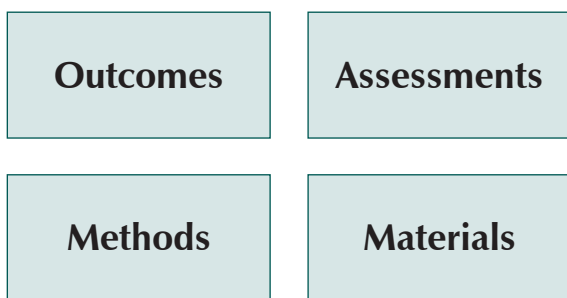


Figure 2    Meyer, Rose and Gordon's (2014) approach to intentional learning design

Although each part of intentional learning design can be a source of reward, punishment or stress, your learning and teaching methods are probably the largest and most influential area when thinking about the emotional dimension of learning. For example, if we're thinking about how learners might experience regular rewards when they learn, or if we're reflecting on potential sources of punishment or stress, then it's likely that your teaching methods will be the major source of these. Let's examine some of the ways we can provide rewards and avoid punishment and stress when teaching.

# Providing rewards

In terms of providing rewards, we're going to delve into the behaviourist school of learning. As a general rule, the behaviourist school posits that learners will require some form of reward to support successful learning (Petty, 2014). Rewards can come in the form of grades on assessed work, but this might happen too infrequently to support motivation and positive emotional responses. Instead, rewards can be provided in the form of regular praise, frequent teacher attention and deliberate encouragement (Petty, 2014). One note of caution though, we're not talking about giving praise for the sake of it. We give praise, encouragement and attention because they are shown to powerfully impact learner motivation (Henderlong and Lepper, 2002), and we need learners to be motivated in order to learn successfully. Happy emotions are a by-product of a process that is intentionally geared toward supporting continued motivation and subsequent learning.

It should also be remembered, that an important part of the UDL principle of Engagement is about how we can motivate learners and keep them interested in learning, even when learning is difficult (CAST, 2018). In this regard, praise, encouragement and teacher attention play a prominent role in supporting motivation for and perseverance with learning.

## When to praise?

Our teaching approaches should involve learning activities for learners to participate in. The purpose of those activities is to enable learners to practise practical and cognitive skills that they must apply to the content of their learning. Such activities provide an important outlet for feedback.
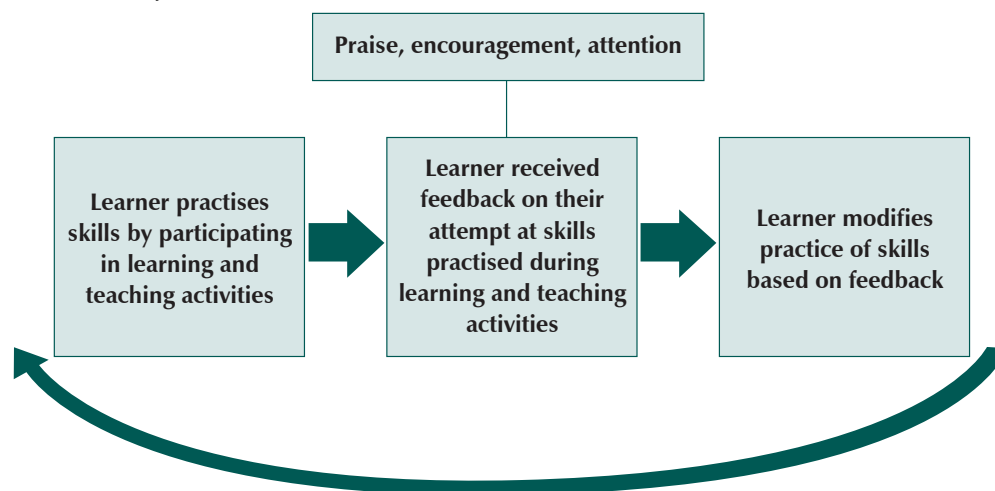
*Figure 3    Feedback-corrected practice and the place of praise, encouragement and attention*

During learning activities, learners can practise various skills and get feedback on their attempts at those skills. Learners then modify their practice based on the feedback they receive from us. The feedback they receive is mastery-oriented because it supports mastery of the various skills learners must learn and eventually master (CAST, 2018). This whole process is known as feedback-corrected practice (Petty, 2014) (Figure 3) and is a key outlet for offering praise and encouragement in the classroom, as well as a key mechanism for mastering practical and cognitive skills.

