Learning to teach - teaching to learn

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One of the things that I have most valued about reading *Self and Society* over the past few years is that it offers a unique space in the world of academic journals, by inviting its authors to engage not just their minds but also their hearts and spirits in their writing. Now that it is my turn to write rather than read, I find myself feeling unexpectedly exposed. It's easy enough to write behind the distancing mask of academic conventions: putting myself on the line by sharing my values and journey as a teacher is a very different proposition! But I realise that this sense of risk speaks to the story I would like to explore and share. For me, growing as a university teacher has been a journey away from just engaging my intellect, and the intellects of my learners, and towards fully engaging all of ourselves as we come together in a group in order to transform ourselves by learning something of genuine and lasting value.

By way of a context, then: I have taught in Higher Education for the past twenty years. In the earlier part of my career, I taught English Literature. I enjoyed both sides of my life in the academy - undertaking scholarship in my discipline and teaching my students - and I saw these two activities as intimately intertwined. Over time, however, I became disillusioned with the direction in which Higher Education in the UK was moving. University priorities became more and more about the production of research - much of it, frankly, of quite low quality, given the pressures to produce in volume. The links between scholarship and teaching became ever more stretched. 'Research' - at least in the Humanities - was increasingly produced for the consumption of a select group of fellow academics; had little to say to students; and was remote from teaching. In the Universities where I worked, many fine, scholarly teachers who happened not to write articles for the high prestige journals were elbowed out. It was made very clear that to spend too much time on teaching was to imperil your professional security.

And yet ... working with my students was what I loved. I identified primarily as a teacher, not as a researcher. At just the same time as I was struggling with my sense of where I was going in my career, two other significant life events shook up my old senses of

myself. My son was born; and I was diagnosed with a genetic liver condition that has had a serious impact on what, and how much, I am able to do. I began to see a core process psychotherapist - a journey which eventually lasted for five years. All of this came together, and I realised that what I desired to bring into the world was my love for teaching and learning. Specifically, I wanted to use my experience to help develop teachers working in colleges and universities.

For the past few years, I have run a postgraduate teacher development course for the British Institute of Modern Music (BIMM) - working with professional musicians to help them take their knowledge and experience into their classrooms, as they work with students on BIMM's professional diploma and degree programmes. Initially, the course was designed for colleagues already teaching at BIMM colleges, but latterly it has also been opened up to music graduates. Some of the graduate participants on this course this year have undertaken to share their reflections on what the experience of our learning group has been like for them in the article that follows this one.

For me, a single, central question has motivated my growth as an education developer: How can I help develop the kinds of skilled and caring teachers I long to see in the world - the kinds of teachers I hope my son will have throughout his education?

In answering this question, I have come to understand teaching as a loving act, designed to enable a group of people (including the teacher) to come together in order to discover and achieve their own potential and liberation. I see the role of the teacher as helping learning groups to thrive and function well, so that the experiences of all the group members can contribute to the group's co-creation of knowledge and, in this specific instance, practice as teachers. My deepest desire is to help my co-learners develop into the teachers they are - drawing on roots of knowledge and evidence about how people learn and how we best enable that process, but bringing such knowledge to fruition in their own classrooms through a creative range of different teaching approaches and personal styles. If I understand anything about bringing a humanistic perspective into teaching, then it is this.

In terms of Higher Education - what it is about this level of education that does indeed distinguish it as 'higher' than previous forms - then I subscribe to Ron Barnett's view that Higher Education should teach its participants to think critically - weighing evidence and argument - in at least three dimensions, fostering criticality about the discipline(s) being studied; the world and the student's place in that world; and the self.

Of course, my sense of the fullest potential of teaching and learning has developed over time, and largely through experiences that in the moment seemed jarring to me. Events that confused me; surprised me; or just didn't work out as I had expected. Events that stayed with me and niggled at me until I was able to process them and try to make sense of them. It has been a jagged progression, not an ordered one.

I imagine that my experience of formal education will be similar to that of many readers of this article. Its focus was on developing my logical and linguistic intelligences, primarily through making me memorise factual content from a number of different disciplines. I was also taught a number of discipline-specific problem solving processes, which were put to use in grappling with neatly contrived academic tests. Luckily, some of my teachers were also interested in what, and how, I thought, and through my interactions with them, they helped me learn how to think. Many others did not.

