

Resource Review by Barbara Thomas, University of Bolton

Name of reviewed item:	On Becoming an Innovative University Teacher (Second Edition)
Author(s) / Editor(s):	John Cowan
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Introduction

One of the difficulties staff face on starting to develop as teachers, and in this case as “Innovative Teachers”, is to make and understand the shift between their expertise in their specialist subject with its underpinning theories into that of the pedagogic theory which underpins teaching. Following on from the popular first edition of the same title John Cowan has embedded his HE experience by presenting us with a book which offers a practical approach to support staff in helping students become effective learners. This is achieved through setting out a number of questions and offering experiences and approaches to support the resolution or at least different ways of approaching those questions. The key difference in this edition is the focus on the “why” rather than “how” approach making “reflection for, in and on” core to the book.

Content

The first 7 chapters focus on reflection and the “why” approach. There is a clear sense of developing reflexivity from its meaning in higher education, what this offers higher education followed by a journey through applying different approaches using models of reflection, the effect of analysis and evaluation on learning and encouraging reflection in students.

The relationship of the Kolb cycle versus the Cowan Diagram is discussed and his personal approach to reflection for, reflection in and reflection on, with roots based in Schönian and Kolbian models, has a more natural relationship to approaches to teaching and learning in Art, Design and Media where the traditional circling Kolb cycle of conceptualisation, active experimentation, experience and reflection is less representative of the continuing exploration and consolidation which Cowan has built into his diagram. A key factor in Cowan is the resonance the approaches he employs have with the experience of working in a subject area where the development of ideas outside known boundaries is encouraged. There is detail about engaging students through the use of reflective cycles and cross references between chapters ensure the reader is reminded of how the present is based on what has been discussed before. He goes on to

discuss relationships and perceptions between the teacher and student and offers a cautionary note about making assumptions about students (including overseas students) and reminds us later about the key qualities of effective teaching – empathy, regard and congruence.

The book then moves to look at how ideas for teaching can be adapted to suit an individual and leads us into “why” and “how” innovation in teaching should happen and the evaluation of that innovation. The transferability through application of this framework is shared and referenced to Constructive Alignment (Biggs) and how staff/students develop an understanding of what staff hope students will achieve. Throughout this section there is a recognition, articulated through personal thoughts, that there may be other ways of doing things but that any change is a major challenge for staff who will be dealing with higher level outcomes in curricula and managing information rather than skills.

A strength of the personal approach which Cowan uses is to refer to methods, in what has traditionally been a theoretical approach, to support ideas and development in teaching and learning. There is reference to the concerns from staff about a theoretical approach outside the ‘comfort zone’ of personal disciplines. The links to staff development and accreditation of teaching programmes require us to review the learning factors which mitigate against the introduction of new teaching methods.

The book also recognises that the broader range of student abilities will require a need for innovative assessment approaches as part of overall innovation. This is further explored in the use of self assessment as a tool for learning and methodology for action. This is further developed as a methodology for action research going beyond feedback and evaluation and the value of these approaches in self evaluation.

Chapter 11 introduces us to other theories and references and useful readings from key texts relating to specific issues to which he has applied his model of reflection, the pedagogic literature linked to current thinking on student learning.

Conclusion

The book is grounded in personal experience linked to models of learning and pedagogy. It addresses the individual who wishes to start or continue with reflective engagement in educational development. Although not subject specific there is much to recommend this book, it is practical in its approach, setting out clear guidelines within each chapter on how staff can help students become effective learners. It recognises the right of the reader to disagree and define their own personal approach, enabling the choosing of individual approaches which is a particular strength of the approach Cowan takes.

Arguably this approach may be obvious but for new staff, joining pre-determined and situated groups this book offers an opportunity to review their teaching and learning methodologies. The practical approach to reflection – what is it for and how teaching develops from this make it easier for the reflection to happen and leads the reader to want to investigate the pedagogy of learning and teaching. This is a very personal reflection on the experience and journey of supporting students through

developing innovation grounded in practice and which is about a university teacher who goes the extra mile in supporting the student learning experience. Throughout this book Cowan's approach to teaching, learning, listening and understanding provides the motivation to improve. The final chapter brings together those aspects he has chosen to reflect upon throughout the book as a very personal approach – it is always about more rather than less.