CHALLENGING CONCEPTIONS OF TEACHING: SOME PROMPTS FOR GOOD PRACTICE

http://www.osds.uwa.edu.au/other_services/publications/herdsa/conceptions

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In recent years, considerable attention has been paid to the quality of teaching in higher education, and indeed Governments and institutions, have channelled large amounts of money into improving practices. In 1989, HERDSA (a professional association dedicated to the improvement of teaching and learning quality) published a Checklist on Valuing Teaching, but its focus was on the responsibilities of institutions, rather than individual academics.

This present document has been prepared with the needs of individual teachers - mainly undergraduate lecturers, tutors and demonstrators - in mind. Based on a large body of research literature, and on considerable 'hands on' experience in higher education institutions, this checklist consists of a number of self-check questions - or prompts - that can be used by individual teachers or by course teams and other groups to think about their practice, not just in the classroom, but across the range of teaching-related activities. Not every question will be relevant to every situation, and even when they are relevant, they have to be interpreted in your particular context. Similarly, these questions cannot possbily be exhaustive; not only are there a variety of perspectives on good teaching but a lot more is known about effective teaching than can be conveyed in a few short pages.

Despite these reservations, the questions should provide a useful and, it is to be hoped, non-threatening introduction to undergraduate teaching in higher education. Some academics who commented on earlier drafts stated that they felt "overwhelmed," "intimidated" or even "guilty" when they though about the things they failed to do; others reported that they were unsure whether, and if so how, they could build these practices into their own teaching. There are two responses to these concerns. Firstly, although the questions are 'leading', this is not an evaluation or test; it is just an opportunity to challenge yourself or jog your memory. Secondly, there is usually help available, either from HERDSA publications (such as the Green Guide series) or from bibliographies and reading lists, or from staff developers and other colleagues. (HERDSA publications are available from HERDSA, PO Box 516, Jamison ACT 2614, Australia)

The important thing now - whether individually or as a group - is to set aside time to read through the prompts themselves and, when you encounter an area in which you would like to

improve, resolve to do something about it. At the heart of all good teaching is student learning, and your students can only benefit if you actively seek ways to assist them to become better learners.

The Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia Inc. (HERDSA) is a professional association for those involved in teaching and/or research and development in higher education. HERDSA is committed to the improvement of the quality of of teaching and learning.

HERDSA welcome comments and debates on the issues raised by the checklist. Correspondence should be addressed to

Designing for learning

A large part of learning is influenced by the ways that students perceive the course/subject and the expectations of the learner. Formal course/subject requirements, content, teaching methods, assessment policies and practices and the provision of learning resources are all aspects of the teaching design which will have an impact on student learning. Students learn most effectively when these aspects fit together coherently for them, and when they perceive that course content is related to their own interests and values and to their longer term goals.

1. What do you do to inform students of course/subject requirements and help them to understand the reasons for them?
2. When you can, do you find out about student's expectations of your subject and use this information to adapt your curriculum?
3. How do you build upon students' life experience in your subjects and in your teaching?
4. Do you ensure that there is consistency between your subject objectives, the ways you teach and the ways you assess?
5. What opportunities do you give students to choose aspects of course work or assessment which are relevant to their interests and experience?
6. How do you encourage students to make effective use of libraries and other learning resources?
7. Do you take note of the gender, ethnicity and other characteristics of students in your classes and respond to their learning needs?

Relating to students

Learning is not a purely intellectual activity. It also involves ethical and personal

development. For such development to occur there needs to be a climate of mutual respect, trust and open communication in which ethical and personal beliefs can be examined without anxiety. Students need to be able to discuss concerns and misunderstandings with their teacher and with other students.

8. How do you indicate to students that you respect their values and beliefs without necessarily accepting those values and beliefs?
9. In what ways do you assist students to reflect on the values they hold and to develop ethically?
10. What do you do to encourage students to become aware of the potential for learning from each other and the benefits of working in groups?
11. In what ways do you provide personal assistance to students, and/or refer them to the range of resources and agencies which are available to assist them?

Teaching for learning

Students' learning and skill development may be enhanced in many ways. However, in order to learn and develop skills and understanding in a subject or profession students must actively engage themselves. Active engagement is assisted by such things as appropriate role models, precisely structured learning activities and by encouragement to think about learning processes.

