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

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Abstract
This article discusses the qualities of inspirational teaching in higher education (HE). It starts by arguing how topical this subject is, given emphasis worldwide 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.

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 sprang up on 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 (Browne, 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
Inspiration and sets down a future research agenda, through which to establish more definitive conclusions. The article reveals aspects of inspirational teaching and learning in higher education. 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 two main 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 ‘promoters of inspiration’ – that is, indicators that they have 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 & Trigwell (1999) explain this in the following way: “different prior experiences of learning, meaning that different learning situations were constituted for each student and different perceptions of their learning situation were evoked” (p. 9). This raises a question of ‘in whom’ and questions which are still relevant to today. Faria (2015) cites four components of charisma, namely the ability to be spellbinding; audacious, exuberant and graceful. Faria 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, Banyard, 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 ideals” (p. 105). Young and Oliver (1939), in their famous song “’Tisn’t what you teach the blues singer Ella Fitzgerald laid emphasis on process as well as product in the quality of an undertaking – such as teaching: “Today you do it, yes, it’s the way you do it. That’s what gets results!”

A belief also espoused by McLuhan & Fiore (1967) when they coined the term “the medium is the message.” In other words, how something is presented – i.e. the medium – is considered to be as important as what is communicated. 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 formula for inspirational teaching. One person’s meat is another’s poison – and may well vary according to cultural considerations, personal preference, and how the teacher and learner’s feel at a given moment” (p.33).

Cohen & Jurkovic (1997) suggest “surprise, fun, and drama” (p. 48) as essential ingredients of inspiration linked to training. McGonigal (2004) useful reminds us that one or more people are being inspired, and to recognise that this can encompass both the teacher and student. Shevlin (2002) also suggests that student autonomy correlate strongly with self-confidence and...this needs to be enhanced through the acquisition of enabling skills” (p.53). Perhaps in his concession of pedagogy or ‘the freedom to work’, Harden deduces that the “educator with a democratic vision or...” is difficult to measure or define that electricity. Lowman and Mathie (2006) note that “the casual observer catches at once, but which is so difficult to define” (p.479). The last point links back to Ron Cooke’s belief that it is difficult to measure or define that electricty.Lowman and Mathie (1993) identify two factors as critical - first, the ability to stimulate intellectual excitement and second, interpersonal rapport already referred to (by a number of authors). "If inspiring teacher-talk can be 47% of the lesson plan (Wilson, 1918), elicits a pupil’s devoted fighting; effort, earnestness, desire commensurate with her own; in a word a willingness to cultivate their conscious powers” (p.481). This also focuses on the co-production of learning and teaching. Wilson goes on to quote the poet Robert Browning and hints at perhaps one of the most elusive of powers “All things grow warm to them” (p.481). Shevlin, Banyard, Davies & Griffiths (2000) point to a teacher’s charisma as “a central trait...which influences a student’s evaluation of the instructor” (p. 97). McGonigal (2004) usefully reminds us that one or more people are being inspired, and to recognise that this can encompass both the teacher and student. Shevlin (2002) also suggests that student autonomy correlate strongly with self-confidence and...this needs to be enhanced through the acquisition of enabling skills” (p.53). Perhaps in his concession of pedagogy or ‘the freedom to work’, Harden deduces that the “educator with a democratic vision or...” is difficult to measure or define that electricity. Lowman and Mathie (2006) note that “the casual observer catches at once, but which is so difficult to define” (p.479). The last point links back to Ron Cooke’s belief that it is difficult to measure or define that electricty.Lowman and Mathie (1993) identify two factors as critical - first, the ability to stimulate
were asked to describe what it was like, using key words extracted from
the literature (referred to in the Literature Review and in the questions used).
The characteristics were deliberately not defined... leaving individuals to make up their
minds and select according to their own feelings.
The number of students highlighting each word in 2016 is below in rank order:

2016 Rank Order

Passionate 28
Encouraging 26
Enthusiastic 26
Memorable 21
Enjoying 19
Interesting 18
Proactive 17
Empathetic 15
Engaging 14
Supportive 10

Students were invited to add any other facets that they felt should be listed: Only three individuals chose to provide
new characteristics; and only one student supported each of interesting, informative, and engaging.

Based on this small sample — 52 student returns — three clear elements of inspirational teaching emerge: First and foremost, it is believed to be motivating (an aspect supported from literature by House, 1977, as cited in Shevlin et al., 2000; James, 2001); second, and related — inspirational teaching is felt to be encouraging (reinforced by Harden & Crosby, 2000; McGonigal, 2004); and third, such teaching flows from teachers who are passionate (backed-up by Harden & Crosby, 2000) about their subject.

Pre-eminent given to the 3 characteristics mentioned directly above, was encapsulated in several student comments (my underlining):

“Any inspiring and encouraging lecturer, encouraging students even when they are struggling...”

“Having lecturers that really care about what they are teaching and passing it on.”

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 students of 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:

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quote from Student</th>
<th>From</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“It was a very moving lecture and really expanded my understanding of homicide”</td>
<td>Memorable 21</td>
<td>1st year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Passion!”</td>
<td>Enthusiastic 26</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Very informative...made me think. I wish all lectures were like this.”</td>
<td>Memorable 17</td>
<td>3rd year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 and why.

Twenty-four students (77.31%) gave feedback in response to the question. They cited 16 teachers 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.”

Given the tentative, illustrative and exploratory nature of the research underpinning this paper, I would argue that — rather like an icing — there are additional aspects to be found, and existing ones to be more fully and usefully studied.

For example there may be different characteristics of teaching inspiration 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 the fact 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).

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 Elliot & Johnstone (2002) termed individualised learning.

I would reduce this to a simple formula: Inspirational teaching > Aspiration > Transformation

This view is supported by Jack Mestrow (1997): “transformative...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 automatically act on those of others” (p. 11). Sounds simple, but how is it done? Cohen & Jurkovic (1997) suggest a series of techniques by which to inspire learning; these include 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” (Cohen & Jurkovic, 1997, p. 69).

However, a colleague at my university commented that she bad-gered an HE lecturer because he had witnessed someone do it so badly! As a result the teacher “can do it better.”

As mentioned several times, this is an exploratory study and one in 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-dear 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 this... such as 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 bad-gered an HE lecturer because he had witnessed someone do it so badly! As a result the teacher “can do it better.”

In conclusion let’s aspire, as higher education teachers, to inspire our students — and be inspired by them ourselves, like my HE colleagues 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 underpinning this paper, I would argue that — rather like an icing — there are additional aspects to be found, and existing ones to be more fully and usefully studied.

For example there may be different characteristics of teaching inspiration 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 the fact 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, that in 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.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank colleagues at my university — JH, KL, LC, LL, RB & SS —
REFERENCES
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. LI, 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:----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------