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

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

## **Abstract**

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.

## **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!

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# 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, 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 establish more definitive conclusions. The article reveals aspects of inspirational teaching based on exploratory original research.

The overall aim of this paper is to establish tentative conclusions as to what constitutes inspirational teaching and learning in higher education. In order to address this, there are a series of complementary objectives: To provide context in the form of a literature review of relevant practice and academic sources. Furthermore, to discover what undergraduates consider to be inspirational teaching and learning (via two surveys - one undertaken in 2010, with a second during 2016). 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 teaching 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, asserts that in higher education “empowerment and student autonomy correlate strongly with self-confidence and...this needs to be enhanced through the acquisition of enabling skills” (p. 229). And returning to Freire (1998), in his work *Pedagogy of Freedom* he deduces that the “educator with a democratic vision or posture cannot avoid in his teaching praxis insisting on the critical capacity, curiosity, and autonomy of the learner” (p. 33). Perhaps by understanding what constitutes inspirational teaching in higher education, it will be possible to ignite “the critical capacity, curiosity, and autonomy of the learner” (p. 33).

I now review existing literature in order to sift and extract what seem to be the components, in the form of ‘key words’ describing inspirational teaching, that are then tested through primary research.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Cohen & Jurkovic (1997) assert: “Call it inspiration, creativity, or whatever you want to; it’s the least tangible and most powerful ingredient in learning” (p. 68). Harden & Crosby (2000) add to the mystery by terming this ‘magic’. Similarly James (2001) advocates these “less observable dimensions of the university experience which capture imagination and spur a continuing commitment, and which are key to persistence and success at university – these include inspirational teaching...” (p. 7).

If that is so then we need to determine the parameters, dimensions, composition and ingredients of inspirational HE teaching... if we are to serve our students and ourselves to the best of our abilities, and recruit them in the first place. One of the difficulties, when we turn to the literature is the fact that sources glide seamlessly across terms like the “good teacher” (Harden &

Crosby, 2000, p.334), “teaching effectiveness” (Tang, 1997, p. 379), quality teaching (Gibbs, 2010), “successful teaching” (Wilson, 1918, p. 476) or the “excellent tertiary-level teacher” (Ellington, 2000, p. 311). Biggs (1999) however suggests that good teaching depends on the perception of pedagogy that an individual teacher has. Prosser & Trigwell (1999) explain this in the following way: “different prior experiences of learning...meant that different learning situations were constituted for each student and different perceptions of their learning situation were evoked” (p. 9). This raises a fundamental point, that there is unlikely to be a single objective formula for inspirational teaching. One person’s meat is another’s poison – and may well vary according to cultural considerations, personal preference, and how the teacher and learner/s feel at a given moment.

Cohen & Jurkovic (1997) suggest “surprise, fun, and drama” (p. 68) as essential ingredients of inspiration linked to training. McGonigal (2004) usefully reminds us that one or more people are being inspired, and to recognise that this can encompass both lecturer *and* student. In similar vein, with “an inspirational teacher, some of the learner’s excitement must derive from being caught up as a character in a co-created work of fiction.” (p. 125). So, inspirational teaching is seen as a collaborative venture, in which inspiration generates “a crystallization or mirror image of what the learner aspires to be...” (p. 121). McGonigal’s research stands out as different from the majority in seeing such teaching and learning as a combined effort that is not solely focussed on the tutor, or just mopped up by a passive recipient.

A student asserts (McGonigal, 2004) that inspirational teaching “encourages you to believe in yourself... presents new perspectives that you hadn’t dreamed of... is honourable and with a strong sense of justice tempered with compassion” (p.120). The latter quote strays strongly into the domain of emotional intelligence (Salovey & Mayer, 1990); and the importance of the learning relationship to (inspirational) teaching. The authors define emotional intelligence as an ability to gauge your own and others’ feelings and emotions, to tease them apart and use the information gained to guide your thinking and action.