## Avoiding punishment and stress

### Removing barriers

We must be aware of any barriers learners face when learning. For example, if a learner with dyslexia is required to read large volumes of text and respond in writing in a short timeframe, then they would likely become anxious, as well as perhaps be a bit angered, especially if there were no alternative options. Understanding the variability of your learners, the barriers they face, and then working to remove or reduce those barriers can be an important way to reduce fear and anger among learners.

### Clear expectations

It is important that we set clear expectations for learners (Mortiboys, 2013). For example, we all like to know how a learning situation will play out. There's sometimes nothing worse than uncomfortable surprises. How would you feel, if the teacher made you solve an algebraic equation in front of the class like the earlier example? One extremely useful way to address learner expectations is to use 'learning commitments'. For example, whenever I meet a new group of learners I define the learning commitments that make clear to them what to expect from me. For example, I like to use cold-calling questioning techniques, making some learners uncomfortable. However, by explaining to learners in advance that I plan to use cold-calling, but also detailing the benefits, I'm avoiding uncomfortable surprises and using EI skills to support learner expectations.

### Acknowledging learners as individuals

We all respond well to a personal touch. It's nice when people know our names or acknowledge us personally. As such, it is important to acknowledge your learners as individuals (Mortiboys, 2013). Making small talk, making low risk personal disclosures, greeting learners, knowing names and even asking names, especially when someone asks a question, are easy ways to acknowledge learners as individuals. Also, knowing learner preferences and removing learning barriers as mentioned earlier, go a long way to acknowledging them as individuals.

### Listening

Teaching involves an overwhelming emphasis on communicating through talking. However, equal emphasis should be placed on listening, since listening is a critical, often overlooked teaching skill (Mortiboys, 2013). The ability to listen, and pay attention to others, is integral to emotional awareness. As such, it is critical that we listen to our learners. Important listening skills include avoiding judgement, showing empathy, summarising, paraphrasing, asking questions and using positive body language. If learners don't feel like they are being listened to, it can be a huge source of frustration and potential anger to them.

## Learner emotional literacy

Learner 'Emotional Literacy' (EL) involves learners having self-awareness and recognition of their feelings and the ability to manage them (Goleman, 1996; Bocchino, 1999). There are clear links between EL and Emotional Self-Regulation (E S-R), and there is an exceptionally strong link between E S-R and effective learning (Nota *et al*., 2004; Kitsantsas *et al*., 2008; Housman, 2017). Successful learners tend to be those that are able to self-regulate. E S-R reflects the ability to be more effective at coping with the demands of the learning environment. As such it's important to develop learner EL through developing self-regulation.

One-third of the Engagement principle of UDL is given over to learner self-regulation, including checkpoints relating to the optimisation of learner motivation, the facilitation of coping skills, and the development of self-assessment and reflection (CAST, 2018). Hence, from a UDL perspective, part of our mission as teachers is to support the development of learner self-regulation, though we rarely make this an intentional part of our teaching.

### Developing self-regulation

How can we support learners to self-regulate? One possibility, is to support learners to develop their emotional skills, which

consists of supporting them to: 1) recognise their emotions; 2) manage their emotions; and 3) use their emotions (Bracket and Katulak, 2006) (Figure 4).
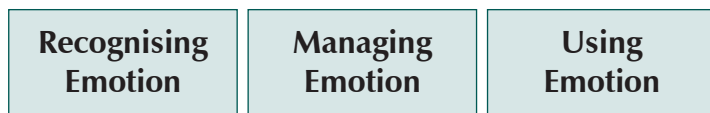
| Recognising Emotion | Managing Emotion | Using Emotion |
|---|---|---|

*Figure 4    Three emotional skills supporting self-regulation and emotional literacy*

### Recognising emotion

Recognising emotion is the ability to recognise emotions by paying attention to feelings during learning scenarios (Bracket and Katulak, 2006). When learners can recognise their feelings in different learning scenarios, their self-expression may improve, and they may be better able to predict their emotions in various circumstances (Bracket and Katulak, 2006). For example, if you know you're going to get anxious in a particular learning situation, then you can proactively work to manage it before it becomes debilitating from a learning perspective.

To support learners in recognising their emotions, we can encourage them to write about the emotions they experience, including their intensity, during a day at university or even during a single learning experience. By getting learners to document their emotional responses to different types of learning situation, we can support them to better recognise how various aspects of their learning experience influence their emotions.

### Managing emotion

Managing emotion is about having the awareness and capability to control emotional reactions and effectively influence feelings so that difficult learning situations can be better dealt with (Bracket and Katulak, 2006). For example, if you know you get frustrated in a particular situation, it's about intentionally applying a strategy to manage the frustration.

