53 Powerful Ideas All Teachers Should Know About

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Prologue

In the late 1980's I wrote a series books with titles such as '53 Interesting things to do in your lectures', with Sue and Trevor Habeshaw. We had a ball writing them and the books sold like hot cakes. They were criticised, in some quarters, as lacking any semblance of scholarship, theory or supporting evidence. We didn't initially take this criticism too seriously though. We jokingly argued that 53 was a magical number and that there were only 53 interesting ways to do anything - and that we knew what they were. We had an underlying rationale for the methods, but were wary of being explicit about it for fear of frightening the horses. These were times when educational theory was a big turn-off for teachers in higher education, and the 'scholarship of teaching and learning' was not yet a concept that anyone talked about. Before the '53' books ran their course the three of us nevertheless tried to write a book that articulated our underlying rationale and that contained 53 ideas rather than 53 methods. It proved beyond us. The folders and notes, and draft lists of ideas, are still on my shelves a quarter of a century later.

The world gradually changed, and today it is expected that teachers who are trained or accredited, or who simply take their teaching seriously, should be aware of at least some of the educational literature underlying the way they go about their teaching and use ideas from the literature to explain their teaching decisions. When I was Director of the Oxford Learning Institute at the University of Oxford we ran a Postgraduate Diploma in Teaching in Higher Education that was more about teacher thinking than about teaching methods. We introduced experienced Chemistry and Philosophy dons to demanding educational literature, in the original, with all its complex and off-putting discourse, terminology and preoccupations. I tried to lead the teaching team for the Diploma to produce a reader, for this course and for those at other universities, that contained short extracts from primary educational sources that brought together the most intriguing and powerful ideas we used in our own teaching development work. I still have the minutes from the year-long series of ever more discouraging meetings as we tried to thrash out a common approach and an over-arching conceptual framework. We failed, again. We kept finding that the sources we wanted to use did not explain their central idea very clearly, and certainly not succinctly. We would have ended up with a tome of over 1,000 pages of extracts with another 200 pages of explanatory introductions to every reading. But even before we got to that point we would have had to agree what these powerful ideas were and agree a common theoretical approach to how to cluster them. And we just couldn't agree. Not having a coherent overarching theoretical framework that encompassed everything I knew about teaching and learning had not seemed a big

problem to me in my own work, but once a group of us tried to articulate an explicit shared framework it proved an insurmountable hurdle.

Then I got involved in the most effective teaching change project I have ever had the pleasure to work with: TESTA, ('Transforming the experience of teaching through assessment'). TESTA is really a way of thinking about assessment. It includes, as an aside, some of the kinds of assessment methods that could be found in my dog-eared copy of '53 Interesting Ways to Assess your Students'. But TESTA, as a change process, starts with a convincing rationale and a way of understanding what was going wrong, and the choice of assessment methods to address these problems was driven by this rationale. Every academic department I have worked with using TESTA has found this 'ideas-driven' approach enlightening, even revelatory. The ideas involved are powerful, and teachers run with them with ease and engagement. I have been asked to speak about these ideas more times than I care to remember, even though they are written down in several formats. The notion took hold that I ought to have a third go at pulling together powerful ideas for teachers not just around assessment, but across the whole range of teaching, learning and assessment issues that frame the everyday teaching decisions that academics make. To avoid the problem of agreement between co-authors I would do it single handed. To avoid the problem of an over-arching conceptual framework I simply would not have one. I would adopt the original structure of the '53' books – a list of completely self-contained items in no particular order. Readers could dip in as their interest directed them, could take up some ideas without having to swallow the whole edifice, and could reject other ideas without having to give up. If readers took away even five of the 53 ideas then that would be a result.

It proved easy to start on, once I had decided to forgo scholarly referencing in every other line of text. The reality is that most teachers never go anywhere near primary educational sources, even if they take their teaching and its development very seriously. Much of it is unreadable anyway. So I chose selected readings for the really keen, often secondary sources, where this seems sensible – though not for every idea. Some of the ideas here are hybrids – they span rather different theoretical accounts and sometimes conflicting positions. I have tried to convey the powerful components of ideas without boring with details of the sometimes esoteric associated scholarly debates. There are no sources for such hybrids. And I have not bothered with justifying every single claim I make. Teachers can decide for themselves if it makes sense and genuinely seems a 'powerful idea' – or is just an educationalists' footnote.

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