Formal education's focus on learning content leaves most people with a clear legacy in the form of a set of unexamined assumptions about teaching and learning. Members of the teacher training group with whom I have worked this year were no exception:

> *First session of the new year on the teacher training course. I'm nervous and excited. I love this - starting out with a new group, seeing who we are, feeling out where we might go. Towards the end of the session, we have a 'Fears and Fantasies' round. Everyone shares their fears about teaching. It's nearly all about not knowing enough and not being perceived as authoritative by our students.*
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> *'I'm scared they'll ask me something and I won't know the answer.'*
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> *'I'm worried I might tell them the wrong thing.'*
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> *'I'm scared they won't respect me or accept me as their teacher.'*
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> *'I'm scared I might get asked to teach something I don't feel confident about.'*

And yet, somehow, by the end of our year together, the focus has shifted entirely:

> *It's the last session of the year. I'm feeling really sad and a little hollowed out. As a group, we need a good leave taking of each other. It's been quite a year together - but now it feels like it has all passed in a flash. I suggest we take it in turns to hear from the rest of the group what it is that they have appreciated about having each of us as a member of the group. It takes us a good hour for the eleven of us in the room to all have a turn receiving feedback. The group handles the process with real grace and depth. Tears. Laughter. A palpable sense of honesty and authentic sharing in the room. It's my turn to hear what everyone has valued about having me in the group. I'm feeling quite vulnerable and weepy, and I'm not sure how much I'll be able to hear in the moment, so I record the feedback on my phone. Listening to it later, I'm struck by how little the feedback is about valuing what I know about the subject. Rather, members of the group talk about valuing my authenticity, honesty, love for them, and my desire to help them succeed and grow.*

What has evidently happened in the eight months between these two sessions is that we have experienced a powerful process of growth and transformation together. We have

come to understand teaching and learning as a process in quite a different way from the way we thought of teaching at the outset of the course. So the obvious question is: what did we do together to make this happen?

The reason this is such a difficult question to answer seems to me to lie in an insight of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Anyone who has struggled to read Lacan will be all too aware of the difficulties of following his notoriously knotty and convoluted forms of expression. He's more fond of the brow-furrowing apothegm than of clear exposition. However, one of his ideas is that as human beings we can consider the ways in which we live not just in the present, but also in the 'future anterior'. For 'I am', we might substitute 'I am that which I shall have been in the process of becoming'. We don't know what, in the present, we will look back to in the future as having been of more significance than we understood at the time.

Deep learning involves a degree of risk, because it is personally transformative, with no guarantees at the outset where the process might take us - and how it might unmake us. Every year I've facilitated the teacher training programme, the course starts with a genuinely stomach-churning step into the unknowable. The educational journey I have taken with each group has been astoundingly different in every case. In particular, there have been key moments of break through for individual participants in the group that have happened at different and, to me, unpredictable times. It generally takes me three months or so before I begin to really know that it will turn out alright again, and I start to witness a depth of individually challenging and personally meaningful learning shared across the group, as we each remake our professional selves.

So, yes, I have learned the importance of trust. Trusting the group process and the participants themselves. But blind trust in the process to somehow 'come right' by itself is a debased form of magical thinking. To enable the process of deep learning to take place, there are a number of things we need, as a group, to do - and it is generally my role as the teacher to be the first to do them, as a way of modelling them for the rest of the participants.

The first is to restore the value of our life experiences to ourselves. Experience is our first teacher - if we are open to learning through and from it. Before we can discover how best to learn and grow from our experiences, most of us also need to discover how cut off we have become from our own experience in an educational context, and to learn how to heal this rift. I have learned that as we return to trusting our experience in learning, many of us will uncover grief and rage at having been cut off from it in the first place. A fearful semi-apprehension of these strong emotions can act as a significant block to growing openness to experience. I first began to understand this back when I still taught English Literature:

Week Two of 'Strategies in Literary and Cultural Analysis'. It's the first term at University for these students - and there are about 150 of them crammed into the room. Some people are having to sit on the floor. It has occurred to me that even the title of the course will sound threatening to some of - many of? most of? - my students. We'd started the previous week by looking at a couple of poems. I saw that what most students were doing was paraphrasing the 'message' of the poem - rewording it into more informal language. I'd like to start us thinking about how literary texts are put together, and why this matters, not just 'what they say'. I'd also like us to make use this 'rewording' skill I've already witnessed.

