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Conceptions of effective teaching in higher education: extending the boundaries

Eileen Carnell*

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This paper examines university teachers’ conceptions of effective teaching. It reports a small illuminatory study of eight teachers. Their narratives identify rich insights. Conceptions of ‘learning through dialogue’, ‘community of learners’ and ‘meta-learning’ emerge as crucial in supporting students’ learning. These conceptions extend understanding of effective teaching in higher education and illuminate how teachers transform their teaching to transform learning. Insights emerge about the importance of social contexts. Theoretical dimensions informing pedagogy, knowledge construction, relationships between teaching and research, and professional learning are congruent: dialogue and collegiality are key. What inhibits teachers’ effectiveness is the ‘performativity’ culture especially setting aside preferred ways of operating as colleagues. A model is constructed to explain opposing standpoints.

Introduction

This paper reports outcomes of a study that considers different ways university teachers conceive effective teaching and ways they develop as effective teachers. It examines supporting and inhibiting factors in the current higher education (HE) climate and seeks to inform debate for raising the status of teaching and improving student learning.

From the mid 1990s the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) implemented several teaching and learning initiatives. The Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund supported this small-scale research study.

Conceptions of teaching and learning in HE

Teachers’ and students’ conceptions of teaching and learning matter for two reasons:

- more sophisticated conceptions lead to ‘higher level’ approaches that is, more complex views of learning (Trigwell & Prosser, 1996);
- a ‘mismatch’ between teachers’ and learners’ conceptions creates difficulties (Chalmers & Fuller, 1996, p. 11).

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Research findings lead to the view that teachers’ and students’ conceptions need to be explicit within the learning process. One, students do not achieve the learning universities claim they ‘provide’ because of the way students view learning and ways teachers view teaching (Chalmers & Fuller, 1996). Two, university students’ conceptual changes are relatively rare, fragile and context-dependent (Ramsden, 1992). Three, an important dimension of teaching scholarship is well-informed bridging between teacher understanding and student learning (Boyer, 1990).

The words teaching and learning cover a range of meanings. In studies with university teachers, Samuelowicz and Bain identify several conceptions of teaching:

- imparting information;
- transmitting knowledge;
- facilitating learning;
- changing students’ conceptions;
- supporting student learning (Samuelowicz & Bain, 1992);
- negotiating meaning;
- encouraging knowledge creation (Samuelowicz & Bain, 2001).

In this list the first three are quantitative, the others qualitative. In quantitative conceptions the teacher is seen as central to the learning process. Teachers decide when and how learning takes place. In qualitative conceptions teaching is seen as changing ways students perceive and use knowledge; teaching involves facilitating learning to develop students’ understanding and ways of interpreting the world (Samuelowicz & Bain, 1992).

Some conceptions of teaching are similar to conceptions of learning HE students’ hold. In Saljo’s research (1979) five conceptions of learning were identified. Marton et al. (1993) added a sixth:

- increasing knowledge;
- memorizing and reproducing;
- applying facts or procedures;
- understanding;
- making sense of meaning;
- personal change.

The first three in this list are quantitative, the others qualitative and range from ‘meagre’ to ‘richer’ conceptions of learning (Watkins, 2001).

Different conceptions are held by different people or by the same person in different circumstances and for different purposes. The learning context is crucial. Students in Marton et al’s study were from the Open University where learning is mostly distant and individual so it is not surprising that there is no mention of learning through collaboration or dialogue.
How university teachers approach their teaching

The ways HE teachers approach their teaching relates to differences in their conceptions of teaching (Trigwell & Prosser, 1996). Those who conceptualize teaching as transferring information see the teacher as pivotal. Those who conceptualize teaching as knowledge construction focus on student learning. Two models of teaching emerge: instruction and construction. Quantitative conceptions are encompassed by the instruction view (passive imbibing of information); qualitative conceptions are encompassed by the construction view (individual sense-making).

In the instruction model learners are seen as passive recipients of knowledge. Teaching stresses cognitive learning and logical, objective, abstract, sequential thinking. The curriculum is fixed. Learners’ and teachers’ roles are distinct. This model encourages dependent learners. Critical thinking is not encouraged (Carnell & Lodge, 2002).

Constructivist theorists include Piaget (1926), Vygotsky (1978), Brown and Campione (1990) who address cognitive, metacognitive and social-emotional aspects of learning respectively. The individual learner’s construction of meaning is central.

