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Students are human beings (discuss)*

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Summary
This article argues that the following seven thoughts are absent from most formal reflections on teaching: 1.We do not teach in an ideological vacuum; 2. We are not here to give students what they want, but rather what we know to be good for them; 3. Every model of learning implies a model of humanity, and may be judged by it; 4. Students do not know what higher education is; 5. Higher education is education in values; 6. Classes are the common rite in the cathedral of reason; 7.The lofty aims intrinsic to higher education are necessary enabling conditions for the utilitarian, economistic aims imposed on it from without. It concludes that we have to pay attention to some rather old-fashioned ideas about pedagogy in order to get the full benefits from the latest teaching technology.

Introduction
What follows here draws on no empirical studies, but is rather an argument rooted in reflection on the experience of teaching students and of talking about teaching with colleagues (together with some established results in the philosophy of science). In other words, it is phenomenological rather than empirical. Phenomenology is subject to two tests. First, is it analytically satisfactory? That is to say, are the distinctions clear? Are the inferences valid? Secondly, does it gather and articulate some part of the reader's experience? The point of writing this article is not to tell you, my academic colleague, something that you do not know. On the contrary, the aspiration is to articulate something that you do know but may not have got around to saying yet. That, however, covers a lot. From the mass of truths that go unsaid, I have picked seven because, I think, they offend in some way against the prevailing political and educational temper of our times. The question

* This article was first published in *Discourse,* Volume 6, Number 1 (Autumn 2006), 225–36 © Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies, the Higher Education Academy, 2006.

is not simply 'are these seven thoughts true?' but rather 'how can they be made effective?' Please let me know if I've hit the mark, or if I've missed, by how much and in what direction.

I do not intend to criticise anyone's teaching practice. Since I rarely see the inside of other lecturers' classrooms, I am in no position to pass judgment on what colleagues do there, even if I wished to. Rather, the principal object of my criticism is the way we talk about teaching. In particular, I have in mind two relatively formal discourses about teaching: pedagogical research and the academic quality apparatus. My basic premise is that the seven thoughts I explore below are largely absent from these two discourses. We lecturers do not get around to articulating these thoughts because the formal apparatus for reflecting on teaching does not make room for them. This matters, because ultimately theory does affect practice.

This is not a view from the mountain-top: as a participant in pedagogical seminars and as an author of subject monitoring and evaluation reports and documents for validations and reviews, I am as firmly implicated in these discourses as anyone.

1) We do not teach in an ideological vacuum

No-one wants schoolchildren to eat junk. Everyone agrees that it would be better if children ate food, but in spite of this consensus, they eat junk. To change that, Jamie Oliver is going to have to pay attention to the large social, political and economic structures and imperatives that conspire to thwart the virtuous consensus. So too for us. If we are determined not to serve intellectual turkey twizzlers, we must pay attention to the bigger picture. In particular, we have to examine the murky background of that big picture; the unspoken ideology, the economic imperatives and the habits of mind that conspire to carve a path of least resistance away from genuine higher education and towards the dumbed-down degree factory. Above all, we must examine students' beliefs about and expectations of higher education (just as Jamie Oliver spent a lot of his time working on children's tastes in food). No-one wants degree factories, but then no-one wants children to eat junk.

The easiest place to start is with our own habits of mind. We must pay attention to the metaphors we use to talk about pedagogy. We should stop talking about the 'delivery' of 'provision'. When a new fridge is delivered to a house, the householder stands by while the deliveryman does all the work, heaving it out of the van, up the steps and through to the kitchen. In other words, the 'delivery' metaphor encodes and approves of student passivity. Gardening metaphors (such as 'cultivating the intellect') are more accurate, because the gardener looks after the soil, the light and the temperature, but the plant has to do the growing. Our job is to maintain an environment conducive to intellectual growth, but it is up to the students to grow. We cannot do it for them, and we should take care to employ metaphors that express that truth. This is not a covert argument for reducing lecturers' work. Gardening can be every bit as exhausting as fridge-delivery. So why would anyone prefer the delivery metaphor to gardening metaphors? One reason arises from the management of academic quality. The growth of a plant is a subtle and complex process, and if the plant fails to bloom, it may be hard to say who or what is to blame. On the other hand, if a fridge is not delivered as ordered, blame can be apportioned accurately, by examining the paperwork. For good, obvious and respectable reasons, managers like to see 'clear lines of responsibility'. The delivery metaphor helps to sustain the fiction that learning and teaching

are the sort of activities in which blame can be allocated precisely.

