

Resource Review by Jonathan Hewett, City University

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Author(s) / Editor (s):	Paul Ashwin (ed)
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Conference participants were discussing the importance of encouraging experienced academics to develop their teaching. One rose to say: “Some say they have 20 years’ experience of teaching – but in reality they have only one; they have simply repeated it each of the following 19 years.” That remark came from Lewis Elton, a leading figure in the development of teaching and learning in HE, and whose work underlies much of this book. (He was also honoured by a Lifetime Achievement Award by the *Times Higher* in 2005).

The title – *Changing Higher Education* – hints at a double meaning. It describes many of the changes that have affected learning and teaching in HE over the past 30 years or so, as well as considering how they might evolve in the future. More actively and engagingly, its authors also offer pointers for staff wishing to examine and change how they facilitate students’ learning.

In his introductory chapter setting the framework for the rest of the book, Paul Ashwin highlights the huge changes that HE has undergone in recent decades. It is not only about the growth of universities, student numbers and diversity, nor confined to policy and funding issues. These are important and have an impact on teaching and learning, but perhaps the most fundamental shift Ashwin charts is a shift in focus (in thinking and research) from “what the teacher did and how they [sic] organised the curriculum for students” to “how students experience their learning environment”.

Against this background, eight chapters go into more thematic detail to cover the development in HE of three main areas: students’ learning; learning technologies; and teaching. An underlying coherence is formed by the connection the authors share with Lewis Elton: they have all been his students and/or colleagues, and draw on his invaluable research and development in this field.

“Aren’t we all learner-centred now?” asks David Boud, who shows how ‘learner-centred’ has meant different things to different people. Combining research

findings and his own experiences, he argues that teaching and learning should be viewed “within its broader context and network of social relations” – including where power lies and how it is exercised.

Academics have long wielded power over students through assessment – but we may be missing out if we fail to use participative forms of assessment – essentially self- and peer-assessment, individually and in groups. Vivien Hodgson uses examples from learning sets and online discussions to argue that it can encourage critical and creative thinking more effectively than traditional forms of assessment. That rings true from my own experience of peer assessment and group work, although both need careful attention to the quality of feedback.

The learning of postgraduate research students is the theme of another chapter. I admit to less experience in this field, but it seems this has been true of too many established supervisors! Twenty years on, “the loud cries of the few stalwarts devoted to trying to improve the learning/support of PG research students” have only begun to be heard, says Pam Denicolo. She fears that funding constraints will lead institutions to lay new courses as a veneer on established practice.

The impact of increasing numbers of non-traditional learners is outlined clearly by Will Bridge. What struck me was their influence on teaching and learning for the whole university population – through greater use of APEL (assessment of prior and experiential learning), for example, and the need to deal with wide variations in knowledge when students start a course. Many non-traditional learners also have plenty to offer, such as input from their life and employment experience; let’s make better use of this potential.

Diana Laurillard’s chapter provides a superb introduction to e-learning. She notes how learning quality has often lost out to other drivers of change in this field – and makes a powerful pedagogical case for paying it due attention. As part of her argument, Laurillard shows how poorly equipped academic professionals tend to be as teachers, rather than as researchers. David McConnell concentrates on networked e-learning, touching on key issues faced by learners, such as the social context, collaboration, design and assessment.

Two chapters concentrate on the development of teaching, but with themes of particular relevance to teachers as learners. One shows how and why professional teaching status (and accreditation) has developed in HE – a theme that Liz Beaty weaves effectively with academic identity, changes in HE, and government policy. In the other, Lorraine Stefani outlines interesting debates centred on the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). How far do academics understand what it means to take a scholarly approach to learning and teaching, for example? Crucially, she addresses the role of educational development and the difficulties of placing its role in institutions generically or by discipline.

In a concluding chapter, Ashwin sets out two scenarios and four questions that draw on the developments charted by his fellow authors. His “bleak future” is dominated by isolation and alienation, while his “bright future” involves integration and critical engagement. Ashwin’s four key questions – to ask in a critical examination of the development of learning and teaching – concern the values and purposes of underlying models of learning and teaching; collective or individual activity; power relations; and models of change.

Its cover blurb claims this book offers “an insightful framework through which to understand and question current and future developments in learning and teaching in HE”. This is an ambitious and wide-ranging agenda for a slim volume (152pp), but one that it addresses directly and effectively.

For newer teaching staff, *Changing Higher Education* provides a valuable and concise introduction to contemporary debates in teaching and learning, usefully set in the context of developments in recent years. This is not a ‘how to do it’ book for lecturers, but its top-quality contributors include plenty of references to follow up; its pithy content add value for others, too. It would remain unopened, I fear, by Elton’s academic who has taught the same thing in the same way for 20 years.