

53 Powerful Ideas All Teachers Should Know About

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Idea Number 7, May 2014

Students' expectations are formed early

What goes on in higher education must appear somewhat strange to a student of 18 who has recently left school, or even to a mature student whose educational experience involved school some while ago and maybe some 'on the job' training or evening classes since. Class sizes may have increased from the dozen or so they were used to in 6th form to over 100 (or even over 500). Instead of a small group of friends you got to know fairly well from years together, your fellow students will mostly be strangers who you may never get to know, and who may be different every time you start a new module. Instead of you being amongst the high achievers you may feel average or even below average. The teachers you encounter will all be new to you, and may change every semester. You may never get to know them, or in some cases even meet them outside of large classes. Whether you can ask questions, ask for help, be informal or visit their offices may not be clear. Weekly cycles of classes and small, short, tasks at school may be replaced by much longer cycles and much bigger assignments – and in some cases the first required work may not be until week 8 in the first semester. What you are supposed to do in the meantime may not be at all clear, and as the ratio of class time to study time is, at least in theory, much lower than you are used to, what you are supposed to be doing out of class may become quite an issue.

The course documentation may only list what the teacher does, not what you are supposed to do, other than phrases such as 'background reading' or 'independent study'. Instead of being asked to read Chapter 6 of the textbook you might be given extended reading lists of seemingly impossible breadth and depth, some of which will be too expensive to buy, out of the library, or, even if you can get hold of them, opaque or of uncertain relevance. The volume of material 'covered' in lectures may appear daunting, and it may be unclear if this is meant to be merely the tip of a hidden, huge and undefined iceberg of content, or the whole iceberg. If you managed to scribble down a comprehensive set of notes, would that be enough? What an essay or a report is supposed to look like and what is good enough to pass or get a top grade may be quite different from what was expected at school, but you may be unclear in what way. Rules about plagiarism or working with other students may seem alarmingly tough yet confusing. It may all feel weird, no matter how routine it feels to teachers, but somehow you have to get used to it.

Most students of course do manage to work out a way of dealing with all this ambiguity and complexity that, if not ideal, is tolerably effective in that they do not usually fail the first assignment or the first module. But once a student has gone through this disorienting and

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anxiety provoking process of adjustment they are not keen to go through it again any time soon.

In order to operate at all, new students have to make some quick guesses about what is expected and work out a modus operandi – and this is usually undertaken on their own without discussion with others. It is very easy to get this wrong. In my own first year as an undergraduate I tried to operate on a ‘week by week’ ‘small task’ way as if I was preparing for regular test questions, as I had done at the Naval College where I had crammed for A-levels alongside my naval training – and I failed several of my University first year exams that made much higher level demands than I had anticipated and that would have taken a lot more work of a very different kind than I had managed. My conception of knowledge, and what I was supposed to be doing with it, was well articulated by William Perry’s description of the first stage in his scheme of student development: “Quantitative accretion of discrete rightness”. It was not what my teachers were hoping for from me – but I didn’t understand that and I was too uncertain to do anything else. Students who are driven by fear of failure, rather than hope for success, may become loathe to change the way they study in case it works even less well than what they have tried thus far. It is the high performing students who are more likely to experiment and be flexible.

Many first year courses are dominated by large class lectures, little discussion, little independence and fairly well defined learning activities and tasks (at least compared with later years) and no opportunity to discuss feedback on assignments. By the end of the first year, students may have turned into cabbages in response to this regime, with little development of independence of mind or study habits. In the second year students may be suddenly expected to work collaboratively, undertake peer assessment, undertake much bigger, longer, less well defined learning activities, deal with multiple perspectives and ambiguity, develop their own well argued positions, and so on. They may throw up their hands in despair or resist strongly.

Teachers’ best response to this phenomenon involves getting their own expectations in early and explicitly, and not changing them radically as soon as students have got used to them. If you eventually want students to work collaboratively, require group work in the first week, not the second year. If you want them to read around and pull complex material together, require it in the first week and give them plenty of time and support to do it. If you want them to establish a pattern of putting in a full working week of 40 hours then expect that in the first week, and the second week....and make it clear what those hours might be spent on, and put class time aside to discuss what it was spent on and what proved productive and what did not. If you want students to lift their sights from Chapter 1 to what the entire degree is about, have a look at some really excitingly good final year

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student project reports in week one, and bring the successful and confident students who wrote them into the classroom to discuss how they managed it, talking about their pattern of studying that led to getting a first and a place to do a Doctorate. In brief, get your clear and high expectations in early, with plenty of opportunity to discuss what they mean.

Students will find this alarming and amazing – but they will get used to it just as they got used to whatever you did before. It will seem equally strange, but no more so than before. The crucial issue is that they will now be getting used to the right thing.

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