

# **Learning, Teaching and Assessment in Higher Education**

## Global Perspectives

Sally Brown

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# **Learning, Teaching and Assessment in Higher Education**

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Sally Brown

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# Series editor's preface

This series of books with Palgrave for all who care about teaching and learning in higher education has been developed with the express aim of providing useful, relevant, current and helpful guidance on key issues in learning and teaching in the tertiary/post-compulsory education sector. This is an area of current very rapid and unpredictable change, with universities and colleges reviewing and often implementing radical alterations in the ways they design, deliver and assess the curriculum, taking into account not just innovations in how content is being delivered and supported, particularly through technological means but also the changing relationships between academics and their students. The role of the teacher in higher education needs to be reconsidered when students can freely access content world wide and seek accreditation and recognition of learning by local, national or international providers (and may indeed prefer to do so). Students internationally are becoming progressively more liable for the payment of fees, as higher education becomes seen as less of a public good and more of a private one, and this too changes the nature of the transaction.

Texts in this series address aspects of these and other emergent imperatives. Among topics covered are volumes exploring student-centred approaches at undergraduate and post-graduate levels including doctoral work, the necessity to work in an internationalised and transnational, tertiary education context, the challenges of staff-student interactions where engagements are as likely to be through new technologies as face-to-face in the classroom and issues about the levels of student engagement, especially where study is in competition with other demands on their time including employment and caring responsibilities.

This book is especially close to my heart, as it is my own first contribution to the series and one which is concerned with an area of particular topicality, since it provides a variety of global perspectives on what comprises good university teaching, learning and assessment. I am very keen to showcase inter- and transnational approaches to higher education pedagogy and am keen to hear from further potential authors for inclusion in the series.

Sally Brown

# **1 Global approaches to teaching, learning and assessment**

## **► Introduction**

There are many books on teaching and assessment at higher educational level, both scholarly reviews of academic practice and pragmatic guidance books offering advice to novices and others on how to be an effective student-centred academic. So why write another? My aim here is to use the best of the scholarship underpinning teaching and learning in universities in the last half-century or more while at the same time taking account of the changing nature of the student body, higher education institutions and potentially of learning itself. However, my particular ambition in this volume is to do so from a global perspective, recognising that many extant texts about tertiary teaching are written from the perspective of a single nation, or a very limited group of nations, usually within highly-advantaged, commonly English-speaking nations. What I have sought to do here is draw on good practice from six continents, supported by a framework of pedagogic discussion and review, which is designed to be of highly practical value to educators worldwide.

This book cannot provide comprehensive coverage of all national practices, nor do I claim that the good practices I include here are the only ones worth discussing. While I cover a wide range of teaching approaches across subjects and disciplines, and refer to undergraduate, masters level and doctoral education, it would be inappropriate to suggest that this is a complete compendium of global perspectives. What I can claim is that I am proud to celebrate here alternative voices, and to help to make them audible beyond their home nations through the good practice accounts (GPAs) I include from six continents. I chose to shun the arrogance of the term ‘best practice’, since it is impossible to judge what is ‘best’ without knowing all of the possible alternatives. In seeking international perspectives, I looked for descriptions of pedagogic practice that were regarded as strong in their

own countries, without trying to impose my own quality judgements. I have been delighted with the range and scale of the accounts, and by the generosity of the authors in sharing them.

The chapters in this book are designed to provide a broad perspective on enhancing the diverse practices that comprise the design, delivery, assessment and support of the curriculum, together with some thoughts about how we can best support the people charged with undertaking those tasks, including academics, learning support staff and managers, and on how to work strategically to improve the ways we make it happen.

