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What is inspirational teaching?

Exploring student perceptions of what makes an inspirational teacher

This report presents student perceptions of inspirational teaching. The author explores the content of student nominations for the 'Inspirational teaching' category in the 2012 Thank You Awards at University of Huddersfield alongside observations and data from students working as teaching and learning consultants as part of a Higher Education Academy funded project.

**Kathrine S. H. Jensen, Teaching and Learning Institute,
University of Huddersfield, United Kingdom
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Developing ‘inspirational teaching’

The concept of inspirational teaching is not easily defined and is bound up with discussions around good practice and quality in teaching. This report does not attempt to define the concept but explores student perceptions of inspirational teaching. Exploring what students say about inspirational teaching is one way to inform how we can develop teaching and learning activities which includes what students believe inspires them to achieve and develop as learners.

Background

Exploring the concept of inspirational teaching was part of the HEA funded project Students as Teaching and Learning Consultants. The original plan had envisaged student consultants working with staff nominated for inspirational teaching. However, this has not been possible to do consistently as the teaching timetables of those members of staff did not match with the timescales of this project. Instead the students worked with staff who requested to be part of the project. This meant the project team opted to explore inspirational teaching in alternative ways.

We asked the student teaching and learning consultants to consider and identify instances and examples of inspirational teaching from their consultancy work and their general experience. Two student consultants also conducted interviews with members of staff that they found to be inspirational. The project coordinator, Kathrine Jensen, also undertook a qualitative analysis of the student nominations for the category ‘Inspirational teaching’ in the Thank You Awards from 2012. The Thank You awards provide the opportunity for students to recognise a member of the University staff who has made a major positive impact on their time here.

These data sources inform the recommendations for developing good practice in relation to inspirational teaching at the end of this report.

Data from student nominations and data limitations

There were 285 student nominations for the ‘Inspirational Teaching’ category in the 2012 Thank You Awards at the University of Huddersfield. The other categories were ‘Exceptional Assessment and Feedback’ category (77 nominations) and ‘Excellence in Student Support’ category (313 nominations).

The short description of the Inspirational teaching category was: “Nominate someone in this category if they connect with you and inspire passion for the subject.”

The nominations were essentially ‘free text’ boxes where students were asked to give reasons for their nominations and to specific examples or evidence of their nominee's contributions/impact.

As such the data simply consist of these nominations, and have no additional demographic data or other contextualising data, which means any analysis is necessarily quite limited. Because of this I used Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis (QDA) computer software package, to code the student



nominations into larger descriptive categories and therefore the following does not represent a thematic analysis of the data.

Initial coding resulted in 32 individual nodes. When nodes with less than 10 references were reviewed and incorporated into other nodes and a number of similar nodes were merged there were 16 nodes left. On the basis of the description of the individual nodes and their frequency in terms of references I created four main categories that covered all of the individual nodes. See Appendix 1 for a description of each node.

Table 1: List of nodes and number of coding references

Main Category	Node	References
1. Supportive		
	Support	110
	Friendly	49
2. Passionate and knowledgeable		
	Fun/Enjoyable	38
	Subject knowledge	34
	Interesting	31
	Passion	29
	Enthusiasm	18
	Humour	15
	Respect	11
3. Motivational		
	Student confidence	69
	Impact	43
	Challenging	26
4. Engaging		
	Student understanding	75
	Delivery	42
	Interactive	44
	Feedback	13
Total references		647

Some of the student nominations were coded as more than one category and in some instances only part of the nomination text was coded. The basis for the following descriptive categories is the 647 instances of coding or references as they are called in Nvivo.

So for example, some nominations were longer and more complex than others and therefore more likely to be coded in multiple categories or nodes. A node is what a coding category is called in Nvivo.

