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Inspirational teaching in higher education: What does it look, sound and feel like?

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Abstract
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Lecturers, at an English University, agreed to circulate a short survey to final year social sciences undergraduates. Fifty-two student returns from 2010 were analysed. A comparative survey of 25 undergraduates – from the same disciplines - was repeated in 2016.

Three clear elements of inspirational undergraduate teaching emerge: First and foremost, undergraduates believe it to be motivating; second, and related – inspirational teaching is deemed encouraging and third such teaching flows from teachers’ passion for their subject. The paper presents exploratory and illustrative data and sets down a forward agenda for further research to explore aspects of inspirational university teaching linked to differing cultural expectations, potential impacts of gender, age and ethnicity.

Keywords
Inspiration; charisma; inspirational teaching; higher education

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Cover Page Footnote
I wish to thank colleagues at my university – JH, KL, LC, LL, RB & SS – who commented encouragingly on a 1st draft, and gave me insightful pointers for modifications. You know who you are! I am particularly grateful to Dr Michel Druey, who very generously put me right on APA referencing!
Inspirational teaching in higher education: What does it look, sound and feel like? An exploratory research study

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This article discusses the qualities of inspirational teaching in higher education (HE). It starts by arguing how topical this subject is, given emphasis world-wide on quality assurance measures, such as the UK Government's 2016 Teaching Excellence Framework TEF. The paper then moves to review the academic and practice literature in order to outline what comprises inspirational teaching in HE institutions. These components – in the form of key words - are extracted from the literature and then tested through primary research. Lecturers, at an English University, agreed to circulate a short survey to final year social sciences undergraduates. Fifty-two student returns from 2010 were analysed. A comparative survey of 25 undergraduates – from the same disciplines - was repeated in 2016. Three clear elements of inspirational undergraduate teaching emerge: First and foremost, undergraduates believe it to be motivating; second, and related – inspirational teaching is deemed encouraging and third such teaching flows from teachers’ passion for their subject. The paper presents exploratory and illustrative data and sets down a forward agenda for further research to explore aspects of inspirational university teaching linked to differing cultural expectations, potential impacts of gender, age and ethnicity.

INTRODUCTION
I clearly remember my old Professor lecturing to me about the conditions that country people in the UK suffered during the Second World War. To illustrate the point he told us how he had woken one morning, in his parents' Welsh farmhouse, to find frost on the inside of the window and across the bed sheets. It was a very personal account of rural poverty; completely appropriate to the subject...and spellbinding. This memory fits neatly with research findings from McGonigal (2004) who emphasises the fact that inspirational impact is significantly based on use of language, and relationship.

I also recall how I feel every time I hear Martin Luther King Jr. pronounce “I have a dream...” or when I listened to Barack Obama’s first US presidential inauguration speech. Hairs stood up on the back of my neck; tears sprang to my eyes; I was moved, and wanted to respond in a positive way. Isn’t this a central tenet of higher education: that as lecturers we seek to prompt our students – and ourselves - to aspire, and contribute towards personal fulfilment? James (2001) certainly believes that most lecturers “have a strong professional commitment to ‘making a difference’” (p. 1).

The New York academic, Ken Bain (2004) expresses excellence in terms of teaching and teachers that help students learn in ways that make “a sustained, substantial and positive influence on how those students think, act, and feel” (p. 5). A sentiment reinforced by Phillips (2000, as cited in Stibbe, 2009), that inspirational higher education should enable students (and staff) to move towards fulfilling and meaningful lives, characterised by generosity, intelligence, community spirit and a healthy level of self-esteem.

And it is inspirational teaching and learning in higher education that I explore in this article. What exactly comprises such teaching? The focus is on “inspirational”, as opposed to good, or even very good teaching at universities and colleges. In researching this topic I am reminded of a remark from the UK educationalist Sir Ron Cooke (n.d.) at my University in England, who commented that the most crucial components of teaching are the most difficult to measure. In similar vein Albert Einstein is attributed with saying “Many of the things you can count, don’t count. Many of the things you can’t count really count.” This suggests an inverse relationship....that the crucial facets of HE teaching are the most slippery, intangible and elusive.

