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The Thrill of the Unexpected

By

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Lewis Carroll, who is best known for *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), also wrote *The Hunting of the Snark*, a poem, in 1876. The following quotation gives a sense of the elusive nature of teaching excellence and how it may be harnessed – in the case of this book – for the benefit of students and staff:

“For the Snark’s a peculiar creature, that won’t

Be caught in a commonplace way.

Do all that you know, and try all that you don’t:

Not a chance must be wasted today!”

Teaching excellence in higher education (HE) has become something of a Holy Grail and – like the Snark – won’t apparently “be caught in a commonplace way.” There is so much noise and talk about what comprises it, how important excellent teaching is to student recruitment and employability, marketing courses and the generation of new insights and personal and societal progress. But in this chapter I want to argue that excellent teaching at universities and colleges cannot be manufactured on a production line, like a car or biscuits. In doing so, I will focus and elaborate on two overarching purposes of this book as a whole. These are to create a discourse amongst different audiences about teaching excellence and to explore what is meant by teaching excellence. The starting point for me is to determine the purpose and intention of such teaching excellence. After which I want to move to discuss the thrill of the unexpected, and, in particular, positive disruption, as a powerful aid to higher education teaching and assessments, for staff and students.

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (*hefce* online), for example, asserts “Teaching excellence must be at the heart of a world-leading higher education system. For students, who now invest substantially in their higher education, it is critically important. We are committed to funding excellent and innovative teaching, to sharing excellent and expert practice, and to supporting the interests of students”. And – I strongly suspect – if you turn to virtually any HE institution worldwide, you will find variations on these themes. So here is a random selection: The University of South Florida (USF), for example, has an *Academy for Teaching and Learning Excellence* that offers “ideas on how to adjust, innovate, and expand your teaching horizons”. USF goes on to cite lecturers from its different disciplines such as sociologist, Dr Elizabeth Hordge-Freeman, who is “motivated to persuade students to challenge their worldviews and critically re-evaluate commonsense notions about the structure of society as well as relationships and interactions that they take for granted” (USF online). Switching continents, the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia works to “facilitate and promote the enhancement of teaching and learning”. Whilst Birmingham University (UK) boasts a “cutting-edge teaching programme built on a foundation of over a hundred years of research and teaching excellence” (University of Birmingham online).

Beyond these general commitments and rhetoric in support of excellent teaching for students, are a string of pearls – or skills – that higher education teachers seek to engender including critical analysis, problem-solving, creativity, original thinking, exploration, and questioning that leads to new insights and possibilities. A 2001 *Briefing on Key Skills in Higher Education* (Murphy, 2001: 6) articulated six core abilities from the UK Qualifications and Curriculum Authority including “Problem Solving” and “Improving Own Learning and Performance”. Murphy (*ibid*: 10) goes on to argue that an “entirely different approach to assessing key skills in HE is to pass the responsibility for such assessment to the students themselves.” We can’t ‘teach’ skills, or ‘impart’ them, but can cause learners to develop these, particularly if students assess them for us; and demonstrate these in assignment submissions. This chimes with Steventon (2016: 98), who refers to [Maslow’s hierarchy of needs](#) (1943), whereby self-actualisation – that is an individual meeting their full potential – results from a student “making decisions and taking responsibility for their learning and in the process becoming less reliant on the teacher as ‘expert’ provider of knowledge.”

Principles for teaching excellence

In 2002 I became the University of Gloucestershire's first *Teaching Fellow* (UTF), and used this award as a launch-pad to successfully bid for a National Teaching Fellowship (NTF), to the UK's Higher Education Academy. A running theme across my university and sector-wide awards was recognition of personal teaching excellence. My case for the initial UTF was built on the back of blended learning approaches for distance learners – many part-time, mature students – working for local councils across England and Wales. Distance and blended learning delivery was much more innovative in 2002; but has become increasingly mainstreamed since then. The university recognition enabled me to apply for a National Teaching Fellowship; these were open competitions, first to be put forward by my own institution; and second to be assessed by peers as worthy of a NTF that “celebrates excellent practice and outstanding achievement in learning and teaching in higher education” ([HEA online](#)). The connection with disruption came with advice from my colleague and NTF, Professor Mick Healey, who recommended that I could present a written application conventionally, as a chronological story. Or I could adopt what he termed a higher risk strategy of being ‘different’, and ‘disruptive’ by setting down my credentials in such a way as to stand out.