To support learners with managing emotion, they can write about a negative emotion they've experienced when studying, including the trigger(s) of the emotion, and the strategies they've employed to manage it. They can consider the effectiveness of the strategies they have used, and devise other potential strategies they could use, such as deep-breathing, meditation, or self-talk, for example. By knowing how to effectively manage negative emotions that impact on learning, perseverance, even with challenging tasks, can be improved.

### Using emotion

Using emotion is about generating the optimum emotional state for different learning tasks and activities (Bracket and Katulak, 2006). Motivation, attention and interest, which are critical to learning, are dependent upon experiencing the right emotions at the right times. Hence, to learn effectively is influenced by the capability to know which emotional states will be optimal for different learning situations. For example, we all face tasks that we must complete but struggle to get motivated for. Using emotion is about how we generate the right emotional state to successfully complete such tasks even though they are boring or difficult.

To support learners to use emotion, we can encourage them to write down the way in which aspects of their learning environment affect their emotional state. For example, they might reflect on the impact of the physical space, learning activities or resources on their emotions, and then reflect on how those emotions impact on their learning or desire to study. They can then write down the ways in which they currently generate certain emotional states in themselves that they feel help them to study in different scenarios, as well as list upcoming learning scenarios for which they would like to put themselves in an optimum emotional state. For example, they may write about a specific class or study task, and reflect on ways they can produce the emotional state required to successfully engage with the event or task.

### Assessment as learning

The assessment process provides a good outlet for learners to explore their emotional responses to learning. A UDL approach to assessment encourages adoption of three forms of assessment: 1) assessment *of* learning; 2) assessment *for* learning; and 3) assessment *as* learning. Assessment *as* learning, where learners assess themselves through self-evaluation, monitoring and reflection as a means of developing their metacognitive skills and subsequent learning capability (Lysight and O'Leary, 2013), also provides a great outlet for developing emotional skills. Hence, assessment as learning activities can be used to support learners to recognise, use, understand, and manage their emotional responses to various learning situations as part of a broader process of becoming a more effective learner.

## Conclusions

As teachers, we must be aware of the emotional dimension of learning. There will be wide emotional variability among the learners we teach, and we must reflect on the learning environments and experiences we create, and assess where there is the potential for reward, punishment or stress. We can actively support learners to develop their emotional and subsequent self-regulation skills by supporting them to recognise, use, understand and manage their emotional responses to learning situations. Assessment *as* learning approaches provide an opportunity for learners to develop their emotional skills.

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# Breaking out: Using Negotiated Ground Rules to 'DRIVE' forward student engagement in online breakout rooms

**Baljeet Sidhu** and **Duncan Hindmarch,** Staffordshire University

## Introduction

This small-scale practitioner-led research project evaluated the impact of negotiated ground rules on student engagement and participation in online breakout rooms. Negotiated Ground Rules, also known by other terms such as Classroom Contracts, are a set of principles agreed by all the students regarding their approach to learning. They can also be adapted for specific tasks such as how to contribute to an online discussion room.

Following the pandemic, delivery of the Police Apprenticeship at Staffordshire University has moved towards a blended model where face-to-face delivery is supplemented with online webinars. With online classes of over 40 learners, it was difficult to monitor and support engagement of the groups during breakout room discussions. Indeed, student feedback complained that there were varied levels of engagement from peers during such tasks.

This project therefore sought to motivate genuine student engagement in the development of 'Negotiated Ground Rules' to facilitate student empowerment and adoption of inclusive online discussion practices.

The study adopted an action research-based method with a 'before and after' cycle to evaluate learner views. We called this approach 'DRIVE':

1. Discuss:  Learners participate in an online breakout room discussion without prior discussion on ground rules
2. Reflect: Learners reflect on the effectiveness of the discussion to inform the creation of breakout room ground rules
3. Involve: Students agree breakout room ground rules
4. Verify: Learners participate in a second breakout room discussion using their ground rules
5. Evaluate: Learners reflect on the effectiveness of these ground rules in terms of promoting greater learner engagement in the activity. Any proposed amendments to the rules are considered.

The study was completed as part of the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher and Professional Education course at Staffordshire University, which is aligned with the SEDA Learning, Teaching and Assessing (LTA) Award.

The research findings gave positive indications of using this approach for developing negotiated ground rules and higher levels of participation and student engagement. It is acknowledged that this was a small-scale pilot study and further research is required to validate findings as well as consider the impact of the approach within different training contexts.

