

# **Towards socially inclusive teaching and learning in higher education<sup>1</sup>**

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Good teaching matters. It has always mattered, but it seems that it has been given greater prominence since the Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley et al. 2008) and the Australian Government's response, which set specific student participation and attainment targets for the sector (Australian Government 2009).

In this paper I outline the implications of this new policy environment for teaching and learning in Australian higher education, particularly in relation to teaching students from diverse backgrounds but also for higher education students generally. In short, the principles of socially inclusive teaching are central to what constitutes good teaching for all students.

## **Policy implications for teaching and learning in higher education**

In May 2009, the Australian Government announced its ambition for Australian higher education that, by 2020, 20% of university students are to come from low socioeconomic status backgrounds and, by 2025, 40% of 25 to 34 year olds are to hold bachelor degrees. (The 2009 figures were 16% and 32% respectively.) On the face of it, these targets speak of orientation days for an increasingly diverse student intake and graduation ceremonies for increasing numbers of students. But the targets also rely heavily on the student experience in between and, particularly, on students' experiences of teaching and learning.

Meeting the Australian Government's targets for improved higher education participation and attainment will require the provision of learning environments and experiences that cater to the needs of increasingly diverse student populations. Indeed, the Australian Government has clearly stated that "improving the quality of teaching, learning and the student experience is a critical factor in the success of universities and other higher education providers" (2009: 15) and has called for such improvements in order "to boost retention, progress and ultimately, completion rates".

As more students enter an Australian higher education system, moving it from mass to universal provision (Trow 1974; 2005), the nature of the teaching and learning will need to connect with and engage students who bring to higher education institutions a diverse range of knowledge, ways of knowing and aspirations for the future. In the past, universities have tended to make assumptions about the knowledges and understandings of their students, even in relation to those who have come from privileged backgrounds. Higher education learning environments and student experiences have tended to be informed by what Paulo Freire (1996: 52) has termed a 'banking concept' of education: with academics making deposits in the minds of their students from which they (both) are able to make later withdrawals. There has been little regard in this approach for what students bring to university, to the learning environment and experience, and little regard for what they are potentially able to contribute. Knowledge was assumed to reside in the cloisters of

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the university, in the heads and hands of its dons. Indeed, universities and their scholars positioned themselves as the legitimate, almost exclusive, producers of knowledge.

Many academics now understand that this does not need to be the only way to think about knowledge and learning. For example, many Australian academics have come to terms with the importance of Indigenous knowledges, although this is more prevalent in places like Canada and in parts of Africa. Apart from a distinctive body of knowledge, Indigenous peoples also have different ways of engaging with and expressing knowledge – through narrative for example – which is often seen as not overly scientific. Similarly, international students are now very much part of the landscape of Australian universities. Their very presence, and in such numbers, has changed Australian higher education for domestic students, for the most part for the better. They have challenged higher education epistemologies and ontologies and prompted Australian academics to think differently about the kind of higher education offered to all, not just to students who come from overseas.

The 20/40 targets now require universities and academics to transfer what they have learned about Indigenous and international students and their learning, to a more diverse student body. They require us to understand socioeconomic status, for example, in socio-cultural not just economic terms and through positive rather than deficit frames. This is important in a context where ‘structural diversity’ – the proportional representation of students from marginalised groups in university populations – is insufficient in itself for achieving the educational benefits of student diversity (Chang 1996). For example, the experience in the USA indicates that:

... when the effects of increased structural diversity are considered without involvement in activities that provide students with opportunities to interact in meaningful ways ... [minority students] were more likely to report less overall satisfaction with their college experience. (Milem 2003: 133)

### **Teaching for social inclusion in higher education**

There is already a significant body of knowledge on how to engage marginalised students effectively in educational activities. Research undertaken as part of the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council’s (ESRC) Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) provides one such example. As part of a TLRP and Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) research project, Hockings, Cooke and Bowl (2010) recently identified four design principles for engaging diverse university student populations: creating individual and inclusive space; developing student-centred strategies; connecting with students’ lives; and being culturally aware. Similarly, although in the context of schooling, one of the most extensive and internationally influential research projects on designing student learning environments and experiences – the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (Lingard et al. 2001) – found that supportive learning environments are those that exhibit: student direction; social support; explicit quality performance criteria; self regulation; and academic engagement.

Informed by similar interests, three versions of principles for good teaching have gained currency in the higher education environment, albeit in different higher education systems (the USA, Australia and the UK). These are set out in Table 1. In comparing these three versions, it is clear that not all principle-sets are the same and they do not agree on the ideal number, but there are at least three principles (in italics) that seem to be consistent across each set. The narrative that weaves these three together and which speak to the heart of good teaching matters, is that:

- There is a diversity of learners and ways of learning, which need to be taken into account when designing learning activities;

- Learners learn best when learning activities require them to be actively engaged; and
- Assessment should have a pedagogical intent, making a contribution to students' learning and not just serving an institutional purpose of allocating grades.