After exploring in this chapter some of the differences students and their teachers experience across the globe, and how we might respond to them, I next explore in Chapter 2 some of the theories and concepts that underpin successful teaching in higher education. Chapter 3 is concerned with translating these into the curriculum we offer our students, ensuring that everything we do is constructively designed (Biggs and Tang, 2007), by working out in advance what we need our students to know and be able to do at the end of the programme, then thinking through how to deliver this, assess whether the students actually can do what we anticipated they could and evaluate our success at doing so. This process is not something that can be undertaken and then continuously implemented, so the chapter also covers enhancement of the quality of provision, through review and refreshment. In Chapter 4 I move to discussing the concept of curriculum delivery and some of the ways we actually do deliver in a range of settings, particularly but not exclusively in lectures, and in Chapter 5, I consider other settings in which students work, within and beyond the campus. Chapter 6 focuses on students, the recipients of curriculum delivery, stressing the importance of fostering various literacies: academic literacy, information and digital literacy, assessment literacy and social and interpersonal literacies, which together are necessary to help students achieve their best. The next two chapters cover aspects of assessment: in Chapter 7 looking especially at how we can make it fit for the purposes it was designed to achieve, and in Chapter 8 considering how assessment can be fully integrated with the learning process, rather than being a separate activity tagged on to the end. Crossing all chapters, but particularly covered in Chapter 9 are thoughts on technologies to support learning and good examples of how these are put into practice. Looking towards the end of the student lifecycle, on graduation students move beyond the university, so Chapter 10 reviews how we can promulgate not just students' employability but also how they can integrate into the wider community, with a toolkit of knowledge, skills and capabilities to equip them to make the best of life opportunities. Recognising

the importance of ensuring the effectiveness of those who help students learn, Chapter 11 examines initial and ongoing training and development activities for university teachers, so they can be competent and current in their practices. The final chapter offers some conclusions on what really matters in higher education and how those of us who work in it can practise to good effect in a global community.

At the outset, therefore, I want to raise a number of questions about higher education pedagogical approaches and practices, and to unpack some of the assumptions that are currently made about how teaching and assessment are actually undertaken in universities in different nations, since unsurprisingly academics commonly assume that the dominant discourses in their own nations are the ones that prevail worldwide.

### ► **Do we currently have a global higher education environment?**

Do we have, for example, shared concepts of pedagogy, compatible technologies for learning, comparable learning contexts, shared languages for learning and shared concepts of student support between nations? I would argue that we do not, and that gaining greater mutual understanding in these areas can be enormously helpful in supporting the recruitment and retention of international students and staff, in improving success rates and satisfaction scores, and in helping to make universities supportive learning communities.

### ► **Do we have shared concepts of pedagogy?**

Table 1.1 aims to tease out some of the underlying perceptions we each have about pedagogies in our own nations. Consider what your answer would be to each of the questions: ‘Yes. Of course, without hesitation, what’s the problem’; ‘It depends. Possibly’; ‘No. Under no circumstances. It would be completely inappropriate’.

### ► **Discussion**

There can be significant variations in approaches to teaching and learning based on cultural factors. These can, according to Ryan (2000), centre on the extent to which historical texts and previously accumulated knowledge

**Table 1.1** International perceptions of pedagogy

<b>Would you as a lecturer/ academic tutor:</b>		<b>Yes</b>	<b>Possibly</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Comments</b>
1	Accept your final year student's invitation to his wedding?				Would this depend on how long you had taught the student? On how lavish the wedding is expected to be?
2	Encourage your students to interrupt and ask questions in your lecture?				In some nations, lectures are encouraged to be dialogic, but in others they are formal occasions with very large cohorts where interruptions are strongly discouraged.
3	Accept gifts from your students?				Would it depend on the size of the gift? The timing (e.g. not just before an assessment period? After graduation?) Does your university have a policy on this?
4	Encourage your students to pose opposing views to your own?				Would your response be the same in relation to seminars, lectures, tutorials, private conversations?
5	Let your students 'friend' you on Facebook?				This might depend on how you are using your own Facebook page and what privacy settings you have on it.
6	Follow your students on Twitter? Encourage your students to follow you on Twitter?				Might this depend on whether you have a Twitter account solely for academic/professional purposes?
7	Meet up with your students in a bar after classes?				If you said no, is the issue meeting outside class, or is it the location (a place where alcohol is served)?
8	Advise your student on how to use the university toilets?				One of the GPAs in this book mentions doing this, as does one of the authors quoted in this chapter
9	Help your students with graduate job applications? Will you write references for them?				Does your response depend on how long and how well you know them?
10	Provide detailed feedback and advice on draft assignments?				Does this depend upon the stage within the programme? Some academics comment extensively on first assignments. In some countries very detailed feedback on drafts is an expectation at all levels.

