

Book review

**John Biggs (2003). Teaching for Quality Learning at University
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by **Paulo Charles Pimentel Botas** (paulobotas@yahoo.com)

This book, according to the author, is intended to help university teachers reflect on and improve the quality of their teaching practice, despite the sociological, psychological and economic conditions that affect teaching and learning in higher education in the UK. The author acknowledges that conditions such as class size and student diversity make 'good teaching more difficult than ever'¹ (p xi). The author has a long experience of teaching in higher education and has been publishing extensively on the subject.

In this book, the author argues that the quality of teaching in higher education relies upon what students do both in and outside the classroom. He claims that at last a shift has occurred in the focus of teaching and learning from what teachers do to what students do in the classroom in higher education. He claims that this shifting is liberating. The main theme of this book is that the quality of teaching can be enhanced by aligning objectives, teaching styles and assessment tasks.

In chapter one, the author, like other writers on higher education such as Deem et al. (1995) and Trawler (1998), recognises that teaching and decision-making in higher education have become more centrally controlled and subject to economic and managerial considerations than they used to be. He also recognises that the environment of higher education has been changing, with students becoming more diverse in: age, experience, socio-economic status and cultural background. He realises that there is not one all-purpose best method of teaching to fit this diversity. He accepts that teaching is individual, but he does not realise that learning is also individual. He claims that the role of the teacher is to engage students in activities that are more likely to lead to quality learning within the constraints of their resources.

In chapter two, the author presents the theories derived from research on students' learning in higher education. These theories are based on constructivist and phenomenological researches and have been developed by researchers such as Bain, Birenbaum, Entwistle and many others. By doing so, he shows his technicist belief that students progress from a surface approach to learning to a deep approach to learning independently of (1) the personal characteristics of students(psychological, physical, socio-economic and cultural), (2) the teachers' personalities and styles of teaching, and (3) the objects of students' desires (teachers, subjects and topics). Students' learning is placed in a continuum and smooth crescendo, and not in a bumpy and jumpy reality of students' individuality. He argues that teaching should be focused on what students do in the classroom in higher education.

In chapter three, the author theorises on his own 'SOLO taxonomy' argues that teachers should formulate and clarify curriculum objectives to students, in order to get students to move from a pre-structural level of understanding to an extended, abstract level of understanding. He also argues that students need to understand what we teach them, in order to know what students understand. In chapter four, the author develops theories of motivation to help teachers to understand how the impact of the climate, i.e., environment

(teachers and students relationship in the classroom) affects students' learning and therefore their achievement in higher education.

In chapters five, six and seven, the author further emphasises his technicist approaches to teaching. Approaches which are valued as more efficient and effective tools for teaching and learning in higher education (Trowler, 1998: p 73). In chapter five he deals with principles of good practice of teaching in higher education, where he focuses on the teaching and learning activities (TLAs) which help students to 'flex their metacognitive muscles' (p 95). In chapter six, he addresses teaching in large-classes where he suggests solutions for problems in teaching large groups. In chapter seven, he deals with teaching international students where, according to him, teachers should assimilate and try to understand the differences amongst the students; teachers should accommodate students' differences; and, last, teachers should address the problems presented by international students.

In chapters eight and nine, the author addresses assessment and its impact on learning and studying approaches of students. In chapter eight, he addresses formative, summative and progressive assessments, explaining the implications that quantitative and qualitative views of learning have on authentic and performance assessments in higher education. In chapter nine, he deals with methods/formats of assessing students' learning, such as essay examinations, multiple-choice tests, critical incidents, presentations and etc. Then, he argues that:

Students will always second guess the assessment task, and then learn what they think will meet those requirements. But if those assessment requirements mirror the curriculum, there is no problem. Students will be learning what they are supposed to be learning, (p 201).

In chapter ten, the author refers to globalisation and the development of information technology for teaching and learning in higher education. He argues that by focusing only on the use of IT (Information Technology) to assure the quality of teaching instead of focusing on the enhancement of the quality of teaching can dangerously associate a relationship with teaching as transmitting and not as helping students to learn. He concluded that ET (Educational Technology) can only provide an alternative to conventional methods of teaching and assessing in higher education.

In chapter eleven, the author gives some examples of aligned teaching in higher education. His examples involve peer assessment and problem-based learning, and learning portfolio. These types of assessments are also supported by Heywood (2000) who also developed the theme. Peer assessment and problem-based learning he calls the "bottom-up alignment", because they are structured and planned by the teacher. Learning portfolio he calls the "bottom-down alignment", because it involves students and teachers negotiating the decisions about the assessment procedure and its method/format.

In chapter twelve, the author touches the controversial topic of being a reflective teacher. He prescribes steps for teachers to follow in order to become a reflective teacher. However, he does not take into account that students are not the same and that students do not learn in the same way. When a teacher will come back to the same topic, he/she will probably have different students in a completely different setting and situation. The question of when teacher's reflection will be applied in order to help those students whose learning he/she closely monitors is not addressed by the author.

In chapter thirteen, the author also touches some of the concepts of quality and claims that the same procedure applied to be a reflective practitioner is exactly the same for the institution. He claims that institutions should also be focusing more on QE (Quality Enhancement) not on QA (Quality Assurance). He also draws a comparison between three

countries: The UK, Australia and Hong Kong, claiming that the difference between them lies in the amount of money invested in the development of teaching.

This is a very useful book for those teachers who are in search of a conceptualisation for their problems in teaching in higher education. It is a resourceful tool for teachers who wish to develop the natural gift of good teaching. It is worthwhile reading.

References

Deem, R., Brehony, K. J. and Heath, S. (1995) *Active Citizenship and the Governing of Schools*. Open University Press: Buckingham.

Heywood, J. (2000) *Assessment in Higher Education: Student Learning, Teaching, Programmes and Institutions*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers: London.

Trawler, P. R. (1998) *Academics Responding to Change: New Higher Education Frameworks and Academic Cultures*. SRHE & Open University Press: Buckingham.