A global preoccupation for universities in the 21st century is quality assurance and enhancement linked to teaching. For example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development OECD & imhe (n.d.) note how national and “transnational debates like the Bologna Process, direct state regulations or incentives, competition among private and state-owned institutions all prompt institutions to put quality teaching on their agenda” (p. 4). And look at a random selection of universities and you will find variations on a theme: The University of Arkansas at Little Rock (Academy for Teaching and Learning Excellence, n.d.) for example fosters “excellence in teaching and learning”; while Madras (2011) claims “provision of superior education of merit and distinction.”

And in 2015 the UK Government’s Department for Business, Innovation and Skills published proposals for a Teaching Excellence Framework TEF to mirror research assessment. The new Framework “will identify and incentivise the highest quality teaching to drive up standards in higher education” (p. 18). So the delivery of excellent university teaching assumes heightened political and public importance in the UK and further afield. Further impetus comes from widespread global austerity and the direct cost of tuition for many students and countries. One example is that, in England, universities now charge undergraduates around £9,000+ per year tuition fees (Browne, 2010). A 2009 petition, signed by 600 students at Bristol University (SW England), for example, complained that revenue per student from such fees had increased without evidence that the quality of education had improved accordingly (Jamieson, 2009).

Given this high profile in terms of politics, student & parental interest in costs and benefits of their education and employer concerns for graduate capabilities, I will argue in this article that gaining a fuller, cleaner and more practical understanding of inspirational teaching is both necessary and pressing. So for example what metrics – if any – can capture and measure inspirational teaching? This piece raises further questions about the nature of
Inspirational teaching in higher education

inspiration and sets down a future research agenda, through which to establish more definitive conclusions. The article reveals aspects of inspirational teaching: (a) the role of the teacher; (b) the role of the student; (c) theoretical perspectives to provide context in the form of a literature review of relevant practice and academic sources. Furthermore, to discover what undergraduates consider to be inspiring Teaching, a survey was undertaken in 2010, with a second during 2013. A third objective is to suggest means by which to deliver inspirational HE teaching and learning; and finally to pinpoint areas for future research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In researching inspirational teaching, the author has drawn on the work of the Brazilian, Paulo Freire (1921 – 97), who saw education as potentially liberating for the individual. According to Ledwith (2005), Freire believed that “education can never be neutral... the process of education either creates critical, autonomous thinkers or it renders people passive and unquestioning” (p. 53). This ties in with the purpose of this exploratory research article, to determine whether and what inspirational teaching may release the enthusiasm and capabilities of individual students.

I also adopt a pluralist position, in believing that higher education can be empowering, and enable individuals to challenge, choose their own life and career paths, and influence decisions made by and for them. Hughes (1998) for example, suggests that new employees entering the workforce need to have autonomy that is clearly seen as being consistent with self-confidence and... this needs to be enhanced through the acquisition of enabling skills” (p. 14). This need presents the challenge of: “How can we educate students in higher education? In the context of this study, I refer to how students are educated, because autonomy correlates strongly with self-confidence and... this needs to be enhanced through the acquisition of enabling skills” (p. 14). It is this need that I seek to assess, in this study of inspirational teaching.

In this context, it is relevant to note that Freedom notes that the “educator with a democratic vision or posture cannot avoid in his teaching praxis insisting on the critical, curiosity, and autonomy of the learner” (p. 33). Perhaps by understanding the importance of enabling skills and autonomy, we can do our part in elevating the status of HE educators and enable students to negotiate their own learning experiences. It seems logical to suggest that if we can identify the key components of inspirational teaching, we can begin to assess and compare the effectiveness of such teaching on a broader scale.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cohen & Jurkovic (1997) assert: “Call it inspiration, creativity, or whatever you want to call it; it’s the least tangible and most powerful force in the classroom” (p. 334). This sentiment is echoed in the work of Crosby (2000), who defines inspirational teaching as “...the process by which the teacher, in cooperation with the students, and in harmony with the needs of the moment, brings about the maximum growth in the individuals concerned” (p. 9). In their work, Cohen and Jurkovic suggest that inspirational teaching is “...the process by which the teacher, in cooperation with the students, and in harmony with the needs of the moment, brings about the maximum growth in the individuals concerned” (p. 9).