## The context of the project

Since the 2020 pandemic, Higher Education Providers (HEPs) have explored different technology-enabled learning methods to deliver educational courses, rapidly adapting to online teaching and learning to meet the needs of students (Xie *et al*., 2020). However, this has brought notable challenges as summarised in the JISC (2023, p. 6) 'Beyond Blended' report on post-pandemic education technology development:

> '…many students and teaching staff found online learning difficult. The issues included problems with focus and engagement, a lack of social cues, less responsive feedback and a loss of cohort effects such as belonging and collaborative learning.'

Brookfield (2015) cautions against assuming that discussions are inclusive, and that without direction they are unlikely to be productive. Brookfield therefore advocates developing clear guidance: 'Protocols used are designed to equalize participation, keep people focused, and encourage new questions and perspectives' (Brookfield, 2015, p. 2). JISC (2023) also strongly advocate the need for clear rules when engaging in online learning in general: 'Norms and rules for online learning may need to be set out clearly' (JISC, 2023, p. 7) with specific reference to breakout rooms: 'the lack of social cues means interactions of all kinds may need to be more closely planned, with norms of behaviour and time/pacing made more explicit' (JISC, 2023, p. 16).

However, when teaching a large group online, the teacher has three main options:

1. Not using breakout rooms
2. Dividing the class into large group breakout rooms
3. Dividing the class into multiple small groups.

The first option may tend towards a traditional lecture, though the session may become dominated by the few students willing to speak up within a large group. Online polling during the lecture may mitigate passive learning to some extent, enabling the lecturer to informally assess at least basic participation and learning.

The second option, large breakout rooms, enables relatively easy direct monitoring by the teacher but again may exclude learners if there is insufficient time for contributions by all or unwillingness to speak out in front of many peers.

The final option – dividing the class into many small breakout rooms – avoids these issues, though does not necessarily guarantee equitable participation (Brookfield, 2015; Kagan, 1994). Furthermore, in an online environment, this makes direct monitoring of engagement difficult as it is unlikely that the teacher will be able to visit each group within a task's timeframe (Savvidou and Alexander, 2022).

What is therefore required to support small group online study is:

- A means of indirect monitoring of participation
- Developing student understanding of what effective group learning looks like
- Encouraging learner responsibility for enabling online engagement of all.

Indirect monitoring can take place where groups are set tasks with clear outputs. This could involve quiz apps where progress can be monitored. Alternatively, using a Padlet with a separate column for each group enables the teacher to monitor which groups are – and are not – contributing. Support can then be concentrated on these groups; they may be disengaged, or engaged but not completing the required output. This then enables targeted intervention by the teacher to join any group not making sufficient progress with the task. As well as this deficit approach, there is also the opportunity to develop self and peer management of group learning tasks by allocating roles and responsibilities. The teacher and peers can also evaluate and support through commenting on posts the quality of student group work.

Although pre-dating online breakout rooms, Kagan's (1994) research highlighted the need for small groups to enable meaningful individual contributions to group activities. Kagan's PIES model emphasises student responsibility for learning in group activities:

- Positive interdependence
- Individual accountability
- Equal participation
- Simultaneous interaction.

To this might be added the need for a clear timeframe for focus and classroom management as well as a clear output (relating to the need for monitoring, discussed earlier). These considerations can therefore inform the development of inclusive ground rules for online breakout rooms. The need for such parameters is further supported by recent research which indicates 'positive learner behaviour' where learner rules are discussed and agreed by the participants (Khonamri *et al*., 2021; Savvidou and Alexandra, 2022). Additionally, a study by Lee (2021) also highlighted challenges with participant engagement in multiple breakout rooms, and they encouraged informal learning principles or ground rules to improve breakout room discussions.

## The study

In support of the purpose for this study, O'Brien's (2008) action research approach was taken. The project used the following stages (Figure 1).

**Step 1**
Breakout room activity without Ground Rules

**Step 2**
Ground Rules Negotiation and Briefing
(Before and After) Participatory Action Research Set

**Step 3**
Questionnaire and Focus Group

**Step 4**
Feedback and Data Analysis

*Figure 1   Flowchart highlighting the 4 key stages of the study*

## Breakout room group discussions without ground rules

The initial breakout room discussion reflected a typical online learning experience where a task was set but without any breakout room specific guidance on ground rules. Students had been briefed on general learner expectations and responsibilities as part of their course induction. The students were divided into 11 online breakout rooms, with each individual room having 4 students.