For example, this student nominations was coded in three main categories and a further two nodes



“X has been my tutor for three years, she has always been kind, patient, supportive, nurturing and inspiring. She takes the time to sit and really go through an idea, she recommends extra reading and research on a wide variety of subjects that are hugely relevant to my practice, which she always has in depth knowledge of. She is able to discuss my work in a number of contexts which helps me explore all paths. X has always treated me with respect as an individual, and has encouraged me to push boundaries with my work to help me gain a better understanding of all the briefs. She is always available to chat, and tutorials are always a pleasant and inspiring. She makes you want to go out there and explore all possibilities of a project. She takes the time to nurture each student and I have found her support invaluable throughout my time at university.”

In contrast, the following was coded in one category:

“I admire my course leader because she is always ready to help and improve the course.”

Due to time limitations the coding approach has been less rigorous than initially expected and it was not possible to quantify or visualise to what extent there is overlap between all of the coding categories. The descriptive categories are valid representations of the different aspects of inspirational teaching expressed in the student nominations as they are grounded in the data from the student participants.

What students have to say about ‘Inspirational teaching’

With the caveat that there are overlaps between descriptive categories and they cannot be considered to be discrete categories, I have identified four major ‘categories’:

1. Supportive
2. Passionate and knowledgeable
3. Motivational
4. Engaging

Supportive

Student nominations in this category talk about staff who are supportive, helpful, assist them, are approachable and friendly. The students highlight staff being available to them either in person or via, for example, email.

With 110 coded references as support this is the most frequent node in all the categories.

“I had a rough time in year two. X was extremely understanding and gave me a lot of support and even asked how I was coping personally, not just from a work perspective, he made me feel valued as a student and as an individual.”

“When one of my second year modules was in crisis and I felt like a failure this woman’s support and words of kindness and inspiration spurred me to try and find a solution. Their industry knowledge and hard work means that we are provided with countless opportunities

to improve our event industry experience. Her hard work, approachability both inside and outside of the lecture room means this course is a joy to be a part of.”

“He inspired our study group to think differently and ... and pushed the study group in a very patient and supportive manner to achieve and go one step further with our thinking. He enabled a very diverse study group to challenge ideas, think outside and well beyond the box and we then indeed did achieve an inspirational mark, after much pain, a lot of hard work, but also a lot of patience and support via Mr XX. I would like to nominate him therefore for an inspirational teaching award. He was always positive, enthusiastic, very patient and supportive to our study group.”

“Her hard work and commitment to [the subject] creates an exciting atmosphere for students, instigating ambitious career goals inspired by X’s own success, encouraged by her approachable and zealous personality.”

Passionate and knowledgeable

This category covers nominations that describe staff as passionate about their subject, enthusiastic in their teaching. Staff are described as delivering interesting, fun and enjoyable sessions and as having great subject knowledge. This also includes references to staff using humour or having a sense of humour as a positive and staff being considerate and respecting students.

“Dr X has a phenomenal amount of deep and complex knowledge and understanding in his field but more than this is a dedicated teacher. He takes the time to explain in simple detail to facilitate student understanding and growth. He is always prepared to assist, and goes more than the extra mile with students when needed. He is rigorously strict on himself and expects the same from his students. This facilitates the mental transition towards adulthood in the students. He always works with modesty and humility, never with pompousness. He is a person that makes the music school at Huddersfield great.”

“He demonstrates that he has a good understanding and a lot of passion for what he is teaching which is perpetually refreshing. He comes to every seminar or lecture with an inspirational amount of energy and he is a wonderful man to be educated by.”

“X has been a great lecturer and tutor this year, the way in which she teaches helps us not only to understand but experience. She has made lectures a joy to attend and has been very inspirational with her own personal stories incorporated in order to help us understand how theories are applied in industry. Great personality, great sense of humour, great tutor.”

Motivational

In this category, students wrote about the way staff encouraged and supported them to develop and achieve as well as how staff had a positive impact on learning development, career and future study choices. Some of the nominations in this category talk about being challenged by staff and developing as a result.



"X has really inspired me with her teaching style. Her friendly lectures have taught me a lot about myself. She makes you feel like you can accomplish any challenge set in front of you and will always support you through both difficult times and times of celebration. All in all, a wonderful woman!"