But it should be remembered that parallel insights have surfaced in times past: Wilson (1918) for example, observed almost a century ago that good teaching “...has something to offer in the way of insight and the teacher must have a general understanding of the subject matter” (p. 9). Wilson goes on to quote the poet Robert Browning and hints at perhaps one of the most elusive of human characteristics – “charisma”. “There’s the secret of life...” (p. 481).

Cohen & Jurkovic (1997) suggest “surprise, fun, and drama” (p. 48) as essential ingredients of inspiration linked to training. McGonigal (2004) usefully reminds us that one or more people may be involved in the experience. In her words, “It’s not just the people who are participating...it’s also the people who are observing...it’s the whole environment that’s involved” (p. 481).

A student asserts (McGonigal, 2004) that inspirational teaching is “...the process by which the teacher, in cooperation with the students, and in harmony with the needs of the moment, brings about the maximum growth in the individuals concerned” (p. 9). In their work, Cohen and Jurkovic suggest that inspirational teaching is “...the process by which the teacher, in cooperation with the students, and in harmony with the needs of the moment, brings about the maximum growth in the individuals concerned” (p. 9).

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THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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I taught none of the modules on which the primary research was undertaken. I taught插入 source articles that I often cited as being instrumental in achieving the research aims. The musical theme is adopted by Hardin and Crosby (2000) who liken teaching “to the performance of an orchestral piece of music. The composer is the planner who has the inspiration and determines the music to be played. The conductor interprets the composer’s score and facilitates and guides the players to perform...” (p. 336). What emerges here is inspirational teaching and learning as a collective venture. There have been several influential texts presented as an illustrative and exploratory sample; with no claim that the findings are representative.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 52 (17 + 21 + 14) questionnaires from 2010 were completed and analysed. There was no compulsion for undergraduate students to complete this survey; but they were invited to do so by the module tutor (who was not the author of this study) and those who completed the survey were those who felt that they would feel less pressure to complete the survey (since I was not physically present). Final year undergraduates were deliberately selected, since they have been exposed to university teaching over at least a three-year period. The modules also span natural sciences (for example biology: an aspect of criminology, biology; plus social sciences (sociology and history).

The results presented are illustrative and exploratory sample; with no claim that the findings are representative.
were asked to describe what it was like, using key words extracted from the literature (referred to in the Literature Review and in the quote above). The characteristics were deliberately not defined...leaving individuals to make up their minds and select according to their own feelings.

The number of students highlighting each word in 2010 is given below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Number of Students Highlighting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Memorable</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowering</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiastic</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memorable</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowering</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiastic</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Captivating</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspiring</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoying</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passionate</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathetic</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memorable</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathetic</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspiring</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspirational</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students were asked to add/any other factors that they felt should be listed. Only three individuals chose to provide new characteristics; and only one student supported each of Interesting, Informative and Engaging.

Based on this small sample – 52 student returns - three clear examples of inspirational teaching emerged: First and foremost, it is believed to be motivating (an aspect supported from literature by House, 1977, as cited in Shevlin et al., 2000; James, 2001); second, and related – inspirational teaching is felt to be encouraging (reinforced by Harden & Crosby, 2000; McGoey, 2004); and third, such teaching flows from teachers who are passionate (back-up by Harden & Crosby, 2000) about their subject matter.

Pre-eminence given to the 3 characteristics mentioned directly above, was encapsulated in several student comments (my underlining):

“An inspiring and encouraging lecturer...”

“Very enthusiastic...”

“I have been very passionate about what I am teaching and passing on it.”

Interestingly the words “passionate” and “enthusiasm” emerged repeatedly time and again in unprompted feedback.

Another facet of inspirational teaching was mentioned by two students in relation to triggering interest in a particular area: “The lecture really inspired me to carry out a career in Forensics as was...” Students were asked to describe their understandings of inspirational teaching and what it showed. I initiated this journey - and invited each to pick one that demonstrated their understanding of inspirational teaching.

The questionnaire also invited students to “describe an example of inspirational teaching at university e.g. a lecture or an educational tutorial, a guest speaker etc. Try to give as much detail as possible regarding who, what, when etc.” Twenty-four students (of 77, 31%) gave feedback in answer to the request. They cited 14 lecturers and other staff - as providing inspirational teaching. For example a university chaplain was mentioned. Also a lecturer discussing a student’s plans “in a field in which she teaches. For example a university chaplain was mentioned. Also a lecturer discussing a student’s plans “in a field in which she teaches.”