**Table 1: Versions of principles for good teaching**

<b>Chickering &amp; Gamson (1999), USA</b>	<b>Kift &amp; Nelson (2005), Australia</b>	<b>David et al. (2009), UK</b>
Student-Faculty contact	Transition	Consistent policy
<i>Diverse talents/learning styles</i>	<i>Diversity</i>	<i>Learning for life</i>
Reciprocity & cooperation	Student-focused design	Informal learning
<i>Active learning</i>	<i>Active &amp; Engaging</i>	<i>Active engagement</i>
<i>Prompt feedback</i>	<i>Assessment</i>	<i>Assessment</i>
High expectations	Evidence-based & evaluation	Social process
Time on task		Systematically developed
		Prior experience
		Discipline knowledge
		Research for teaching

NB: common principles in italics

These seem eminently sensible, almost 'motherhood' statements, with which few would disagree. They – and many of the other principles – are also informed by a particular constructivist theory of learning, which posits that people learn through their experiences, through activity, by doing. However, there is also a danger in these principles to over-emphasize the role of the individual in the learning process. George Kuh, the founder of the USA's National Survey of Student Engagement, provides the perfect illustration of this way of thinking. Kuh has often asserted that:

When we control for factors such as students' socioeconomic backgrounds, parents' education and students' measured level of academic achievement prior to university, it turns out that *how much students learn is not a function of who they are, it's a function of what they do* (Kuh in Leech 2009: 3; emphasis added).

This would seem to be the ultimate tautology: if you ignore students' socioeconomic status, then socioeconomic status does not feature in students' learning. However, if we are to take "a more sophisticated approach" (Bradley et al. 2008: 39) to equity, as Denise Bradley encourages us, 'who students are' is at the heart of the equity issue for higher education. An approach to teaching and learning that strips learners of who they are, imagines that what people are asked to learn has no bearing on how well they learn it. It fails to take into account that 'who people are', in relationship with others and where they are located, has a bearing on what they already know and what they count as worthwhile. It is like imagining that an Indigenous person has no connection with the land, other than a European notion of ownership that allows for land to be bought and sold or acquired by force. It is like suggesting to a working-class person that knowledge can be generated outside contexts of practice or that contexts of practice rely on abstract knowledge to inform action. It is in fact hard to imagine how 'who people are' can be disentangled from what they do and, hence, what they might learn from the experience.

To be fair, buried in these sets of principles identified above are three that hint of a more critical constructivism that moves us towards socio-cultural even political understandings of teaching and learning. In drawing attention to these three, I deliberately want to emphasise what I see to be the possibility of an equity principle in each of them. Consider:

- *Student-faculty contact*, which signals a level of significance for students in the higher education environment, in their own terms; students matter, time spent with them in intellectual discussion matters, engagement with who they are matters;
- *Informal learning*, which acknowledges that students learn things outside the official boundaries of education systems and that these knowledges and ways of knowing have value, that they have something to contribute to higher education; and
- *Research for teaching*, which is not research that determines what to teach (and learn) but which informs the teaching and learning experience, which informs teachers about how to engage with different knowledges and ways of knowing, including research about what students know and how they know.

More generally, research conducted with higher education academics and students in the UK shows that teaching and learning approaches “that are student-centred, inclusive of individual differences, and relevant in the context of the subject are likely to widen as well as deepen academic engagement” (Hockings, Cooke and Bowl 2010: 108).

### **Socially inclusive teaching for all students**

These approaches to socially inclusive teaching in higher education should not be regarded as relevant only for a select group of university students and in contexts of additional support. If they are to be effective, they “must also be embedded within the context of the subject and not treated in isolation or as add-ons” (Hockings, Cooke and Bowl 2010: 107). Social inclusion needs to be at the heart of the teaching-learning relationship.

If we take a socially inclusive approach to good teaching – that how well students learn is related to how well teachers take account of who students are – there are implications for academics and universities. It means that they will need to think about:

- The repositioning of lecturers, peers, academic literature, fieldwork, ‘service learning’, and so on, as resources for students’ learning;
- The repositioning of disciplines and traditions as resources to aid the understanding of issues, problems, and themes; and
- The repositioning of students as important resources and contributors to their own learning and to the learning of the university’s scholarly community.

Creating socially inclusive learning environments and experiences are important in order to redress the persistent discrimination and inequalities in our education systems (Bradley et al. 2008). However, such learning environments and experiences are also important in order to promote educational excellence for all students.

Analyses of the international research literature indicate that students who are part of and graduate from socially, culturally and economically diverse university populations are more likely to reach higher levels of academic achievement. The educational benefits for all university students in more diverse cohorts include: “greater relative gains in critical and active thinking ... greater intellectual engagement and academic motivation ... greater relative gains in intellectual and social self-concept ... [and] higher levels of retention and increases in degree aspirations” (Milem 2003: 142).

That is, in the absence of social inclusion, “the quality and texture of the education we [universities] provide will be significantly diminished” (Association of American Universities 1997), particularly for

“those enrolled in our elite institutions, which tend to have more homogeneous student populations” (Gale 2009: 14). The research indicates that the educational benefits of social inclusion are greatest for “majority students who have previously lacked significant direct exposure to minorities” (Milem 2003: 131-132).

Socially inclusive teaching is about providing room for different ways of thinking about, and different ways of engaging with knowledge, and indeed including different kinds of understandings that perhaps have not been part of Australian higher education before. It is about how we structure the student learning experience in ways that open it up and make it possible for students to contribute from whom they are and what they know. It is about an enriched learning experience for *all* students. It entails the creation of space in higher education not just for new kinds of student bodies but also for their embodied knowledges and ways of knowing.

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