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

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Abstract
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Lecturers, at an English University, agreed to circulate a short survey to final year social sciences undergraduates. Fifty-two student returns from 2010 were analysed. A comparative survey of 25 undergraduates – from the same disciplines - was repeated in 2016.

Three clear elements of inspirational undergraduate teaching emerge: First and foremost, undergraduates believe it to be motivating; second, and related – inspirational teaching is deemed encouraging and third such teaching flows from teachers’ passion for their subject. The paper presents exploratory and illustrative data and sets down a forward agenda for further research to explore aspects of inspirational university teaching linked to differing cultural expectations, potential impacts of gender, age and ethnicity.

Keywords
Inspiration; charisma; inspirational teaching; higher education

Cover Page Footnote
I wish to thank colleagues at my university – JH, KL, LC, LL, RB & SS – who commented encouragingly on a 1st draft, and gave me insightful pointers for modifications. You know who you are! I am particularly grateful to Dr Michel Druey, who very generously put me right on APA referencing!
Inspirational teaching in higher education: What does it look, sound and feel like? An exploratory research study

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This article discusses the qualities of inspirational teaching in higher education (HE). It starts by arguing how topical this subject is, given emphasis world-wide on quality assurance measures, such as the UK Government’s 2016 Teaching Excellence Framework TEF. The paper then moves to review the academic and practice literature in order to outline what comprises inspirational teaching in HE institutions. These components – in the form of key words - are extracted from the literature and then tested through primary research. Lecturers, at an English University, agreed to circulate a short survey to final year social sciences undergraduates. Fifty-two student returns from 2010 were analysed. A comparative survey of 25 undergraduates – from the same disciplines - was repeated in 2016. Three clear elements of inspirational undergraduate teaching emerge: First and foremost, undergraduates believe it to be motivating; second, and related – inspirational teaching is deemed encouraging and third such teaching flows from teachers’ passion for their subject. The paper presents exploratory and illustrative data and sets down a forward agenda for further research to explore aspects of inspirational university teaching linked to differing cultural expectations, potential impacts of gender, age and ethnicity.

INTRODUCTION

I clearly remember my old Professor lecturing to me about the conditions that country people in the UK suffered during the Second World War. To illustrate the point he told us how he had woken one morning, in his parents’ Welsh farmhouse, to find frost on the inside of the window and across the bed sheets. It was a very personal account of rural poverty; completely appropriate to the subject...and spellbinding. This memory fits neatly with research findings from McGonigal (2004) who emphasises the fact that inspirational impact is significantly based on use of language, and relationship.

I also recall how I feel every time I hear Martin Luther King Jr. pronounce “I have a dream...” or when I listened to Barack Obama’s first US presidential inauguration speech. Hairs 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 (Brownle, 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
Inspirational teaching in higher education

inspiration and sets down a future research agenda, through which to establish more definitive conclusions. The article reveals aspects of inspirational tertiary-level teaching. 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 variety of 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 important in their experience of higher education teaching (via a survey of students – 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 “empowerment” is about student involvement; that student autonomy correlates strongly with self-confidence and…this needs to be enhanced through the acquisition of enabling skills” (p. 259). This is in line with the concept of autonomy, which places the student at the centre of learning; it is their autonomy that allows them to “do as they please”. Self-determination theory deduces that the “educator with a democratic vision or posture cannot avoid in his teaching praxis insisting on the critical autonomy of the learner” (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, Bandy, Davies & Griffiths, 2000, p.399) highlights “arousing motivation… to be productive.” Shevlin and colleagues (2000) post 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 “You ain’t what you was” estimated the “medium is the message” in other words, how something is taught, is as important as what is being taught. 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 melody; the director 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 collaborative venture.

Davidstitch and Søren (2006) note that increasing “age negatively influences students’ perceptions of personal appeal.” Younger faculty members received higher scores than older faculty members. The authors point out that their results suggested that younger faculty members were effective due to their “youthful charisma, effective use of teaching aids, clarity of lectures and course structure and organization” (p. 370). Gomez-Majano and colleagues (2013) point out that although 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 impacts of generational differences; it largely preceded efforts to explore in further research; a point that I will return to in setting down a future agenda.

The second research question points to 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 to a series of recurring or ‘key’ words. Linked to ‘relationships’ are: 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. I sifted the Liverpool John Moores University 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 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 teaching 6,500 full time students and 9,000 part time; of student learning, and has its quality and standards for academic provision confirmed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. So the focus of my research.

