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Highlight:

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“What makes good teaching”: Reflections from a Teaching Fellow in Law

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I became a Teaching Fellow in September 2016 and it was recommended that I undertake the Teaching and Learning in Higher Education programme (TLHEP). I wasn't completely new to university teaching; I had been a Graduate Teaching Assistant for three years while researching my PhD, with positive feedback from students and peer review from colleagues. I confess to having been somewhat sceptical as to what the TLHEP could offer me, and wary of the additional workload on top of a new job with a busy timetable. However, as the course progressed, I appreciated having dedicated time to reflect critically on my teaching, and I discovered how theories of learning and teaching could help me make more informed choices about how I teach. This is what Brookfield means by the 'deeper benefit' of critical reflection in addition to mere 'procedural utility', because critical reflection leads us to 'know why we believe what we believe'.¹

This discussion on 'What makes good teaching?' is from my first TLHEP assignment. Like any student looking back on work she wrote last year, I am very aware how much I have learnt since then and I am therefore a little shy of sharing it! I hope readers will find it interesting nevertheless.

What makes good teaching?

¹ Stephen Brookfield, 'The Getting of Wisdom: What Critically Reflective Teaching is and Why It's Important,' in *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* (1995): 1-28, 25

It can be difficult to define what makes good teaching, not least because teaching is 'a complex act, influenced by subtle conditions and swift teacher-student interactions'.² I have strong memories of certain teachers throughout my life: for example, the primary school teacher who encouraged me to read Orwell; the high school physics teacher whose vivid explanation of force remains with me 35 years later; the university lecturer who managed to make contract law interesting through his use of entertaining stories; and the Master's lecturer whose eccentricities of dress and personality complemented his ability to make us question our assumptions. Students remember good teachers for a variety of reasons, but there are several factors that contribute towards what is generally understood to be good teaching. This discussion draws on both the academic literature and on personal reflection from my own teaching experience so far.

The overarching aim of successful teaching, for me, is to provide a collaborative and enriching learning experience which enables students to achieve their goals. An important ingredient in this experience is a teacher who is both knowledgeable and enthusiastic about her subject, who can stimulate students' interest in the topic and inspire them to look at it in more depth. As one student said in her feedback, 'After each seminar I come away determined to learn even more. Stella provokes my thinking and so do my fellow students'. This, for me, is the epitome of a successful university experience, and one which I try to foster in my classes.

I teach on a variety of modules on the undergraduate Law degree (LLB) and on several postgraduate courses. This means that providing a collaborative and enriching learning experience, so that students can achieve their goals, is not straightforward! Students' goals – as well as their prior knowledge, attitude and

² Allan C Ornstein, 'The New Paradigm in Research on Teaching,' *The Educational Forum* 59.2 (1995): 124

background – can vary according to both the course itself and also where they are personally in their academic development. As Bruner observes, students in the early stages of approaching a new course or topic may require more ‘scaffolding’ to support their learning.³ Scaffolding is defined as ‘those elements of the task that are initially beyond the learner’s capacity, thus permitting him to concentrate upon and complete only those elements that are within his range of competence’.⁴ Once the student becomes more competent, the scaffolding can be dismantled and the student can proceed with more independent learning. Students can become engaged or disengaged according to how well this scaffolding is deployed to support their learning, particularly in the first year of undergraduate studies.

This idea of scaffolding, or guided learning, builds on Vygotsky’s idea of the ‘zone of proximal development’ (ZPD), where we can learn more in collaboration with a more knowledgeable other. The ZPD is ‘the distance between the actual developmental level (as determined by independent problem solving) and the level of potential development under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers’.⁵ In other words, a student who is in the ZPD for a particular learning task can be supported to achieve the desired outcome by providing appropriate assistance, through guidance from the teacher and collaborative learning with peers, such as in small group work and guided team activities. This aspect of learning and teaching remains important throughout the degree course and into postgraduate study, and is why tutorials and seminars play such a vital role in student learning.

³ DJ Wood, JS Bruner and G Ross, ‘The role of tutoring in problem solving’ *Journal of Child Psychiatry and Psychology* (1976) 17(2), 89-100

⁴ [n 3], 90

⁵ LS Vygotsky, *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes* (1978, Harvard University Press), 86

My teaching experience, along with discussions with tutors and peers on the TLHEP course, has enabled me to reflect that good teaching therefore requires an ability to adapt to a range of classroom situations and to be aware of learners' diverse needs. Nevertheless, there are certain key aspects that every teaching session should contain, such as clear Intended Learning Outcomes (and associated assessment criteria), which inform the structure and focus of the session. Clear ILOs ensure that as the course – or even the individual class – progresses, students are supported to develop their knowledge and to thereby move up the 'taxonomy of educational objectives'.⁶ Bloom's taxonomy has six levels, each involving a higher level of abstraction, from knowledge through comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and finally evaluation. Good teaching, as my student implied, supports this movement up the taxonomy by provoking thinking and encouraging students to want to go further in their understanding.

Bloom's taxonomy relates to another important aspect of good teaching, which is to challenge students' assumptions and encourage a more critical approach to the subject. In my Law classes, I encourage students to engage with judicial reasoning, particularly in cases where judges agree but for different reasons, and where judges make strong dissents from the majority decision. I invite them to debate which they find most persuasive and why. Showing them that judges disagree demonstrates that there is often no 'right' answer – the important thing is being able to put together an argument that supports their point of view. Seminars and tutorials offer a rich opportunity to support both academic and transferable skills, by facilitating group work and debate to improve students' confidence in public speaking and presenting, or playing 'devil's advocate' to provoke their thinking in a humorous and non-

⁶ BS Bloom (ed) *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives Vol. 1: Cognitive Domain* (McKay, 1956)

threatening way. I encourage students to view law in its wider social, economic and political contexts, and to appreciate the impact of political decision-making on access to justice.

In the past, only 5% of young adults had the opportunity to go to University; now the figure for England is around 48%.⁷ The bulk of this increase involves young people who are less academic; they do not spontaneously use qualitative modes of understanding, and so they need to be supported to enable them to reach that level. This means that we all need to understand what makes good teaching.

⁷ Department for Education, *Participation Rates in Higher Education*
<https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/552886/HEIPR_PUBLICATION_2014-15.pdf> accessed 18 July 2017