We live in a technocratic culture that pretends to regard language as an ideologically neutral means of storing and transferring information. Language is more than this; it shapes our imagination and makes some thoughts easier to think than others. Awareness of this requires ceaseless mental fight. We cannot take charge of our own thoughts, let alone speak the truth to power, if we do not examine the metaphors that pass between us.

2) We are not here to give students what they want, but rather what we know to be good for them

Students often do not know what is good for them. Like the children in *Jamie's School Dinners,* many students will choose intellectual turkey twizzlers if we let them. An essential part of Jamie Oliver's campaign was forcibly to remove children's junk in order to make them eat food — and with what shocking indifference to the ideology of consumer choice! Then he showed the older children what goes into a chicken nugget. Thus educated, these children were left to choose, and they almost invariably chose wisely. Note the order of events: education before free choice. Indeed, we may wonder whether a choice made in ignorance can be free (rather than arbitrary or whimsical).

Obviously, our relationship with students is not that of retailer to customer. But competition between universities, faculties, departments and subject groups presses us all to behave more commercially. In some ways, this is a good thing. It is no longer possible for universities to treat their students (or students' parents) as a necessary nuisance. Ultimately, consumerism is a damaging picture of our relationship with our students, and we must take care that it does not shape our thoughts surreptitiously.

Consumerism *will* shape our thoughts if we do not take care because it is part of the unspoken common mind of our age. To use the computer imagery that is also a powerful and often pernicious part of that common mind, consumerism is the 'default option'.

Hence, 'student-centred' cannot mean 'customer-focused', and we will not fulfil our laudable aim to practise student-centred teaching merely by increasing the choices available to students, or by doing whatever it takes to improve student feedback questionnaire scores. Rather, we have to ensure that we understand our students well enough to know that we really are giving them what is good for them. This is more difficult than knowing what they want, and much more difficult than knowing what they say they want. It gets harder as our students become more diverse and less like we were at their age. What is more, we should think of our students not just as customers or future employees but rather as people whose most profound needs cannot be met with anything that can be bought. Those needs include companionship, recognition of one's moral worth and public confirmation of the ethos by which one is trying to live. Sometimes, the diligent student who does the reading *before* the class can feel as lonely and ridiculous as Don Quixote, doggedly living by standards that others find quaint and silly.

Notice that these are all social needs. The last one is the particular responsibility of the institution charged with sustaining a given ethos (in our case, an academic ethos). What tone is set, what message about priorities is sent, for example, by cancelling classes throughout a university to make way for non-academic activities? How would a university regard a lecturer who refused to teach students who persistently failed to prepare for class?

Why do so many university websites embody the assumption that prospective undergraduates have no interest in our research? Of course, few students want to read our research. But descriptions of research remind the students, their parents and everyone else that a university is a living embodiment of the academic ethos, rather than merely a repository of curricular content.

3) Every model of learning implies a model of humanity, and may be judged by it

We cannot say what it is for a human to learn without saying something about what humans are like. Therefore, we may test a model of learning by comparing its implied model of humanity with what we already know about people. Humans think feelingly and imaginatively. We humans (including students) live first in a world of meanings, connotations and associations, which are only later resolved into thoughts, facts, hypotheses and suchlike. What is more, our world of images, feelings and meanings comes painted in ethical colours. Words and deeds, people and things strike us as admirable, mean, unfair, compassionate, and so on. Also, our experience tends to be densely connected: a smell can summon a whole world of memory; a book can re-draw one's map of the future. Consequently, any model of learning that finds no place for feelings and the imagination is too impoverished to be of any use. Any model that forgets that students are ethical agents who make judgments of value as well as of utility will struggle to understand student motivations. Any model that conceives of learning as the transfer of isolated packets of information is false to the connectedness of human experience. Human learners do not access information, they seize ideas and make them their own.

