'An A to Z of Creative Teaching in Higher Education' by Thomas George, University of Lincoln.

Abstract

Sylvia Ashton and Rachel Stone have written a truly brilliant, holistic, and creative resource for teaching and learning in Higher Education. In recent years, the Higher Education sector has embarked on a dramatic transformation, and with a greater diversity of learners and growing expectations amongst the student population, this has subsequently placed a new profound importance on 'teaching excellence' at the heart of academia. Viewed through a critical lens, this resource explores a wealth of themes offering innovative approaches and practical suggestions for teaching and learning in Higher Education. In addition to sharing nuggets of sound teaching experience, this book also incorporates current pedagogical evidence and reflective dialogues to engage the reader throughout. This text is an essential read for anyone seeking to enhance their teaching practice and support student learning in Higher Education, from those individuals pursuing professional accreditation or early career teachers, to advanced experienced practitioners.

Introduction

As an early career teacher, who has recently undertaken a Postgraduate Certificate in Education, this book 'An A-Z of Creative Teaching in Higher Education' by Sylvia Ashton and Rachel Stone has been an excellent resource for consolidating my knowledge and experience in teaching and learning within Higher Education. In this review I address several key aspects of this book, including the format, writing style, reflective components, and a discussion on 'community of practice', whilst further acknowledging relevant existing policies that are present in Higher Education in England. Furthermore, I also identify possible gaps within the literature and provide a personal perspective on aspects of this book, which I have applied within my own teaching practice.

Format

In this first section I seek to address the format of the book which has been cleverly constructed. It draws upon combined wisdom from two experienced educators, in 26 concise alphabetical chapters, such as 'Action' (active learning), 'Blue sky thinking', and 'Communication'. These discrete chapters challenge the reader's thoughts and encourage critical discussion on concepts of teaching in Higher Education. The varied but logical structure of this book enables you to approach the written chapters in any order. An example chapter which explores 'Joy' and 'how to find it in teaching and learning', illustrates a brief summary in the title page that captures the essence of the section (Ashton and Stone, 2018, 68). The chapter begins by defining this concept, further disseminating it into manageable sections, and asking why this is important in learning. It provides case studies for the reader to explore with a well-balanced argument to conclude. Additionally, the authors encourage you to read a signposted chapter on 'Wellbeing' that is relevant to the discussion; nevertheless, there is certainly no obligation to follow this flow of reading. An excellent example of the reader establishing their own chapter combinations can be demonstrated by the chapter 'Listening', and how to attend to your students and inform your practice, and the chapter 'No one excluded' explores creating environments to enable all students to be heard. By allowing the reader to create their own chapter combinations aids creativity and the process of reflection on one's personal practice. I found this particular chapter combination very useful in addressing and understanding my own teaching practice on the subject of engaging students who typically do not participate in activities or discussions, and in how I can support and facilitate them to contribute to their own learning.

Furthermore, in the introduction the authors openly state the intentions of this book; what it is, merging the 'boundaries between research, theory and practice', and what it is not; a 'pocket guide of hints and tips'. Stating the intentions of the book sets the tone for how you may wish to approach and engage in this resource. Skilfully written to enable you to dip in and out of it with little interruption to the flow of reading, this book is highly suitable for busy professionals. In one respect, this book can be best perceived as 'teacher fuel' on-the-go, ideal for digesting bite-sized refined information, an approach I have undertaken in-between timetabled teaching

commitments. On the other hand, this book undoubtedly makes an excellent evening read for reflecting and consolidating one's teaching practice, one chapter at a time.

