

Book Review

Developing Expertise for Teaching in Higher Education: Practical Ideas for Professional Learning and Development.

Edited by Helen King, 2022, London and New York: Routledge, 253pp., £96.00 (Hardcover) ISBN 97810320566999 (Hardcover).

What does it mean to be a good teacher in higher education? Universities are awash with indications of ‘excellence’, from teaching awards (student-led or centrally chosen) to evaluation exercises. Universities in the UK are largely judged through government-led ‘Excellence’ frameworks – the Research Excellence Framework on one side, and the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework on the other. Educational research has responded to this by examining themes such as how best to evaluate the development and training teachers receive, what affects the numerical scores students give to teaching, and how teachers themselves perceive excellence. However, as Helen King notes in the introduction to this volume, so-called ‘teaching excellence’ is both constantly cited and poorly defined.

King’s collection provides a welcome new angle on the issue, offering a variety of perspectives that have in common a desire to explore the complexities of the ‘messy, human’ business of teaching and learning. Emerging from a 2020 symposium on [expertise – find real title], the collection brings together practical and theoretical explorations of what it means to be an expert teacher in the 21st century university. A unifying theme is the replacement of ‘excellence’ with ‘expertise’: King (2022) explains that while ‘excellence’ is ‘by definition, achievable by only a few’, the term ‘expertise’ connotes a ‘dynamic journey [of] processing and experimenting’ – something to which all teachers can aspire (p. 2).

The collection is divided into four parts: perspectives on expertise for teaching in higher education, pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), professional learning for higher education teaching and the artistry of teaching.

Part 1 outlines three key elements that help us understand expertise as it applies to university educators. King uses the first chapter to outline ‘expertise’ in more detail, including its three constituent elements – pedagogical content knowledge, professional learning and artistry – which correspond to the book’s other three parts. Leonardo Morantes-Africano outlines a model for critical reflection that combines enhancement with ethical considerations, moving discussion beyond ‘what works?’. Charlie Reis uses a text from 4th-century BCE China as a prompt to consider another dimension of expertise, conceptualising it as an opening up of ‘spaces between’, where increased ability to see options opens up teachers’ practice to innovation. Deanne Gannaway reports on an institution’s attempt to build a culture of teacher learning and growth from the ground up, including microcredentials. Beth Pickard provides a welcome challenge to conventional ideas of ‘expertise’, exploring disabled people’s lived experience as a form of legitimate expertise. Finally, Kathryn Kwok and Jackie Potter explore gendered language in students’ nominations of their teachers for excellence awards.

Part 2 adopts Lee Shulman’s term ‘Pedagogic Content Knowledge’ (Shulman, 1986). John Bostock’s chapter reports his research into staff perceptions of this idea and considers

whether ‘dual professional’ is a helpful term for university teachers. Rachel Wood considers the idea of ‘thinking like a lawyer’, in clinical legal education, especially the university law clinic as a liminal space between the classroom and the workplace, and how the law curriculum can better acknowledge this. Zooming out, Rebecca Turner and Lucy Stewart consider how staff in all disciplines develop PCK through reflective practice, exploring areas of challenge and potential progress. Finally, Erika Corradini considers how educational research can help staff engage with PCK, on an individual and institutional level.

In Part 3 the collection turns to professional learning. King begins Part 3 with a chapter on the relationship between ‘professional learning’ and her conception of ‘expertise’, including how to integrate continuous learning into the academic role rather siloing it into ‘CPD’. Alexandra Morgan and Emmajane Milton then consider ‘educative casemaking’ and the value that case studies taken from the messy reality of practice can bring to this professional learning. Warren Code and collaborators round off the part with a collection of vignettes from different institutions, including a fascinating programme for the professional development of postgraduate students in STEM.

Part 4 addresses the ‘artistry of teaching’, what King (2022) calls the ‘intangible characteristics that make expertise recognisable’ (p. 2). Richard Bale considers dramatic improvisation as a key pedagogical skill, and Nick Sorensen continues this theme with a study of outstanding teachers and the improvisational foundation of their practice. Finally, Peter Fossey explores the ‘emotion work’ (drawing on Hochschild, 1979) of teaching, asserting the fundamental power of emotions in the classroom – even negative ones.

This collection will be useful to everyone who wants to make teaching in higher education better, from individuals looking to improve their own practice to those wishing to create an institutional or even sector-wide culture of enhancement. We have known for some time that evaluation is tricky, and the lack of guarantees can make this area dispiriting for those tasked with making tangible improvements. While it is tempting to move further towards ‘hard evidence’ and ‘what works’, the perspectives in this collection show that this may be the wrong direction. While others have also challenged the metricisation of higher education – notably Collini (2012) – this collection strengthens that challenge and shows how educational and staff development might acknowledge the complexity of teaching and learning. Over-reliance on metrics and numbers treats teaching as a rational, and rationalizable, pursuit. In fact, it is messy and human, and this is precisely what makes it so powerful. The nuanced and thoughtful contributions by King and her collaborators in this collection offer a path for us to begin acknowledging that in our practice as educators, educational developers and institutional leaders.

References

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