12. How do you show students your enthusiasm in the subject?
13. Do you make a conscious effort to be an effective role model for thinking and practice in your profession or discipline?
14. What approaches do you use to induct students into research and other forms of active scholarly involvement?
15. What steps do you take to extend the range of learning activites that you draw upon in your teaching?
16. How do you allow for students preferring to learn and participate in different ways?
17. What approaches do you use to help students to reflect upon their own learning intentions, behaviour, and practice, and to develop effective skills for lifelong learning?
18. What strategies do you adopt to help students look critically at accepted knowledge and practice in your discipline or profession?
19. What work do you include to make explicit the forms of thinking and writing in your discipline, and to help students develop competence in these?
20. How do you frame questions to help students learn effectively?
21. How do you encourage questions from students and respond in a way that facilitates their learning?
22. How do you check that your explanations are clear to students?
23. How do you respond when students indicate difficulties with content, pace, emphasis or style?
24. If necessary, how do you find out about the causes of disruptive behaviour and remedy them?

Assessing and giving feedback

Students' approaches to learning are directly affected by the type of assessment that is used. If

assessment allows for inappropriate rote learning, then some students will respond accordingly. Effective assessment strategies encourage students to engage deeply with the content material of the course. Such strategies need to provide constructive feedback to students as quickly as possible as well as being valid and reliable measures of achievement.

25. How do you help students develop habits of routinely assessing their own work?
26. What strategies do you use to provide immediate feedback to students to help them improve their performance?
27. Do you identify for students the specific strengths and weaknesses of their performance and offer precise feedback about how to improve?
28. In what ways do you ensure that your assessment methods accurately assess the learning outcomes that you intended?

Evaluating teaching

Evaluation of teaching and subjects/course for purposes of development involves collecting information from a range of sources by a range of methods and using that information to make changes. The information collected should include more than outcome measures. since the quality of student learning is related to the way students learn, information from the students on their learning processes can be an important component of evaluation.

29. What forms of information about your teaching and your subjects do you collect on a regular basis?
30. How do you change your approaches to teaching and/or your design of your subjects in the light of the information obtained?
31. How do you find out about the approaches students take to their learning and the ways your teaching and/or your subject design affects that approach?
32. How do you use the information obtained from student assignment and examination work in evaluating your teaching and/or your subjects?

Developing professionally

For the quality of teaching and learning to improve staff should actively extend their knowledge and skills not only in their discipline of profession but also in their teaching. This may involve discussing teaching and learning issues with colleagues, reading about teaching strategies, participating in teaching development activities, reflecting upon teaching practice and engaging in research in relation to it. For senior staff members it may also involve providing developmental support for more junior members teaching in the course and also valuing their ideas.

33. How do you keep your expertise in your own field up to date?
34. How do you stay in touch with developments in teaching in your own discipline or profession?
35. What opportunities do you make to discuss aspects of learning and teaching with colleagues?
36. What opportunities do you make to receive feedback on your teaching from colleagues?
37. How do you go about developing your skills and expertise as a teacher?
38. What strategies do you employ to reflect upon your teaching practices and identify

areas for development?
39. Do you participate in seminars, courses, or conferences which focus on learning and teaching?
40. What reading related to teaching and learning do you do?
41. In what ways do you ensure that your more junior colleagues receive your help and support?

Influencing the context of your institution

Some aspects of teaching and learning are influenced by the institutional, political and social contexts in which they occur. Good teaching involves recognising these influences and responding at the departmental/institution/community level to enhance teaching and learning

42. What opportunities do you create to discuss with students the wider conditions that affect their learning?
43. In what ways do you contribute to decision-making processes in your institution in order to enhance teaching and learning?
44. In what ways do you maintain and develop communication with your colleagues who teach related subjects in your department/division?
45. How do you ensure that your institution is using a comprehensive approach to teaching achievement for the purposes of tenure, promotion and developmental review?
46. Do you make use of your professional association to raise issues of curriculum concern for the discipline?
47. In what ways do you maintain your familiarity with national or local policy directions, monitor effects on teaching and learning, and voice your concerns in appropriate forums?