If we want students to embrace their studies, we have to stop talking about them in a way that could equally well apply to laboratory rats or Turing machines. Laboratory rats do not pursue ends simply because they perceive them to be intrinsically worthwhile, and Turing machines do not synthesise their packets of data into coherent experiential wholes, or seek recognition and approval from other Turing machines. Of course, no lecturer thinks of any individual student as a rat or a computer; still less do we treat our students that way. However, when we lecturers gather to discuss learning and teaching, we tend to focus on the mechanical aspects because these are the easiest to talk about. As a profession, we seem to lack a language to talk about the lived experience of learning and teaching. Fearful of sounding like mystery-mongers, we discuss configurations of classroom furniture, the use of technological teaching aids or some such, even though these are in fact marginal to our teaching practice. That is how we come to talk about students as if they were laboratory rats or computers. That is what we do whenever we discuss the mechanical aspect of teaching without connecting it to the inner lives of our students.

As I said at the outset, my principal targets are the formal discourses of pedagogical research and the academic quality apparatus, rather than informal conversations among teachers and lecturers. Take a pedagogical model from the learning and teaching literature, or an academic quality document such as a programme specification. Does it reflect, respect and minister to the fact that students are feeling, imaginative ethical agents, each of whose experience and activity forms a (mostly) coherent whole?

Why do we struggle to articulate the higher humanity of students, that is, the ways they differ from Turing machines and laboratory rats? Writers on pedagogy from earlier ages,

and in particular churchy Victorians such as Matthew Arnold or J.H. Newman, had more success in this regard. A comprehensive explanation for this would require a cultural and intellectual history from their time to ours, but the short answer is that theology is out and cognitive science is in.[1] In most respects, this change is progress. Nevertheless, there are things that theology finds easier to see and to say than does cognitive science. Theologically-informed discussions of pedagogy naturally focus on the ethical and affective aspects of learning that more instrumental and technologically-minded approaches tend to neglect. For such teachers, it was obvious that the main task of education is to remedy defects in the students themselves. The main questions for these Victorian educators were 'what sort of character does this education produce?' and 'what sort of character ought we to try to produce?' These questions are difficult to ask in earnest now, partly because 'character' sounds hopelessly unscientific and partly because controlling others' moral development sounds unacceptably manipulative. The commercial aspect of present-day education also militates against this approach. It is a bold salesperson who tells putative customers that they are morally and intellectually defective. Here, in passing, is a good reason to read old books: to identify and illuminate the blind spots and taboos of present-day ways of looking and speaking. To paraphrase another unfashionable figure,[2] what does he know of the present, who only the present knows?

4) Students do not know what higher education is

Nor do we, in the sense that there is no agreed set of necessary and sufficient conditions that jointly define higher education. But we do know something about what it is *not* (this is often the case with philosophically interesting terms).[3] Many students arrive at university with a bucket-model of education.[4] You pass a module by mugging up some stuff and reproducing it in coursework and exams. Then, you forget it. Higher education must be more than this.

Often, students who subscribe to the bucket view do not expect to enjoy their studies — and why would they? Education as they understand it is a suitable activity for a disk-drive; it is purgatory for a human being. It is hardly surprising that these students do not embrace their studies. Consequently, every programme of study should include some discussion of the nature and purposes of higher education. Students are hardly likely to commit to learning if they do not know what it is for or how it might be satisfying.

Naturally, we cannot simply tell them what higher education is, since we are not altogether sure ourselves. Rather, the aim (as always when teaching essentially contested concepts) is to equip students to participate in the discussion and invite them to make up their own minds.