A psychology teacher, John Radford (as cited in Harden & Crosby, 2000, p. 339) goes on to suggest that lecturers have “a caring, pastoral role.” According to James (2001) students respond to “being treated as individuals by staff who show concern for their progress” (p. 8). And in 2011 Derounian published a journal article entitled *Shall we dance? The importance of staff–student relationships to undergraduate dissertation preparation*. This reinforced the point that staff need to be emotionally aware in understanding how their own - and student - attitudes and behaviours can influence - for better or worse - undergraduate dissertation/thesis preparation.

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 (as opposed to inspirational) “is the response awakened in the group and the individuals of the group through the effective leadership of the teacher” (p. 476). She went on to describe the class atmosphere as “charged...with a certain electric spark; there is *color, vigor, character*, which the most casual observer catches at once, but which is so difficult to define” (p. 479). The last point links back to Ron Cooke’s belief that it is difficult to measure or define that electricity. Lowman and Mathie (1993) identify two factors as critical - first, the ability to stimulate

intellectual excitement and second, interpersonal rapport already referred to (by a number of authors).

The inspirational teacher, for Wilson (1918), elicits a pupil’s “devoted fighting; effort, earnestness, desire commensurate with her own; in a word a willingness to cultivate their conscious powers” (p. 481). This also focuses on the co-production of learning through captivating teaching. Wilson goes on to quote the poet Robert Browning and hints at perhaps one of the most elusive of human characteristics – “charisma”:

“Such men [sic] carry the fire

All things grow warm to them” (p. 481).

Shevlin, Banyard, Davies & Griffiths (2000) point to a teacher’s charisma as “a central trait...which influences a student’s evaluation of the lecturer” (p.397). Carlin Flora (2015) cites four components of charisma, namely the ability to be spellbinding; audacious; exuberant and graceful. Flora goes on to highlight the importance of teaching that fosters personal change and development. House’s (1977) theory of charismatic leadership (as cited in Shevlin, Banyard, Davies & Griffiths, 2000, p.399) highlights “arousing motivation...to be productive.” Shevlin and colleagues (2000) posit a somewhat circular argument that lecturers are attributed a level of charisma based on their ability and attributes, so that the ‘better’ the lecturer the more charismatic they are considered to be (by those on the receiving end). Graham (1991) in a view of leadership, observed that the “ideal leader is visionary, practical and inspirational ... charisma is a term frequently used to describe leaders who possess these ideal qualities” (p. 105).

Young and Oliver (1939), in their famous song “‘Tain’t what you do” performed by the blues singer Ella Fitzgerald laid emphasis on process as well as product in the quality of an undertaking – such as teaching:

“‘Tain’t what you do, it’s the way that you do it,

That’s what gets results!”

A belief also espoused by McLuhan & Fiore (1967) when they coined the term “the medium is the message.” In other words, *how* something is communicated is as important as what is conveyed. The musical theme is adopted by Harden 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 delineates 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.

Davidovitch and Soen (2006) note that increasing “age negatively influences students’ perceptions of personal appeal.... Younger faculty members received higher scores than older faculty members on the following measures: general evaluation, ability to incite curiosity, effective use of teaching aids, clarity of lectures and course structure and organization” (p. 370). Gomez-Mejia and Balkin (as cited in Tang, 1997) extend this sentiment: “teaching evaluations by students are not true reflections of teaching performance; they are basically a popularity contest” (p.380). The literature around inspirational teaching doesn’t pick up on impacts of age, gender or ethnicity, but this would be an interesting avenue to explore in further research; a point that I will return to in setting down a future agenda.

What the secondary research points to is a widespread desire by inspirational teachers and teaching to effect positive change

for individuals and – to a lesser extent – groups. The literature also raises the importance of relationships to the experience of inspirational teaching and learning.