"X has repeatedly encouraged me to take risks in my work that I would never previously have dared. She has challenged me to challenge myself and look at things in totally new lights. Through her teaching and personality, she has helped me decide that I will take a challenging dissertation topic on as my project. She's really made me realize that my almost crippling fear of failure is unfounded, she encourages us to reach to our full potential and never stops trying to help us reach that goal. For all of these reasons, I believe X should not just be nominated for this award - she truly deserves to win it. It would be the recognition a truly fantastic teacher deserves."

"X's style of teaching is exciting and every day is a new day with a lot of challenging things to do. Even though, we come from different backgrounds and probably cultures but the group discussions which were always interactive showed us how globalised the world was. His steadfastness in giving us advanced reading for the next lecture made me fully prepared for active class participation. There were no surprises or designing lectures on the spot and there were no 'passengers' as everyone must participate making us all 'drivers' .."

Engaging

Nominations that describe staff, who are great at engaging students, who ensure all students are included, who are concerned with ensuring student understanding and have great ability ready to simplify complex information and make something understandable. Students comment on staff being well prepared, organised, making sessions interactive, materials available to students and using a variety of techniques and formats to keep students engaged.

"In tutorials instead of sitting at the front and waiting for students to go to him for help, he consistently moves around the room speaking to us individually asking things such as "Anything you didn't understand in the lecture"? Or "How are you getting on with the tutorial"?"

"X's lectures are clear and comprehensive. Her slides are organised and easy to follow making learning and revision more successful. Her lectures are demonstrative and interactive and she is always able to engage students in their learning. The... practicals are always clear and easy to follow, and X is on hand and happy to answer any queries in a way that encourages further questions and research. The feedback on practical reports is helpful and constructive and identifies where concepts have been misunderstood or material needs revising. X has also made available additional resources for revision, including revision packs and example questions. In addition to the excellent academic quality of X's sessions, they are also fun and friendly, much as the lecturer herself."



“In the sessions that Dr X has run for the year, he has taken a hands-on approach that has genuinely helped students not only to follow the instructions on a script, but to understand the reasons why they are doing things. This belief in it being more important for students to understand the core of subjects rather than just memorise information has been the underpinning factor in all of Dr X’s teaching this year, and from my point of view, has made his subjects the most rewarding and enlightening of all the modules we have undertaken in the year.”

Student consultants on inspirational teaching

The analysis of the student comments from the award nominations reflect observations made by a number of student teaching and learning consultants that took part in a Higher Education Academy funded project.

Some observations from the student consultants’ work with staff and their general reflections on their own experiences of inspirational teaching identifies similar aspects to the four major categories identified above:

- “Passion behind subject, very knowledgeable, and has a knowledge of how we want to learn it and that’s really crucial he knows how we want to learn it and ... picks up on the vibe in the room and frequently breaks it down into question based on what he’s just been teaching and it is a good balance...all these small things that are just enough to mean that I look forward to his lecture...” (Student Consultant I)
- “All the students, without prompting, said his enthusiasm passes on to them, makes them enthusiastic about the course...makes them want to work harder.” (Student Consultant G)
- “...the fact that the lecturer was so knowledgeable and very confident in his subject came across strongly. Not using a power point and only a handout was a different learning experience.” (Student Consultant H)
- “...he showed us that there are always other options available to keep the topic interesting, even if that means using resources from outside the department, i.e. he used a film clip from a period drama to show group tension and dynamic and how those situations can be resolved.” (Student Consultant G)

Other notes on practices the staff working with student consultants said had been identified as helpful to students in the consultation

- Students were given an outline of the lecture beforehand
- Lecture was delivered by two members of staff, which meant a variety of style that was more engaging
- Use of voting pads and peer instruction had a positive impact on student learning and enabled instant feedback
- Make lectures interactive and take time to ensure all student understand and are engaged

Passion, enthusiasm, subject knowledge, ensuring understanding and use of a variety of techniques to engage students in their learning, which are aspects of category two and four, are all reflected in these comments.