Would you as a lecturer/academic tutor:		Yes	Possibly	No	Comments
11	Routinely spend an hour with your students after a lecture discussing queries?				In some cultures, academics are timetabled for at least an hour after lectures to clarify issues. In others, it's normal to speed from one lecture to another.
12	Ask your students to call you by your first name?				Whether you do or not will depend on cultural mores and the power distinction between academics and students.
13	Require your students to participate in assignments where they are assessed as members of a group?				In some nations this is uncommon or indeed frowned on.
14	Allow your students to negotiate the mark you are awarding them?				Might it be possible for students to convince you that they deserved a higher mark? Or is this completely out of the question?
15	Timetable exams on Friday afternoons, Saturdays or Sundays?				This might be problematic for students with devout religious convictions.

is respected and how much students are expected to have their own ideas, how far authority figures, including teachers, are respected (or not) and in particular, how far it is acceptable to be overtly critical of authoritative texts or figures, whether a 'correct' answer is sought, and the extent to which alternative responses are acceptable.

Cultural mores can impact on expectations of behaviour and thereby can impact on assessment. For example, 'Eastern, Latin American and some Caribbean cultures can deem it rude to make firm eye contact: while in the UK it is often thought rude not to' (Grace and Gravestock, 2009, p. 61). Maori students in New Zealand similarly retain close eye contact for personal relationships (or to frighten enemies). An insistence on the desirability of direct eye contact can be problematic where the assessment criteria for a presentation specifically mention it, which may be difficult for some students, including female students from cultures where eye contact with males is considered brazen.

Expectations around participation in **group work** can similarly pose problems, with some students being thrown by expectations to do so as part of assessed activities if they have no experience of it to date. Until



recently in Denmark assessing students collectively in groups was illegal in higher education, due to government ministers' uncertainties about assessment. In some nations, group work is an expectation of students throughout school education, so nothing strange to encounter at university, but for students from other nations, it may be a first! Students from cultures where the genders are usually strictly segregated may find participating in mixed groups challenging initially.

**Asking and answering questions:** in many Western nations, there is often an atmosphere of 'give and take' in lectures, with questions and interruptions welcomed, but in some Eastern European nations, for example, to stop a lecturer in full flow for a query would be considered quite rude. There can be issues in cultures where staff are almost venerated and students are not prepared to ask questions in class or seek support, for fear of 'losing face' themselves or causing the teacher to 'lose face'. These divergences are not problematic so long as the local contextual 'rules' are shared, otherwise some students can be regarded as inappropriately forward and others as excessively passive.

Similarly, the extent to which students expect academics to find time to talk to them personally, live or electronically, can vary across cultures. Some universities in Pacific Rim nations provide substantially more one-to-one support than students might expect in the UK, for example, acting almost *in loco parentis* to help students do well, so their students might feel short changed when arriving to study in a nation where fees are high and overall expectations of support are lower.

Some nations provide substantially less support than is common in the UK. For example, in some higher education institutions (HEIs) in Italy, it is not uncommon for the (very low) fees to cover only mass lectures, with seminars and personal tutoring available as extras.

There is diversity in the extent to which **robust discussion** is valued, with students from some cultures preferring to focus on the importance of harmony and co-operation within the group rather than the interests of the individual within it (Ryan, op. cit.), and others where challenge is more highly valued.

## ► Diverse assessment approaches

There are likely to be differences in emphasis on unseen time-constrained exams (which are fairly ubiquitous, but vary in length from one hour on the Indian subcontinent commonly to nine hours in Norway!), multiple-choice questions (widely used in the US and many Pacific Rim nations) and

oral defences, vivas and presentations, which are much more common in Northern Europe and Scandinavia than in the UK. What is actually assessed is variable too, since some national contexts prize accurately demonstrating the learning of content above all other elements, whereas in others, use of that information in context is the prime expectation. As Beetham proposes:

‘When the focus is on accuracy of reproduction, learners will be given opportunities to practise the required concept or skill until they can reproduce it exactly as taught. When the focus is on internalisation, learners will be given opportunities to integrate a concept or skill with their existing beliefs and capabilities, to reflect on what it means to them, and to make sense of it in a variety of ways.’

