

BOOK REVIEW

Original Title: Teaching for understanding at university: Deep approaches and distinctive ways of thinking

Author: Noel Entwistle

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This book was written mainly for teachers in university departments, although it would also be valuable for research students. I read this book from the perspective of a researcher in the particular field who is trying to see “where we are” concerning teaching and learning in HE. The book provides a comprehensive and thorough look at the field of learning and teaching that smoothly brings together educational psychology, pedagogy and education. Throughout the book, the theory and the empirical findings are intertwined comprehensively and the research findings provide a sound basis for the theoretical and practical suggestions for teaching for understanding. Entwistle’s suggestions for teaching for understanding bring to the current literature a fresh pedagogic theoretical look and are thoughtfully accommodated in a scholarly

perspective on learning and teaching. Such a perspective brings together the deep knowledge of the subject and tutors' readiness to reflect on particular issues relating to teaching and learning within their own discipline, also taking into account their own experiences and how students go about learning in their particular subject area. On top of this, the author also raises the issue of an academic context where supportive leaders provide the conditions for forms of teaching that encourage students' understanding.

The book could be seen as a pedagogy-oriented book that belongs to the theoretical tradition of "the students' perspective on learning and teaching", drawing from research into educational psychology. The author's perspective is fully informed by modern psychology and provides evidence for a complex picture of the effect of teaching on learning that brings students' understanding up front. The perspective adopted by the author, goes beyond the practices involved in teaching usually pointed out in the pedagogy literature. It involves not only how knowledge and ideas are made available to students and how evidence is used and ways of thinking are developed, but also what approaches to learning students develop in tackling academic work. The influence of teaching goes hand in hand with assessment, feedback, workload, and the extent to which assessment procedures reward students' efforts towards understanding or towards memorisation. In addition, concepts like 'interest' and 'empathy' are used to provide insights into teaching for understanding.

Throughout the book, the direct and indirect influences of teaching on learning are comprehensively discussed within the psychological perspective of learning and in relation to "approaches to learning" (developed in educational psychology within the tradition of the "students' perspective on learning and teaching"), and to the nature of

academic understanding and how this becomes feasible in different disciplines. Approaches to learning are seen in relation to approaches to teaching and are further discussed in the context of how teaching for understanding takes place in different fields. The heuristic model of teaching and learning suggested in the book indicates a research-based theoretical model with aspects of teaching that encourage thinking and understanding and involve emotional elements like interest, excitement, empathy.

Although the book comes to an end with a comprehensive chapter on monitoring the effectiveness of teaching, drawing on a major British research project using a questionnaire, along with group interviews, to reveal students' experiences of learning environment in relation to their approaches to studying, the writer draws attention to the idea that the 'disposition to understand for oneself' expands the notion of a deep approach. "This idea goes beyond a deep approach by including a continuing willingness to direct effort towards understanding, and an alertness to whatever might contribute to deepening it further. The academic understanding that students develop has to be expressed in terms of accepted knowledge and the conversations used in describing it. But the activity of organizing understanding in one's own way remains crucial, if it is to become firmly rooted and, above all, easy to use in the future. That future perspective becomes increasingly important as students move out into a world of 'supercomplexity' (p. 181)".

This idea, and the notion of 'knowledge objects' (entities developed by students during their attempts to reach a personal understanding that have a clear structure, while retaining flexibility and interrelatedness), suggest the continuing effects of individual differences on learning. The holistic quality of the experience of the

knowledge objects suggests the importance of teachers stressing the interconnections that exist within a topic and also how students can be encouraged to develop a dialogue both internally, and with others, as a way of bringing together ideas from many sources that could enhance their existing understanding. Such a perspective meets the ongoing discussion on the development of thinkers, the inter-subjectivity in learning and also the relational nature of learning either in terms of dialogic understanding or in terms of a ‘meeting of minds’ [an idea that has been introduced subsequently by Karagiannopoulou & Entwistle (2013)], which is seen as a relational experience that brings together cognitive and affective elements in learning. The tutors’ contribution to creating interrelatedness and interconnections between notions and conceptions plays an important part in the students’ growing awareness of the nature of knowledge and epistemological development (Hofer, 2001), while also contributing to Barnett’s (2000) concerns about preparing students for an uncertain future. ‘Thinking in relation’ to the tutor’s ideas enables the student to come to terms with different thinking paths, involving the exploration of both similarities/sameness and differences/diversity, that lead to students’ intellectual development and their engagement with the values and norms of the discipline in supporting personal development (Baxter-Magolda, 2009; Karagiannopoulou & Entwistle, 2013).

The book suggests that effective teaching on understanding depends, above all, on teaching being seen not just from the perspective of the subject specialist but also from that of the student and so lecturers need to know what learning processes and strategies are necessary for a deep approach to be encouraged in the topic being taught, and this perspective is thus important within the initial training of lecturers. Presenting a holistic

perspective for teaching and learning, the book presents a narrative for teaching and learning in which they become integrated, while taking into account the fact that students leaving university move out into a world full of uncertainties and change. From this perspective, the role of the university is to develop active citizens, and cultivate students' disposition for understanding for themselves, as critical thinkers and efficient learners in an environment where tutors appreciate their way of thinking, empathize with their difficulties and create space for students to develop their own voices.

The narrative the author presents does not consist of a “neat, little study” but rather draws on different traditions, perspectives, findings and theoretical and practical aspects of learning. It provides an overall picture of teaching and learning in higher education and a narrative about ways and practices that enhance teaching for understanding in different disciplines. This is a valuable tool in a society that needs the university more than ever. In an academic society where uncertainty and unpredictability dominate, there is a prominent need, more than ever, for students to gain knowledge of the epistemological foundations and the inner logic of their subject that allows them to formulate their own insights, to contribute their own suggestions, to develop their own understandings and to engage in their own actions. In order for students to imbue their learning acts with their own experience and feelings and develop a disposition for understanding for themselves, tutors need to act as scholars of teaching, changing their way of thinking about teaching and learning towards “Teaching for Understanding at University”.

Noel Entwistle has been at the forefront of research and thinking in the field of teaching and learning in higher education for over forty years, and he uses this experience in this book to provide a lucid insight into the nature of university teaching and how it affects students' ability to build up their own ways of understanding academic subjects. I believe it makes an important contribution to this literature when university education is facing increasing pressures to demonstrate its importance and relevance to society.

References

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