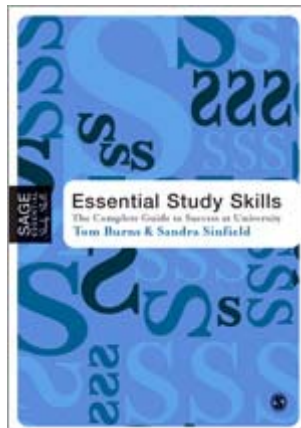


## Book Review



### **Teaching, Learning and Study Skills: A Guide for Tutors**

Tom Burns and Sandra Sinfield

London: Sage Publications (2004)

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### **Review by Sean P. Whittle**

This is an essential guide for anyone aspiring to teach in Higher Education (HE) in the UK. Not just because it is packed with practical tips and even lecture notes, but crucially because it explains the nature of University teaching in the wake of the 'widening participation' agenda. The authors of this book have sought to both explain the changing context of lecturing and tutoring in the contemporary British university as well as provide an accessible and highly practical guide for the novice or time-poor HE teacher. This book is a companion text for an earlier handbook aimed at students. It can however, be fruitfully used without reference to that text.

This book contains fifteen chapters, all of which have a similar structure. Most chapters seek to tackle a practical aspect of being a HE tutor, from dealing with effective transition into Higher Education to promoting effective note-making. The strength of the structure is that each chapter can be read as a stand alone treatment of the particular issue, or the whole book can be read as an integrated programme. An important aspect of the book is that it contains a large 'resource' section. These are over 40 pages of examples and pro forma documents that can be photocopied or adapted to suit the readers' needs.

The pivotal section of this book is contained in Chapter 2, which is titled 'University teaching, widening participation, and study skills'. It is here that the authors identify the changing context of university education in the UK. They explain that traditionally university education has been characterised by a commitment to research and education in the fullest sense. However in the wake of the UK Government led 'widening participation agenda' there has been a shift towards mass higher education. The goal is to achieve the participation of 50% of 18-30 year olds in higher education by 2010. The result is not simply increased class sizes and strain on resources but a more fundamental change in the nature of the students entering higher education. Teaching in higher education in the UK has become, and will continue to become, much more of a mixed ability activity. In addition a greater proportion of students will need learning support and careful induction into the demands of learning in Higher Education.

It is explained that the impact of the Widening Participation agenda has coincided with what can be coined the 'skills debate' within Higher Education. In very basic terms this skills debate is about the need for university education to equip students with a range of transferable skills (such as Communications and Problem Solving) that they can use in their future employment beyond university. In addition to developing learning and insight into an academic discipline the HE students needs to be receiving training and development in a range of skills. The net effect is that there are an increasing proportion of 'non-traditional' students who are attending universities in the UK and this is set to continue. The central argument in this book is that if these students are to achieve the level of successful university experience that the traditional students have, then there is a huge need to support their

learning development while they follow their HE courses. This cannot be left to chance and has to be systematically organised. Throughout the entire book the authors maintain that teaching, learning, and study skills are in fact the responsibility of all professional staff in a university. In the remainder of the book practical advice and guidance is presented to help these professional staff fulfil and deliver this responsibility.

In Chapter 3 a short but highly accessible treatment of assessment issues is presented. This acts as a preface to assessment issues, which are repeatedly picked up in subsequent chapters.

In chapters 4 and 5 the vexed issues of orientation and induction of students into HE is considered. The initial discussion in chapter 4 is about the need to understand the students who are now entering HE. There is a need to adopt a suitably positive attitude, particularly to the non-traditional student. In chapter 5 some useful guidance is given on how to practically organise the initial induction of students into HE.

In the remaining ten chapters the focus is clearly on 'how to' support student learning throughout their time at university. An integral part of each of these chapters is where the authors explain how they have succeeded with their own students in the university where they work. This is a positive reflection of the thirty years of combined experience they have drawn upon in writing this book. The topics dealt with in chapters 6 – 15 include:- How to promote student self-confidence; How to promote effective organisation and time management; How to promote effective research and reading strategies; How to promote effective note making; How to promote effective presentations and seminars; How to promote effective writing; How to promote effective revision and exam techniques; How to promote effective group work; How to promote effective reflective practice; How to promote overall success.

For anyone working or aspiring to work in HE in the UK this book is a highly useful resource. However, the importance of this guide book is not simply in the quality of the practical suggestions. Rather it is the wider argument that the authors, Burns and Sinfield, have maintained about the changing nature of the contemporary HE student. In this argument the book actually crystallises fundamental debates about Government Policy on Widening Participation. Moreover it also implicitly draws attention to issues within the Philosophy of Education about what is the nature and purpose of university education. Whilst Burns and Sinfield do not resolve these wider issues they do give a pragmatic response about how to positively respond to the changing nature of teaching in Higher Education in the UK.

In summary, this book is well worth reading not just by those currently working in Higher Education. It would be particularly relevant for research students, not just because they may well be aspiring to work in Higher Education, but also to keep them informed about the changing nature of the contemporary UK university – because this is the context in which they are completing their research.