## METHOD

As an experiment, pause and try to remember whether you have experienced inspirational teaching at university... and if so what made it inspiring? See if you can name the qualities. The literature points us to a series of recurring or ‘key’ words. Linked to “relationship” are a lecturer’s authority, empathy, encouragement, enthusiasm, guidance, ability to motivate & provoke, and their passion for the discipline. Whilst in terms of language, energy, captivation, dazzle, entertainment, excitement, fun, memorability and originality, all feature. I sifted the pedagogic literature for these key words which were 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 this to level 6 (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 ‘commended’ for its enhancement of student learning, and had its quality and standards for academic provision confirmed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. So the focus of my research is on a predominantly teaching university, with the vast majority of its income (£55m of £74.4m total - 74%) coming from student tuition fees.

I taught none of the modules on which the primary research is based; in the belief that students 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 forensics as an aspect of criminology, biologies) 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 this article) in classroom sessions occurring during the same week. Of the 52, all but 4 (92%) agreed that they *had* experienced inspirational teaching at university.

However, only 18 (38%) of the 48 who had experienced it, viewed inspirational teaching as commonplace; whilst 21 (44%) felt it was a rarity and 6 (13%) saw it as somewhere in between. The remainder offered no view.

Those that had experienced inspirational teaching at university

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 reproduced as Appendix 1). 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 below in rank order:

| 2010 Rank Order         |              |                |                            |
|-------------------------|--------------|----------------|----------------------------|
| Motivating responses 37 | Memorable 19 | Captivating 14 | Provocative 8              |
| Encouraging 27          | Energetic 17 | Exciting 13    | Original 5                 |
| Passionate 25           | Enthusing 16 | Guidance 11    | Dazzling 4<br>Empathetic 4 |
| Entertaining 20         | Fun 15       |                | Authoritative 3            |

Students were invited to add any/other facets 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 elements of inspirational undergraduate teaching emerge: 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; McGonigal, 2004); and third, such teaching flows from teachers who are **passionate** (backed-up by Harden & Crosby, 2000) about their subject.

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

| Direct student quotes illustrating the top 3 elements of inspirational teaching, 2010                               |
|---|
| A lecturer is "inspirational because they show their <u>passion</u> for what they are talking about."               |
| "An inspiring and encouraging lecturer... <u>encouraging</u> students even when they are struggling to comprehend." |
| "Having lecturers...that really <u>care</u> about what they are teaching and passing it on."                        |

Interestingly the words "passionate" and "enthusiasm"/"enthusiastic" surfaced time and again in unprompted feedback.

Another facet of inspirational teaching was mentioned by two students in relation to triggering interest in a particular career path: "The lecture really inspired me to carry out a career in forensics." Another two replies were along the following lines – at a "usual lecture... [he] shared his passion for teaching...and love of the subject. This had a huge influence on me as a student to discuss my opinions and comfortably debate." And it chimes with Moon's (2007) work about academic assertiveness and the notion of co-production of learning mentioned earlier in this article. The value of guest lecturers and contributors was also mentioned by respondents.

The research was repeated during March 2016: This time 25 questionnaires were analysed 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.

Those that had experienced inspirational teaching were asked to describe its characteristics, using the key words from literature. The features were not defined, leaving individuals to make their own interpretations.

The number of students highlighting each word in 2016 is given below:

| March 2016 Rank Order        |                           |                               |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Captivating responses 19     | Energetic 9               | Enthusing 5                   |
| Passionate 16                | Memorable 8<br>Guidance 8 | Provocative 4                 |
| Motivating 15<br>Exciting 15 | Fun 7                     | Original 3<br>Authoritative 3 |
| Encouraging 12               | Entertaining 6            | Empathetic 2                  |

What emerges is that both the 2010 and 2016 lists share 3 of the 'top five' characteristics [encouraging, motivating, passionate] in spite of a 6 year gap between the original and subsequent survey.