I've brought in the first couple of pages of The Ballad of Peckham Rye. I ask the students, in groups of four or five, to re-write the passage in a variety of different ways. Some write it from the point of view of a different character. Some rework it as a soap opera script; as science fiction; in the style of Mills and Boon; or as if the tale to follow were to be darkly gothic. One group of students (from a range of different ethnic backgrounds) reproduce the passage written in vernacular Black English. We read out the different versions. They are fascinating. Some are hilarious; some somber. Some make the start of the novel seem newly mysterious. Some suggest different sides to the characters from the portrayals in the original text. Together, we begin to see that how something is written has a significant effect on the way in which we perceive the meaning of the text. I am very pleased with how the class has gone.

A class vote at the end overwhelmingly elects the Black English version as the best of the day. It has a great sense of energy and pace, and we agree we'd really want to read on.

After the session, X, one of the black students from that writing group comes to see me. She's really angry. 'I came here to learn to write proper English, not the crap I use at home.'

I was completely floored. At the time, I had no insight into the absolute gulf in my own experience between my 'studies' and the rest of my life - so I could hardly understand hers. What I thought had happened was that I had done something clumsy or bad to this student, and that her anger was all my fault.

It took me a long time to see this experience as an important spur to my growth as a teacher. Since then, I have come to recognise that teachers regularly go through remarkably similar patterns of development, in three distinct phases, and that these come about as a result of reflecting and acting on our own experiences in our classrooms. I have also come to see that very many teachers get stuck somewhere along the way. In my experience, only a minority ever get to the third stage - yet I believe this to be

the one most supportive of student learning. I think that one of the most important tasks of the PGCert group is to help all the participants grow through these three stages. (Of course, we only have ten months together, so it's a tall order! However, it's a mark of the absolute commitment of this year's group that hand-on-heart I can say everyone made the journey successfully.)

In the first stage, teachers focus the majority of their attention on the content of the course, and on transmitting 'knowledge' to their students. As we saw above, this is the sense of teaching that the PGCert participants brought to the beginning of their course this year, largely because it is the main kind of teaching they had experienced themselves as students through school and college. This has been the dominant model of teaching promoted by successive governments: witness, for example, Michael Gove's recent speech on the centrality of teaching facts, and the notion that we should be aiming to recruit graduates with the best degrees, and hence the highest supposed level of subject knowledge, as the next generation of teachers. It is a sense of teaching shared by many long-serving teaching colleagues as well:

> *I am working with a group of senior University lecturers, from a number of different institutions. Most of them are heads of their departments. We're exploring ways to increase student participation in class and to help students become more actively involved in their own learning. I can see that one of the participants is getting increasingly agitated. Over lunch, I ask if he's OK. He takes this as permission to explode. He sees no point whatever in asking students to work with each other in class, and asks rather belligerently 'What could they possibly have to learn from each other?'*

In the second stage (which is where I think I was in the writing scene above), the teacher's focus switches to themselves, and to what they are doing in class. Teachers develop thoughtful concern about their own performance. We seek to be 'good', 'inspiring', 'motivating' and to drive our students to achieve. Teachers start to think about different, active ways of helping their students engage with the material being learned. Often, such teachers have great charisma in the classroom - but they may actually leave relatively little space for their students, and the classroom agenda tends to remain firmly under their own control.

In the third phase, attention switches to what the students are doing, and to how effectively they are learning. Teachers operating at this level are notably observant in their classes, and flexible in their approaches to teaching. They look for changes in their students and are highly responsive to these. They come to take a different role in the group – occupying a productive space as themselves a member of the group, rather than apart from it, but one holding particular responsibilities. They are open to their own learning and development as they teach.

