

# ACADEMIC PRACTICE

Developing as a Professional in Higher Education

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2ND EDITION

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SARANNE WELLER

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For Tim Julier



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# BECOMING A TEACHER IN HIGHER EDUCATION

## Introduction

This book is about being and becoming a teacher in universities. The routes into university teaching can be wide-ranging, teaching roles may differ and the formal research role of teachers may vary. Many teachers begin university teaching following doctoral or other higher degree study, but others are appointed on the basis of professional expertise, clinical or artistic practice experience or are undertaking teaching as PhD students while they themselves are also students. Teaching can be part of the role of lecturers alongside research commitments, but can equally be undertaken by teaching fellows, technicians, library, student support or quality staff, or education technologists, as well as employers, work-based supervisors and alumni directly teaching and assessing students in the university and in practice settings, or supporting others to design and deliver modules and programmes. For those with research roles, the need to maintain research and professional expertise alongside teaching may mean there is a tension between the demands and rewards for teaching or research. However, this book emerges out of what it might mean if we recognise the diversity of being a teacher, and see teaching and becoming a teacher as identity work rather than the acquisition of a set of professional techniques or practices that can be applied in any setting. Learning lies at the heart of research, professional or industry practice and teaching. To research or practise is to enquire, explore and recognise gaps in our understanding and to pose and answer questions. Likewise, teaching enables us to extend, test and explore our understanding of our disciplines with our students, as well as to enquire into the process of learning itself.



This book starts from the position that becoming a teacher in higher education, therefore, is first and foremost concerned with recognising ourselves as learners. We may have qualifications, expertise, knowledge and publications, but in essence we are continually learning both when we research and when we practise in our professional field, as well as when we teach. In this book, we will consider what it is to be a teacher in contemporary higher education and how we might construct a meaningful multidimensional professional identity and role as a teacher in a complex and demanding sector undergoing tremendous change. This involves acknowledging that teaching is:

- reciprocal with learning – we cannot teach well if we do not recognise ourselves as learners in that process;
- a situated process that cannot be decontextualised but takes place within a specific discipline, departmental and institutional setting;
- informed by the identity of a teacher and their values and beliefs about teaching, research and the role of the university.

These propositions all play out in the context of a sector that has increased student numbers, the participation of students from socio-demographic groups previously excluded from universities, different expectations about the outcomes of university study in relation to employment and the uses of knowledge in society, as well as an increasingly global and technologically connected personal and professional world. In this chapter, we will begin by exploring the implications of these propositions for new teachers. We will then explain the rationale for this book and how it will support you to engage with the ongoing questions about who we are as teachers, who we teach, for what purpose and how.

## Understanding teacher identity in higher education

The traditional model of teaching has been described in transactional terms that position the teacher as authority and possessor of knowledge and teaching as an ‘act of depositing’ that knowledge into the minds of our students (Freire, 1970: 53). For many teachers, teaching is concerned with the presentation, transmission and retention of knowledge, and this is manifested in the traditional didactic lecture, a monologue delivered to a student audience. An alternative position to this model, however, suggests a more emancipatory, democratic and transgressive conception of the relationship between student, teacher and knowledge. As a counter to a ‘banking’ model of education, Freire argues that ‘in problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world [...] they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as reality in process, in transformation’ (p. 64, emphasis original). From this perspective teaching and learning

are liberating, enabling us to interact with others to develop our mutual understanding in personal, collective and situated ways. Significantly, a conception of a teaching as either concerned with transformation or transmission has been found to relate to the approach that students then adopt to their learning: 'university teachers who focus on their students and their students' learning tend to have students who focus on meaning and understanding [...] while university teachers who focus on themselves and what they are doing tend to have students who focus on reproduction' of knowledge (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999: 142). What we think the purpose of learning and teaching is will influence what our students think the purpose of learning and teaching is.

The benefit of a student- rather than teacher-centred approach to teaching is that we reject a homogeneous 'rote, assembly-line approach to learning' and instead 'approach students with the will and desire to respond to our unique beings' and foster 'a relationship based on mutual recognition' (hooks, 1994: 13). This way of understanding the relationship between teachers and students as one of 'mutual recognition' and our knowledge of the world as a 'reality in process' enables us to acknowledge, first, our own ongoing learning experience as researchers or professionals who are also teachers and the impact our orientations to teaching will have on our students' learning. From this perspective we can understand learning and teaching as a 'partnership' in which 'staff and students [are] learning and working together to foster engaged student learning and engaging learning and teaching enhancement' (Healey et al., 2014: 7).