I took the latter route, writing about myself in the third person; and started with “*Once upon a time* there was a young man who was brought up in North London....” Somewhat perversely I struck on distancing my written self from my writing self; so sentences read along the following lines: “His goal has been to provide enjoyable, innovative and engaging opportunities for teaching and learning in higher education.”

I felt this device enabled me to look more coolly and objectively at myself, career progress and achievements. I also enjoyed the challenge of communicating in this way. And in one sense this is a highly conventional academic writing device, in that most journal articles refer to ‘the research’, ‘the research shows....’ So I used an accepted academic style, in an unfamiliar context – writing about the self. At root it obviously did the trick, since I was awarded a fellowship, complete with £10,000 towards future teaching and learning development, for which I remain grateful. But the two reviewers articulated very different conclusions about my application: Reviewer 1 stated (2007) there “is strong evidence of your commitment and enthusiasm for providing students with the best learning experience with the goal of developing a cadre of committed community developers”, but “found the use of the third person in the written submission detracted from the sense of personal ownership and commitment that could have been conveyed by writing as yourself.” Reviewer 2 – on the other hand – “truly enjoyed reading this application due to its biographic approach and its content highlighting an impressive career and contribution to teaching and learning both within and outside the applicant’s discipline.” This divergence draws us back to the delicacy and sensitivity

of disruptive practices that, for some, may lead towards revelation, whilst for others could be irritating, frivolous, irrelevant, discombobulating or upsetting.

It seems to me that just as a mountain will look different depending on where you stand, so too the view of excellent teaching may well differ, from student to student, teacher-to-teacher or teacher to student! Previously I presented three “clear elements of inspirational undergraduate teaching” as judged by some UK undergraduates (Derounian, 2017). First and foremost, from the research, they believed it to be motivating – which can be seen as a form of disruption, moving people on from the status quo; second - and related - inspirational teaching is deemed encouraging and third, it flows from teachers’ passion for their subject. In this chapter I will move to suggest practical means by which, as HE teachers, we can foster these three ingredients.

On the track *Road To Nowhere*, American band Talking Heads (1985) sang the following tantalising lyrics:

“Well we know where we're goin'

But we don't know where we've been

And we know what we're knowin'

But we can't say what we've seen

And we're not little children

And we know what we want

And the future is certain

Give us time to work it out”.

This quotation gives an indication of the ambiguity of teaching excellence, and how to trigger it: “we know where we’re goin’” – in pursuit of excellent teaching– but we need “time to work it out”, as far as exact meanings and ways of delivering. In a global context this journey for universities and colleges has become urgent. UK central government, for example, has introduced a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) that it claims will help inform student choice of courses and HEIs and recognise excellent teaching (Higher Education Academy, online). The TEF is hotly contested by academics, not least on the basis of how excellence will be measured. So, for example, the Framework links wonderful teaching to students’ securing professional jobs. But what has terrific teaching got to do with job attainment? We can encourage students’ skills for employability – priming them via quality teaching and assessment - but we cannot guarantee them decent jobs; there are too many variables (such as individual personality,

commitment and aptitude) that will influence an employer to hire or not. Not to mention the general state of the national and global economy.

But equally, in this section, I want to give “time to work it out” in terms of principles for teaching excellence. I will argue that one way of achieving excellence is to utilise disruption; whilst acknowledging that disruption as a mechanism for learning will not be a panacea for all.