## Ground rules negotiation and briefing

The ground rules were then discussed in an open online class of 44 students, and all were encouraged to contribute. The ground rules were agreed by the group through a process of open discussions, with each student having the opportunity

to influence them, and also add their thoughts through separate online submissions. The group was divided into the same 11 breakout rooms with the same participants. This time they were encouraged to follow their agreed ground rules in their individual online breakout rooms. The students' feedback to evaluate the impact was then collected using an online questionnaire open to all students as well as a follow-up focus group discussion. This focus group consisted of six students, who had volunteered from the larger group.

## Findings

### Agreed ground rules

The students discussed and agreed the following ground rules:

- Everyone in the breakout group to participate and support each other's participation
- Keep cameras on in the online breakout rooms
- Assign and agree tasks in the group to include person feeding back to the main classroom
- Encourage turn-taking in role of feeding back task outcomes to the whole class.

### Student feedback on creating discussion group ground rules compliance

Out of the 44 students who participated in the action research set, 37 students (84%) responded to the questionnaire, which asked (2A) 'Were the negotiated ground rules followed by all in the breakout room?', and (2B) 'Did you follow the ground rules?'.

As shown in Figure 2 below (2A), 75% (28 respondents) stated that everyone followed the ground rules in the breakout room, providing a positive level of compliance. However, in answer to question 2B, this increased to 89% (33 respondents) when the students were asked if they personally followed the ground rules. This potentially indicates a difference in the participants' own perception as compared with their peers when providing feedback, in line with Kagan and Kagan's (1998) observation about the difference experienced in personal feedback and group feedback from students. Overall, though, these findings do give a positive initial indication of their adherence to the ground rules they created.
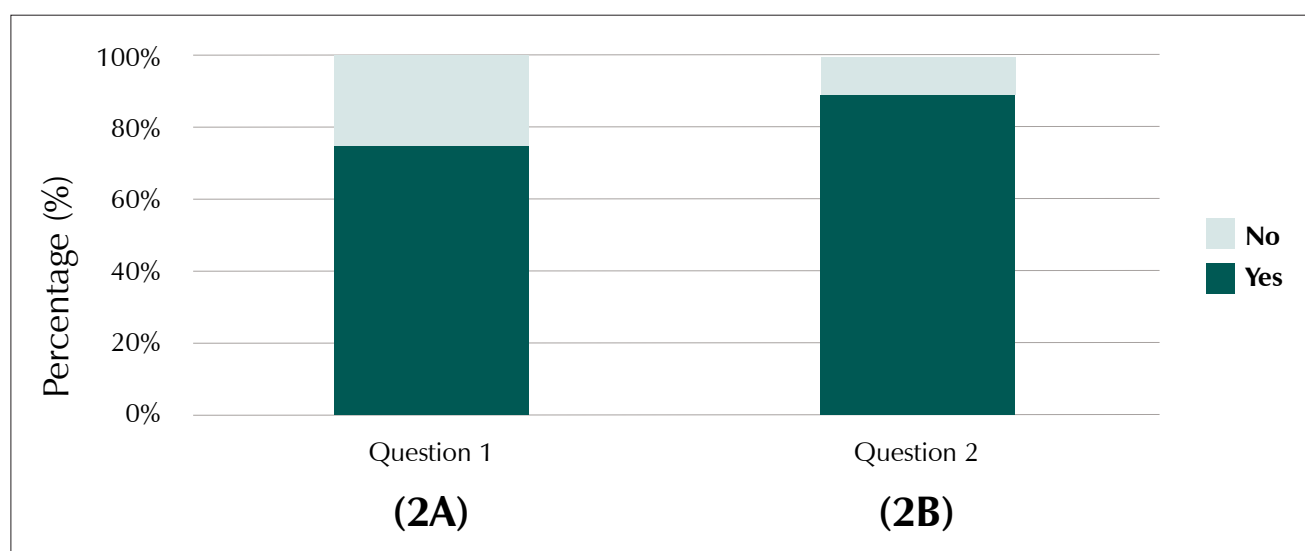


*Figure 2   Graph illustrating perceptions of peers' and personal compliance with the ground rules*

### Participants' reaction to ground rules

If peers found that the ground rules were not followed by some in the group, in most cases they felt comfortable in challenging each other, though they accepted that, ultimately, they could not enforce compliance. The feedback from both the focus group and the questionnaires indicated a positive attitude towards ground rules from the majority of the participants. Not putting their camera on was the one ground rule participants found most challenging to follow. The main reasons were internet issues and some students preferred privacy as they did not want others to see their personal backgrounds. This highlighted the need for clear guidance to learners on how to apply a picture

background screen/blur background.

