53 Powerful Ideas All Teachers Should Know About

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Many patterns of teaching in HE simply follow conventions

If you scan most course documentation in the UK you will see sections which are intended to elicit a rationale for the choice of teaching and assessment methods. Normally they will simply state "Lectures to introduce students to core content and seminars to discuss this content" or some such routine statement. The early editions of much the most purchased of all books about higher education teaching, Bill McKeachie's 'Teaching Tips', used to have a chapter about course design that stated unambiguously that your course would have 24 lectures you would need to plan. It is possible Bill assumed something he should not have done, and that what took place in the Psychology Department at Milwaukee University in the 1950's may have been invariable, but it was certainly not inevitable.

I was once undertaking a consultancy to an Engineering Department at the University Politecnica de Catalunya in Barcelona. Students spent a great deal of time in lectures, and very little time in problem classes or labs. I asked them why and was told that, as a Psychologist, I clearly did not understand Engineering – this was simply how Engineering had to be taught. I explained to them that at Imperial College there was a balance between lectures, labs and discussion, that at Lulea in Northern Sweden students spent most of their time in labs and that a University in Queensland students spent most of their time in the workplace, only visiting labs to pick up measurement skills they could not acquire at work. At the Open University there were no lectures and practical work was conducted at home with home experiment kits or at Summer Schools. At Maastricht, Engineering was taught through tackling complex problems with few lectures or labs, at Rosskilde through group project work, at MIT through a 'design and build' sequence, and so on and so on. They were dumfounded. Something that they had taken completely for granted, that they had only ever experienced as a student or as a teacher, was in fact only one of a number of options! Amazing!

Lee Shulman has written eloquently about 'signature pedagogies' associated with disciplines – patterns of teaching, learning and assessment that you see again and again in some disciplines but not in others. To an extent he is right, and that this reflects some inherent characteristics of the discipline and that these signature pedagogies are more appropriate than some alternatives, given the subject matter and the educational goals. But even in his own writing he describes differences within disciplines – for example the 'black letter law' approach to Law teaching in the UK contrasted with the emphasis on disputation in the US. But within the UK giving didactic lectures about the Law itself, rather than learning to use it to make different

arguments and decisions, is a convention (with mooting being almost an extra curricula activity), and in the US disputation is a convention and lectures are interactive. Both approaches are possible and both are relatively invariant in their countries.

Some of the conventions I have bumped into are actually built into funding and regulatory frameworks, but people have forgotten or not noticed, and ascribe pedagogic rationales post hoc to situations that have been formed by other forces. For example at one Engineering department I visited, one of the reasons the lecture classes were so huge (the reason my consultancy was sought) was that their national funding system made it advantageous to departments to get rid of as many students as quickly as possible (as they already had the cash that came with their enrolment). They set very challenging exams so that many students failed, and the large classes consisted of students taking the course for the first, second, third or even fourth time. Large lecture classes were almost inevitable given their funding and assessment system. I pointed out that at Oxford about 98% of entering Engineering students graduated three years later and they were shocked and said that Oxford must have very low standards. I asked them what an ideal pass rate would be and, after an hour of discussion, they grudgingly agreed it might be as high as 50%. This looked very like a local convention framed by a funding system, with no possible pedagogic justification.

And at a University in the Netherlands I was puzzled by the different student learning behaviour in relation to assessment until I realised that all their courses are pass/fail. The entire educational system, from Primary School to postgraduate education, was built around entitlements to progress, even to Bachelors and Masters courses, provided that you passed. With no grades, students were much less strategic, less 'syllabus-bound' and not at all mark-oriented. It completely changed how assessment was perceived and operated. When I explained the pedagogic significance of an emphasis on formative assessment without grades they were very struck by the possibilities – and they were in a position to exploit these possibilities given their regulations, but had not realised it.

It is very difficult for teachers operating in their own, invariant, system, to spot these underlying framing features that determine pedagogic patterns because they are in the background and are taken completely for granted. Timetabling systems, the kind of classrooms available, examination regulations, ways that funding follows students to departments or even to courses, how courses are evaluated and approved, rules about minimum cohort sizes...many aspects of infrastructure determine what pedagogies are practicable and likely.

A more honest statement in the 'Rationale' section of course documentation might be "This course has been allocated two large lecture theatres for an hour on Tuesday morning and again on Friday afternoon, so I am going to have to lecture, and the exam regulations only allow two assignments and

forbid giving feedback on drafts so I am going to have to set two 'one stage' assignments and hope my students can get things right the very first time they do them, each time. And anyway if I suggested anything very different my colleagues would disapprove".

I once applied for a £250k teaching development grant that allocated almost all the funding to travel expenses so that teachers could visit other institutions to see how others taught their subject. My role would have been to identify varied practices, wherever they were, and negotiate 'visiting days'. I regret that it was never funded. The University of Utrecht actually funds international visits, to wherever has extraordinary practices, as part of their demonstrably effective 'leadership of teaching' programme, to widen senior academics' horizons about what is possible rather than be bound by conventions. Utrecht is ranked top for teaching in the Netherlands.

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