Education Consultant Professor Phil Race (pers. comm. 2017) put forward the importance of “disrupting students’ equilibrium in order to trigger their learning and movement towards new understandings”. The argument goes that from discomfort comes wrestling to make sense of what is presented; and from such active thought, emerge new insights, developments, knowledge and skills.

In similar vein one academic Dean at a UK university (Feldman, 2008 online) writes in praise of “mavericks and risk-takers... Because to be dangerous and fearless goes hand in hand with genius and without it we’re stuck”. And she throws down the gauntlet to those of us who are teaching staff that “unless we incite our students to push the boundaries, scale unclimbable walls, seek the invisible stars, question and challenge, defy and test limits, we won’t be truly serving them.” (*ibid*, 2008 online). But there is a tension here that – I suspect – infiltrates education from top-to-toe, from adult to early-years teaching, and that is the intention to build knowledge and stir up independent thought and non-conformity, whilst maintaining order and citizens’ utility to society at large. Students who “question and challenge, defy and test limits” may be deemed a pain, a nuisance, a thorn in the side, in that such challenges may get in the way of communicating what was set down for a class, module or award, in the time available. The state also has a stake in enabling graduates to become law-abiding citizens, workers and non-disruptive, pliant contributors.

And yet, according to Jenny Moon (2009: 4), inculcating and facilitating such “academic assertiveness” and disruption - in the sense of not taking information from lecturers as given - is precisely what we academics should be about. For Moon (*ibid*: 4) academic assertiveness “is described broadly as a set of emotional and psychological orientations and behaviours that enable a learner appropriately to manage the challenges to the self in the course of learning and their experiences in formal education and persona development work”. Moon develops her argument by contending that such assertion is key to behaving as a good critical thinker, since this requires an individual to stand up and be capable of defending their viewpoint. A key means by which to engender assertiveness amongst students is to first make them aware of their own capabilities and the value of these. It must be acknowledged, however, that such assertion may be uncomfortable both for the student (in placing a burden of expectation on them), and for the lecturer on the receiving end of what may amount to disruptive behaviour in class.

Positive disruption and contribution can come from the skills, knowledge and experience that students bring with them to their studies; and fits very much with the idea of co-producing learning. In which, according to US academic Alison King, “the student is like a carpenter (or sculptor) who uses new information and prior knowledge and experience, along with previously learned cognitive tools (such as learning strategies...and critical thinking skills) to build new knowledge structures and rearrange existing knowledge.” The sculptor or carpenter respectively takes stone or wood, in a raw form, and disrupts the material to create something quite different. For Ausubel (1968: 235) “the most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Ascertain this and teach him accordingly.” Claxton (2006: 360) agrees that a “creative breakthrough...often comes as a reordering of what one already knows”.

Unfortunately, mechanisms like the TEF risk stifling creativity and innovation and promoting passive and conservative approaches to learning. This view is supported by Naidoo and Jamieson (2005: 272) who agree that such market driven teaching in HE is “not sufficient for high quality learning which is based on intrinsic and hard to measure factors such as commitment, professional responsibility, empathy and knowledge and enthusiasm for the subject”.

And yet, in a world of ‘wicked’ intractable problems, that seem to kick up as many questions as answers – such as climate change, migration, global terrorism, and addressing poverty – Martin Luther King Jr’s exhortation from 1963 seems as crucial as ever: this “hour in history needs a dedicated circle of transformed nonconformists...The saving of our world from pending doom will come, not through the complacent adjustment of the conforming majority, but through the creative maladjustment of a nonconforming minority’ (King, 1963: 27-28). Without such questioning and disruption of the accepted order we would still believe that the heavens revolve around the Earth, our planet is flat and humans have nothing in common with apes.

So far I have tried to draw a thread through teaching excellence as an important and topical focus for pedagogy, to understanding the principles underlying and challenging excellent teaching in higher education. I now want to move from the principles to the practice of disruption for excellence.

