

Hard-to-reach students, or hard-to-reach lecturers? A personal reflection

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Abstract

This piece reflects on the challenges of engaging 'hard-to-reach' students in higher education, urging a shift in focus towards relational teaching. It highlights the importance of building human connections and creating inclusive learning environments. The piece emphasises that universities must provide the necessary support and resources for lecturers to foster genuine human relationships, as learning is most effective when students feel valued and connected.

Keywords: hard-to-reach students, relational teaching, engaged pedagogy, inclusive learning environments

Introduction

Understanding 'hard-to-reach' students

In higher education (HE), the term 'hard-to-reach' is commonly used to describe students who appear disengaged, unresponsive to conventional teaching methods or less likely to participate in institutional support systems (Thomas, 2012). Thomas offers a useful and nuanced definition, describing these students as individuals who, owing to social, economic, cultural, educational or personal factors, are less likely to access or benefit from the full spectrum of university life. However, the concept is not without controversy. Some academics, such as Lightbody (2017), argue that the label reflects a student-blaming narrative, as it places the burden of engagement solely on students while overlooking structural or relational barriers. Marie *et al.* (2017) take this critique further, by questioning whether it is the students who are truly hard to reach or whether educators and institutions create the conditions that make us – the educators – inaccessible. These different perspectives invite a deeper reflection, not just on who is disengaged, but why, and on what role educators might play in shaping this dynamic. In this personal reflection, I explore how my own teaching practice has evolved in response to these questions and how shifting the focus from student deficits to relational pedagogy has helped me to provide better support to those who remain on the margins of classroom engagement.

Relational teaching and engaged pedagogy

In my teaching, I have tried to respond to this challenge by fostering inclusive, collaborative and student-centred learning environments. Drawing on Clarke and Ashhurst's (2018) approach, I regularly incorporate group work and interactive tools such as LEGO Serious Play and Mentimeter to create participatory settings that bridge theory and practice. These activities are grounded in experiential learning theory, particularly Kolb's (1984) experiential learning

cycle, which proposes that effective learning arises through a continuous process involving four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. By engaging students in this cycle – starting with a hands-on activity or shared problem, encouraging them to reflect on the experience, linking it to theoretical frameworks and then applying their insights – I aim to create deeper, more transformative learning. This model, as also supported by Martin-Cruz *et al.*, (2021), aligns closely with my belief that learning is most powerful when students can connect abstract ideas to lived, collaborative experiences. In practice, I have found that this approach particularly benefits students who might otherwise remain silent or disengaged, helping them develop confidence and a stronger sense of agency in the classroom.

Yet, despite these efforts, I still notice a few students who remain distant. Even group work and interactive tools do not always reach them. Rethinking my whole approach, I recently found myself drawn to the work of Marie *et al.*, (2017) at UCL, who suggest turning the question around: could it be that we lecturers are sometimes hard to reach?

Not long ago, I was a student myself. I was often seen as quiet, although I was fully engaged. My silence was not because of a lack of interest; it came from not feeling that I fully belonged in the space. As an international student from a very different academic and cultural background, I struggled with invisible challenges – unfamiliar norms, unwritten rules and the emotional weight of being the first in my family to study abroad. I battled language confidence and cultural dissonance; I often felt unsure and lost, though I rarely spoke up. These forms of hidden labour and emotional burden are well documented in McKinley's (2024) exploration of international student 'belonging'.

These early challenges have shaped how I teach today. I now see that silence often comes not from lack of engagement but from fear: fear of making mistakes; fear of being judged; fear of exclusion. Recognising this has changed the way I look at my students.

Looking back, I also remember the lecturers who made a real difference to me. They had time. They would stay after class, talk to us individually and create a genuine sense that we mattered. It was not elaborate interventions or flashy technology that made me feel welcome – it was a simple, basic human connection. And that, I believe, made all the difference. Human connection, more than any specific method or tool, was what mattered. This resonates with bell hooks' (1994) concept of 'engaged pedagogy', which advocates a teaching practice grounded in love, mutual respect and the holistic well-being of both students and educators. Hooks argues that learning should be a liberatory experience, where "*teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualisation that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students*" (hooks, 1994, p.15). In this view, connection is not a soft, optional extra; it is a radical, ethical stance that transforms the classroom into a space of care, presence and co-creation. When students feel genuinely seen and heard, they are more likely to trust, engage and thrive.

For hard-to-reach students, the literature increasingly points toward relational approaches – building trust, fostering belonging and encouraging authentic communication (Felten and Lambert, 2020). Moving towards a connection-based teaching style means shifting the classroom culture in order to prioritise meaningful interactions, empathy and co-creation of learning experiences. Simple things make a big difference: starting dialogues instead of monologues; making time for small talks that help students feel seen; showing real interest in

their backgrounds and goals; designing curricula that represent a wide range of perspectives. Inclusive teaching is central to this.

Inclusive practices and the role of institutional support

As Hockings (2010) argues, inclusive teaching is not just about offering different options; it is about being aware of how our methods and classroom dynamics might exclude some students. It calls for reflexivity, questioning our own assumptions and behaviours. I now firmly believe that students will not learn well if they do not like or trust their lecturers. Building human connection is essential, especially for those who might otherwise feel invisible or undervalued. Rita Pierson's famous TED Talk (2013) captures this perfectly: "*No significant learning can occur without a significant relationship*". Pierson argued that students need to know that their teachers believe in them. Learning is most powerful when built on genuine, caring relationships. If we really want to support all students, especially those who struggle to engage, we need to go beyond content delivery; we need to build meaningful relationships, just as Pierson suggested.

But – and this is crucial – building these relationships takes time, space and, importantly, institutional support. Relational pedagogies demand emotional labour and presence, which are often invisible and undervalued in academic workloads. Research by Davidson *et al.*, (2014) suggests that smaller class sizes, protected time for mentoring and opportunities for meaningful student-staff interaction are all linked to improved student satisfaction and engagement, particularly for students from under-represented backgrounds. Similarly, Kahu and Nelson (2018) emphasise the importance of student-staff relationships as a key dimension of student success, noting that sustained interaction and personalised support foster a sense of belonging and motivation.

Yet, without structural recognition and appropriate reward structures, this work risks becoming an unsustainable personal commitment rather than a shared institutional priority. By 'reward structures', I refer to formal recognition systems within HE that value and support the emotional and relational aspects of teaching, such as teaching awards, workload models that account for pastoral care or promotion criteria that recognise contributions to student engagement and inclusion (Bryson, 2014). If teaching excellence is measured primarily by outputs, such as National Student Survey (NSS) or Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) scores or publication metrics, we risk overlooking the human-centred practices that truly transform student experiences. To reach all students, especially those on the margins, we must value not only what is taught, but also *how it is taught* and *how relationships are nurtured* in the process.

Conclusion – a call to action

Maybe, as Marie *et al.*, (2017) suggest, it is time to rethink the label 'hard-to-reach' and instead ask: how might we, as educators and institutions, become more reachable? The true goal of HE is not just to teach – it is to *reach*.

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