

# 53 Powerful Ideas All Teachers Should Know About

## Graham Gibbs

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#### Students do not necessarily know what is good for them

In the UK the [National Union of Students](#) has undertaken a long, well organised campaign and won a remarkable victory politically in demanding that students are taught more, in the sense of receiving more class contact. A measure of how much they are taught is now included in public information (Key Information Set, KIS) about degree programmes designed to improve ‘consumer choice’ when deciding where to study, and this ‘Performance Indicator’ is having all kinds of consequences for how teaching is configured. This is proving a pyrrhic victory. This is just one recent example of students getting things horribly wrong and demanding changes to teaching that will hinder rather than help them, and I’d like to explore this phenomenon because ‘the student voice’ and ‘consumer rights’ and other such expressions are starting to dominate the discourse about educational provision. The consequences are often not what students had hoped for.

#### **Class contact**

The source of student demands about low class contact hours has probably been a minority of ‘threadbare’ courses that do not offer students much of anything and which rightly induce anger and dismay, given the fees. Even in text-based subjects, courses with only six hours a week in class can lead to a sense of being short-changed and not

supported enough. Protests have, however, generalised to all courses – that everyone should be taught more. Furthermore demands for more teaching have not discriminated about the type of class contact that might be helpful. The research evidence is pretty clear. There is no relationship between class contact hours and learning gains. There is a strong relationship between total study hours – total student effort in and out of class – and learning gains. However increased class contact is often accompanied by less independent study (and lower class contact hours by increased independent study hours) and the total weekly student effort remains the same pretty much the same regardless of class contact hours. This relationship only seems to break down when there are hardly any class contact hours – but even then the Open University manage with almost no class contact hours at all and still tops National Student Survey league tables. What matters is how you do it. Simply stripping bare a model that worked when it was resourced better nearly always fails. Research evidence also makes it clear that it is ‘close’ contact that helps student learning, not any kind of contact. Increasing lecture hours is unlikely to help.

So what has happened now that class contact hours is a PI? First, there has been pressure to increase class contact. But with fixed

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resources and fixed student numbers and fixed teaching hours contracts the only way this can be achieved easily is to replace small classes with big classes – for example replacing seminars with lectures. You can give students more class contact without increasing costs, but at the expense of class size. And student performance goes down as class size goes up, so students actually end up learning less even though they now experience more class contact hours. Alternatively you can reduce your teaching hour costs so as to increase class contact by hiring what Americans call ‘Adjunct Faculty’ – part-timers on zero hour contracts, graduate teaching assistants and so on. And the evidence is that this lowers student retention, performance and learning gains. Furthermore the PI is framed in the form of the proportion of student time in class. The cheapest and easiest way to increase this proportion is not to increase class contact but to reduce independent study demands, so the proportion of class contact goes up but student ‘time on task’ goes down and so, yet again, they learn less.

This is probably not what the NUS had in mind.

#### **Criteria**

Both quality assurance demands and student demands have led to ever more detailed specification of criteria for marking. Students want to know exactly what they have to do to get good marks and the QAA thinks they are right to make this demand. Unfortunately specifying criteria in detail has turned out to

be a pretty ineffective mechanism. No matter how elaborate the specification, students always want more detail and still do not understand and still get confused and still do the wrong thing with the assignment. But now their assignments are narrowly focussed on instrumental ends rather than on understanding the subject and expressing that understanding and actually learning something.

The unfortunate and messy reality is that everyone interprets criteria differently, and markers interpret them at least as variably as students do. Marking involves professional judgement and is inevitably and necessarily subjective involving tacit knowledge and implicit assumptions about what quality looks like in the discipline. I remember a group of Literature students bemoaning the way their teachers seemed to want different things in their essays despite the stated criteria (which they all interpreted differently). A mature and more sophisticated student said “But this is Literature! What do you expect? Everyone has different views about what makes good literature - or a good essay about literature. Get used to it!”

A better way to clarify what might be expected is through exemplars of work of varying standards that have approached the assignment in different ways, and discussion of these exemplars and their characteristics in relation to what the course was hoping to see. Unfortunately this is not what students ask for.

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#### Marks

It is common for students to say that they are not prepared to tackle assignments that are not marked. They want marks on everything. At [Oxford University](#) every so often the Students Union demands that all tutorial essays are marked. Oxford refuses, and quite rightly so. The evidence is clear that students learn more when assignments are formative, with feedback but no marks. If they are not accustomed to formative assessment, or do not understand why it is valuable, or only care about marks, that can be a focus for developing their sophistication as learners. But responding to their demands will reduce their learning and probably their effort as well, as well as killing you with the marking load – effort that could better be directed elsewhere.

#### Conclusions

There are many other educational issues where students consistently ask for the wrong thing. So what should teachers do? First, it is the responsibility of teachers to be professional and to make professional (and rational and well informed) decisions about what is in the best interests of their students, and to know more than students do about what practices produce more learning. It is irresponsible to simply do what students ask them to do when it is known that this will make things worse.

Second, the problem is caused by the lack of sophistication of students. Early on in the development of phenomenographic research in teaching in higher education it became

clear that students had very varied underlying conceptions of what learning consisted of. They also have varied conceptions of what ‘good teaching’ consists of. And [Eric Van Rossum’s](#) work has shown that these two conceptions are closely linked.

Unsophisticated learners want unsophisticated teaching (characterised by the teacher doing all the work and taking all the responsibility) and sophisticated learners want sophisticated teaching, which emphasises support for independent learning where the responsibility lies with the learner.

Third, the problem is caused by some students who have little interest in learning, only in acquiring credentials with the least possible effort, and who want you to collude with them to make this possible.

Fourth, the problem is caused by students having little idea what the practical and policy consequences of their demands will be. They do not know about finances and logistics and teaching contracts and so on. The NUS did not think ahead and anticipate the kinds of institutional responses to their demands for more class contact there would be - and that this would be a disaster. It is as if the NUS thought there were plentiful resources squirreled away that could easily be spent on more teaching if only teachers were not so lazy.

The solution is not to do what students ask, but to make well founded professional judgements (that take into account what students have said) but at the same time to

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develop students' sophistication as learners so they ask for the right things. And in the meantime hold your ground and try and explain why you do what you do, and why doing what they want would be an abnegation of your responsibilities.

Who knows, students might even start asking to work harder....

#### Suggested reading

[Van Rossum, E .J., Deijkers, R. and Hamer, R. \(1985\) Students' learning conceptions and their interpretation of significant educational concepts. Higher Education. 14 \(6\), pp617-641](#)

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