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# JOURNAL OF Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice

## Inspirational Teaching: Beyond Excellence and Towards Collaboration for Learning with Sustained Impact

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### ABSTRACT

Within higher education, there is a continued focus on teaching quality, with teaching excellence often linked to the idea of engaging and motivating students. This article examines the concept of 'inspirational' teaching, going beyond notions of excellent teaching, and proposes that inspirational teaching is defined by being transformational in the sense that it has a sustained positive impact on student learning. By exploring current literature on inspirational teaching, including some literature on teaching excellence, four overarching themes are identified as constituents of inspirational teaching: knowledge and passion for the subject, understanding learning and knowledge, constructive and challenging learning environment and students as individuals, partners and colleagues. The practices of the inspirational teachers presented are characterised by their focus on student learning rather than teacher performance and so indicate that inspirational teaching is an outcome that cannot be reduced to a set of characteristics or practices. Finally, we conclude that collaborative and scholarly relationships between students and teachers underpin these four themes and are central to creating inspirational learning experiences.

**Keywords:** teaching; excellence; inspirational; learning; collaborative.

The effectiveness of teaching staff in higher education has been identified as a dimension of quality (Gibbs, 2010) and, as such, the issue remains a priority in the higher education agenda. In 2011, the Higher Education Academy (HEA) introduced the revised UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) for teaching and supporting learning in higher education (Higher Education Academy, 2011). The framework can be seen as part of an ongoing sector-wide professionalisation of teaching and learning support in UK higher education; for example, in December 2011, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) launched the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (QAA, 2012), and in 2012 the National Union of Students (NUS) called for those teaching in higher education to have formal qualifications in teaching (Boffey, 2012). In addition, since 1993, the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) has been working to promote innovative and good teaching practice in HE, with the association's conference in November 2012 focusing on teaching excellence. Teaching excellence is often linked to the idea of engaging and motivating students; this article aims to examine 'inspirational' teaching, which we deem going beyond notions of excellent teaching.

### The problem of defining inspirational teaching

Many UK universities now have teaching excellence awards (Gibbs, 2008; Turner & Gosling, 2012, p. 3), with some awards focused around the concept of the 'inspirational teacher' (Bradley, 2012; Jensen, 2013). Defining inspirational teaching, however, is identified as problematic by McGonigal, who suggests, "Inspiration remains a catch-all term within education and, to that extent, is problematic in its lack of specificity" (McGonigal, 2004, p. 117). Inspirational teaching as a theoretical or analytical term is little used in the literature on higher education; it is mostly associated with personal awards in the field of teaching and learning. The inspirational

teacher, however, remains a powerful image or concept; for many people an inspirational teacher is associated with someone who they remember from their days in school or at university, someone who made a significant difference to their learning experience/life, or had some part in bringing about a transformational experience (Jackson, 2010).

While there is little doubt that teaching excellence is a noble aim, there is less agreement about 'inspirational' teaching. Bain's study of good teaching practice in higher education defines 'outstanding teachers' as having "achieved remarkable success in helping their students learn in ways that made a sustained, substantial and positive influence on how those students think, act and feel" (Bain, 2004, p.5). For Brown, inspiration appears to be an outcome or characteristic of excellence:

*Many would agree that excellent teachers should be deemed inspirational, committed, motivating, well-informed in their subjects, supportive to their colleagues and influential in the wider learning and teaching community[...]*

(Brown, 2003, p. 5)

Such interchangeable use of the terms is common, with most literature on teaching quality in higher education using terms such as 'good practice', 'excellence' or 'effectiveness' to refer to similar conceptions of teaching practice (Little, Locke, Parker & Richardson, 2007; Gibbs, 2008). Skelton argues that teaching excellence is a contested concept and part of a move towards a culture in higher education of measurement and business management discourse (Skelton, 2009). There is, however, a dearth of literature addressing the concept of inspirational teaching in higher education. This article aims to contribute to the scholarly discourse in this area by exploring current literature on inspirational teaching and teaching excellence in order to begin to define some characteristics of inspirational teaching. However, it is not an exhaustive review of literature on excellence in teaching; rather, the purpose of this article

is to spark some debate and discussion of inspirational teaching.