Whilst I recognise the word limit restrictions imposed on the authors despite their intentions to include additional topics, I would have liked to have seen a specific chapter addressing T for technology as in 'digital technology'. Although I would not intend this proposed chapter to be a comprehensive list of digital educational platforms and tools, this phraseology and 'conceptual package' is a widely used concept within 21st century teaching and learning in Higher Education. I would therefore have appreciated and applauded some discussion on a highly contentious subject of 'mobile phone learning' within the teaching environment. I reason that this specific technology has become increasingly prevalent in recent years, and is likely to become an efficient method of delivering higher education instruction in the future (El-Hussein and Cronje, 2010, 20). I am conscious that not all educators favour mobile phones within the Higher Education setting. I also appreciate that there is relatively little systematic knowledge available regarding the use of mobile phone learning; however, given their widespread use it would appear unreasonable not to acknowledge the capabilities of these devices within this context (Pimmer, Mateescu and Grohbiel, 2016). Personally, I am a strong advocate of mobile phone use within the learning environment, albeit with the caveat that the technology is appropriate for the set task and the learning outcomes of the module, to positively enhance student learning. An example of digital technology which I have applied within my teaching practice is a tool known as 'Kahoot!' to formatively assess Level Four learners on human anatomy and physiology. This game-based learning platform and educational tool comprised a multiple-choice quiz using responses from mobile phones to create a fun, interactive, and engaging environment for all students to learn, and providing an opportunity for myself-as-the-teacher to gauge effective student learning in the process. In one respect I agree that not all teaching requires technology. In fact, some of the most effective sessions can be delivered without the reliance of PowerPoint slides or YouTube videos, something I have undertaken within my own practice. However, given the emergent discussion on 'digital technology' within Higher Education, the question is how can we as educators determine the appropriate balance of technology use within learning, and what are the most suitable approaches to capturing this? In its simplest form, an effective way of using

technology through the use of mobile phones could be to capture learning through photographs and videos, which could then be uploaded onto academic institutional platforms such as Blackboard™ to reinforce student learning. Therefore, mobile phones may not be required solely within the teaching environment, although they may be used to enhance the learning process.

Writing Style and Reflection

In this second section, I address the writing style of this book, which is enormously accessible and offers innovative pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning in Higher Education. I particularly enjoy how this book evokes a strong internal dialogue, enabling you to critically reflect and challenge your thoughts. The more time I spend actively reading and engaging with concepts proposed in this book, the more I am determined to explore the well-researched pedagogical literature and apply these exceptional ideas within my own teaching practice. This is further aided by a healthy, but not exhaustive, list of pedagogical references for further reading opportunities and continuing personal endeavour. This book certainly encourages you to develop and participate in a more critical, highly reflective, and openly creative approach to teaching, fundamentally benefitting the student learning experience that is key to delivering 'teaching excellence'. Concepts are introduced in such a resourceful way that this enables you to ponder and question your own teaching practice. For example,

> Think of an occasion where you learnt something effectively – not necessarily in an academic context. What did you learn and how did you learn it? What was helpful about this way of learning? What barriers were there? (Ashton and Stone, 2018, 2).

This particular question made me reflect on my own personal experiences of learning to drive a car as a teenager. I remember undertaking weekly driving lessons with a local instructor and regularly driving in the evenings after school with my father. Learning to drive was mostly a positive experience for me (perhaps less so for my father!), amongst stalling the car at junctions and the crunching of the gears, with the odd expletive thrown around (Sorry Dad!). However, this constant exposure and practice in all-weather conditions built my confidence and enabled me to successfully obtain my driving licence on my first attempt. On reflection almost a decade later, this experience demonstrates the appropriate combination of

ingredients for successful learning; exposure to various situations, making numerous mistakes, peer support and repeated practice. While this experience is personal to me, I feel learning to drive is an ideal example for demonstrating the processes involved in effective non-academic learning, an opportunity and skill which most, but not all, have encountered. These types of cleverly-formulated questions are distributed throughout the book and help elicit creative ideas, enabling you to embed them back into the academic context to understand how successful and effective learning may occur in Higher Education. Rather than being prescriptive in nature, this book has been designed to empower you as the reader to step out of your comfort zone, by challenging your own professional practice through experimenting with new innovative pedagogical ideas proposed in the book. I found this resource to be extremely helpful in offering useful suggestions for becoming an inspirational and inclusive teacher. I therefore feel inspired, empowered, and compelled to enhance my teaching practice. I also particularly admire how this book elicits creativity and 'blue sky thinking', while acknowledging the academic policies, regulations, and guidelines which govern 'teaching excellence' in Higher Education. One such policy which is pertinent to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across England is the Teaching Excellence Frame which assesses the quality of teaching, feedback, and academic support the students receive (via student satisfaction survey results, most importantly the National Students Survey NSS); the learning environment, and student outcomes and learning gains (graduate-level employment and further study) (Department for Education, 2016). This acknowledgment helps ensure that academic rigour, authenticity, integrity, and effectiveness are maintained. Therefore, this dual purpose book is an enlightening and empowering resource which inspires you with confidence and academic freedom to be creative within teaching and learning in Higher Education.

