

## 53 Powerful Ideas All Teachers Should Know About

### Graham Gibbs

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### Teaching is driven by beliefs and assumptions

The first person who hired me and worked with me, in the 1970's, was Andy Northedge. He had just written a paper called 'Examining implicit analogies for learning processes' and it was an attempt to understand the extraordinarily different ways Open University Lecturers wrote their Open University course materials. The core of the paper was a contrast between a 'brick building' analogy, in which standard components are put together brick by brick by the teacher, to a plan, to create a pre-specified structure, and a 'gardening' analogy in which seeds and soils varied and, however wonderful the nurturing, the end products would be unpredictable, sometimes exceeding our expectations, sometimes disappointing, but never much under our control. I imagine teachers with these contrasting implicit analogies worked alongside each other writing the same course, but bemused by the approach the other took to the task and without an obvious way of making the course appear coherent in its approach.

Shortly afterwards a SCEDSIP paper (SCEDSIP was the progenitor of SEDA) was illustrated by some wonderful cartoons that brought some more of these implicit analogies to life. One showed an engineering lecturer in a workshop, turning wooden students on a lathe. On the wall was a detailed drawing of a model student, a blueprint for a 'Standard BSc

Hons Engineering Graduate' and the lecturer was using a micrometer to measure whether the student currently on the lathe yet measured up. In one corner were student blocks of wood, barely recognisable as human, not yet formed. In the other corner, overflowing a bin, were a pile of student rejects, turned on the lathe but who did not meet the quality control standards. The fact that the only living thing in the workshop was the lecturer, and that the students were treated as blocks of wood, was only one of the many features of this vivid representation of a distinctive model of teaching. Other cartoons satirised Law teaching, Social Work and other disciplines, and they were 'laugh out loud' representations of teaching beliefs and assumptions that were immediately recognisable.

I subsequently came across published work on underlying assumptions and beliefs about teaching by Axelrod, and others, based on their own experiences and insights, but still not based on research. Then the phenomenographic research movement got going, and Keith Trigwell and Mike Prosser started articulating teachers' 'Approaches to Teaching' based on interviews, and turned these into a questionnaire, the ATI. Teachers were described as 'Teaching Focussed' with attention paid to content and how the teacher got it across, or 'Learning Focussed',

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concentrating on what students had to do to acquire knowledge, and how teachers could help them. These were not seen as mutually exclusive or, as they were cross sectional rather than longitudinal studies, developmental stages. These ‘approaches’ to teaching have been shown to have profound effects on how students go about learning.

In parallel Kugel’s work at Harvard and, with a stronger empirical basis, Jody Nyquist’s work at Washington, started providing descriptions from longitudinal studies about what changes as teachers get more experienced and better – particularly about their ‘focus of attention’ and what they believe makes most difference to their effectiveness. These studies, in summary, describe a focus on the self (“Am I liked?”), the content (“Do I know my stuff?”) the process (“How should I do this?”) and finally the outcome (“What have students actually learnt?”) as a kind of developmental sequence of priorities driving teaching behaviour. Teaching development effort was seen as attempting to move teachers on from earlier to later foci of attention. The argument was that, for example, until new teachers have calmed down a bit about whether they can pass themselves off as a Sociologist, or whatever, they are unlikely to be able to pay much attention to teaching methods, hence the obsession of new lecturers with preparing their lecture content and setting the standard much too high.

All this scholarship and empirical study revolved around the same central notion – that the methods teachers use, and the way

they make teaching decisions, is driven not by their reading of the educational research literature, or even of books full of teaching tips, but by underlying sets of beliefs, assumptions, conceptions and foci of attention – much of which they will be only dimly aware of and which are quite difficult to tease out and get at. When educational developers work with teachers it may be very difficult to surmise their underlying beliefs and what they are concentrating on, and yet these are pivotal.

Sometimes, however, I have encountered such beliefs simply flopping out in front of a group of people, unprompted, leaving everyone speechless. I was once running a one day workshop on teaching large seminar classes. The client was a Social Science department at a research university and student number increases had obliged them to increase seminars from 6-8 to 16-24 – and they had stopped working. I was ‘walking the talk’ and demonstrating a series of group management techniques that, basically, divided a large group up into smaller groups and then brought them back together again, in a way that engaged everyone and generated lots of talk, even in large groups. It was not rocket science. An elderly Professor had been sitting further and further back in his chair and progressively disengaging and eventually brought the workshop to a standstill by bursting out “I have been wracking my brain all morning trying to imagine what students could possibly gain by talking with each other”. Silence. We had bumped into an underlying belief that had not been articulated

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before in this Department and it was so profoundly contradictory to my beliefs that there was no way we could progress until it had been discussed. But this Professor had clearly held his beliefs – that nothing worthwhile could take place unless he was there and in charge, that students would ‘get things wrong’ and never be corrected unless he was there to correct them, that he could somehow magically control students’ thinking, and so on – for his entire career, unchallenged. A more extreme ‘Teaching Focus’ it is hard to imagine. I would have loved to have had the chance to probe what he believed discussion was actually for.

It must be the case that all teachers have a set of underlying pedagogic beliefs of some kind. I do not know how common are such wacky and destructive beliefs as in the anecdote above, but I worry that they are more common than I realise and that as they are almost always hidden from view, I am unlikely to ever know. Research methodologies such as that associated with ‘Approaches to Teaching’ only look at one component of variation at a time, leaving plenty of scope for extraordinary beliefs to go undiscovered and to be left intact and obstructive of all possible growth in teaching, despite the best efforts of educational developers.

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