The ambiguity of this academic identity as a process that is relational, situated and in partnership with students can be a valuable insight for new teachers. 'Becoming' a teacher in higher education involves a complex socialisation into the sometimes opaque culture of teaching and researching in a department or university (Smith, 2010). As Clegg (2008) argues, 'universities and academia are imaginary spaces as well as lived and experienced ones' (p. 339). Archer (2008) suggests that teachers can experience feelings of 'inauthenticity' as a result of the juxtaposition of their gender, class, ethnicity, age or academic status as it relates with their imagined idea of the authoritative academic or teacher in university. New teachers may not feel they have the expertise, gravitas or status that is required to be an academic when they enter the academy. While the projected image of meritocratic university is often unquestioned, universities are social spaces that inevitably reflect the values, assumptions and histories of wider society, including limiting constructions of race, gender, class and worth (ibid.). Understanding that academic identity is socially constructed means that it is not something that we have or do not have, but is a process always in action that is an outcome of our individual agency, the personal values, aims and experiences as we teach or research, as it relates to the social structures of institutional, disciplinary or professional contexts. Our academic identities are profoundly contextual and our practices

are ‘simultaneously about the individual and the group [...] created socially, strongly influenced by the communities with which we identify and to which we feel a sense of belonging’ (McAlpine and Åkerlind, 2010: 4).

Many disciplines and institutions have robust sets of values, traditions, narratives and histories that define, and are in turn shaped by, teachers’ and researchers’ identities. The process of becoming a teacher, therefore, involves exploring these collective values of the discipline with our students and how they interact with our own personal beliefs. This includes how the discipline generates new knowledge, how it validates or sanctions that knowledge, how it is communicated and used, and how it should be taught. Yet it also means negotiating sometimes tacit assumptions about who has the right to engage in higher education or in a specific discipline, and what are appropriate academic behaviours or practices. Being a teacher in higher education, therefore, involves understanding teaching as a social practice that is defined by the individual in relationship with their institution, department, discipline, peers and students.

The idea of the ‘academic’, therefore, is not a stable one and has changed significantly over a number of decades. While many teachers become teachers as a result of completing doctoral studying many fields, such as law, management, healthcare, engineering, education and creative arts, it is professional expertise and experience that are important prerequisites for a teaching role in university. At the same time, the conventional idea of an holistic ‘tripartite role of academics in teaching, research and service activities’ has also become increasingly ‘unbundled’ with the rise of the specialisation of research, teaching, leadership and support roles and activities. This has seen the rise of the ‘para-academic’ roles that include specialist researchers, teachers, student support advisers and library staff, technicians and learning technologists (Macfarlane, 2010: 59). In this context, traditional terminology such as ‘academic’ or ‘lecturer’ excludes the many individuals and roles that support student learning in universities. Teaching is also an unstable and shifting concept. It may involve one-to-one study support, laboratory and studio teaching, as well as lectures and seminars. With the growth in digital technologies, teaching may take place in different locations – in workplaces, in informal spaces and different countries – as well as in different times, synchronously and asynchronously. This shifting definition of teaching is exemplified in the more recent recognition of research supervision as teaching as well as research. Working with research students not only promotes the research objectives of a supervisor, but also involves the development of students as they learn to be researchers through the process of ‘becoming a peer’ within the research community their supervisor belongs to (Bruce and Stoodley, 2013; Boud and Lee, 2005: 511). Teaching, therefore, is not a set of transferable skills or strategies, but is a dynamic, complex and situated process that requires teachers to interpret and make ongoing critical judgements about the identities, relationships and practices of all those involved.

## The changing context of higher education

As a situated practice, the experience of becoming a teacher is undertaken in the context of increasingly complex and potentially incompatible sector and institutional demands for teachers to respond to, such as employability, inclusivity, internationalisation, digital technologies and student engagement. These demands shape both the purpose and practices of individuals, institutions and the wider sector nationally and internationally. Most significantly for the UK, in April 2017 the Higher Education and Research Act was approved by Parliament and represents the first major change in the legislation of UK higher education in a quarter of a century. The Act replaced the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) with a new body called the Office for Students. Unlike HEFCE, the purpose of the Office for Students is to implement a new regulatory framework for higher education with the aim to promote competition in the sector and to improve the perceived 'value for money' of higher education for students. This includes management of the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF), which seeks to assess the quality of undergraduate teaching in universities and colleges in England. Universities and colleges in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland can opt into the TEF. The TEF uses contextualised institutional data, such as National Student Survey results and student employment outcomes as proxies for teaching quality. Institutions also provide a statement that contextualises their institution and includes strategic evidence of the commitment to teaching excellence. The outcome of this assessment is the award of an institutional TEF rating of bronze, silver or gold, which is then held for up to three years. This sector-level policy agenda asserts three important issues for higher education teachers:

- the purpose of higher education is increasingly defined as the long-term predominantly economic outcomes that graduates gain from higher education study;
- students are active and engaged consumers of higher education;
- teaching excellence is performative, measurable and replicable across an institution.