Practices for teaching excellence

Here is a case for positive disruption to spark teaching and learning excellence: A soap-opera on television, radio, or online, invariably employs the ‘hook’ of a cliff-hanging end to an episode, so that you are keen to find out what happens next. And in the first minutes of the following encounter, you recall a lot of detail about where the story left off. This can be described as purposefully unfinished learning, and may be much more effective in helping us remember, than if a programme ended with everything resolved. “Unfinished business”, whether issues, concerns or opportunities nag at your consciousness, occupy and disrupt your thoughts, and demand to be addressed.

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A student contact session strikes me as similar. If we tie off all the loose ends, then there is little appetite and anticipation for what follows. Whereas, if there are a few unresolved issues or possibilities, then there is a chance that students’ memory of the week’s content will return during the opening minutes of the next class. Reflection includes pondering and ruminating on outstanding matters, and this can be highly purposeful and productive, in that the process of reaching for solutions makes it your own, and sticks in a way that passively receiving does not.

So there is a benefit to finishing while a majority are engaged in discussion or disagreement, so as to tee them up for more. This can be more productive than neatly delivering all the intended learning outcomes.

Cohen and Jurkovic (1997: 66), of the American *Learning Design Group*, turn to art for teaching inspiration and disruption: “Masterpieces move us, intrigue us, and remain in our thoughts well beyond the ordinary admiration we have for a good, solid piece of work.” They suggest a number of ‘surprise packages’ for student learning and teaching; to answer the question what “can we do creatively to give life to...information?” (*ibid*, 1997: 68). On a parallel track Stevnton (2012: 87) highlights the potentially transformative possibilities of podcasts as providing a means by which to encourage students to express themselves differently; “as a medium through which students can reflect themselves as reflective, creative beings, harnessing intrinsic motivations, such as the pleasure of learning and thrill of enlightenment”.

Meyer (cited in Meyer & Land, 2003: 1) introduced the idea of “threshold concepts” that enable ““seeing things in a new way””; and this fits with Cohen and Jurkovic’s (1997) teaching practices; whereby HE teachers can “use the element of surprise to make us see, hear, and experience the world anew.” (*ibid*, 1997: 68). For example, we might require students from one discipline (say, sociology) to look at an issue through an economic lens, and then see how that plays out in practice – perhaps exploring financial impacts on mental health provision by talking this through with practicing therapeutic counsellors.

Or ask social work students on a module about disabilities, to work in pairs with one pushing and the other occupying a wheelchair. The lived experience of wheeling another human around is far from textbook.

Cohen and Jurkovic (1997, 68) also encourage teachers to get out of order, so that “by shaking up the accepted sequence of things, people see processes in a new light and become open to fresh approaches.” An example of this kind of disruption would be to dive in at the end point of an idea or class, and then with students to work back to the beginning. Rather like the Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur; in which the hero kills this monster and finds his way out of its labyrinth by following a length of string back to the entrance. This approach is in opposition to the conventional route of starting at the beginning and moving towards an ending. The *Creative Teaching Site* reinforces this approach, noting that periodically “something comes along that is so exciting, so much fun, or is so compelling that it would be great to use it in your work as a teacher, even though it may not fit the methods you'd planned. Perhaps there are things so compelling that you should use them as teaching tools even if at first glance they don't seem to fit what you're teaching.”

Or what about ‘breaking the rhythm’? So in talking through with students about how to present in public, I acted out a series of cardinal errors that were plausible enough so that they nodded in acknowledgement: “Yes, I do that!” This short disastrous and disruptive presentation involved turning my back on the class, coming in late, quoting without sources, crossed arms as defensive body language, picking my nose, avoiding eye contact and ending abruptly...“By the time they realized that the examples were don'ts rather than do's, they had been disarmed into recognizing their own mistakes, and they became more open to change...” (Cohen and Jurkovic, 1997: 68). Such practical techniques are supported by Paulo Freire, the radical Brazilian educationalist (1921-97), who sought “the awakening of consciousness through the release of the creative imagination” (Steventon, 2012: 89). In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Freire (1972: 11) endeavours to stimulate “the power of thought to negate accepted limits and open the way to a new future.”