Interviewing inspirational teachers

Two student teaching and learning consultants interviewed members of staff they considered to be inspirational teachers. The interviews were semi-structured as both students had prepared questions in advance but independently of each other. Both of the colleagues have been nominated for awards by students for their teaching practice.

The importance of connecting with students was something that both lecturers saw as central to learning and their practice. This resonates with the 'Supportive' category where student comments centred on approachable staff, staff who are interested in the students.

"I think you need to be able to make relationships with other people and I think learning relationships start with interpersonal relationships...I think you can teach in lots of different ways because I think it comes from you, but I think you have to be quite genuine about yourself... Because it is very difficult for people you are teaching to make any sort of relationship if you are trying to be something you are not...To be a really good one [teacher] you have to lay yourself on the line." (Lecturer S)

If you can touch base with students and really connect then they are going to connect with you and then they are going to learn." (Lecturer R)

Both lecturers talked about the importance of having fun as a way to engage and connect. This resonates with the category Passionate and Knowledgeable where humour is a key element as well as the 'Supportive' category where a relaxed atmosphere was included:

"I think learning should be fun, you should be able to have a giggle in class...If you have this loose-ish atmosphere...where people can have a giggle without offending anybody. The thing is it relaxes the atmosphere, and when people are relaxed, they learn." (Lecturer R)

"I will go to considerable length to make people laugh." (Lecturer S)

The importance of having confidence in order to learn was highlighted by both lectures and they saw themselves in a supportive role in relation to students. These is similar to the 'Motivational' category where student comments were about staff who supported their learning and development and gave them confidence.

"I believe all students have it [confidence] I feel it just needs teasing out...Every student has a spark of confidence, they just need to be encouraged." (Lecturer R)

"I do fundamentally think that your role as a teacher is to support people. I don't think it is about pushing them. I think it is about facilitation....If I could redesign the whole education system...it would all be about making people feel confident about their learning." (Lecturer S)



“...the lesson is not there for me to show what I know, it is there for you to show what you know, what you’ve learnt.” (Lecturer R)

The interview discussion also covered their concern with developing students as learners and thinkers. Here there are links to the ‘Engaging’ category with the lecturers talking about how they prepare and get students engaged by getting them thinking.

“I am very structured, I think a lot about how learning happens...I am not interested in scoring points of students, the points I want to score are them learning.” (Lecturer S)

“My ultimate aim is to get students to become autonomous learners and that is where students can go out and find information for themselves, have that confidence.” (Lecturer R)

“What I want them to do is think, I don’t care if they agree with me or don’t agree, I just want them to think about it.” (Lecturer S)

“Every module is like a gear in a gear box, it drives your education. If the students don’t connect those gears their education is not going to move forward. So it is about..how concepts and theories from other modules link in. What you got to do is when you look at your modules you look at the bigger picture: how does all this fit together...” (Lecturer R)

“I am really, really organised and prepared. I would never turn up and just do something, I have always prepared something, know what I want to achieve in there, it fits into a longer story of what I want it to be.” (Lecturer S)

Looking at teaching practice

I would argue that most of what is mentioned by the students is probably not surprising to people working in education though perhaps some would disagree with the students as to whether what they describe is ‘inspirational’ or simply what some would call ‘good’ or ‘best’ practice. However, I believe the frequent references to staff being supportive, within this category of inspirational, merit further exploration and consideration in any subsequent research.

