

One

INTRODUCTION

If any of us were to pause for a moment to think about teaching in universities and similar institutions we might be struck by a paradox. Generally speaking, our formative education is spent with each of us saying ‘look how much I know’ or ‘see, this is how clever I am’. We are praised for this, encouraged to focus principally on our needs as learners and then researchers, and we expect to be rewarded for our talents and efforts. What is the reward? Well, some more research time (we expect), some sense of security, both practical and intellectual (we hope) and ... teaching. This last is, of course, entirely illogical. Why should we be good educators, or even want to be good teachers, just because we are intellectually impressive and research motivated? Where is the incentive and, just as importantly, where is the skill?

In the past this conundrum was either overlooked entirely or dismissed as a minor foible of our education system. It assumed that if you were expert in your field you would be able, by some ill-defined means, to teach others. In some situations (and many of us will no doubt remember these), the onus was clearly on the learner to learn rather than on the erudite, brilliant researcher to teach. Pearls of wisdom would drop casually from the lips of a master into the eager hands of followers. This presumably worked well for Socrates – it is not going to work for anyone today.

It is said that J. R. R. Tolkien gave all of his lectures at Oxford with his back to the auditorium. In today’s world, he would struggle with this approach. By the time he had mastered the nuances of formative v. summative assessment, coursework v. exam-led modules, extra-curricula v. intra-curricula placement learning and student-led seminar groups he would probably be delighted to have had the chance to turn around and remind himself of the point of teaching; the students.

The individuality of the educator should be defended within higher education as one of the hallmarks of our much-admired system; as long as an approach stimulates learning, then we would encourage it. The aim of this book, therefore, is not to foster a ‘one approach fits all’ attitude towards teaching, but, rather, to allow you to explore this area of your life as a researcher.

Having made that point, it would be unfair not to warn you of a significant difference between the approach others will take towards you as a researcher and that which you might experience as a lecturer. As a researcher, much is done to foster your well-being, encourage your intellectual development and support you as you produce excellent, ground-breaking research. As an educator, you are required to fit into a system, within what is currently a relatively tough educational environment. Although the work can be hugely rewarding, much less attention will be paid to your individual needs: the task is all and the system can feel overwhelming at times.

Throughout this book we will be urging you to talk to your supervisor or mentor about how to make your situation most conducive to your development as an educator and researcher, but you need to be aware that it may not be possible for changes to be made to accommodate your needs. You are probably already used to this in many areas of your life and this experience will help you now.

We cannot know exactly which stage of the life of a teacher would apply to you as you read this book for the first time. You might be a postgraduate research student, an early career researcher or a far more experienced academic faced with a new challenge. You might expect to be teaching only what pertains directly to your specialism or you might (as is far more likely) be expected to teach more broadly. You might be teaching students at any stage of their career or you might be using your teaching skills to disseminate your research and knowledge to a much wider field. Whatever your situation, we can help.

Although we can know relatively little about you, we do know that you are taking your task as an educator seriously, so you do not want to waste your valuable research time inventing ‘new’ teaching methods when the work has already been done for you, and that you are open to advice. You can also learn here something about us, right here at the outset.

Cindy’s life in teaching began in the world of professional training and the idea of teaching in academia was far from her mind for many years. As a trainer in a variety of communication and management skills, she was used to holding the attention of adults for two-day courses. Working principally with scientists, lawyers and engineers, she developed an appreciation of the work of different fields and came to enjoy the range of ways in which

people approached similar problems. Alongside her training life, she dabbled in other areas – teaching A-level students, being an agony aunt for a local newspaper, acting as a website study adviser and counselling people through career change management.

Even as Cindy began her doctoral research, her focus gravitated to research rather than teaching. As a mature postgraduate student, grappling with English literature and social history, she came to understand much about how she learned; her research also created enthusiasm to share both her knowledge and her intellectual curiosity with others. For her, a love of teaching students hit her the moment she took her first seminar group. It was not even a very good seminar, despite all of her overpreparation, but she knew she could get better and the better she got, the more likely she was to see that spark of recognition and understanding in her students' eyes.

Pam began teaching in a technical college – a baptism of fire since, as a science teacher, she was expected not only to teach A level subjects but also aid hairdressers' understanding of the chemical processes of perms and dyes and the lifecycle of head lice. She wanted to inspire her students and so undertook a teaching qualification part-time concurrently with some Open University courses that eventually culminated in a first class honours degree in psychology, particularly related to learning. This experience came in handy when she was pursuing her doctorate because she was able to undertake teaching duties on a course designed for all those whose job encompassed in some way the teaching of adults, which soon led to an academic post that involved designing courses for academics to learn how to teach more effectively.

