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Inspiring and motivating learners in Higher Education: The staff perspective



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ABSTRACT

There is currently a lack of research exploring strategies to inspire and motivate students. As a result, the current study explored the perceptions of academic staff regarding what being inspirational meant, its sources, and the implications for the student. Eighteen academic staff were interviewed in this study (Age $M=41.7$; years in HE $M=9.2$). The data were thematically analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Seven superordinate themes emerged: inspiration, influencing factors, outcomes, motivating students, staff development, reducing factors, and responsibility for learning. Results suggest that inspiration is multifaceted and not simply dependent on the charisma/personality of the presenter.

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1. Introduction

Increasingly in Higher Education (HE) there is a recognition that students cannot effectively be 'taught' unless motivated to learn. Some students are naturally enthusiastic about learning, but many others need academic staff to stimulate them (Halawah, 2011). There is also an acknowledgement that the time when academic staff in HE could simply follow the teaching methods that they experienced as students has passed (Bourner & Flowers, 1999). But the challenge for academics is how best to go about inspiring and motivating students to learn? Part of the problem here is that there is very little research exploring these aspects of teaching. Indeed, there is little clarity regarding what inspirational practice in HE is and how it can be best used to inspire and motivate students. Also, to what extent is it the individual or the learning environment that inspires the students? Developing a greater understanding of these factors is important to underpin the development of student-focused pedagogies that inspire rather than dictate learning.

1.1. Excellence in teaching practice

It has been generally agreed in the pedagogic literature that a widely accepted definition of excellent teaching in HE has yet to be developed (Kane, Sandretto, & Heath, 2004; Mclean, 2001; Trigwell, 2001). However, while this is the case there have been a number of research studies in the past 25 years that have sought to identify the characteristics that highly effective educators in HE possess. For example, Sherman, Armistead, Fowler, Barksdale, and Reif (1987) suggested the following five core characteristics: enthusiasm, clarity, attention to preparation/organisation, ability to stimulate interest and thinking about the topic, and a love of knowledge. Building upon these suggestions Horan (1991) reported that excellent college teachers have a good subject knowledge, were interested in teaching, were organised, were respectful, monitored

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student learning and regularly provided feedback, were interested in their students, and encouraged students to participate. [Hativa, Barak and Simhi \(2001\)](#) in a review of research on characteristics of excellent university educators reported that

Exemplary University teachers are well prepared and organized, present the material clearly, stimulate students' interest, engagement, and motivation in studying the material through their enthusiasm/expressive, have positive rapport with students, show high expectations of them, encourage them, and generally maintain a positive classroom environment (p. 701–702).

More widely this highlighted research into teaching excellence has consistently reported five common characteristics found in good educators: enthusiasm, clarity, attention to preparation/organisation, ability to stimulate interest and thinking about the subject, and a love of knowledge ([Hildebrand, 1973](#); [Sherman et al., 1987](#)). [Feldman \(1997\)](#) reported knowledge of the subject, enthusiasm for the subject, clarity, stimulation of interest, organisation, and motivation of the students as defining factors. Interestingly, in this study the personality of the academic member of staff was seen as less important. [Elton \(1998\)](#) proposed a list of competencies for academic staff including organisation, presentation, relationships, assessment and evaluation, reflective practice, innovation, curriculum design, and discipline-specific and pedagogical research. Finally, [Kane et al. \(2004\)](#) in their study of science lecturers developed five dimensions of tertiary teaching: subject knowledge, pedagogic skills, interpersonal relationships, personality, and research/teaching interaction. But while this research highlights key characteristics for educators it has not comprehensively articulated a difference between good teachers and good inspirers of learning.

1.2. Student motivation

Post 18 years of age it is both difficult and possibly unethical to force individuals to learn. Instead, for deep learning to take place the student has to be an active participant and driven instigator of their own learning. A number of factors have been highlighted as impacting upon student motivation to learn including interest in the subject, desire to achieve, self-confidence, self-esteem, persistence, and patience ([Davis, 1999](#)). Research has also highlighted that another crucial factor in motivating students are their academic instructors ([Halawah, 2011](#)). As a result, the approach adopted by the academic is seen as fundamentally important.

Students perceive conventional didactic models of teaching as being less motivating and less effective than more student-centred approaches. However, student groups have also expressed anxiety about approaches that lacked structure, guidance and support in the pursuit of being student-centred ([Lea Stephenson & Troy, 2003](#)). These views are in line with studies that have found that student-centred approaches may improve student motivation and academic success (e.g., [Lonka & Ahola, 1995](#); [Prendergast, 1994](#)), as well as those which have documented resistance to such initiatives (e.g., [Geelan, 1999](#); [Peeke, 1993](#)).

In an attempt to define 'Student Centred Learning' (SCL) [Cannon and Newble \(2000\)](#) suggested that

It is ways of thinking and learning that emphasize student responsibility and activity in learning rather than what the teachers are doing. Essentially SCL has student responsibility and activity at its heart, in contrast to a strong emphasis on teacher control and coverage of academic content in much conventional, didactic teaching" (p.16).

This approach builds upon active rather than passive learning, emphasises deep learning and understanding, increases responsibility and accountability on the part of the student, increases the autonomy for the learner, advocates an interdependence between the teacher and learner, fosters mutual respect in the teacher–learner relationship, and develops a reflexive approach to learning by both parties ([Lea et al., 2003](#)). As a result, [Lea et al. \(2003\)](#) argue that SCL differs fundamentally from more conventional approaches to student learning.

But, while there is a growing literature on SCL and motivating students there is still very little clarity regarding the role of the academic to inspire and motivate the student to learn, and indeed determining what being inspirational actually means. [McGonigal \(2004\)](#) conducted a survey of 30 PGCE English students, in which the authors identified inspirational teachers as being crucial to pupil learning. Inspirational teachers in this study were described as having empathy, enthusiasm, passion, encouragement, attentiveness, consistency, excited about learning, and enjoyment.

[Kane et al. \(2004\)](#) in a study exploring excellent teaching in tertiary education highlighted the response from one participant who stated that

"the word inspirational describes the characteristic that is needed in a university teacher. You need to be able to make bright students not only understand your area, but be enthused and want to work in your area.... unless the lecturer can inspire the students, they don't have much of a role in the actual learning process" (p. 294).

What is most interesting in Kane et al.'s study though is the conclusion that "Good teaching is not innate, it can be learned" (p. 306). If this is true there is an opportunity to better understand how to motivate and inspire students to learn. Indeed this offers a glimpse of inspiration that goes beyond the character or personality of the individual educator. However, while Kane et al. highlighted the importance of inspiration and that it can be learnt, the study did not explore what being inspirational actually is, or the different ways in which students can be inspired. These points are important if educators are going to develop their competence in this area. As a result, the aim of this study was to explore the perceptions of academic

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