A co-constructivist approach is an expanded version of the constructivist model. It relies on dialogue. The responsibility for learning shifts from individuals to emphasize collaboration in co-constructing knowledge (Carnell & Lodge, 2002). In the co-constructivist approach the most ‘desirable view’ is for teacher and learners to share responsibility for teaching and learning (Chalmers & Fuller, 1996, p. 11). This encourages effective learning: activity, collaboration, responsibility and meta-learning (Watkins et al., 2002).

University contexts require richer conceptions of teaching and learning: to enable students to ‘posses a capacity to look at problems from a number of different perspectives, to analyse, gather evidence, synthesize, and be flexible, creative thinkers’ (Aulich, 1990, p. 3). The challenge is of preparing students: ‘not just to cope with this world but to prosper in it and to go on adding to its supercomplex character’ (Barnett & Hallam, 1999, p. 138). In a ‘supercomplex’ world students are faced with ‘alternative frameworks of interpretation’ through which to make sense of the world and to ‘act purposefully’ in it: self-understanding is essential (ibid.).

This paper reports a study of teachers’ conceptions of effective teaching. It suggests previous lists of conceptions of teaching are incomplete. Missing elements include richer conceptions, including, dialogue for learning, learning community and meta-learning.

Aims and method of the research

This research examines conceptions of effective teaching in a small sample of university teachers. It analyses their views of characteristics of effective teaching and what supports and inhibits it. These views help make sense of conceptions of teaching and are used to construct a theoretical model.
A qualitative method based on appreciative inquiry was developed. The roots of appreciative inquiry are in organizational change processes: appreciate the best; envision possibilities; engage in dialogue to generate new knowledge; innovate (Brighouse & Woods, 1999). This approach was chosen as it reflects an appreciative approach to the subject under discussion. It provides opportunities for the researcher and participants to extend their understanding and has the potential to lead to experiments to try out more effective practices.

The method is based on ‘situated constructivism’ (Kanuka & Anderson, 1999) mirroring the substantive issues: knowledge is negotiated socially; everyone has different social experiences. The method highlights effective aspects of teachers’ experiences and avoids a blaming stance. The method recognizes appreciative inquiry’s underpinning assumptions: it avoids focusing on problems; assumes people want to learn purposefully and effectively; recognizes multiple realities; realizes that asking questions is influential; values differences, and understands that language creates our reality (Hammond, 1996).

The interviews focus on teachers’ conceptions of their most effective experiences and what hinders them. The study does not examine practices but conceptions of what teachers consider to be effective. Therefore, there were no observations of practice. The interviews are based more on conversation than questioning (see the Appendix) designed to enable participants to articulate insights about their conceptions of effective teaching experiences.

The taped interviews were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were read several times using the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). Similarities and differences were analysed. Themes emerged. The theoretical dimension developed is grounded in experience and practice.

A draft paper was sent to each participant to ensure that selected quotations reflected their views accurately and that the analysis and argument was based on an accurate understanding of their views. Second meetings took place with five participants. The other three were satisfied with the paper as it stood. The second meetings created a forum for dialogue, an example of the way appreciative inquiry processes generate knowledge about teaching and learning. Changes were incorporated to reflect new understandings.

To extend the appreciative inquiry process the findings were presented at two research seminars as part of a series in institutional research in action within the organisation. These opportunities encouraged a wider group of colleagues to consider their own practices in relation to the findings and discuss insights into teaching across the organisation and from different cultural perspectives. An ongoing group was formed to encourage innovative teaching practices.

Research participants

Eight participants were invited to be involved. They were selected carefully to represent as much difference as possible. For example, they represent a range of
disciplines, one from each of the groups that make up the organisation. All participants are education specialists teaching in different disciplinary traditions in a post-graduate institution. All have teaching backgrounds.

Their experience of HE teaching is very different, ranging from one with three years part time experience to one with 35 years full time experience. Five are full time; three part time.

Among them they teach different programme levels: one teaches the B.Ed. programme as well as an MA; five teach the PGCE as well as MAs, two teach certificate, diploma and MA courses. In addition three of the eight supervise doctoral students. All eight are expected to submit publications for the research assessment exercise (RAE) even though one part timer is appointed on a teaching only contract. Five are involved in personal research to complete a Ph.D. Three have completed Ph.D.s and lead or are part of a research team.

Participants are identified by pseudonyms chosen themselves.

Findings from this study
The results of this small study need to be viewed cautiously. The study does not claim to be comprehensive but connections with themes in other research suggest findings are significant.