These are not in themselves new propositions for contemporary higher educators, but they reassert a framework for teaching quality that neglects an opposite understanding of teaching as identity work that is:

- values-based rather than economic, positioning teaching and learning as a way of being and becoming, a 'moral endeavour grounded in virtues of honesty, care and compassion' (Fitzmaurice, 2011: 621);
- relational rather than transactional, involving people as social beings in action and interaction with each other;
- practice-oriented rather than skills-based, implicated in the ongoing practices of teachers as they teach and learn.

The aim of this book is to support teachers to navigate and respond to these debates in the development of their practice.

## Rationale and structure of this book

The understanding of teaching in higher education articulated above has determined the structure of this book. This model of teaching practice emphasises the reciprocity and mutuality of the learning of teachers and students at all levels in the university. We begin by considering the ways in which disciplines are socially constructed to define what knowledge is, how we create it, who sanctions and regulates it and how it is shared. For many new teachers, their initial identity is framed by the disciplinary and professional communities to which they previously belonged as postgraduate researchers or professional experts. Part I of the book, therefore, supports the process of translating this understanding of the discipline into meaningful learning experiences for students through the curriculum as we develop from disciplinary and professional expert to teacher and assessor of the discipline. The social practices approach to learning and teaching accentuates how we engage our students as valuable members of the disciplinary and university community, and how we seek to integrate the sometimes separate priorities of teaching and research within our curricula. Through Part I, we develop an awareness of our beliefs, values and assumptions about the subjects we teach, and how we and our students make meaning as we engage with the subject matter.

For many teachers, the demands of teaching their discipline are framed by wider institutional strategies that emphasise the employability, inclusivity and international relevance of their degrees, as well as different ways in which we might teach and learn virtually and collaboratively. While professional development for new teachers can focus on the different genres of teaching such as small group teaching, lecturing, assessment, curriculum design, technology-enabled-learning or feedback, these institutional priorities enable us to think about teaching thematically in ways that help us to interrogate the purpose of university and what we are trying to achieve before we think about how we do that. In Part II, we will look at this context and how we can respond and develop our teaching through our understanding of the purpose of higher education study. We will explore critically the policies, debates and research that inform these agendas, but also how we can respond as teachers to these priorities in practical and meaningful ways that help us to extend our practice.

Being a member of the university community ultimately means learning to become a disciplinary or professional expert, translating that expertise into learning experiences that engage our students and becoming a researcher into the practices of teaching to continuously improve the student learning experience as the context changes. Teachers have to learn how to engage their

students, how to reframe complex ideas through language and learning experiences that help a diverse student cohort make personal meaning rather than just rehearse what we tell them in lectures and, lastly, how to make professional judgements about learning and teaching that are based on interpreting evidence and planning for change. In Part III, we explore some of the ways in which becoming a professional means extending our own learning as we supervise the research of our students and develop our capacity as educators to make decisions about our teaching, drawing informed conclusions that in turn will challenge, enhance and develop our own disciplinary and pedagogic understanding.

In each chapter, we will explore the research that has been undertaken into higher education learning and teaching, and how we can use these ideas to inform our teaching practice. The language of educational research and academic development can be obfuscating, unpersuasive or disheartening for many new teachers who are unfamiliar with the specific methodologies, concepts and ways of communicating in educational research (Weller, 2011). The aim here is to engage with the complexities and debates without being reductive, and finding practical ways to enact these ideas in practice. The case studies, 'Focus on practice' activities and further reading in each chapter are all designed to help that process of reflecting critically on our personal values and the context within which we teach as the basis for transforming our practice. The case studies, in particular, have been selected on the basis that they are examples of teachers responding to questions they have about their own teaching in a range of disciplines, at different levels and in different types of institutions across the four nations of the UK. While reading from the beginning to the end of the book chronologically maps the trajectory of our development as a professional educator from disciplinary expert to scholarly teacher, equally, each chapter can be read as a stand-alone introduction for those interested in exploring a specific topic or finding a solution to a particular challenge in practice. Ultimately, no book can be comprehensive and is only ever a starting point for the professional process of asking our own questions about why and how we teach. It is these questions that enable us to explore what we believe teaching and learning are, what it is to practise our discipline or profession, how we learn throughout our careers and how we can share this with our students as the basis for enhancing their own learning journeys.

