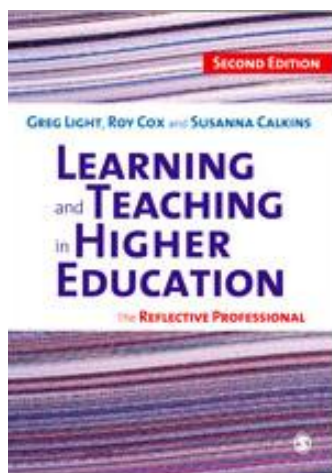


## Book Review



### **Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: The Reflective Professional (Second Edition)**

by Greg Light, Roy Cox and Susanna Calkins

London: Sage Publications (2009).

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Review by **Zarin Gul**

The second edition of *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: The Reflective Professional* has been noticeably improved not just in terms of incorporating new research, literature and teaching practices into the themes of the book, but also in terms of incorporating fundamental changes brought about in higher education by technology-based learning as well as the global aspects of teaching and learning.

This book is essentially aimed at academics in higher education in order to provide them with a theoretical and practical framework to reflect on their professional practice in the light of the contemporary demands of higher education, ie, an increased accountability of academic performance and excellence which is further driven and accelerated by globalisation. Academics today are enormously burdened by faculty-student ratios, time spent on teaching, assessment, supervision, evaluation, feedback, and at the same time juggling intensely with research and academic administration. Therefore it will be an appropriate guide for those who plan to pursue careers involving teaching in higher education, because this book will familiarise them with the demands of contemporary teaching and learning practices in higher education. Moreover, this book will also be helpful for researchers, staff developers and many others who are involved in higher and professional education.

In this book the authors have tried to cover two main issues relating to the professional development of academics in contemporary higher education. Firstly, the authors have provided a theoretical basis for highly demanding teaching and learning practices. A critical matrix of learning and teaching is devised by the authors to address the five learning gaps that teachers and students often face at universities: Firstly, students simply remember and reproduce the information but do not develop an ability to reconstruct ideas and facts relevant to their own experiences; secondly, when students do understand the information they can't make practical use of that knowledge because they lack the skills; thirdly, sometimes students learn the practical skills but they may end up in not wanting to use those skills at all because of lack of emotional commitment to work in ever changing situations or context; fourthly, the lack of transformation of self for taking on new roles and acting upon new knowledge and skills; and finally, students' lack of ability to improvise and cope with ever-changing situations in the world create a gap in students' learning. Overall the learning gaps are about difficulties in understanding self and its related anxieties and threats that students and teachers face during the learning process. But the critical matrix of learning and teaching extends the focus from simply intellectual to personal, social and practical dimensions of students' learning. Furthermore three general modal contexts constitute learning environments or critical matrix ie, a context of support where principal modes of meaning (like course content, teaching strategies, assessment etc.) are provided by

teachers, context of independence where students can work and think independently and the interpersonal context where modes of meaning are developed and disseminated among students and teachers. The critical matrix tries to cover all of the learning gaps by making the learning process as less instructive and authoritative as possible. It focuses on the meaningful learning of students where they can independently construct ideas and experiences in order to successfully manage and work in rapidly changing and complex situations. By devising a critical matrix of learning and teaching that advocates a learner-focused approach the authors have provided extensive practical examples on how practitioners can incorporate this matrix into their current teaching practices. Consequently, a practitioner can become a truly reflective professional in a contemporary sense. Secondly, the authors have tried to bridge a gap between isolated practices of teaching and the research of academics in higher education by keeping “learning” as central to this approach. The authors argue for teaching practice as research and through action research demonstrate how this cyclical integration of research and teaching practices can be achieved for continuous professional development.

The book is divided into three main sections. The first section discusses the theoretical issues of becoming a contemporary reflective professional. In it the authors argue that in the rapidly globalising environment, the discourse of excellence imported from industry and the accountability of higher education for its social role has transformed the very nature of higher education. To achieve the status of a reflective professional, the authors have devised a professional language of academic development that consists of three main components: A critical conceptual framework, appropriate genres and general performance strategy. The authors consider “learning” as central for the progress of professional development. In terms of student learning, the authors argue for engagement or a learning-focused approach (where a student’s conceptual development and understanding is the teacher’s concern) instead of transmission or teacher-focused (student’s learning is not the teacher’s concern) or acquisition or student-focused approach (where only acquisition of course concepts and skills are the teacher’s concern). Through devising a critical matrix of teaching and learning the authors argue that only the composite of intellectual, personal, social and practical dimensions of learning can address the learning gaps in higher education.

The second section extends this critical matrix to the genres of teaching that include course and curriculum design, large-group teaching, small-group teaching, supervision of projects, thesis or dissertation, teaching with technology, student assessment and teaching and course evaluation. Through extensive examples the authors demonstrate how the learning matrix can be integrated into the genres of teaching. For instance, in course and curriculum design the personal dimension includes ownership, unfreezing and icebreaking etc. The social dimension includes leadership and social interactions. These sub-categories are further explained with examples, eg, the environment: Music, space and the visual allows one to think about the course in terms of “bodily / kinaesthetic, music and special / visual intelligences” (p 95). In this way the authors suggest that music could be played in the class before the session begins in order to create a certain mood for the class.

In the third section the authors advocate “teaching practice as research”. They argue for integrating teaching and research practices through action research. Furthermore the authors suggest that a portfolio of practice (a requirement for demonstrating professional growth by academics in the United Kingdom and the United States of America) can be supported by action research as a method for establishing oneself as the true reflective professional.

*Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: The Reflective Professional* is quite thorough in terms of bringing forth the issues of changes taking place in learning and teaching practices in higher education at the turn of the century, eg, teaching and learning in technologically mediated environments, ever increasing pressure on academics to produce excellent results

in terms of students' learning who come from diverse backgrounds because of the rapidly globalising world etc. This book provides the reader with robust examples based on the authors' critical matrix of learning and teaching framework in order to reflect on their current practices and achieve a status of a reflective professional in contemporary higher education setting. At the same time the authors approach to their critical matrix of teaching and learning is quite flexible and encourages the reader to devise their own strategies in this regard as well.

Although the authors argue for changes in higher education and learning practices in the new millennium they do not mention the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which advocate gender equity at all levels of education. Though the authors hint at gender discrimination in terms of course evaluation of female teachers (p 249) or the stereotypes associated with female students' learning abilities (p 58), overall this book lacks a gender sensitive approach in terms of the application of its critical matrix of teaching and learning. For instance, it does not take into account how a gender sensitive curriculum or evaluation could be devised in a contemporary higher education setting.

This book is highly recommended for professionals and researchers in higher education who are towards the beginning of their careers. It is also a valuable book for already established academics to reflect upon and improvise their professional practice.