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Book Review: Enhancing Teaching in Higher Education. New Approaches for Improving Student Learning

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Book reviews

Enhancing Teaching in Higher Education. New Approaches for Improving Student Learning by Peter Hartley, Amanda Woods and Martin Pill (eds). Oxford: Routledge, 2005. ISBN 0–4153–3529–9. 196 pp. £24.99 (pbk).

All tutors have the opportunity to influence their students' learning, but knowing how to enhance their students' ability to learn how to learn is far more complex. This book clearly sets out to unravel the complexity of the processes and will be a very useful guide for both new and experienced lecturers in higher education.

The editors focus upon the operational level exploring what teachers and lecturers do to influence student learning. They have selected contributions from practitioners who are actively involved in the enhancement of student learning. The common theme of each chapter is the exploration of learning techniques that have encouraged and supported groups of students in their development towards becoming self-directed learners.

The chapters have overlapping themes and are structured into four parts. Part One (Approaches to Learning) consists of three chapters inviting the reader to consider and evaluate their approach and perspective on three very different learning and teaching issues. The learning 'combination lock' approach examines and represents the main components of the learning processes. The four case studies are helpful and can be readily adapted to any curriculum and subject area. David Major argues that Work Based Learning (WBL) requires students to assume a greater degree of responsibility for their own learning than conventional methods. He compares research from his own students with empirical research from Alverno College, USA, and concludes that this greater responsibility together with critical reflection is key to success in WBL. Annie Huntington explores approaches to interactive learning by reflecting on her own substantial teaching experience, which she shares with her students. The tasks and practice examples are very helpful and could be adapted and used in many different teaching contexts.

The chapters in Part Two (Working With Students) include pedagogic research on students' reactions to different methods used to support learning and teaching. The methods range from using concept maps to facilitating tutorials in Problem Based Learning (PBL) and how group and teamwork skills can encourage critical reflection. The final three chapters address the issues around the use of learning technologies, starting with learning to learn online, using blended learning and finally facilitating students towards self-directed learning. All the authors advise the reader to adopt a stage by stage approach (scaffolding) in using these methods and emphasise the importance of feedback.

The chapters in Part Three (Enhancing Student Progression) address reflective practices and how they can influence a student's progression in HE. Jenny Moon explores learning as represented in level descriptors, Jenny Phillips describes the development of the Keynote Guide to PDP, and Kathryn McFarlane's chapter on Learning about Employability completes the set of three topics that are a priority for many tutors in HE. All the authors offer excellent advice to readers wishing to incorporate the strategies discussed in the chapters into their courses or research projects.

The chapters in Part Four (Supporting and Developing Staff) shift the focus from students to the support and development of staff. John Shaw claims that it is important for those who support learning to understand how they learn in order to improve their teaching. He challenges the reader to instigate an action research project addressing an educational hypothesis, engaging in reflection and acting on the findings. Vivien Sieber's chapter on Learning to Teach with Technology is excellent, highlighting the important skills required and some strategies that promote the development of these skills. Each section ends with key questions and challenges for the tutor, to aid the development of their teaching with technology. The final two chapters address the impact of new legislation and policy changes on inclusive learning and equality of opportunity. Both authors make it very clear that the new legislation involves everyone in HE and offer excellent guidance for implementation.

This book does what it sets out to do in that it considers at the operational level a range of new approaches for improving students' learning and will be useful and challenging for a wide range of tutors in HE. In particular, the examples of pedagogic research will be extremely helpful to tutors who are participating in Higher Education Academy Accredited Postgraduate Certificate courses and will complement the core texts that already exist.

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Retention and Student Success in Higher Education by Mantz Yorke and Bernard Longden. London: The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press, 2004. ISBN 0-3352-1274-3. 171 pp. £23.99 (pbk).

This book is concerned with many aspects of retention and student success in higher education systems, covering:

retention and student success from a public policy perspective;
the theoretical approaches and enhancement measures for retention.

All ten chapters of the book have been written in a professional manner, with its presentation, analysis and discussion based upon a wide range of sources of information. A welcome feature is the international perspective, particularly from the UK, Australia, South Africa and the United States.