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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 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, clearer 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
inspiration and sets down a future research agenda, through which to extend our understanding of the goals, objectives, and processes that underpin the practice of teaching. It presents a critical review of the literature on inspirational teaching and learning, and identifies a series of recurring or 'key' words. Linked to the themes of leadership, enthusiasm, guidance, ability to motivate & provoke, and their passion for the discipline. Through the themes of language, energy, creativity, dazzle, entertainment, excitement, fun, memorability and originality, the key words are then incorporated into a short (2 page) survey given to students (see appendix 1).

The survey was distributed by three colleagues at the University of Gloucestershire, England, who volunteered to circulate it to level 5 (final year) undergraduates completing either a sociology, history or criminology module during October 2010; and was repeated with another set of social sciences students in March 2016. The institution in question gained university status in 2001, and describes itself as teaching-led and research informed. The online Complete University Guide notes that there are around 8,000 students of which 80%* are full time undergraduates. 95% of students at this university are UK citizens, and there is a 40% (men) - 60% (women) gender split. In 2015 the university was teaching-led and research informed. The student body is a predominantly undergraduate university with the vast majority of its income (£55m £74.4m total - 74%) coming from student tuition fees. I taught none of the modules on which the primary research was undertaken. I have little confidence that my own practice would hold up to the critical scrutiny. I taught core modules, and the modules that would 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 (one of the themes, in the form of an aspect of criminology, biology) plus social sciences (sociology and history).

The results are 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 the survey). The potential sample size was around 80 students on the one credit week. Of the 52, all but 4 (92%) agreed that they had experienced inspirational teaching at university.

The quality of engagement (men) - 60% (women) gender split. In 2015 the university was teaching-led and research informed. The student body is a predominantly undergraduate university with the vast majority of its income (£55m £74.4m total - 74%) coming from student tuition fees. I taught none of the modules on which the primary research was undertaken. I have little confidence that my own practice would hold up to the critical scrutiny. I taught core modules, and the modules that would 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 (one of the themes, in the form of an aspect of criminology, biology) plus social sciences (sociology and history).

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were asked to describe what it was like, using key words extracted from the literature (referred to in the Literature Review and in the questionnaire). 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 in rank order:

**March 2010 Rank Order**

- Passionate 25
- Encouraging 16
- Memorable 15
- Captivating 14
- Entertaining 8
- Energetic 7
- Original 5
- Function 4
- Passionate 3
- Captivating 2
- Memorable 1
- Entertaining 0

**2010 Student Quotes**

- “An inspiring and encouraging lecturer: using scenarios, relating to what they are talking about.”
- “Motivating lecturers, that really care about what they are teaching and passing on it.”
- “Very passionate and enthusiastic, and they take time to explain things again in unrompt feedback.”

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, where, why.

**March 2016 Rank Order**

- Captivating responses 19
- Memorable 19
- Original 15
- Captivating 8
- Entertaining 5
- Energetic 5
- Provenance 4
- Enthusing 2
- Provocative 1
- Energetic 1

**Combined 2010 & 2016 Rank Order**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>2010 Rank</th>
<th>2016 Rank</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Memorable</td>
<td>15</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Captivating</td>
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<td>Original</td>
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<td>Energetic</td>
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The second conundrum 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.

I would also 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 the students’ experience – age, gender, ethnicity of teaching staff as well as different cultural expectations of staff and students… that need further scrutiny.

As such, the research was repeated during March 2016. This time 25 questionnaires were analyised from level 6 (final year) criminology, sociology and applied social sciences undergraduates. Again, there was no compulsion for students to complete the survey; but they were invited to do so – as previously – by the module tutor in a classroom session. Of the 25, all agreed that they had experienced inspirational teaching at university.

However, only 9 (36%) of the 25 who had experienced it, viewed such teaching as commonplace; whilst 9 (36%) believed it to be rare and 7 (28%) saw it as somewhere in between.

Repetitive student comments mirror keywords from secondary sources in terms of themes:

- **Memorability**
  - “It was a very harrowing lecture and really expanded my understanding” of homicide

- **Passion**
  - A lecturer and guest speaker together “were so passionate for the victims of domestic abuse.” [The invited speaker’s sister had been murdered by her ex-husband.]

- **Challenge**
  - “They challenge you, and make you want to know more.”

- **Inspiration through “thought-provoking topics, where there are no clear answers.” Similarly “controversial, challenging topics” that confronted “ordinary thinking.” One lecturer “proposed really interesting arguments and it made people question and justify (argue their case).” Another reply highlighted teaching that “really expanded my understanding.”

- **Empowerment**
  - “Entertainment and humour were suggested by 2 students as features of inspirational teaching they had encountered. One respondent talking about a lecturer remembers “everything he says, entertains, and great jokes.”

**CONCLUSIONS**

Conclusively, inspiration is important to teaching and learning at university! Given the emphasis in literature and primary research findings on “motivation” – then inspirational teaching will help with absorption of information and catalyze a constructive response, insight and personal growth. This reinforces the importance of perceiving that the teacher is speaking directly to you to foster what Johnstone (2002) termed “empiricism.”

I would reduce this to a simple formula:  

Inspirational teaching = Aspiration + Transformation

This view is supported by Jack Mezirow (1997): “transformative learning…is the essence of adult education…to help the individual become a more autonomous thinker by learning to negotiate his or her values, meanings, and purposes rather than to act only on those of others” (p. 11). Sounds simple, but how is it done?

Cohen & Jurvick (1997) suggest a series of techniques by which to inspire learning. These include getting out of order – that is “shaking up the accepted sequence of things” (p. 68) so that “people see processes in a new light and become open to fresh approaches” (p. 68). Breaking the rhythm - running counter to an expected sequence; maybe putting conclusions at the beginning and working back to an introduction. And then there’s my favourite “Toy with success,” on the basis that “toys have a liberating effect… a disarming way to break the ice, but they are also a deceptively powerful way to break down the barriers of rigid adult thinking” (Cohen & Jurvick, 1997, p. 69).

I wish to thank colleagues at my university – JH, KL, LC, LL, RB & SS – for their support, understanding and patience. And to the students who participated in the research, I would like to thank you for your co-operation and enthusiasm. This research has been possible because of your generosity and understanding.
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REFERENCES
Cook, R. (n.d.) Address at the University of Gloucestershire, UK.

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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:

   Authoritative  Captivating  Dazzling  Empathetic
   Encouraging  Energetic  Entertaining  Enthusiating
   Exciting  Fun  Guidance  Memorable
   Motivating  Original  Passionate  Provocative

   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. LI, 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: ___________________________________________________________