Four themes are discussed:

- effective teaching: conceptions and approaches
- characteristics of effective teaching and learning
- what supports teachers in being effective and,
- what inhibits teachers being effective.

Effective teaching: conceptions and approaches
Each interview began with an ‘appreciative inquiry’: an example of an effective teaching experience (see the Appendix). Given their different experiences, I anticipated their conceptions would vary. I expected conceptions would reflect the range identified in other research. However, congruence emerged in participants’ views.

What is striking is that even though teachers were asked to give an example of effective teaching all chose to focus on students’ learning (Table 1). Each participant linked effective teaching and student learning.

These short extracts get to the heart of the teachers’ conceptions; learners are central in the narratives. All teachers focus on learners and what they are doing rather than the teacher and what s/he is doing. Conceptions match qualitative stances described earlier focusing on ‘supporting student learning’ (Samuelowicz & Bain, 1992). Learners are seen as active, resourceful agents. There is a strong emphasis on understanding and interpretation—a student focus (Trigwell & Prosser, 1996).
What distinguishes responses between them and from previous research is the extent of an explicit shift from a constructivist to co-constructivist approach. Distinguishing features include facilitating a community of learners, learning through dialogue and sharing responsibility for teaching and learning. Some teachers make this explicit. Casper uses the term community of learners highlighting learner responsibility. Learners are seen as generative, collaborative and resourceful. Veronica describes the creation of a learning environment emphasizing lively and participatory talk. Natasha identifies dialogue as the means of extending learning.

**Characteristics of effective teaching and learning**

When teachers talked about the *characteristics* of effective teaching there is more divergence. Different priorities emerge (Table 2).

Analysis of these data reveals three characteristics of effective teaching: learning is transparent; dialogue enables learning; a community of learners generates knowledge.

*Learning is transparent*

A strong view among the teachers was that in the context of their teaching the process of learning should be made transparent. Mary talks with students during sessions to consider their learning experiences. Casper highlights the importance for students to think about their own and group learning. He said students need to feel responsible for their learning otherwise they will expect him to generate learning.
Casper focuses explicitly on learning to avoid any mismatch of learning conceptions and approaches. Keith expands on this theme:

There is an invitation in this module about being active, experimenting. Students need to know what the different modes of participation are. It is a reciprocal arrangement. . . . I say to my students when I am in the student role if the presuppositions on which the person is running the session are not explicated it annoys me because there is no explicit agenda. I keep a strong reflexive character and dialogue with students reflecting my theoretical interest in Vygotsky.

Keith suggested if teachers want to create a dialogic community they have to think of the content and pedagogic process to achieve that and make it clear to students: ‘so they see it in dialogic terms rather than one way traffic’. Learning itself is the focus of learning.

Dialogue enables learning

A second view is that learning comes about through dialogue. This is apparent in all accounts. Sandra underscores the importance of promoting dialogue. Mary stresses that talk with students is key. They, like Alice, describe their classrooms as dialogic: ‘There must be talking going on by students. They have to articulate their ideas. It is a dialogic classroom’ (Alice).

The role of dialogue was a strong feature of the interviews. Teachers emphasized that the process of dialogue generates language to talk about the subject. Dialogue prompts reflection, critical investigation, analysis, construction of knowledge. Learners are allowed to experiment with ideas and the group is seen as a resource. Casper’s account shows how dialogue about group learning is an essential part of co-constructivism. Peer dialogue gives learners greater control and responsibility.

Table 2. Characteristics of effective teaching and learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clarity about student experiences and to talk about this with the students, then find out what their experience has been. (Mary)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawing on the learners’ experiences; interaction; understanding the learning needs of individuals. (Natasha)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning at the core; enable students to use their prior learning, empowering them, working from their strengths; enable them to contribute to theirs and everyone else’s learning. (Casper)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Producing new knowledge; drawing on a research base. (Veronica)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawing on personal experience and drawing out knowledge—a combination of the teacher’s knowledge and bringing out knowledge in students. (Joy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoting a growing dialogue; constant evaluation of impact on learners; critical engagement; seeing the bigger picture; participating in a community of enquiry. (Sandra)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong theoretical frameworks and learning theory; clarity of purpose and the need to be open with the students about what’s happening. (Keith)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing subject knowledge; rationale for teaching and learning; language to talk about the subject. (Alice)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Keith suggested if teachers want to create a dialogic community they have to think of the content and pedagogic process to achieve that and make it clear to students: ‘so they see it in dialogic terms rather than one way traffic’. Learning itself is the focus of learning.
Learning is seen as complex and involving everyone. Casper indicates how hierarchies are broken down and boundaries less evident.

