

## **Book Review**

### **Ashton, S. and Stone, R. (2018) *An A-Z of Creative Teaching in Higher Education*. Sage Publishing.**

#### **Dr Chris Little**

Teaching Fellow and Learning Developer, Keele University

Corresponding author: [c.w.r.little@keele.ac.uk](mailto:c.w.r.little@keele.ac.uk)

Early on in this book, the authors establish a tone of disruption and criticality. Here, the authors utilise terms such as “teacher” instead of “lecturer” and “facilitation” instead of “delivery” in order to challenge some of the underlying “baggage” associated to certain terms in the scholarship of teaching and learning. The prelude sets an exciting tone and this is what good teacher/lecturer education should be — challenging, disruptive, exciting and with a knowing acknowledgement of the contexts we all work in.

The first chapter (prior to the A-Z chapters beginning) thanks and acknowledges colleagues, students, while namechecking the “right” people (Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1991; Wingate, 2015; amongst others) and establishing their credentials. They also note that topics such as inclusivity and technology-enhanced learning are not to be dealt with in isolation but cross-cut through all aspects of the work — a really pleasantly joined-up intention.

This book features a substantial number of chapters — 26 chapters, plus an introductory section. As such, the review of the book will feature general comments on the whole book and several reviews of specific chapters. It is worth noting however, at the outset, that each chapter contains reflective exercises which are designed to drive your own thoughts around teaching practices on further and a number of worked examples of how to apply content to your own practice. Chapters come in a variety of forms ranging

from more traditional types to back-and-forth dialogues, transcripts from imagined lectures and assumption hunts (Brookfield, 2005).

### **Chapter highlights**

**A is for Active learning** — Here active learning means active, not exclusively *physically active* which is often a common misconception amongst educators — students *can* be actively involved when participating in a standard lecture. The ethos here is really that we have a responsibility to encourage action beyond simply encouraging students to try and write down every word we say.

**D is for Design** — The authors posit three concepts to encourage deeper thinking about planning — design science, learning design and universal design for learning. These concepts are briefly, but sufficiently, covered in one page leading reflections upon how we ensure learning drives technological change rather than the other way around, how we ensure learning is designed systematically but also creatively and how our learning, and learning spaces, are open and accessible for all. Regardless of which model or mode you adhere to, the ethos presented here is simple — plan beforehand rather than adopting a reactive approach whereby you “retrofit” learning spaces and resources. These sentiments are refreshingly caveated with the simple knowledge that not all outcomes are foreseeable at the time of planning, not all student groups are the same and not all teaching spaces are under our control. The reflections in this chapter are particularly useful and comprehensive, offering practitioners a huge range of critical questions to prompt further critical reflection (pp. 28-31).

**J is for Joy** — There are some interesting ruminations on how joyous teaching can be transformative for both learner and teacher. We are encouraged to demonstrate appreciation and affirmation of learner input, acknowledgement of all successes, large or small, curiosity and an openness

to frank conversations. There was also an interesting note here on humour and, while it can be a great leveller and rapport-builder, it can also be destructive and excluding if used insensitively — it is refreshing to see this written down.

**N is for No One Excluded** — This felt like an important chapter in the book. Here, the dangers of targeting disadvantaged groups are discussed along with the perils of thinking all disadvantaged groups are covered by the 2010 Equality Act, when they are not — the example of white working-class boys is given. The authors discuss not a BAME/BME attainment gap, but a white attainment advantage. It is this sort of paradigmatic shift that is evident throughout not just this chapter but the whole book and is refreshing to hear.

**W is for Wellbeing** — Again, a refreshing angle is taken, with staff wellbeing given pretty much the same prominence as student wellbeing. Important discussions are had around how the statistics for wellbeing are worse for staff and students who are female, part-time or who have a disability. This chapter brings together current debates and chimes with the recent work of scholars such as Morrish (2019). I also found it refreshing to see discussions around how being available/responsive all the time, regardless of time and day, places undue pressure on colleagues to do the same and potentially hinders the development of student resilience. This was a really well-handled chapter with several links to important documents and research that should give insight to any practitioner, regardless of experience.

Elsewhere there are excellent examples of how to use questioning to “activate” your students’ prior understanding and knowledge (p. 19) and how using questioning can model and promote an inquiry-based approach to teaching, which should or might inspire an inquiry-based approach to learning and knowledge construction in learners. Similarly, this commitment to

encouraging an openness in learners is echoed in sentiments surrounding internationalisation (pp. 61-67) and assessment-as-caring (pp. 152-158).

I do wonder at times if the leaning on theorists such as Foucault in particular chapters may hinder the effectiveness of this text with particular groups of practitioners. These theorists are not the easiest to read for those of us who are roughly from the same disciplinary area. For those who may never have encountered such verbose theoretical language around teaching, these sections, found throughout the book, may be a little alienating.

I would, however, like to draw particular attention to a brilliant example of reflection for any early career educators reading this or those who support trainee HE educators in their practices (pp. 89-90). In a chapter around listening or noticing, the authors guide readers through a series of things that happen regularly to those of us teaching (students on phones, a particular clique not engaging, etc.). They then give practical options for each situation and a comprehensive list of critical thoughts on these issues. This is, in short, a perfect page to show to trainee educators who may be new to writing critical reflections — well worth a look!

Overall, this is a really useful book for experienced-practitioners looking to improve their teaching or those just starting out in higher education teaching. The A-Z structure can feel a little frustrating at times as some chapters are so brilliant, you wish they would expand even further on the topics therein. Nevertheless, each chapter features fantastic prompts for further critical reflection, regardless of the stage of your career, and an absolute treasure-trove of references to drive further learning.

## References

Brookfield, S. (2005). *The power of critical theory for adult learning and teaching*. Maidenhead: Oxford University Press.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Seabury.

Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Morrish, L. (2019). *Pressure vessels: The epidemic of poor mental health among higher education staff*. HEPI Occasional Paper, 20.

Wingate, U. (2015). *Academic literacy and student diversity: The case of inclusive practice*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.