Four students (of 77, 31%) cited a guest speaker who had given a memorable and experienced inspirational teaching experience of inspiration – age, gender, ethnicity of teaching staff; as higher education teachers, to ensure students are energized and inspired by these experiences.

CONCLUSIONS

So why is inspiration important to teaching and learning at university? Given the emphasis in literature and primary research findings on “motivation” – then inspirational teaching may help with absorption of information and catalyse a constructive response, insight and personal growth. This reinforces the importance of perceiving that the teacher is speaking directly to you to foster what Johnston & Johnston (2002) termed “hybrid pedagogy...”

It is important to develop research findings in the area of inspiration and to try and generate richer and more discursive qualitative data and insights. The literature hints at variables that may influence teaching and learning. To try and generate richer and more discursive qualitative data and insights. The literature hints at variables that may influence teaching and learning. To try and generate richer and more discursive qualitative data and insights. The literature hints at variables that may influence teaching and learning. To try and generate richer and more discursive qualitative data and insights. The literature hints at variables that may influence teaching and learning. To try and generate richer and more discursive qualitative data and insights. The literature hints at variables that may influence teaching and learning.

The second corollary is related, in that the literature review points to largely passive students receiving inspiration; and yet there are existing research findings that advocate participatory approaches as a means of engendering inspiration.

Next is the way in which the secondary and primary research informing this paper has accentuated positive mechanisms for inspiration. Whereas a colleague at my university commented that she had attempted to use “iNet” in HE because she had witnessed someone do it so badly. As a result she thought “I can do better.”

As mentioned several times, this is an exploratory study and one which I would like to scale up, in terms of involving colleagues, to gather much more information from staff and students.

I would like to involve students as co-researchers, to undertake peer-peer conversations around the topic of inspirational teaching. To try and generate richer and more discursive qualitative data and insights. The literature hints at variables that may influence teaching and learning. To try and generate richer and more discursive qualitative data and insights. The literature hints at variables that may influence teaching and learning. To try and generate richer and more discursive qualitative data and insights. The literature hints at variables that may influence teaching and learning. To try and generate richer and more discursive qualitative data and insights. The literature hints at variables that may influence teaching and learning.
REFERENCES
Wilson, L.M. (1918). Factors in successful teaching that need to be stressed in both high school and college. The Classical Journal, 13(7), 476-482.
Appendix 1

Inspirational Teaching at university: What does it look, sound & feel like?
Please answer the following questions honestly & anonymously; circling answers you agree with:
1. Have you experienced inspirational teaching at University?
   If “no”, go to question 2 and then return the form to jderounian@glos.ac.uk
   If “yes” please complete Q.3 to the end.

2. If you haven’t experienced inspirational teaching at the university, please describe what you think it would look, sound & feel like?

3. If you have experienced inspirational teaching, describe what it looked, sounded & felt like, circling or adding your own key words:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authoritative</th>
<th>Captivating</th>
<th>Dazzling</th>
<th>Empathetic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Encouraging</td>
<td>Energetic</td>
<td>Entertaining</td>
<td>Enthusiastic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exciting</td>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>Guidance</td>
<td>Memorable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivating</td>
<td>Original</td>
<td>Passionate</td>
<td>Provocative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Others? Please describe__________________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________________________________

4. Please describe an example of inspirational teaching at university e.g. a lecture or an educational tutorial, a guest speaker etc. Try to give as much detail as possible regarding who, what, when, where why
______________________________________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________________________________

5. About yourself:
   Your age______________ Undergraduate, postgraduate or lecturer?
   Level of study e.g. LL, final year etc._________________________________
   Your course e.g. Theology__________________________________________

6. Is inspirational teaching at university commonplace or a rarity?
______________________________________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________________________________

7. How can we ensure that inspirational teaching increasingly occurs?
______________________________________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________________________________

8. Any other points about inspirational teaching at university you’d like to make?
______________________________________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________________________________

E-mail contact only if you’re happy to provide I may come back to discuss further
Name:____________________________________________________________________________________________________
e-mail:__________________________________________________________________________________________________