Beetham, 2007, p. 33

**Group assessment** is strongly encouraged in nations where problem-based learning is commonplace and is frowned on or banned in others. (Denmark, as mentioned earlier, has only recently repealed a law preventing higher education students being assessed in groups.) Negotiation of marks is considered part of the process in some nations, but is completely unacceptable in others.

The timetabling of exams can be problematic for some students if they fall at times which are traditionally set aside for religious observances, as can setting multiple exams on the same day if this coincides with days of religious obligation. For example, in further northern and southern latitudes, if Ramadan falls in high summer, fasting can last many hours after dawn, leaving devout Muslim students potentially debilitated towards the later part of the day.

## ► Diverse expectations concerning feedback

There can be significant differences in expectations internationally about the type, timing and purpose of feedback. There is considerable diversity in the explicitness of criteria and the amount of support students can expect if they are struggling with assessed work, with academics in some nations taking a much more intense personal interest in students’ progression than in others.

In some nations, multiple assessment opportunities are provided, and students failing modules simply pick up credits elsewhere (as in Australia and New Zealand for example), which is not the case in other nations, such as the UK, which have much more hidebound regulations on progression issues.

Carroll and Ryan (2005) note common problems about students complying with assignment length regulations: in some nations word limits are merely advisory, but in others they are strictly adhered to, which can cause real problems. For some African students, for example, starting into the main body of the essay without a personal preamble is considered impolite, meaning they frequently go considerably over required assignment word limits, while other students whose first language is not English comment on the problem of writing first-year assignments of say 3,000–4,000 words when their previous writing assignments have been around 1,000 words.

The nature of the **personal relationships** between academic staff and students is hugely variable internationally, with much more formal interactions expected in some nations than others. Knowing what to call your teacher can be a tricky issue: in the UK and US it is not at all unusual to be invited to use a lecturer's given name, but many continental European professors would be alarmed if anyone addressed them with other than their full title. Staff–student friendships outside the university can be either encouraged or regarded as suspect depending on the national context, while staff dating adult students would be considered gross professional misconduct in some nations and is completely acceptable in others.

Gifts to teachers are seen as unproblematic in many cultures, and are actually an expectation in others, for example, Japan. However, in the UK, for example, gifts other than small souvenirs from home nations of items of food or confectionery that can be shared with fellow students are frowned on, and it is a customary requirement in many universities for gifts of any other than trivial value to be recorded in the Gift Book and only acceptable if deemed so by a senior manager. Misconceptions in this area can cause embarrassment on both sides, especially if presents are given immediately before assessment activities.

## ► Teaching approaches

Students moving from one country to another to study can expect different modes of curriculum delivery. The traditional lecture, delivered from behind a lectern or from a podium, with little interaction between the lecturer and students is much more common in some nations than others and students may find it difficult to readjust to new contexts. A similar diversity exists in the level of provision of support materials students can expect to receive, including handouts, electronic texts and postings within social learning environments, depending on where they are studying.

## ► **Do we have shared learning and communication technologies?**

This is patently not the case, since there are huge differentials between universities in terms of access not just to kit (mobile devices, laptops, PCs, reliable servers) but also to infrastructure (networks, broadband speeds, liberty to access social networks and so on) and expertise (some academics are much better enabled to support their students through digital and social media than others, for example). This is not just a matter of the wealthiest nations having more of all of these than the less advantaged, since a number of these issues are politically rather than exclusively economically determined. In terms of kit and infrastructure, the near ubiquity of mobile phones and mobile devices in nations without the infrastructure (and reliable power supply) effectively to support fixed IT devices has radically changed some of the assumptions formerly made about access to technology.

