

53 Powerful Ideas All Teachers Should Know About

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Teachers' beliefs and practices are framed by their social setting

53 ideas item number 12 introduced the idea that teachers have an underlying set of beliefs, conceptions, assumptions and foci of attention, that frame their choice of teaching methods. The way this idea had been researched has implied that it is a psychological phenomenon – that individuals develop these conceptions and beliefs individually and change them (or not) through their own individual efforts. Attempts to develop the sophistication of teachers' thinking has usually involved training programmes, or other change processes, that focus on individuals and their personal beliefs, usually away from their own academic department, separate from their colleagues, and away from their everyday work context. It has become clear that this is not a very helpful way of understanding what happens, or of producing worthwhile change. Teachers develop their ideas in the context of a local community, a 'micro culture' if you like, that shares beliefs - even without talking about them. Whether teachers change and develop depends crucially on the dominant ideas in the local community and the way this local community behaves, and in particular whether they talk seriously about pedagogy. It is quite difficult, and even unusual, for teachers to develop their thinking very far if most of their colleagues do not travel down much the same route at the same time. If teachers do manage

to develop independent and different ideas they may find that they are blocked, or even disparaged, if their local community does not share these ideas.

The Approaches to Teaching Inventory (ATI) identifies whether individual teachers have a predominantly teaching focus (paying attention to content input and what the teacher does) or a learning focus (paying attention to what the learner does and learns). When the ATI started to be used across whole departments it became clear that it was not just individual teachers who differed: there were 'teaching focussed' and 'learning focussed' departments. Studies then tried to identify where such departmental foci came from. Sometimes it is just practical matters: large classes, heavy teaching loads, no time to talk and so on. But also the style of leadership of the Head of Departments was shown to make a lot of difference. How teachers conceived of teaching is related to how the Head conceives of leadership of teaching. Which comes first is not clear – it may be that if a Head finds herself with a teaching focussed bunch of colleagues then this constrains what kind of leadership of teaching is practicable. Or it may be that teaching focussed departments choose Heads whose beliefs mirror their own. Either way, an individual teacher is likely to have a hard time maintaining a learning focus in a strongly

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teaching focussed context with teaching focussed colleagues and a Head whose approach supports this focus.

At [Oxford Brookes University](#) there is a phenomenon that is probably common in many universities: some subjects perform much better at teaching than others. The subjects may all be operating under the same quality assurance system, regulations and financial regime, but some are very good at teaching and some others are awful. Variations in National Student Survey scores are usually much wider between subjects within an institution than they are between institutions, to the point that it is possible for a university to have one subject that is ranked top nationally and another that is ranked bottom. At Oxford Brookes this also produces very different average marks between subjects, to such an extent that the chance of a student getting a good degree is markedly influenced by which subjects they chose to study. The national quality agency, the QAA, had told them this was a 'standards' problem, and Brookes had gone to a good deal of trouble to try and find out what was causing it. Were classes bigger where marks were lower? Were students less well qualified? Were assessment patterns different? Nothing they could measure, and nothing they could find in their management information database, explained the differences in average marks between subjects. Then a visiting ethnographer 'hung out' with teachers in subjects with very high and very low average marks, to try and see what was going on. It was simple – the teachers in the subjects with high average

marks had a curry together on Fridays. Teachers in subjects with low average marks did not even turn up to formal departmental meetings and said things like 'Frankly I have my hands full teaching my modules and I don't have time to talk to anybody'. High performance is associated, across many professions and contexts, with lively 'communities of practice' that talk about what they do and share beliefs and approaches and skills.

Meanwhile down the hill, at the [University of Oxford](#), a Science Faculty had been selected to be the focus of a research study on the basis of its wonderful record of high quality teaching. The centre of their building was a social space where everyone, students included, had coffee, lunch and tea together, with offices with open doors around this space. The innovation the current Head was most proud of was instituting 'beer on Fridays'. Students knew each other across years – even Masters and Doctoral students knew undergraduates personally. Students got 'sucked into' research projects by social contact. New academics were hired on the basis of their research record – but only if they were seen to be able to 'fit in' with a social and collaborative local culture. Again the defining characteristic that explained how this Faculty could be so wonderful at teaching was that they had supportive social processes.

This kind of phenomenon has also been identified in the USA, where studies have looked at local contexts where scores on the ['National Survey of Student Engagement'](#)



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shows students to be highly engaged despite all the other indicators (such as class sizes) suggesting this would be unlikely. What the studies find is something very simple – the teachers in these surprisingly educationally effective contexts talk to each other about teaching.

Amazingly ‘talking to each other about teaching’ is relatively rare in higher education. Studies at the [University of Lund](#) have found that many teachers have hardly had any ‘significant conversations’ about teaching in their entire careers, and those that have may

have talked to relatively few people. Lund has identified very different kinds of local cultures in departments in which discussion of teaching is likely, or unlikely, to take place, and they work to build communities where such discussion is common and productive.

There is a limit to the extent to which it is possible to understand why teaching looks as it does, or to improve students’ overall experience of teaching, unless the context, and particularly the social context, is taken into account.

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