The focus of Pam's doctorate and her subsequent research and academic teaching became the same – finding ways to improve student learning, particularly in higher education – and led to an exciting life, wandering the universities of the world as a provider of workshops on student learning and academic teaching for the British Council, in addition to her normal but related research, writing and teaching duties in the UK. Over time, her interest became further focused on developing the support and training of research students and led to her establishing a graduate school with a large range of courses and other forms of support for postgraduate students. It was at this point that she met up with and began her joyful collusion with an intellectual soulmate, Cindy.

Together, we set out to enliven and enrich the intellectual lives of postgraduate researchers at our university. An ambitious goal, we know, but one that we believed we could achieve. We designed courses to suit the changing needs of researchers in a competitive and fast-moving world; as much as possible we tried to anticipate their cultural and emotional needs as well as their academic requirements; we worked with our peers to offer the

best possible support and training, drawing on the skills of colleagues from all over our university; most of all, we had fun. What has been confirmed for us during our time together is that learning to teach is fundamental: sharing your ideas and helping others to find their intellectual path is the richest reward. Beyond that there is a world of challenges, of course, but we are both still at our happiest when we are standing in front of (or sitting beside) a group of learners, making things happen.

We do not believe that any one method works for all teachers or for all students in all situations. What we do believe is that there are many approaches that can work and some of them will suit you and the ways in which your students tend to respond. It is for this reason that the guide is crammed full of ideas and guidance points.

This is also why we make just one request of our readers: be open to ideas. Be prepared to try an approach and, if it is not exactly what you want, be bold about adapting or even abandoning it. If you can be sensitive to the responses of your learners you will instinctively know when a method needs some flexing. We say here ‘can’ be sensitive because this is not necessarily about your willingness to be open to your learners; it simply takes a fair bit of confidence to allow yourself to do this. We would fully expect that for your first lecture, for example, your experience would be similar to ours – you find yourself in a surreal world of terror in which you can do little more than follow your script and hope that you make it through to the end without making a fool of yourself (for the details of how this did not work for one of the authors, see Chapter 6!). As your confidence grows, so will your ability to judge the feel of a lecture theatre and gauge how much your audience would appreciate digressions, for example. At that point, a lecture can be a pleasure to give. This guide will show you that there are many ways to succeed and it will help you to get there more quickly and surefootedly than you would on your own.

Ways to use this book

We anticipate that you will use this book in several ways. You could read it through in its entirety, especially if teaching is a new venture for you. You might, perhaps, just look at certain chapters as the need arises. If you want a quick boost as you face new situations, you could then revisit a chapter to check out the main points. Over time, you will need the detailed guidance less often, but may find it interesting to return to some of the theoretical points. If you are ever lacking in ideas, the handy top tips will be there for you. If you are ever lacking in inspiration, the boxes on how research and teaching dovetail will be there, too. If you are ever lacking courage, the

‘voice of experience’ feature will remind you that others have been there before you and you are not alone.

The exercises in the guide serve two purposes. They will help you to develop your thoughts and skills in an area, but they will also act as a record of how you feel about teaching and how you foresee your progress. This type of reflection is valuable in itself, of course, but we also hope that it will be of benefit to you in the future. As you face new teaching challenges, you will be able to remind yourself of how this felt before and, when you are in a position to mentor others in their teaching, you will recall the learning process that you went through.

It is because we know that the guide could be used in many ways that we have constructed it as we have. The main text of each chapter offers practical advice on teaching and, within this advice, you will also find, as mentioned, step-by-step exercises, top tips, checklists and examples, as well as boxes that give you the opportunity to think more broadly about the task you are facing, allowing you to ponder both how a teaching situation might feed into your research and the theories of teaching underpinning the advice we are offering. As we have experience of teaching triumphs *and* disasters, we sometimes offer a ‘word of warning’ box.

Terminology may occasionally crop up as an issue as we go through the guidance with you, so we will define terms whenever we feel there could be any confusion. This is not to suggest in any way that you do not know basic teaching terminology. Rather, we define terms because we know that institutions use them differently and we want you to know exactly what we mean for the purposes of this book. A tutorial, for example, can mean a one-to-one learning session with a student or a session with one or more students to discuss their essays or other coursework, or a more general group learning session. Our aim is to ensure the smoothest possible transition of knowledge from us to you, whatever your circumstances or experience.