Furthermore, we believe this article will add to the debates around student-centred teaching, how to better engage students in their learning and university experience and recent ideas around 'students as partners' and 'students as change agents' (Bovill, Cook-Sather, & Felten, 2011; Dunne & Zandstra, 2011; Freeman, Millard, Brand, & Chapman, 2013; Neary, 2011). You can see this recent focus in the bibliography of *Students as change agents*, which was started by Healey in 2005 and is continually updated (Healey, 2013).

## What is inspirational teaching?

We propose that inspirational teaching is an outcome; that it is transformational in the sense of having a sustained impact on student learning. This reflects what Bain found in his 2004 study and classified as defining 'outstanding teachers'. We would re-define this as inspirational teaching because of its focus on student learning and positive impact on how students "[...] think, act and feel" (Bain, 2004, p. 5). Such a redefinition reflects a student view that inspirational teaching is "teaching for 'learning that lasts'" (Little, Locke, Parker, & Richardson, 2007, p. 46) and has a more holistic view in the sense of considering the student as a 'whole'.

In this way, an excellent teacher could be someone who guides the students to make sense of and connect academic subject areas to their experiences and the world outside academia. But inspirational teaching would occur when this is done in such a way that the students can take the ideas, connections, practices and develop them in their own ways, make their own contributions, offer new perspectives, connect them to different contexts. If excellence in teaching is about supporting students to achieve the required learning outcomes and inspirational teaching goes beyond this – and by 'beyond' we mean that the impact on the student learning is 'sustained' – it must be considered that the students' actions following the teaching and learning interaction is also what makes it inspirational. Before we get onto how students are partners in inspirational teaching, it is worth defining the four overarching themes identified from the literature that we believe to be constituents of inspirational teaching:

1. Knowledge and passion for the subject: Teachers who are knowledgeable and passionate about their subject are more likely to engage students, encourage learning and find creative ways to make content relevant to the lives of their students, the other subjects under study and the wider world.
2. Understanding learning and knowledge: Teachers who understand how students learn and the complexity of how knowledge is constructed encourage students to be active participants in their own learning experiences.
3. Constructive and challenging learning environment: Teachers who create a collaborative, challenging and supportive learning environment inspire students to rise to the high expectations established.
4. Students as individuals/partners/colleagues: Teachers who treat students with respect, acknowledge the potential of all students and build a strong community of practice that encourages scholarly behaviour.

## The practices of inspirational teachers

### 1. Knowledge and passion for the subject

While good teachers can be good at teaching almost anything, an inspirational teacher will not only likely be familiar with, interested in and excited by the subject material; they will also be able to get students interested in the subject. Bain (2004, p. 15) highlights

that the 'best' teachers know their subject well, are able to make it relevant and demonstrate passion and enthusiasm. According to Bain, the best teachers

*[...] know how to simplify and clarify complex subjects, to cut to the heart of the matter with provocative insights, and they can think about their own thinking in the discipline, analyzing its nature and evaluating its quality.*  
(Bain, 2004, p. 16)

Similarly, Dunkin also argues that expert teachers have the ability to arouse students' enthusiasm for the subject (Dunkin, 1995). An Australian study also found that lecturers who were passionate about their research was one of the factors in inspiring engineering undergraduates to want to become researchers themselves (Guerin & Ranasinghe, 2010).

An ability to connect learning with practice and other experiences is part of engaging students. While knowledge and enthusiasm are important, truly inspired students understand the wider contexts and application of the subject knowledge. Bain (2004) argues that inspirational teachers connect learning objectives to questions students might bring to the course, constantly help students to keep the larger questions of the subject at the forefront and actively build connections between their questions and students' lives and interests. Wieman also emphasises the importance of ensuring that course material is relevant:

*[...] I eliminated all material that was impossible to justify to the students as relevant or useful to them based on anything they had previously experienced or would likely encounter in the future. It was sobering to realise that this was nearly half of the traditional material.*  
(Wieman, 2011, p. 63)

Boyd and Singer (2011, p. 56) also underline that students learn best when they can see a purpose to the knowledge. Inspirational teachers help students understand not just 'what' they need to know, but 'why' they need to know.