Most students understand (some more consciously than others) that higher education changes a person. Sometimes, students resist our efforts because no-one has bothered to explain what we are trying to change them into. This is entirely reasonable. Students who do not have graduates among their relatives, friends and neighbours often worry that higher education will estrange them from their former lives. This too is a reasonable fear. Education can set a person apart. These anxieties require a discussion about the nature and purpose of higher education. Why would anyone in education refuse that? There are plenty of reasons. First, some potential students may not wish to be changed, and hence decide that higher education is not for them. Secondly, this discussion would require us to confess that we do not quite know what higher education is.

Thirdly, an educationalist who talks about the way education changes a person runs the risk of sounding like Matthew Arnold. Nevertheless, education does change people, and we should talk to the students about that.

5) Higher education is education in values

Every institution, including ours, has a characteristic ethos. We value rigorous, gleeful curiosity and free discussion. Trying to instil these values in students is part of our job, and we should tell them that.

There is a streak of populist moral relativism in the spirit of the present age that intimidates some academics on this point. Is it not authoritarian to impose our value judgments on students? In fact, we do not impose our values on students and we could not if we wanted to. We have two options: either we explain the ethos of academic life to our students and thereby give them the possibility of embracing it themselves, or we keep quiet and leave them in the dark about why we do what we do. The academic ethos itself, and common honesty, require us to choose the first. Of course, if we make our values explicit, students will hold us to them.

In any case, there is no cause for academics to be shy about their professional values. We know that rigorous, gleeful curiosity and free discussion are good, just as we know that murder is bad. We know that some books are better than others, just as we know that some essays are better than others, and we think it matters — not as much as the AIDS crisis in Africa but rather more than the outcome of Big Brother. Part of our job is to help students to recognise truth, beauty and goodness when they meet them. These are not merely matters of opinion, although they are essentially contested notions. There is a debate to be had about exactly where and how truth, beauty and goodness may be found; it is part of our job to equip students to participate in it. This applies across the university: in engineering, for example, we can ask whether the ingenious solution is the most elegant; whether the most elegant is the most cost-effective; and whether the most cost-effective solution is socially responsible. (I do not doubt that engineering lecturers do this. The point is that in doing so, they are thinking about truth, beauty and the good.)

Students implicitly accept the university ethos when they enrol. We should tell them what they are letting themselves in for, and make the academic ethos a regular part of the conversations we have with them. Indeed, it should be the animating principle of those conversations, or else we will have fallen into inauthenticity.

6) Classes are the common rite in the cathedral of reason

Why give classes? Why not transmit information to students in more effective and flexible ways?

We may as well ask: why do people go to religious buildings to worship together? Why don't they just pray and sing at home? God, being omnipresent, presumably would not mind. Or, for a secular analogy: why do people go to football matches? You get a much better view of the action on television, and you get replays in slow-motion from several angles. Or again, why do people go to political rallies? Surely, they could signal their support more efficiently by sending a text-message or email. The answer is something like this: you have to be there to make a public affirmation of your commitment to your faith, your team or your cause, and to witness others doing the same. Religious meetings, football matches and political rallies are celebrations of common purpose from which individuals may draw comfort and encouragement when they are later alone and wavering.

If we want students to commit to their studies, we should look at practices that people engage in wholeheartedly (like religion, football and politics). These have common rites that speak to our need to know that we are not quixotically alone in our values (laboratory rats and Turing machines have no such need). We should think of our classes in this way rather than as information-exchanges, and alter our practice accordingly. The student who skips the class because the notes are available online is like someone who thinks that reading the order of service is equivalent to going to church, or that reading the programme is equivalent to going to the match, or that reading a pamphlet is as good as going to the rally. Classes are our main opportunity to address the social needs I mentioned at the end of section two.

This may make teaching sound like preaching, but with the ethical and social dimensions of education in view, this is hardly surprising. Of course, classes have other functions too. They are an opportunity to be a critical friend to students; to engage in dialogue that would be clumsier and slower by email or some other remote means; to foster the social skills requisite for reasoned debate. But the most neglected and easily overlooked purpose of classes is this social, ethos-confirming role. Lecturers do not merely communicate to students; we commune with them, and they with each other.