The latter research was based on predominantly teaching university; the vast majority of its income (£55m of £74.4m total - 74%) coming from online modules. The institution in question gained university status in 2001, and describes itself as teaching-led and research informed. The online Complete University Guide notes that there are around 8,000 students of which 80%+ are full time undergraduates, 95% of students at this university are UK citizens, and there is a 40% (men) - 60% (women) gender split. In 2015 the university was teaching 6,500 full time students and 9,000 part time; of student learning, and has its quality and standards for academic provision confirmed by the quality and standards for academic provision confirmed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. So the focus of my research.

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were asked to describe what it was like, using key words extracted from the literature (referred to in the Literature Review and in the question in Appendix 1). The characteristics were deliberately not described—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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Memorable 14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiastic 14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Captivating 14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathetic 8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provocative 8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energetic 15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun 15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authoritative 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memorable 8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiastic 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Captivating 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energetic 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathetic 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students were invited to add any other characteristics that felt should be listed. Only three individuals chose to provide new characteristics, and only one student supported each of Interesting, Motivating, and Empathetic.

Based on this initial 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 Shenel et al., 2000; James, 2001; second, related – inspirational teaching is felt to be encouraging (reinforced by Harden & Crosby, 2000; McGeeon, 2004); and third, such teaching flows from teachers who are passionate (backed-up by Harden & Crosby, 2000) about their subject disciplines.

Pre-given emphasis on the three characteristics mentioned directly above, was encapsulated in several student comments (my underlining):

Direct student quotes illustrating the top 3 elements of inspirational teaching, 2010

“An inspiring and encouraging lecturer; an enthusiastic and empathetic teacher…gave me ideas for projects and got me interested in the profession”

“An inspiring and encouraging lecturer…encouraging students even when they are struggling with a topic”

“They do it so badly! As a result she thought “I can do better.”

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. Twenty-four students (of 77, 31%) gave feedback in answer to the question. They cited 14 key 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.”

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Captivating responses 19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiastic 9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energetic 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memorable 16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathetic 8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provocative 8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proactive 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energetic 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energetic 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathetic 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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, if 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 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Memorability 52</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Captivating 41</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energetic 28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiastic 21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathetic 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authoritative 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memorable 27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance 19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desiring 14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoying 15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun 22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original 8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 Egan & Johnston (2002) termed “proactive participation.”

I would reduce this to a simple formula:

Inspiration teaching > Aspiration > Transformation

This view is supported by Jack Mestrov (1997): “transformative learning…is the essence of adult education…to help the individual become a more autonomous thinker by learning to negotiate his or her values, meanings, and purposes rather than to uncritically act on those of others” (p. 11). Sounds simple, but how is it done? Cohn & jurkovic (1997) suggest a series of techniques by which to inspire learning including 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” (Cohn & 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 matter allow students the chance to explore their own lives and educations; they explore themes that matter in an unusually deep way, and share this exploration with fellow students” (p. 21).

As an example: a special 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 that the “ordinary” way of doing things explained that sometimes 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 that 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 had already found the offering 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 icebergs – there are additional aspects to be found, and existing ones to be more fully and usefully studied.

For example, there may be different characterizations 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 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 ‘always wanted to teach in HE because I 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 these approaches – age, gender, ethnicity of teaching staff as well as different cultural expectations of staff and students… that need further scrutiny.

In conclusion, I am aspiring to a higher level of education, to inspire more 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. 47).

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank colleagues at my university – JH, KL, LC, LL, RB & SS – for their encouragement and support in this project.
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 Druy, who very generously put me right on APA referencing!

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Cooke, R. (n.d.). Address at the University of Gloucestershire, UK.
Wilson, L.M. (1918). Factors in successful teaching that need to be stressed in both high school and college. The Classical Journal, 13(7), 476-482.
Appendix 1

Inspirational Teaching at university: What does it look, sound & feel like?

Please answer the following questions honestly & anonymously; circling answers you agree with:

1. Have you experienced inspirational teaching at University?

If “no”, go to question 2 and then return the form to jderounian@glos.ac.uk
If “yes” please complete Q.3 to the end.

2. If you haven’t experienced inspirational teaching at the university, please describe what you think it would look, sound & feel like?

3. If you have experienced inspirational teaching, describe what it looked, sounded & felt like, circling or adding your own key words:

Authoritative  Captivating  Dazzling  Empathetic
Encouraging  Energetic  Entertaining  Enthusing
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. L1, 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: ______________________________________________________________

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