### 2. Understanding learning and knowledge creation

The literature shows that it is essential for excellent teachers to not only know their subject very well, but also have a keen interest in how learning happens and how knowledge is constructed. Free touches on this when she states that it is "critical for us to focus on what students are learning – not simply what we believe we are teaching" (Free paraphrased by Hay in Hay, 2011, p. 210). Wieman (2011) also advocates explicitly discussing research on learning with students, supporting the notion of inspirational teachers' concern with how their students learn and creating the optimal environment for learning that engages students.

Bain (2004, pp. 83–84) also found that successful teachers have a richer and deeper understanding of human learning compared to less effective teachers, who tend to think of memory as a storage unit and intelligence as the capacity to use the information in the storage unit. Inspirational teachers also recognise that knowledge is constructed, that students have mental models of reality already and these will be critical in understanding and approaching new knowledge (Bain, 2004, pp. 26–28). For example, excellent teachers challenge students intellectually by asking questions that get students to realise where models fall short, rather than supply correct answers. Inspirational teachers may require students to develop their own questions.

Wesch (2011) also provides an example of inspirational teaching with his story of how he changed his practice to focus on student learning rather than on his own performance as a content deliverer by organising the course around real and relevant problems explored in collaboration with students. His new focus also involved talking to students about different approaches to learning and categories

of learning taken from theory of education, such as the differences between being 'received', 'subjective', 'procedural' and 'constructed' knowers (Wesch, 2011, p. 25).

Wesch argues that this new approach reflects what he actually wanted the students to learn all along, "[...] a new way for them to see, understand and make connections in the world" (Wesch, 2011, p. 26). Inspirational teaching aims to be transformational, have a sustained impact on the students and to do this in collaboration with students.

### 3. Constructive and challenging learning environment

Bain (2004, p. 31) states that "if we are not seeking an answer to anything, we pay little attention to random information"; he highlights that the 'best' teachers understand that learning is a result of contextualised, active and critical engagement. These excellent teachers

*[...] believe that students must learn the facts while learning to use them to make decisions about what they understand or what they should do. To them 'learning' makes little sense unless it has some sustained influence on the way the learner subsequently thinks, acts or feels. So they teach 'the facts' in a rich context of problems, issues and questions.*

(Bain, 2004, p. 29)

Moltzen also underlines that in his teaching, questions and problems are essential, and he does not offer solutions or provide answers (Moltzen, 2011, p. 159). In the same vein, Detweiler-Bedell and Detweiler-Bedell describe offering a course experience that is "frustrating by design" in order for the students to achieve deep understanding of concepts (Detweiler-Bedell & Detweiler-Bedell, 2011, p. 145). Healey also stresses the importance of getting students to think outside their comfort zone in order to prepare them to cope with a "super complex" world (Healey 2011, p. 203).

In his study, Bain found that excellent teachers promoted a sense of intellectual curiosity rather than a focus on grades (Bain, 2004); they fostered co-operation and collaboration, gave every student the opportunity to achieve the highest grades and standards and offered many opportunities for students to revise and improve their work with non-judgmental feedback (Bain, 2004). Similarly, Detweiler-Bedell and Detweiler-Bedell state that "[G]reat teaching systematically guides students to take responsibility and ownership of the endeavour of learning itself" (Detweiler-Bedell & Detweiler-Bedell, 2011, p. 142).

In the literature, this challenging environment, which has the potential to make students uncomfortable (and perhaps not meet – or subvert – their expectations), is combined with an approach to the student/teacher relationship that is based on mutual respect, which is the fourth theme of inspirational teachers.

### 4. Students as individuals, partners and colleagues

Bain describes a collaborative attitude as one of the most powerful tools in setting expectations and creating an environment for learning where the students are at the centre. It is an approach that positions students and teachers as equals but also one that gives primacy to "caring about students" (Bain, 2004, p. 139).