### What went well with the ground rules

When exploring what went well in relation to the ground rules, 97% – 36 of the 37 – survey respondents contributed to this discussion. The key themes highlighted by the participants from both the questionnaire and the focus group were:

1. Strong group contributions to the discussion in the room
2. Having cameras on where possible encouraged people to engage more
3. Assigning tasks to group members was helpful and more productive
4. Encouraged team working
5. Provided a structure and frame-

work to follow
6. Behaviour in the breakout rooms was more in line with professional expectations
7. Smaller breakout room groups worked better, as it allowed all to have a voice, summarised by one student as follows: 'The rules helped bring the quiet people out of their shells, so they talk a bit more. This made the whole chat more interactive and more beneficial for all of us.'

The above feedback points towards a positive impact of having negotiated ground rules in improving student engagement in online breakout rooms.

At the conclusion of the focus group discussion, some participants gave informal feedback requesting the ground rules approach to be followed in all online lectures they attended as they believed it improved their quality of learning: 'The ground rules made it feel more like a normal classroom, in terms of actually seeing people and doing the work rather than just voices', and 'Everyone had clear roles and actively participated'.

The participants in both the questionnaires and the focus group were asked to compare their learning and engagement experience between the breakout rooms where no ground rules were agreed and applied and those where ground rules were applied. 91% – 34 out of 37 – respondents provided feedback. Their key positive themes were:

- Increased participation
- Better engagement when cameras were on
- Encouraged contribution and open discussion.

There were a small number (10%) who felt it did not make any difference.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The study implies some clear benefits to learners in adopting negotiated ground rules in online breakout rooms *after* they have experienced a short breakout room activity without task-specific ground rules. This experience gives learners the opportunity to see the importance of implementing ground rules in a specific context and provides motivation to engage in their development. The participants felt it professionalised the teaching environment and group discussions, providing a clearer focus with increased engagement and encouraged student participation. A very important point that was made by one of the students who had a learning support agreement in place was that they found the ground rules allowed them to participate and contribute more. As they had an assigned task and owing to the ground rules, all in the group had the opportunity to voice their opinion without being rushed or feeling left behind. This suggests the need for further research to consider the potential benefits of online discussion negotiated ground rules to promote inclusion with neurodiverse learners.

To summarise, the evidence from this study provides a positive indicator that negotiated ground rules in online breakout rooms, when developed and reflected upon by the learners, tend to improve student engagement and participation considerably. However, it is recognised that there are limitations to this study, as it was conducted on a relatively small sample of participants in a single course. Further studies to explore the negotiated ground rules method in breakout rooms would contribute to the understanding of the benefits and challenges of this approach and assist in building a stronger evidence base.

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Xin Xie, Keng Siau and Fiona-Hoon Nah (2020) 'COVID-19 pandemic - online education in the new normal and the next normal', *Journal of Information Technology Case and Application Research*, 22:3, pp. 17-187.

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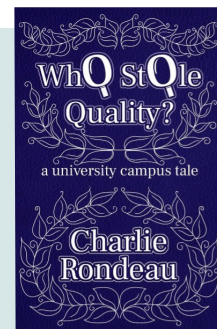## Who Stole Quality? A university campus tale

by Charlie Rondeau

Maple Publishers

364 pages

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ISBN-13: 978-1835380697

If this book was a song, it would be a mash-up, in the style of say, Baby I Love Your Way (Peter Frampton)/ Freebird (Lynyrd Skynyrd) by Will To Power. A tune that is curious mix – yacht rock meets out and out guitar showstopper. But one that is oddly effective. Here we have, equally oddly but equally effective, a mix of romance with discussion of quality in Higher Education (HE).

The two main characters, Jack and Lotte, at the start of the novel are both academics working at the same university. We then follow them over the course of many years, through three parts of the book, paranoia, anger and calm, during which their relationship with each other and the notion of quality in HE unfolds and evolves. It can be read as a straightforward story of the lives of two educators or as a discourse on the definition and ownership of quality.

For experienced academics the discussion is insightful and illuminating, for new academics it provides an engaging primer into the debate. I found it to be an interesting refresher of ideas that I had, in the main, previously come across, although there were new things there too. I had not heard about, for example, Mondragon in the Basque. At the same time, you will also be wanting to know what happens to Jack and Lotte.

In one section, that neatly brings this romance and discussion together, our two protagonists are sending each other postcards with educational quotes they write on the back. The internal debate each has about the selection of the card (and upon its receipt), in respect of the image and the message it conveys and then the selection of the quote that advances their postal discussion, I particularly enjoyed. Readers who are looking for interesting academic

debate and references, if they don't know them, can follow up the quotes. Indeed, I found myself looking up the images too. Quality stuff!