Community of Practice

While the authors encourage personal critical reflection, creative pedagogy, and enhanced teaching and learning in Higher Education, one significant concept that resonates throughout this book is a particular emphasis on 'community of practice'.

According to Wenger and colleagues,

> communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis (Wenger et al., 2002, 4).

Thus there is significant emphasis and encouragement from the authors to advance beyond enhancing one's personal practice, but to further share, collaborate, and communicate pedagogical ideas with a wider professional audience, placing 'teaching excellence' at the heart of these discussions. I strongly echo and endorse the author's philosophy of 'community of practice' within Higher Education, and I am particularly excited to share pedagogical ideas with colleagues to enhance and showcase 'teaching excellence' in my institution. Another important aspect which I strongly echo is the author's vision of observing teaching and learning in Higher Education as a holistic approach, for example, by acknowledging the diversity of learners, educational backgrounds, and the growing expectations of the student population. Furthermore, I equally share the authors' passion and enthusiasm for teaching and learning, which I feel is deeply engrained throughout this book. Viewed through a critical lens, this resource explores a wealth of themes offering innovative approaches and practical suggestions for teaching and learning in Higher Education, by sharing nuggets of sound experience, reflective dialogues, and pedagogical evidence to support these concepts.

Summary

In summary I would highly recommend this book for any practitioner, either new or experienced in Higher Education, who is seeking to apply more thought and engagement within their teaching practice, whether this is looking for new creative ideas within sessions, refreshing old formats or pursing professional accreditation. Framed in the context of other available pedagogical literature in Higher Education, which can often be perceived as prescriptive, highly comprehensive, and presenting an exhaustive array of teaching and learning tools, this resource most certainly does not conform to your standard academic book (Ashwin, 2015; Fry, Ketteridge and Marshall, 2015; Race, 2015). To my knowledge, this is the first pedagogical book that offers a unique perspective from two highly experienced educators on some, but not all, of the key aspects of creative teaching in Higher Education. The book is

refined, and it encompasses discrete concise chapters that challenge the reader's thoughts, present valuable case studies and tasks, and propose opportunities for reflection-on-practice. I have found this book to be invaluable to my pedagogical understanding, where it is to become my new companion as I venture into Higher Education as a newly qualified teacher. I am excited and I am looking forward to applying the concepts expressed in this book to action. #pedagogyinaction.

Bibliography

Ashwin, P. (2015) *Reflective teaching in Higher Education*. London: Bloomsbury.

Department for Education (2016) *Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes*

Framework. London. Department for Education. Available from
www.gov.uk/government/collections/teaching-excellence-framework [accessed 15
February 2019].

El-Hussein, M. O. M., and Cronje, J. C. (2010) Defining Mobile Learning in the

Higher Education Landscape. *Educational Technology and Society*, 13(3), 12-21.
Available from
www.academia.edu/633655/Defining_Mobile_Learning_in_the_Higher_Education
_Landscape [accessed 15 February 2019].

Fry, H., Ketteridge, S., and Marshall, S. (2015) *A Handbook for Teaching and*

Learning in Higher Education, Enhancing Academic Practice, 4th edition. London:
Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group.

Pimmer, C., Mateescu, M., and Grohbiel, U. (2016) Mobile and ubiquitous learning in

higher education settings. A systematic review of empirical studies. *Computers in
Human Behavior*. 63, 490-501. Available from
www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0747563216303843 [accessed 15
February 2019].

Race, P. (2015) *The Lecturer's toolkit. A practical guide to assessment, learning and*

teaching, 4th edition. Abingdon: Routledge.

Stone, R., and Ashton, S. (2018) *An A to Z of Creative Teaching in Higher*

Education. London, UK: SAGE Publications.

Wenger, E., McDermott, R., and Snyder, W.M. (2002) *A Guide to Managing*

Knowledge Cultivating Communities of Practice. Boston, MASS: Harvard
Business School Press.