What does this mean in practical terms? It may be as simple as ensuring that there is time to enjoy the material. In a class stuffed with content, there is no opportunity to revel in the details. Cut back on the content and use the time saved to talk about why this stuff is interesting or important. Point out bits that you find interesting even if they are not quite on the main track. Take a moment to show the students something from the recent research if you think it might help them to see the significance of the assessed material. Show them that there are live questions as well as fixed answers and established solutions. This is particularly important in cumulative disciplines where the point of this year's stuff is to prepare for next year's stuff. Those students who just want to get through their assessments as efficiently as possible may express some irritation at these apparently irrelevant and self-indulgent asides. Turn their resistance into a teachable moment. Explain that in wandering off the lesson-plan, you are giving them a tutorial in gleeful curiosity.

7) The lofty aims intrinsic to higher education are necessary enabling conditions for the utilitarian, economic aims imposed on it from without

This may seem like a splendid sermon — meaning, a speech one can enjoy on a Sunday precisely because it has no connection with anything that happens from Monday to Friday. Our students have to get jobs in an increasingly globalised market, and our first responsibility is to ensure that they have the necessary skills. Isn't it?

This reaction is mistaken. Students will not acquire their economically useful skills unless they find their motivation in the activity of learning itself. Extraneous goads and bribes (such as the threat of failure and the promise of higher earnings) rarely carry a student all the way through a degree programme. In fact, a wholly disengaged student cannot succeed in higher education. To be successful, a student must learn to make sound judgments, and all judgment has an aesthetic aspect.[5] A mathematics student must be struck by the elegance of a proof; a science student must feel the weight of evidence (or the lack of it). In the humanities, a lot of bad writing is the result of students trying to articulate and defend judgments that they have copied from

secondary sources rather than felt in their viscera. The same point applies to directly vocational studies, especially those that require quick decisions, such as nursing. This is not to say that judgment is all inarticulate conviction or unreasoned snap decisions. However, a graduate should have developed the expert intuitions that guide judgment in new situations or cases that were not covered in the lecture-notes. This education in feeling, this refinement of specialist sensibility cannot happen if a student simply has no feeling for the discipline at all, or if the discipline evokes a single, uniform reaction such as boredom or resentment. A student who knows that the argument on page 84 is a good one simply because it satisfies the rules set out on pages 64–73, but who does not feel the force of its logic, is unlikely to develop the critical-thinking skills that are demanded by employers and essential to anyone hoping for promotion into senior management.

For this reason, joy in learning is not merely desirable. It is essential. We (the university) have to foster a culture in which students can discover and express without embarrassment a delight in learning and find it reflected in other students and in staff. Joy does not usually figure in the aims, objectives, learning outcomes, programme specifications and benchmark documents that jointly constitute our official professional effort to say what we do and why. Until it does, these documents will never be more than *pro forma*[6] exercises.

In short, we must consciously adopt a pedagogical discourse that takes full account of students' humanity. Doing so may sometimes cause us to sound a bit old-fashioned, even a bit like churchy Victorians. Ironically, this is what we have to do in order to take full advantage of the unprecedented technological teaching-aids available now and in the future.

Biographical notes

Brendan Larvor studied philosophy and mathematics at Balliol college before embarking on a brief career as a systems analyst. He resumed his studies in philosophy, taking an MA from Queen's University Ontario before returning to Balliol to write a doctoral thesis on the philosophy of mathematics of Imre Lakatos. He taught at the Universities of Liverpool and Oxford before joining Hertfordshire in 1997. He is currently subject leader for Philosophy and BLU champion for the Faculty of Humanities, Law and Education.

Endnotes

1 In fairness, I should note that computational cognitive science has moved some way beyond Turing machines.
2 Kipling.
3 Spinoza: 'All determination is negation'.
4 W.B. Yeats: 'Education is not filling a bucket, but lighting a fire'.
5 This is a long-established point in the philosophy of science. Its origins are usually traced to Pierre Duhem's *Aim and structure of physical theory;* the *locus classicus* is Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of scientific revolutions*; and the fullest development is probably Michel Polanyi's *Personal knowledge: towards a post-critical philosophy.*
6 Merely for form's sake.