Additionally, 9 facets - **captivating, encouraging, energetic, entertaining, exciting, fun, memorable, motivating, passionate** - are listed in common amongst the top 10. These responses therefore illustrate significant agreement across undergraduates from different disciplines and across time, as to what constitutes inspirational teaching and learning in higher education. This list of features is combined in the following table:

| Combined 2010 & 2016 Rank Order |                                 |                |                                 |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------|---------------------------------|
| Motivating responses 52         | Exciting 28                     | Enthusing 21   | Empathetic 6<br>Authoritative 6 |
| Passionate 41                   | Memorable 27                    | Guidance 19    | Dazzling 4                      |
| Encouraging 39                  | Energetic 26<br>Entertaining 26 | Provocative 12 |                                 |
| Captivating 33                  | Fun 22                          | Original 8     |                                 |

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." 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. Gave me ideas for projects and got me interested in the profession after university."

One lecturer, we'll call *Electra*, was mentioned as an inspirational teacher by 8 students. She is "so passionate", "engaging", "very interesting" and "makes you want to know more and more."

Repeated 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]. Another commented that a lecturer "inspired me, and I wanted to become that passionate."

**Case studies** were mentioned directly by 2 respondents (as bringing subjects to life); and indirectly by 8 others.

#### Challenge

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." 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, entertainer, and great jokes."

## 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 Elton & Johnston (2002) termed individualised learning.

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 own values, meanings, and purposes rather than to uncritically act on those of others" (p. 11). Sounds simple, but how is it done?

Cohen & Jurkovic (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 & Jurkovic, 1997, p. 69).

David Kahane (2011) – a professor at the University of Alberta, Canada – argues that students "are energized and inspired by these highly participatory, contemplative courses. The methods and subject matters of the courses speak to students' search for meaning in their lives and educations: they explore themes that matter in an unusually deep way, and share this exploration with fellow students" (p. 21). At an international Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) conference delegates were somewhat puzzled when I presented them with a box of children's toys – that had made the transatlantic journey - and invited each to pick one that demonstrated their approach to teaching, and explain what it showed. I initiated this

audience participation by inflating a balloon. And commented that it resembled my teaching in that I try to expand in to new territory; but then – releasing the balloon - explained that sometimes such attempts fall flat and do not succeed.

My experience mirrored that of Cohen and Jurkovic (1997) in that the "silliness of the exercise" allows participants "to be more bold, truthful, and perceptive about themselves than they probably would have been with a more traditional approach" (p. 69). However, it was quite clear from the atmosphere in the lecture room that while a number embraced the opportunity, other international colleagues found the offer baffling, embarrassing, and even demeaning. Which links back to an early point about (likely) cultural differences as to what may be seen as acceptable, let alone inspirational, in university teaching and learning.

## A forward agenda

Given the tentative, illustrative and exploratory nature of the research underlying this paper, I would argue that – rather like an iceberg – there are additional aspects to be found, and existing ones to be more fully and usefully studied.

For example, there may be different characteristics of inspirational teaching as experienced by individuals, and groups. Furthermore, there appear to be at least 2 paradoxes emerging from the keywords extracted from existing literature: first is the fact that in majority inspiration is explained as flowing from lecturer to student (whilst to a lesser extent mutually assured inspiration does surface – whereby both student and lecturer co-create the inspirational teaching and learning).

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.

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 been inspired to teach 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 students across natural and social science undergraduate studies, courses, universities and countries. In this way more representative and persuasive data can be generated.

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 experience of inspiration – age, gender, ethnicity of teaching staff; as well as different cultural expectations of staff and students... that need further scrutiny.

So in conclusion let's *aspire*, as higher education teachers, to *inspire* our students – and be inspired by them. Wilson, from as far back as 1918 encourages us to "judge our value as teachers on the basis of our power to stimulate a willingness to work, and to train young minds to do hard things in such a way that they will gain pleasure from the effort" (p. 477).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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!

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## Appendix I

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](mailto: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 | Enthusiasm  |
| 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. 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: \_\_\_\_\_