

53 Powerful Ideas All Teachers Should Know About

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Students respond to clear and high expectations

One of the 'Seven Principles of Good Practice in Higher Education' is that 'Good practice conveys clear and high expectations'. Students who are more clear about challenging 'goals and standards' are likely to learn more and to take a deep approach rather than a surface approach, and less likely to be confused and disengaged. However in the UK we seem to have focussed increasingly on the 'clear' bit and forgotten the 'high' bit. The proportion of students who gain 'good' degrees (Firsts or Upper Second Class degrees) has shot up while the amount of time students need to spend studying to achieve this is currently very low (about half what it should be, in some subjects and in some institutions), and the lowest in Europe. Comparative studies of students who have studied both in mainland Europe and the UK describe their UK experience as less demanding (as well as involving fewer hours per week and shorter semesters). The shift from exams to coursework, which has been comprehensive in some contexts, has meant that the marks students get are today rarely a good indicator of what they have learnt across the whole curriculum, but only of the small sample they studied in depth for marked assignments. Telling students that they only need to study two topics out of the ten the course covers is not perhaps the best way to communicate high expectations.

Concerning the 'clear' bit, the QAA, and virtually every institution's own internal quality assurance regulations, demand that courses are accompanied by 'learning outcomes' and

assessment criteria. Course documentation has become ever more explicit and ever more detailed. Feedback forms for assignments have become highly structured, linking back to both outcomes and criteria and framing the feedback teachers give and generating grades by adding up marks on defined sub-sets of the overall goals of the assignment. All of this is supposed to convey clear expectations. However there is a growing realisation that, first, it is very difficult for anyone to understand what learning outcomes and criteria actually mean, or for two people to understand the same thing – including teachers and markers. Second, that the more detail is provided, the more detail students demand. Third, that the big, complex and important goals teachers care about can come to be replaced by small, simple and trivial goals that seem easier to specify. This is a problem that was encountered with 'behavioural objectives' in the 1950's and 60's to such an extent that such objectives were largely abandoned in the UK (though not in the US). And fourth, that the greater the degree of specification, the easier it is for students to see clearly what they do not need to do, resulting in them narrowing their attention in a strategic way.

Interestingly an institution where students are very clear about goals and standards is Oxford, where learning outcomes and criteria are specified weakly or not at all. Students come to understand what they are supposed to be doing through repeated cycles of formative assessment and feedback, mainly oral feedback.

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Expectations are high and if a student has done little work or made a weak attempt at a tutorial essay then there is nowhere to hide.

So there seem to be two problems to address here. How to help students to understand what they should be doing, in a way that does not have unfortunate side-effects on their engagement or breadth of focus, and how to raise expectations in ways that challenge students, stretch them and get them to work hard and do their best work.

There have been attempts in the UK to define 'threshold standards' which a student in a discipline must reach to be awarded a degree at all. However in some institutions this is seen as starting at the wrong end. In highly research-intensive universities with a large proportion of exceptionally able students, there is only one set of standards involved and they are those of the scholarly community in the discipline, evident in books and journal articles and conference presentations and research grant proposals. A student who gets a first is quite close to achieving this standard, at least in a few places (such as their final year dissertation), and would be likely to be invited to join that scholarly community by undertaking a doctorate. Meanwhile students who get lower classes of degrees are judged to be various distances below this standard. What a threshold standard looks like in such institutions is a bit of a conundrum. Scholarly standards are evident all around students in the form of exemplars of academic work. Where many undergraduates can realistically aspire to be researchers or academics and where this is the (unspoken) pinnacle of achievement for academics, there is

not much of a problem. Where this is unrealistic, and only a few students either aspire to such a goal or could realistically achieve it, or even understand what it consists of, there is a big problem, because the only goals would clearly be out of reach.

But underneath what goes on in such élite institutions is a principle that is vital to the communication of challenging goals. Standards are best embodied in exemplars. A good way to orient freshers to clear and high expectations is to invite a few students who have just got firsts, and who produced exceptionally good final year projects, to talk to the freshers about their project: to show them what it looks like and explain what it took to produce it. The teacher's implicit message can be "I know I have only asked you to read Chapter 1 and consider these three questions, for a test next week, but in the end I want you to be able to produce something as complex and sophisticated as this final year project – and if you work as hard as this graduate did, you will be able to achieve that!". Sometimes negative definitions work well, to make clear what students are not supposed to be doing. For example a generic task definition for how to get a fail mark on an essay might be: "Write down anything you can think of about any of the words in the essay question, in the order in which you think of them. Include irrelevant material. Make no arguments. Draw no conclusions. Write illegibly." Try capturing that as effectively in 'learning outcomes'!

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Suggested reading

Chickering, A.W. & Gamson, Z.F. Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education

<http://www.elmhurst.edu/~richs/EC/SPS/UsefulDocuments/7%20Principles%20of%20Good%20Practice%20in%20Undergrad%20Ed-ChickeringGamson.pdf>

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