The book itself: the paperback version has a quality feel to it and the text is easy to read in both terms of font and layout and the author's writing style. The author is also very knowledgeable about the field of 'quality' and more generally the nature and purpose of HE. For anyone who has thought 'huh?' about 'Excellence' as applied to HE in the way it is used in the TEF (a quality standard), then this is for you. If you have not, it is then most definitely required reading.

**Peter Gossman** is a Principal Lecturer and Course Leader for the Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education in the Institute of Education at the University of Worcester.

# On questions asked about the keys to teaching excellence

**Claire Goode,** Otago Polytechnic, NZ

Why is it that we remember some teachers and not others? What is it that makes a teacher excellent, and do recognised educators see these traits and practices in themselves? Are these factors something which can be learned?

To better understand the facets that make up 'teaching excellence', I used narrative inquiry to investigate the stories of twelve national Tertiary Teaching Excellence awardees in New Zealand. My research questions explore awardees' respective trajectories and professional practice, including views on their identity, their practice, and on what they consider to be excellence in tertiary teaching. As a teacher myself, I was able to relate to many aspects of what we discussed. While I had a core set of questions that I wanted to cover, it was also

important to let the conversation flow naturally, and to allow people to reflect on key moments in their respective careers. What was it that drew them to teaching? What has influenced them as they have developed their practice? How do they describe their professional practice now? What would they like to see in teacher development for the tertiary context moving forward?

**The 'Keys to Teaching Excellence'**

One concrete output of this research (Goode, 2021) is the 'Keys to Teaching Excellence' model. This model pulls together the most common themes identified through data analysis of the semi-structured interviews with these twelve awardees.

Participants' narratives are incredibly rich in data, and valuable in their own right, but it was through thematic analysis across the set of stories that the Keys to Teaching Excellence model came about.

It is worth noting that I chose to use the term 'teaching excellence' based on the fact that it was, at the time, the name of the national tertiary teaching awards in New Zealand, and it was these awardees whose stories I investigated. However, the term could perhaps be thought of as 'teaching well', 'best practice', or 'evidence-informed practice', whichever feels most comfortable. The awards have since been reviewed and revised, launched in 2022 with new criteria and a new name – Te Whatu Kairangi, the Aotearoa Tertiary Educator Awards. Aotearoa is the Maori name for New Zealand, and see Ako Aotearoa (2023) for the significance of the Maori name for the awards.

The model comprises five overarching themes or 'keys':

- Building relationships
- Focusing on learners
- Facilitating learning
- Creating a positive environment
- Reflecting on practice.

Each key is made up of characteristics inherent in a teacher's personality (see, for example, Goode 2023) and skills which can be developed through practice and reflection. No one theme or key is more important than any other; instead, it is about the combination and balance of these 'Keys to Teaching Excellence'.

Having completed the study and developed the model, the next important step was to consider how best to disseminate my findings. In September 2022, postcards of the model were distributed to academic staff across our tertiary organisation. I felt significant goosebumps the first time I saw it pinned to the noticeboard behind a colleague's computer monitor, and it is still rewarding whenever I see it around different departments across campus. I have loved hearing how many of my peers are using the model to guide conversations on how they might be able to focus their individual and/or team development in learning and teaching.

Postcards have also been hugely popular with diverse audiences at the conference presentations I have given on the model, in New Zealand, Australia, and Norway. A few weeks after a conference on the Gold Coast, a Nurse Educator contacted me to give feedback on my presentation, which had ended with a 'call to action' to see teaching excellence as a habit and not as some unattainable endpoint. Although working in a clinical setting, rather than in a campus-based context, she was encouraging her colleagues across the hospital to apply the model in their interactions with medical students and other practitioners in training.

In summary, then, while the full 'Keys to Teaching Excellence' model is still to be published, I believe it has been affirmed and found to be both relatable and useful to others. One of my hopes was that teachers would be able to see aspects of themselves and/or their practice across the five keys, and feel (re-)inspired and (re-)motivated by this. I am hearing regularly that this is happening, which is wonderful. There are, though, questions and 'wonderings' which have come up and I now turn to focus on three of these.

## Is 'excellence' the best word to use?

My initial answer is that this is a really good question! The use of terms like 'best practice', 'excellence', and 'teaching excellence' is commonplace across tertiary education and related academic literature. These terms are also widely criticised as having lost any meaning, with no clear definition, and overuse in government policies and strategies. Having said that, annual teaching excellence awards exist in many tertiary institutions and educational organisations, with national teaching excellence awards also present in several countries including New Zealand, Australia, Malaysia, South Africa, Canada, the USA, and the UK.