All of this matters a great deal if we take the purpose of education to be students' conceptual development, rather than just the acquisition of facts (which activity is not unimportant, of course, but it is just one necessary part of the process of conceptual development, and not for me the ultimate goal of education in and of itself). If we are to help our students construct richer understandings of discipline, world and self - understandings which crucially lead them to a changed and enlarged ability to be and to act in the world - then the first two approaches to teaching are simply inadequate to the task.

The second requirement that a group must meet in order for deep learning to take place is that all group members need to learn how to be fully authentic and present in the group. We have generally not been encouraged to bring all of ourselves into class - bodies, emotions, selfhoods and spirits as well as minds. The related aspect of this is learning how to help other group members trust to their own authenticities by welcoming and valuing them. Our effectiveness as an educational group is markedly diminished if we block anyone from fully showing up.

> *I've been in my new job for a couple of weeks. I'm in my early twenties, and the youngest member of the English Department by quite a long straw. By chance, I happen to get a quiet moment in the corner of the staff lounge with my Head of Department. 'X,' I say, 'Um ... I haven't mentioned this before, and I hope it's not a big deal to you, but I thought I should let you know that I'm gay.' There's something of a pause while he digests this information. I already know that there aren't any other out members of staff in the Faculty. 'Neill, thank you for sharing that,' he says, 'I'm sure it won't effect your teaching.'*
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> *In the moment, I am grateful for his response. Later on, I wonder whether what he meant was that my sexuality would not have any negative impact on my teaching. In some way that I can't articulate, I think my experiences as a young gay man could actually have a positive impact on my teaching - but I don't yet understand how or why.*

I know a lot about being inauthentic in an educational setting. I am a past master of the art. Growing up gay, in the environment of an all male, rugby valuing, army cadet marching, poetry suspicious boarding school was the perfect training ground for cutting myself off from my feelings and selfhood. We all developed the art of presenting a tough shell to the world - *I'm untouchable, so keep your distance and go pick on someone else instead.* So, while I was a very 'successful', straight A student - I secretly, shamefully, hated my time in school, and lived in fear that my ugly secret would be discovered. These were the Eighties, remember: AIDS had burst into the media spotlight as a new 'gay plague', even as a divine punishment; the age of consent for gay men was 21, rather than 16; and government ministers were fulminating in public against 'pretend family relationships'. It was not a good time. Schooling was just something to be endured until it was over.

I'm always intrigued by what we attract into our lives. I seem to draw many participants who want to train as teachers who themselves have had awful experiences of formal education. Many were written off academically, and were either sent to, or found their own way to, the Art and Music block in school as 'the only place for them'. But for all of us, it's precisely this wounded experience of our own education that can, if addressed, processed and understood, become our greatest gift as teachers. It obviously tends to lend an empathetic quality to our teaching, but more than this it helps us see the class from the perspective not only of the students who are thriving in it, but also of those who are struggling. I think in my case understanding how I was hurt and how I came through this has also given me a useful toughness to go with my natural softness, and has helped me go to places the group needs - holding up a mirror to individual and group blind spots for example - when these are profoundly uncomfortable for me, for all their necessity.

The third requirement is to invite all participants in a learning group to do what they need to do to make their learning fully personally meaningful, so long as this does not hinder the learning of anyone else. Again, in general, this is not an offer many of us will have experienced regularly throughout our educations, and it balances opportunity with responsibility. I still remember the shock of being asked by my tutor at Oxford during my first week there which author I wanted to study that week. Even such a basic level of freedom and autonomy was previously unknown to me - little wonder it took me longer to learn to extend conscious choice to areas affecting my personal growth, not just my academic studies.

Interestingly, whilst there is often an initial element of anxiety to be overcome in accepting control over our own education, I find that participants are quick to grasp, and value, the experience - and I think this is best demonstrated in the personal narratives that follow this article. Dysfunctional prior educational experiences most certainly do not prevent learners from taking to a new way of learning - often with a sense of great excitement and satisfaction.

So, with these three conditions in place - valuing personal experience, authenticity and autonomy within a supportive group setting - it is my experience that the group will come to function well as a space for transformative learning, and the individuals within it will be enabled to grow significantly. And in such a way - for me at least - is joy returned to learning.

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