* A community of learners generates knowledge

A third view is the importance of developing a sense of community within a teaching context. Sandra emphasizes its importance: ‘I bring to the role a passion about community. This is what is exciting about being a learner, a deep-rooted belief in how much more can be gained in not doing things alone’.

This quotation illuminates a co-constructivist approach where learners are participating in a community. This emphasis is echoed by Alice who observes how her teaching has changed over 35 years:

> The longer you teach the more you teach less but the more students learn. When I first started I was anxious I didn’t know enough so I packed in too many activities and they don’t get what it’s all about. As you get a complete picture you relax more. You can share the rationale and be more open. I introduce peer review. That takes a lot of confidence to handle. Peer review is valuable to get people to share the difficulties of writing. . . . Because I am working with teachers I do try and articulate a lot about the teaching.

Alice describes a shift from teacher responsibility to a community view where learners support each other’s learning.

Sandra, Veronica, Joy and Alice stress the importance of community in generating knowledge. ‘Teachers are learners and learners teachers. This extends to teachers’ views about the links between teaching and research:

> We give them an overview of the bigger picture, not just socializing them into one school of thought. You have to draw on recent research and that is a synthesis of practice and theory which is really valuable. The teachers are not just trainees they are researchers. (Veronica)

Sandra concurred:

> In HE you are in the great position of having much greater access to research and having time to read and explore what is going on internationally. It gives you responsibility to find ways of making research accessible and to create a community of enquirers.

Veronica and Sandra do not see a distinction between what academics and students do. This reflects congruence between a constructivist approach to learning and research. Mary explains:

> There is congruence between my approach to teaching and to research. In my teaching I enable students to construct their own knowledge and my research methodology is about identifying how people understand and make sense of their experiences. I am not going to use a positivist approach.

Veronica, Sandra and Mary model and encourage a research–critical enquiry approach to learning, teaching and research. Whereas, lecturers who regard ‘teaching and research as incompatible or largely unconnected experience teaching
as the transmission of new knowledge’ (Robertson & Bond, 2001, p. 14, emphasis in original).

What supports teachers in being effective?

These university teachers also prefer their own learning experiences to be based on co-constructivist approaches. Mary stated that working with colleagues in a small research group looking at specific issues was a helpful but rare occurrence. She wanted chances to talk about her teaching ‘as it is much more exciting’. Natasha had been involved in an international research project that she found exciting, supportive and extended her knowledge. It increased her confidence and enabled her to change and sustain her teaching approach:

Teaching has to be much more interactive and you have to be confident. You have to accept criticism, disagreement and a number of different views. That approach is harder but with confidence is the ability to say I don’t have the answer for that. (Natasha)

Casper said that support came informally: ‘Things you set up yourself. Being part of a team has been the best way of looking critically at what I do and to think about developments and changes’.

Veronica agrees: ‘One of the most important things is collaboration with people who speak the same language, discussing ideas and having them value what you say’. Sandra said that peer support was ‘absolutely critical’. Joy, who has been in the organisation for the least amount of time, said ‘engagement with other staff would help but we do not have the opportunity to talk about teaching. I am sure that is the way one progresses’.

These views about their own learning are congruent with their views about effective teaching. Opportunities for dialogue and joint research help identify and sustain effective teaching and learning approaches in classrooms.

What inhibits teachers in being effective?

There is considerable congruence in the analysis so far about theoretical dimensions that inform the life experiences of teachers. Their views of pedagogy, knowledge construction, relationships between teaching and research and professional learning are founded on similar values: collaboration and dialogue.

The main tension that emerged from the interviews relate to a ‘performativity’ culture (Ball, 2003). (Ball suggests that ‘performativity’ is a technology, culture and mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change—based on rewards and sanctions.)

The teachers seemed to dwell on ‘performance in research’ as the main conflicting issue. Other demands made on them were not seen as so significant.

This section illuminates two themes: how a ‘performativity’ culture can effect teaching; how teachers react differently to this culture.
‘Performativity’ and teaching

Tensions are produced in a ‘performativity’ culture when external demands and internal values clash. Natasha explains:

Ofsted could adversely affect what and how we teach. *What*—because we are expected to toe a Government line—when we see our role as one which includes critical evaluation and analysis—critical thinking in teachers being a fundamental element of what we try to develop. *How*—because for PGCE courses the ground to be covered is vast and the time spent in school so long there is little time for thinking.