Many educators do not see their teaching as 'excellent', or think that it might be a lofty goal. It is interesting to highlight that the majority of my participants (all national tertiary teaching excellence awardees) would not use 'excellent' to describe their practice either. A colleague recently sent me an article which used 'teaching well' as the goal for educators to work towards. I commented that I like this phrasing as it is much gentler (and potentially seen as more achievable?), but perhaps this is all semantics. Regardless of the term used, educators, leaders, and policymakers would have to come to a shared understanding of what it actually means. Can 'teaching well' be defined any more clearly than 'teaching excellence'? Possibly not, given that learners, teachers, heads of discipline, and chief executives/vice-chancellors, among others, are all likely to have different opinions on what teaching excellence looks like in practice.

## Why is subject knowledge not part of the model?

Some of my peers in the tertiary sector may be surprised to learn that subject knowledge does not appear in the Keys to Teaching Excellence model. The simple reason for this is that it was barely mentioned in the conversations with my twelve research participants (one awardee mentioned it once but, even then, only very briefly). This does not mean that content or discipline-specific knowledge is not important, *but* pedagogical knowledge and skills, and classroom 'craft' are what really make a difference for learners. If we think about the teachers that made a difference for us, I would guess with some confidence that it is not because of how much they knew! So *how* we teach is much more important than *what* we teach, and facilitation of learning is something we can craft over time.

Even the use of terms like 'facilitation' or 'facilitator' seems to rub some educators up the wrong way. I have often been asked about the use of the word 'facilitating' in the Keys to Teaching Excellence model, with people commenting that they feel the term 'facilitator' perhaps minimises what we do as educators. However, if we think about the meaning of the word 'facilitate' with learning, isn't it about helping to 'bring about' learning, or making learning easier? The importance of *sharing* passion, *co*-constructing knowledge, and *sharing* stories came through strongly in awardees' narratives. These practices all suggest that learning and teaching are collaborative. If we see facilitation of learning as making learning happen, does it portray us as 'less than' in any way (not teachers, not educators, but facilitators)? Not for me.

**What about 'creating a positive environment'?**

Teacher education programmes may include content on practical aspects of creating a place for learning, such as classroom layout, or technology-enhanced learning, for instance. These can certainly contribute to the learning environment, but, again, my research participants' narratives suggest that it is the *interpersonal skills* which make the difference between whether or not a learner feels safe, valued, and motivated to learn in any particular space and/or interaction with others.

A positive environment is also one in which learning is fun and enjoyable. One example from my own time at school saw our French teacher turn a difficult grammatical structure into a calypso which we all sang for 10 minutes or so. This was a very long time ago now, yet, whenever I need to use that particular sentence structure, I *still* sing the calypso in my head to recall it. Are there things like this in your content that learners have difficulty remembering? Can you turn it into a funny phrase, saying, or a song? If it works, it is worth it!

**So what?**
I invite you all to be thinking about what 'teaching excellence' means for you in practice. What can you do to implement these five keys to teaching excellence? Can you use them to guide your reflective practice, or to inform your Professional Development choices? Think about things which you already do as educators, and, for areas where you think you could do more, think about progress towards these, rather than it being about perfection. I absolutely believe that excellence is a habit, not a destination or an end point; it is about repeated choices. Just like any professionals at the top of their game, or elite sportsmen and women…they do the simple and important things, with discipline, every day. So, ask yourself, 'What can I do today to continue making my facilitation, and the learning experience, have the most significant impact on learners?' 'What can I do now, day by day and step by step, to continue my professional growth?

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# SEDA News

## Membership of the Editorial Committee
We welcome two new members of the Editorial Committee.
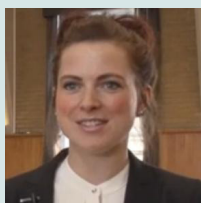
**Dr Poppy Gibson** is a Senior Lecturer at Anglia Ruskin University (ARU), Essex, and Course Leader for the 2-year accelerated blended learning BA in Primary Education Studies.

**Dr Annie Hughes** is the Head of the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Centre at Kingston University.

## Reviewing applications for the Student Partnership Impact Awards
Gemma Mansi (g.j.mansi@gre.ac.ik) is looking for SEDA members who can review a few of the applications for this very successful Award scheme. The applications are quite short, and they need to be read in early June.

# Just published
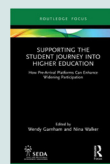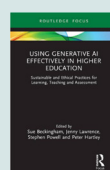
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