Next are some questions to help us consider the extent to which we can say we have shared learning technologies. All of these questions are offered without making value judgements about which is best (or at least aim to do so!):

- Do your students principally write with pens or keyboards? Do they read screens or paper books primarily? Do they physically carry assignments to you or submit electronically? Do your students write notes in lectures? Do you permit/encourage/ban audio/video recording of classes?
- Do students primarily 'access content' (see other chapters for discussion of the issues underlying this seemingly straightforward term) through face-to-face lectures, seminars, lab practicals, studio work, online, through technology-mediated discussions, via Open Access resources or Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)? Are these issues a matter for discussion among your complement of teachers?
- Do your classrooms make it possible for students to access and use the internet, or is Facebook, for example, seen as a distraction from learning and (perhaps futilely) banned?
- Do you permit/encourage the use of Twitter for academic purposes?
- Do you expect your students to bring their own prescribed IT equipment? Do you advocate Apple or Microsoft® or other suppliers? Do you give them laptops? Do you tell them to 'Bring Your Own Device' (BYOD)? Do you work across media and platforms to ensure everyone can access equivalent learning materials?

- ▶ Are your teaching staff qualified, enthusiastic advocates for using technology to support learning? Are they techno-tentatives? Refuseniks?
- ▶ Do you use an assessment management system across the university for alignment of assignments to learning outcomes, submission and return of work, recording and presentation to exam boards of marks? Or do you rely on hard copy approaches?
- ▶ Is communication to and between staff (plans, policies, developments, initiatives) mainly done face-to-face in meetings and committees, by telephone and voicemail, or paper-based memos and documents, or using email, departmental bulletin boards, text messages for important snippets of information, email attachments for longer documents, and so on?
- ▶ How do staff mostly contact students when necessary, and vice versa, about issues such as changes to class venues, cancellations, tutorial appointments, assignment briefings, deadlines, marks/grades, and other such information? By mail and paper-based memos and notes? At face-to-face group meetings? By individual one-to-one appointments? By notices on boards? By phone? By voicemail? By email? Using text messages? Using Twitter? Using bulletin boards on course or departmental web pages?

### ▶ **Do we have shared learning contexts?**

It certainly is not the case that learning contexts are the same worldwide, although technological advances are whittling away at some of the differences. Class sizes can be highly variable, with lecture rooms holding over a thousand students very common in some nations (see, for example, the good practice account from Egypt in Chapter 4), whereas in others lecturers regard class sizes of over about 60 students as being unacceptable. The trend internationally is, however, strongly towards the massification of higher education: whereas formerly perhaps 5–10% of the age cohort might be expected to study at university, in many nations this exceeds 50%, moving it from a privilege of the elite to a benefit for the many. However, how that benefit is perceived varies from nations where higher education is regarded as a public good, with society benefiting from having a highly educated populace (and hence state-supported), to nations, such as England at the time of writing where higher education is seen principally as a private good leading to higher employability and thus ultimately to a financial lifelong advantage (and hence high fees being charged).

The series of questions in Table 1.2 (pp. 12–13) is designed to enable us to interrogate the extent to which aspects of the learning context which we might regard as ‘normal’ are actually not as ubiquitous as we might imagine. As students studying and staff teaching away from our home nations, we are likely to encounter, on occasions, learning situations very different from those we normally experience. The learning context in which you work is likely to cause you to tick items in either column and also to add modifying/qualifying comments like ‘This applies to most universities in this country, but not all’, ‘It used to be like this until relatively recently’, ‘This is a situation that is currently changing rapidly’ and so on. They are presented here as a way of thinking about different international learning contexts, but sometimes items from both columns may be found concurrently in a given context or nation.

### ► **Do we have shared languages for learning?**

Even when people from nations who share a language (English or Spanish for example) discuss pedagogy, it is not always the case that the words they use mean the same things to them both. Contested terms I’ve come across in the English language which do not automatically translate to different parts of the English-speaking world include:

- **Assessment and evaluation:** in the UK, assessment means the marking and grading of student work and evaluation means the commentaries and the ratings and feedback about teaching given by students, for example, through course evaluations of the National Student Survey. In the US it is usually the other way round. This can cause confusion – for example, when I invited an expert on classroom assessment from the US to speak at a UK Assessment conference! In my experience, in Australia and New Zealand the way they use the terms tends to depend on which side of the Atlantic they use as their principal resource-base.
- **Compensation** in the UK implies the regulatory framework through which students who for reasons of illness or due to other causes miss or fail assignments and can remediate the problem by undertaking re-sit examinations or alternative tasks. It can also be implemented on rarer occasions when the student’s overall work can be deemed to have demonstrated that they have achieved a standard that merits the award, and they are given an *aegrotat* (from the Latin *s/he is ill*), meaning an award may be given without further work if the student is deemed likely to

**Table 1.2** Questions relating to international work contexts

Aspects	Do your students:	Or do they?
Curriculum	Study a generic curriculum at undergraduate level as at the University of Melbourne in Australia, where specialisms are pursued at post-graduate level, or undertake Liberal Arts programmes as is the case in many US institutions?	Specialise from the first year of study in higher education, e.g. Law, Medicine, English Literature?
Gender mix	Study in single-sex environments as in Saudi Arabia?	Study in mixed-gender environments as in Europe (although some subject areas e.g. Physics and Nursing may be taught in de facto single-sex groups where there are few applicants other than from the dominant gender)?
Inclusivity	Study where any disabled students are protected against discrimination on the grounds of disability, as with the UK Special Educational Needs and Disability Act?	Experience direct or indirect discrimination as was being challenged in Indonesia in 2014? ( <i>THES</i> , 20–26 March 2014, p. 18).
Institutional size	Study in small higher education institutions (5,000 students or fewer)?	Or large ones (30,000+ students)?
Retention	Mostly drop out (retention of less than 50% of those who start undergraduate programmes)?	Mostly complete? Are your national attrition rates relatively low (less than 15%)?
Curriculum	Study curricula that are mandated at a national level?	Study curricula that are devised at an institutional level, with considerable local autonomy over issues like validation, quality assurance, integration with professional body requirements, nature and scope of assessments and so on?
Proportion entering higher education	Represent up to 50% of school leavers as in Ireland?	Represent a minority of the age cohort?
Financial arrangements	Study without fees for home students for undergraduate study as in Scotland? Get financial support for other expenses e.g. living costs, accommodation, travel from home?	Pay substantial fees for undergraduate study as in the US and England?

Qualifications of teaching staff	Experience (mainly) being taught by permanent senior academics including lecturers and professors?	Mainly experience being taught by Graduate Teaching Assistants, Doctoral Students, part-time and sessional teachers?
Training for teaching staff	Experience being taught by academics who are normally expected to have training in how to teach and/or accreditation and/or CPD expectations as in UK?	Study in an institution where there are no expectations of training or accreditation for university teachers, so long as they are appropriately qualified in their subject areas (e.g. Masters degree/ Doctorate)?
Estate and services	Have on-site catering? If so, is it subsidised? Do they have social learning spaces in which to do group work and individual tasks informally? Are your lecture theatres comfortable and well equipped? Are your teaching rooms heated/air conditioned with enough seats for all students, good sight lines and audibility? Is the estate spacious and landscaped?	Study on a university estate offering basic learning facilities only?
Learning resources	Have to buy all their own books and learning materials, IT equipment and devices? Are they expected to BYOD (Bring Your Own Devices)?	Have access to an extensive and up-to-date library containing books and other resources? Do they have ready electronic access to texts and journals on site/at home? Do they have access to loan laptops?
Classroom equipment	Learn in classrooms which contain fairly basic equipment (blackboard, whiteboards etc.)? Is maintenance of equipment and spaces a low priority?	Learn in classrooms equipped with effective audio-visual devices (microphones, data projectors, personal response systems ('clickers'), audio loops for hearing impaired students, connection points for electronic devices for each student etc.)? Are laboratories and other specialist learning spaces including studios well equipped and well maintained?
Political context	Study on campuses which are frequently disrupted by civic disturbances, warfare and so on? Do your students (and staff) feel safe on campus and travelling there?	Study on normally undisrupted campuses, with a calm atmosphere of mutual tolerance?
Status of being a student	Regard being a student as a right, and see themselves as customers?	Regard being a student as a privilege?