Natasha said that some factors inhibit effective teaching whilst others inhibit the further development of new ideas in teaching and learning:

The research expectations inhibit the development of good teaching and learning practice because of all the time required. Because publishing has higher status than teaching, we don’t dare waste our time thinking about how to improve our teaching. The irony is of course when we publish, it’s not good enough either. (Her emphases.)

The tensions are that while efforts may be appreciated by senior managers for good grades in external assessment exercises they feel criticized for not publishing enough in prestigious journals.

The increasing emphasis placed on research and what seems as an imbalance between the rewards for research and for teaching suggests teaching is a less important activity (Robertson & Bond, 2001). As Joy put it: ‘Research is the only thing that matters. It is the culture and ethos. You cannot progress in any way unless you have a Ph.D. or unless you are a researcher’. As Robertson and Bond (2001) point out this kind of scenario weakens the basis for the unity of research and teaching.

Teachers’ reactions to a ‘performativity’ culture

The new vocabulary of performance (rather than learning) renders some ways of thinking and relating redundant (Ball, 2003). Tensions for teachers clinging on to the ‘old’ ways of relating (ethics of professional judgement and cooperation, Ball, 2003, p. 218) and those embracing the ‘new’ ways of relating (competition and performance) emerge in this study.

Sandra spoke of her resistance to be changed by the culture:

There are tensions in a situation where there is too much to do and these tensions are situated in certain parts of the organization and not in others. Some people are very good at saying no and I don’t want to be like that. . . . I am not going to change as ultimately I have to face my peers.

Elsewhere there are indications of game-playing or ‘cynical compliance’ (Ball, 2003, p. 222). What it means to teach and what it means to be a teacher
(a researcher, an academic) are subtly but decisively changed (op cit., p. 218). Casper explains:

There is a tension that has never been resolved. While the institution talks about the importance of teaching and learning another reality is more important—the RAE. Over the years I’ve taken a pragmatic view: If that’s what they want then that’s what I’ll do. If I’m being brutal the realization is that the teaching will not be rewarded financially or in terms of career development.

There are ‘costs’. If teachers resist aspects of ‘performativity’ they fear their courses will be awarded lower grades. If teachers ‘play the game’ they betray their principles, feel compromised and uncomfortable but are more likely to be promoted:

I haven’t been valued for what I’ve done or for the teaching. I’ve got a Ph.D., been involved in funded research but it isn’t a level playing field. I am expected to produce the same sort of articles for prestigious journals that non-teaching colleagues do. (Veronica)

These expressions of discomfort link with Ball’s (2003) view that authentic social relations are replaced by judgmental relations. People come to think they are valued for their ‘performativity’ alone.

Sandra points to the need for collective resistance to sustain effective approaches. She maintains that pressures of quality assurance and inspection put teachers on the line, forcing them to make explicit the approach they are taking:

As course leader I get more forceful about what we are doing and why and about intellectual rigour. There are certain things we would not give up. Student discussion about teaching and learning here is second to none. But it doesn’t get any Brownie points. ... However, being in a collective situation can sustain you. Collegiality allows you to continue to fight for what you believe is important. Examining your aims and values is the hallmark of any kind of scholarship.

A model to explain these tensions is developed next.

Discussion

A model is constructed to examine areas of congruence and struggle in teachers’ lives illuminating teaching conceptions seldom reported in the literature. It highlights the values and ideologies that underpin different teaching positions.

A model of teaching is formed using two continua—from objective to subjective views about knowledge and from individual to collective views of the teaching approach (Figure 1, adapted from Carnell, 2001).

By considering teaching along two axes objective–subjective and individual–collective four approaches are identified: didactic; cooperative, empowering; community.

The construction of this model provides a framework within which to set out different approaches to teaching in university settings, rather than provide a rigid categorization to handle complexity. The continua are about teaching approaches and how knowledge is seen. The individual–collective continuum is to do with the
process, or dynamics of teaching and learning. The objective–subjective continuum is to do with how knowledge is seen, that is, knowledge is either given or constructed.

In creating this model I do not wish to over-simplify. In practice approaches may overlap and teaching may not ‘fit’ into any one quadrant. It is important to point out that I do not believe that one approach is necessarily more valuable than another, per se. However, the analysis of the data suggest *conceptions* of effective teaching in higher education sit squarely in the subjective–collective quadrant (community).

Each approach implies different emphasis in purpose, means and decision-making (Table 3).