*I cannot stress enough the simple yet powerful notion that the key to understanding the best teaching can be found not in particular practices or rules but in the attitudes of the teachers, in their faith in their students' abilities to achieve, in their willingness to take their students seriously and to let them assume control over their own education and in their commitment to let all policies and practices flow from central learning objectives and from a mutual respect and agreement between students and teachers.*

(Bain, 2004, pp. 78–79 [emphasis by Bain])

Lucas also advocates adopting three attitudes that characterise a

facilitator of learning as identified by Rogers: "genuineness", "prizing, acceptance and trust" and "empathic understanding" (Rogers, as cited in Lucas, 2011, p. 167). As in Bain's findings, 'prizing, acceptance and trust' reflects a teaching approach concerned with the learner as a person with worth and highlights the importance of the teacher being open to the students' potential. Similarly, Jerusha and Brian Detweiler-Bedell argue for a repositioning of the teacher and student roles and to design teaching that fosters a community of colleagues, where students collaborate and staff act as mentors (Detweiler-Bedell & Detweiler-Bedell, 2011, pp. 143–147).

Following on from this focus on collaboration and partnership it can be argued that talking about inspirational teaching and what the teacher 'does' is really only half of the story. In the above examples of the practices of inspirational teachers it is clear that an inspirational teacher recognises this and makes collaborators and co-conspirators of the students.

## Discussion

A common thread in the literature is that excellent teachers are explicit about aims of teaching, address topics such as critical thinking or learning styles and make students aware of the premise of what is going on in the teaching and learning environment. In effect, students are 'in on it', part of it and their agreement and opinion on these meta-cognitive approaches are actively sought. Explicit reference to learning and teaching methods is one way to ensure that there is a feeling of collaboration, an ethos of co-inquiry and in developing an understanding that the teacher and the learners are co-creators of knowledge, which is important in higher education (Healey 2011, p. 200).

In the UK, this more collaborative approach is reflected in, for example, the Higher Education Academy's recent focus on students as active partners in enhancing learning in their funding and research activities. As part of this, Birmingham City University (BCU) has developed many initiatives, including the Student Academic Partners scheme which employs students to work in collaboration with staff on educational development projects (Freeman, Millard, Brand, & Chapman, 2013).

Another example is the 'student as producer' programme developed at the University of Lincoln. The programme aims to restructure teaching and learning activities in order to enable students and academics to work collaboratively on research projects inside and outside the curriculum (Neary, 2011).

Perhaps we can view this development as one where the sector has moved from a concern with 'student voice' (mainly about student representation, input and feedback), which is passive, to a focus on 'active student engagement' in teaching and learning, where students are partners, collaborators and change agents. In this focus, students are researchers and producers as opposed to consumers. (Bovill, Cook-Sather, & Felten, 2011; Dunne & Zandstra, 2011; Healey, 2013).

While the core of 'inspirational teaching', in terms of the practitioner, is the teacher's commitment to learning, willingness to reflect on and develop their teaching practice and continual engagement with (and actively seeking out) learner feedback in a variety of forms, 'inspirational' teaching, as opposed to 'excellent' teaching, can be argued to be an outcome rather than made up from characteristics. The learning experience has to inspire the students to do something that is not in the handbook; change their schema, their world view; and affect them on a personal, not just intellectual, level. Inspirational teaching is more holistic, about the whole student and not limited to transmitting academic knowledge. Focusing on the learning experience is one way to avoid some of the problems of the term 'teaching excellence', which can too often be mired in connections to external, standardised, management targets.

## Conclusions

From the literature analysis we have identified four overarching themes that we believe to be constituents of inspirational teaching:

1. Knowledge and passion for the subject
2. Understanding learning and knowledge
3. Constructive and challenging learning environment
4. Students as individuals/partners/colleagues.

However, we argue that collaborative and scholarly relationships between students and teachers underpin these four themes and are central to creating transformational/inspirational learning experiences. Ultimately, although we have identified these four themes in the literature, we would argue that it is not useful to reduce inspirational teaching to a set of characteristics or practices as this tends to foreground teaching practice and take away focus from the quality of the learning experience and the more holistic and sustained impact on students. Inspirational teaching involves a collaborative ethos and a partnership approach where students' and teachers' roles and responsibilities are mutually constitutive in developing inspired learners.

Finally, we recognise that inspirational teaching is not about mastery and performance but that "by opening themselves up to failure, exposing themselves as fallible human beings, working as collaborators with students and by acknowledging the constant need to learn and develop practice, [inspirational teachers] sustain

outstanding teaching and learning" (Hay, 2011, p. 209).

We call for future research to be focused on inspired learners rather than inspirational teaching, and the ways that staff and student collaborate to achieve this 'learning with a sustained impact'.

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