Interestingly, the ‘Good Teaching Project’ at Anglia Ruskin University does not explicitly mention support in the categories they have developed. Their project aims to capture elements of good teaching practice and they have divided this into four components:

Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • teaching is well prepared • outcomes, content and assessment are constructively aligned • teaching is clearly linked with the curriculum • demonstrates evidence of reflective practice
Methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • address different learning styles • are contextualised in students' understanding and experience • engage with practice • promote independent learning

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • promote critical thinking • promote deep learning
Scholarship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • teaching is informed by pedagogy • content is up to date with the subject and practice • content is informed by research and evidence
Personal Attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • engaging • enthusiastic • flexible / adaptable • tolerant • eager to learn • committed and respectful

See the website for videos of teaching practice identified as ‘good’ relating to each of the categories:

<http://www.lta.anglia.ac.uk/resources.php/LTA-Resources-Links-Good-Teaching-Toolkit-Good-Teaching-Project-7/>

Inspirational teaching is all about the learner

Reflecting on the student nominations I would argue that you could understand them to be about learning rather than teaching. Because the student comments are not so much concerned with describing aspects of inspirational teaching but rather describe staff who support students to be innovative, who guide them to become independent learners as well as to work collaboratively, who encourage and motivate them to learn and seek knowledge for themselves. It is in this sense that a focus on learning and the learner appear to be at the centre of inspirational teaching.

Perhaps such a focus could explain why the notion of supportive staff caring about students is the most frequently mentioned aspect by the students. It is really the students who are at the centre of this; inspirational teaching thus becomes a much more collaborative concept with learners developing their own confidence, understanding, abilities and achievements with staff as facilitators in this process.

Although this is perhaps beyond the scope of the data, I would argue the data points towards the need to go beyond a focus on ‘inspirational teaching’ as delivering content in an engaging way and the personality of the staff members and refocus on learning and the many faceted experiences of the student body. The following recommendations should be read with this in mind.



Recommendations for developing and supporting inspired learners

1. Discuss with your students how learning happens, include conversations about their previous learning experiences and current expectations of the course
2. Ensure your teaching and learning activities are inclusive and interactive and take time to ensure all students understand and are engaged
3. Consider how you can develop student confidence through your teaching and learning activities
4. Make it clear to your students that you care about them and believe in their abilities to achieve
5. Consider how you can challenge students through teaching and learning activities
6. Show consideration and respect for students and set an expectation for students to do this also in relation to you and their fellow students. Establish ground rules in collaboration with your students.
7. Develop an approach that shares your enthusiasm and passion for the subject with your students
8. Design your teaching and learning activities to be structured and clear so that you are aware of what you want to achieve
9. Continually seek student feedback to develop your understanding of how students are learning
10. Work with colleagues and students to review impact of teaching and learning activities



Appendix 1: List of nodes coded in Nvivo with their description

Node	Description
Supportive	
Supportive	Comments about the level of support given by staff, open door policy, flexibility of lecturer to give time to student questions. Also more personal support related to pastoral care and disability.
Friendly	Comments that staff are friendly, approachable and down to earth and create an relaxed atmosphere where students are at ease
Passionate and knowledgeable	
Fun/Enjoyable	Comments about a lecture being fun or enjoyable
Subject knowledge	Comments about the extent of staff subject knowledge and/or experience in industry.
Interesting	Comments on how staff make the subject interesting
Passion	Comments about staff having passion for the subject and/or for teaching
Enthusiasm	Comments about staff being enthusiastic teachers
Humour	Comments highlighting the staff using humour or having a sense of humour and making students laugh
Respect	Comments about staff respecting students, being considerate to students and about staff that command respect
Motivational	
Impact	Comments about how staff have been key to changing student thinking, their mindset or had a positive impact on learning development, career and future study choices
Student confidence	Comments about staff motivating students to learn and develop, giving students confidence, staff believing in their students' ability to achieve and supporting students to do the best they can
Challenging	Comments on how staff challenge students, expect high standard and present students with challenges that develop their thinking
Engaging	
Student understanding	Comments on staff ability to simplify complex information and make something understandable. Staff concerned with ensuring student understanding and that every student is included.
Delivery	Comments on staff delivery. Staff are well prepared, organised, materials available to students and staff use a variety of techniques and formats to keep students engaged
Interactive	Comments about how staff engage students, keeps them interested in the subject or session, keep student attention, ensure interaction and student participation
Feedback	Comments related to how feedback has helped improve work, skills or enabled progress

