

Review of *Reflective Teaching in Higher Education*

by Paul Ashwin, David Boud, Kelly Coate et al, Bloomsbury, 2015.*

Linda Carey

Queens University of Belfast

To quote the first sentence of this book, “Teaching in higher education is a creative and intellectually demanding process”. This book provides a coherent theoretical framework for higher education teaching, based on a synthesis of key research findings; it also presents practical examples which have direct relevance to classroom practice, including some useful case studies. It therefore provides a perfect combination for university and college teachers at all stages in their career. It is a useful key text for a course leading to a higher education teaching qualification, and of equal value to an experienced staff member wishing to refresh his or her approach to teaching in the light of recent pedagogical research.

The principles set out in the introduction have two functions – one as to provide a coherent theoretical framework based on a recent major research and development programme, the Teaching and Learning Research Programme, TLRP and the other as an organisational structure for the book itself. Underpinning the book is, as the title indicates, the philosophy of reflective practice. This is a term much used in professional development contexts but not always clearly defined for those who are new to it. This book is particularly useful in unpacking what is meant by being reflective and how one might become reflective (or more reflective). The actual format and layout of the book helps here in providing key theoretical background,

*URL:<http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/236>

interspersed by case studies from real teachers in higher education. The short key reading sections at the end of each chapter point to further reading without overwhelming the reader. The result is a de-mystification of the jargon and a real sense of what being a reflective practitioner might mean, and why it is important.

Chapter 2 on student learning is particularly useful for the “new lecturers’ courses” which are run by many institutions in Ireland and UK. It is significant that this topic is given a prominent place early on in the book and the chapter is excellent at synthesising a huge amount of research into a relatively short space, without patronising the reader or over-simplification. This is always a difficult subject to include on teaching courses in that the staff often don’t have the time or perhaps the inclination to explore learning theories in depth and to follow up on the terminology. This chapter does it for them by providing short sections on the key concepts and placing them again in the practical context.

Chapter 3 on reflection is useful in laying out the theory in a meaningful way. The idea of reflection is fundamental to lecturers’ self-development, yet it can sometimes be dismissed by those who are cynically undisposable to develop and learn. This chapter provides excellent ammunition for persuading staff of the importance of reflection and offers practical ways to engage in reflective practice. It contains the underpinning theoretical models (with several key diagrams), but it also persuades the reader by practical examples how powerful a tool reflection can be. This chapter should be required reading for both new and experienced lecturers alike.

Chapter 4 returns to the evidence-informed principles mentioned in the introduction and explains each in some detail as well as mapping the principles on to other chapters in the book. This cross-referencing is particularly useful as it gives the book an overall coherence which is often missing in textbooks on teaching. It also emphasises the complexity of teaching as an activity and the inter-dependence of the key elements. The complexity provides the academic foundations for the pedagogy espoused and this chapter helps to unpack this complexity in a user friendly way.

Once the framework has been established in Part 1 of the book, Part 2 explores how we create conditions of learning, the contexts, relationships, engagement and learning environments which help and support student learning. Part 3 then explores, more traditionally, curriculum, planning, teaching strategies, communications with students and assessment. Here the book is moving much more into the how-to aspects of teaching, but the research base and theoretical framework is interwoven to provide that all important justification of the approaches suggested.

The case study approach provides some rich examples across a range of disciplines and types of institution. The readers can dip in and out of chapters and sub chapters, helped by the very clear formatting and chunking of the text, and learn something new at whatever stage they may be in their professional career. Fundamental essential information such as developing a session plan are included, as well as more recent developments such as threshold concepts and “flipping” the classroom. Embedded in each chapter are a number of reflective exercises which could be used or easily adapted as in-class activities in a professional development setting, or could be used by lecturers who are making their way through the book in their own time. These are essential for encouraging the readers to reflect on their own practice in the light of the advice and examples provided in the book.

Overall this book would be a very useful addition to reading lists for accredited course on teaching and learning in higher education. The balance between theory and practice is particularly helpful – it goes way beyond a tips for teachers approach, and yet still includes some of those tips that staff so want to read about. The coherence of the framework presented is a big plus – it is interwoven throughout and difficult concepts are made more accessible once their practical application is clear, but they are not over-simplified. The advice provided is based on a plethora of research. There are a number of authors involved with this book, as well as the lead author, and they are to be congratulated on providing such a comprehensive book on teaching in higher education under the umbrella of “reflective teaching”.