Finally, Cohen and Jurkovic (1997) encourage us, as teachers, to engage in fun as a mechanism for disruptive learning, running with our imaginations, and adopting a lightness of being rather than succumbing to technical aridity! “Put on a good show...Create shock value Compose a soundtrack...Tell a story”. In the latter case I recall a lecture on rural poverty by my old professor Gerald Wibberley at London University's Wye College, when I was a student, in which he described a Welsh farmhouse he grew up in during the 1940s. And the fact that in winter he would wake to frost on the *insides* of the windows and over his bed covers. It was a highly personal, immersive and dramatic story to communicate the realities of country life for many experiencing disadvantage.

Hughes, Perrier & Kramer (2009: 31) refine the idea of fun in learning, by discussing *jouissance*. This “represents the disruptive rapture experienced” when texts, materials and teaching “enable us to transgress or see beyond cultural limits...for example, when reading produces new insights and unforeseen perspectives.”

A further, simple mechanism that I practice and encourage students to do likewise, is what might rather grandiosely be termed “strategic opportunism” (Isenberg, 1987), namely putting yourself in the way of opportunities to advance understanding of something; for example by attending an event concentrating on the topic, a networking gathering of specialists in your field, or an opportunity to present at a conference. This proactive serendipity can operate as positive disruption to increase the chances of gaining new insights, understandings, information and ways forward. Jim Baggot wrote in the *New Scientist* magazine (1990 online) that “Chance is a fine thing and it’s essential to the progress of science”. And reflecting on the use of podcasts in teaching and learning, Steventon (*ibid*, 2012: 93) concluded that “the chance to express themselves in different ways led some students to reappraise the way they learn, drawing together a range of cognitive abilities ranging from reflection to concise thinking”.

It must be acknowledged, however, that “liberating pedagogies...are challenging for students and teachers, taking both out of their comfort zone” (Steventon, 2012: 91). He goes on to highlight problems that may be associated with novel or unfamiliar approaches to learning and teaching: uncertainty about expectations, disruption leading to anxiety; worry about impact on grades and degree classifications. And for lecturers, fear of the unknown (practices) or loss of control of the direction of travel in a module or class. Palmer (2001: 4) notes that an “insight may be a pleasant awakening or rob one of an illusion...The quicksilver flash of insight may make one rich or poor in an instant.” So the disruptive toolbox carries a health warning – ‘handle with care’.

Assignments for excellent learning

Brown (1997 cited in Rust, 2002: 145) states bluntly that assessment “defines what students regard as important, how they spend their time and how they come to see themselves as students and then as graduates. ... If you want to change student learning then change the methods of assessment.” If we accept this, then there must be room for assignment tasks beyond the regular suspects of essays, presentations, group work, exams seen and unseen, portfolios, and reflective diaries.

So long as creative and inventively ‘disruptive’ assessment methods and approaches deliver intended learning/ learning outcomes, then why not? The thrill of the unexpected must be purposeful and not merely frivolous or an indulgence. I talked about serendipity, happenstance,

fluke and ‘strategic opportunism’ (Isenberg, 1987) and their value to stimulate student learning and teaching, and well remember sitting in a politics group presentation, listening to undergraduates talking about the ills of a centralised state, citing North Korea and China and a litany of their drawbacks. Amidst increasing perplexity, a colleague and I turned to the assessment brief and realised what had happened: because of a typo we had required students to weigh up the pros and cons of a ‘Unitary Country’ when in fact it should have read ‘Unitary County’ – where a single local authority operates! Much hilarity ensued, and an extremely interesting divergent and unscheduled conversation took place; that also resulted in the award of a decent mark. While I believe in intended outcomes, there should be room for emergent and unexpected ones too, which may turn out to be more useful than the originals.