The community approach is evident in participants’ narratives. Learning is complex and contrasts with a straightforward view. Effective learning in the subjective–collective quadrant sees the learner as central; the roles of teacher and learner are blurred. Learners are active and resourceful; learning is transparent, learning comes about through dialogue. Knowledge is constructed through dialogue.

Teaching, learning and research share a symbiotic relationship in this quadrant. This contrasts to the approach at the objective end of the continuum where

![Figure 1. A two-way continuum of teaching](image)
knowledge is transmitted by experts. All themes raised in this paper can be applied to this model:

- conceptions of teaching;
- conceptions of learning;
- views of knowledge;
- views of research;
- what supports teachers’ own learning and what inhibits it.

This model explains that congruence relates to the position held by teachers and how other factors match their stance. Collaboration matches the teachers’ values in this study. Discomfort arises when the external culture conflicts with their values.

The concept of ‘performativity’ sits squarely in the ‘didactic’ quadrant: teachers feel a loss of control, decisions are imposed; there are differences about what is considered important. The pressures of performance and competition clash with teachers’s preferred ways of operating and hinder attempts to sustain effective teaching approaches.

This model draws attention to the creation of a learning community in which knowledge is co-constructed and where the focus is dialogue and meta-learning.

The community dimension

The idea of belonging to a community of learners challenges traditional views about teaching. The community dimension illustrates changing relationships at two levels: between teachers and students and between students and students. Dialogue transforms learning. There is a sense of learning together by talking about their learning, engaging in co-constructive dialogue, focusing on learning about learning.

One definition of a learning community suggests it ‘is a collective which learns together, including about its collective process of learning’ (Watkins, 2004, p. 1). In this definition the focus is on human processes for building social and learning relations. There is agency where learners decide and review; belongingness develops; cohesion emerges; diversity is embraced. Particular processes include: active engagement with community goals; bridge-building to other communities; collaboration to create joint products; dialogue to engage and progress.

The hallmarks that Watkins highlights can be traced in this research. For example, Sandra’s notion of a community of enquiry and Veronica’s view that students are researchers supports the goal of advancing collective knowledge. Casper emphasizes students seeing themselves as resources for learning. There is reciprocal teaching. Sandra’s view is that a more collective stance achieves better outcomes and testifies that people find strength when working together to resist the pressures of accountability.

In Watkins’ definition (2004) a learning community also learns about itself, so reflection (collective) and meta-learning are present. While meta-learning is an
important element in this research less emphasis is given by the teachers to the community learning about itself.

The teaching–research relationship changes within a community through an emphasis on learning–enquiry. The key link between research and teaching is learning (Brew & Boud, 1995). In a community of learners research is understood as a process of inquiry: ‘the ways in which knowledge is generated and communicated’ (op cit., p. 261) rather than a quest for objective knowledge.

**The meta-learning dimension (learning about learning)**

Meta-learning is a concept not widely recognized in HE (Jackson, 2004). It is about helping people connect their thinking about their own learning to actions and behaviours that engage them in learning strategically (Jackson, 2004, p. 391). Watkins usefully distinguishes learning and meta-learning: ‘Learning is the process of creating knowledge by making sense of experience’: ‘Meta-learning is the process of making sense of your experience of learning’ (Watkins, 2001, p. 7). Figure 2 sets this out diagrammatically.

Building meta-learning capacity, Meyer and Norton (2004) argue, is as important as learning about specific subject content, epistemologies and discipline mores. In this study Casper, Alice and Natasha identify their own meta-learning and the development of dialogue between teachers and students to encourage meta-learning.

The contribution of this analysis is the identification of effective teaching approaches to support student learning. Through analysing teachers’ own accounts of their practices, characteristics of a community of learners and meta-learning emerge. These add transforming elements to the conceptualizations of teaching and learning. A model explains the positions of underpinning values and ideologies in relation to views of knowledge and how learning comes about.

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**Figure 2. A meta-learning cycle**
In shifting to a co-constructivist, learning-centred approach teaching is transformed to transform learning. Certain things change. Teachers and students are seen as co-learners, knowledge is constructed collaboratively, learning takes place through dialogue, learning itself is a focus of learning. A community of learners helps resist pressure to behave in ways that inhibit effective learning.

References


Appendix

- Describe a recent teaching experience that you thought was effective, something you were proud of.
- Identify the characteristics of that experience. What made it effective?
- How have your ideas about teaching developed?
- How is effective teaching supported?
- How is effective teaching hindered?