On another occasion, colleagues from my university took final year undergraduate Countryside Planners on a residential fieldtrip to Spain to look at aspects of rural development. Instead of a more conventional reflective log and portfolio, they were asked to produce a *museum artefact* that had been unearthed and exhibited by future archaeologists, to illustrate country life in the 2000s. I still remember receiving (and smelling) a charred, battered and tea-stained sepiia manuscript, purporting to have been dug up in an archaeological excavation, that explained social, environmental and economic conditions in Catalan villages, liberally illustrated with carefully selected scorched photographs, brochures and other ephemera. Disruptively engaging.

As part of my own teaching practice, I was faced with the problem of how to get a scattered and disparate group of learners to compile an online group essay; the title of which was “Explain the key principles of Community Development”? The answer was to allocate a mix of about 50 campus-based and distant students randomly into small groups. The assignment mirrored key aspects of community development (which was the focus of the module), around inclusion/ exclusion, collaboration, ownership, and individuals sharing complementary skills to agree on and deliver the content of their group submission. Finally, each individual briefly reflected on the process, with reference to key community development principles: joint working, participation trust and so on; invariably the process *was* the product: the extent to which members cooperated to produce the essay was generally reflected in the group mark. I was delighted, therefore, to read that one of my NTF reviewer’s commented: “The applicant’s approaches to enhancing learning are pedagogically innovative and wholly student centred.”

Of course ‘left-field’ or disruptive assignment tasks need to be fit for purpose and enable the learner to meet required learning outcomes. Like humour, assessments should be treated with care and sensitivity. Or as Rust (2002: 156) has it: “ensure that all assessment tasks, and assessment criteria, clearly and directly relate to the learning outcomes... [and] engender intrinsic motivation (and reduce plagiarism) by encouraging assessment tasks which resemble

‘real-world’ tasks and involve active engagement by the student, and by providing choice of tasks”.

And finally.....

I return to UK academic Sally Feldman (2008) and her *cri de coeur*, that if “there’s one quality I hope our students will hang on to, it is courage in the face of wimpishness and cravenness. Foolhardiness is underrated.” To this end she advocates “mischief with a purpose”, which I would extend to staff in their disruptive teaching as well as students in their learning. Hughes *et al.* (2009: 37) articulate their desire “to make a space for the student in higher education who engages with, and enjoys, intellectual work not simply because it will lead to a higher mark or because it will lead to a better job (though we would not of course discount these aspects) but rather because the wider experience of intellectual work enables the student to more fully and deeply engage with issues of concern in their lives and the lives of others.”

As mentioned at the start of this chapter, I have endeavoured to connect with several of the overarching goals of this book: to encourage a conversation amongst different audiences about teaching excellence, and to explore a range of pedagogical approaches and interventions; to beneficially impact on teaching excellence. In this regard I have argued for what Meyer and Land (2003: 4) term transformative ‘threshold concepts’, that once understood, their “potential effect on student learning and behaviour is to occasion a significant shift in the perception of a subject, or part thereof.” Furthermore, I have tried to deliver on the editors’ request to “suggest solutions/outcomes/ways forward and...explore what this means in a practical sense”, for example through the use of clear and concise illustrative examples linked to disruption.

So as UK universities hurtle headlong towards the Government’s implementation of a *Teaching Excellence Framework* - we would do well to remember the words of philosopher, Bertrand Russell (1950, cited in Woods, 1993:6), that the “teacher, like the artist...can only perform his work adequately if he feels himself to be an individual directed by an inner creative impulse, not dominated and fettered by an outside authority.” Reinforced by Naidoo and Jamieson (2005: 275) who conclude that “constant threat of student litigation and complaints, together with requirement to comply with extensive external monitoring procedures may encourage them to opt for ‘safe teaching’ which is locked into a transmission mode where pre-specified content can be passed on to the student and assessed in a conventional form.”

Constructive disruption is one arrow in the quiver of teaching excellence.

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