



Review of *University Teaching in Focus: A Learning-Centred Approach*

I am a frustrated political scientist. As I watch my discipline ratchet up the methodology training requirements for graduate students, and as I watch our econometric techniques become more and more esoteric, I cannot shake the fact that political science seems to be doing increasingly complicated work that no longer seems relevant to the political world (if, in fact, it ever was). Our advanced degrees seem to buy us precious little ability to forecast real-world events, or even to explain them to those without doctorates in the field; as such, there are very, very few political scientists who seem to be doing expert commentary on world affairs. I fear us becoming a marginalized community whose complex and sophisticated work speaks only to other academics and not to those toiling in “the real world” of politics.

As a scholar of teaching and learning, I have had fears that our movement may one day go in similar directions. At conferences and in journals, it seems I have seen more and more esoteric studies of student learning, increasingly using unfamiliar jargon, leading me to fear that the work we are doing may be losing sight of its main purpose—to enhance student learning by improving teaching practice. When Sue Clegg’s 2008 International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning keynote address quoted Maryellen Weimer in arguing that the SoTL literature is “more likely to cure insomnia than to improve practice,” I feared she may be onto something. Are we producing better and better studies, of less and less consequence?

Against this fear, however, comes a wonderful new book, edited by Lynne Hunt and Denise Chalmers. *University Teaching in Focus: A Learning-Centred Approach* offers a series of chapters that manage to synthesize the current research and also offers a simple, easy-to-use guide for instructors. For example, many people in higher education have heard about problem-based learning (PBL), and might want to try using it in their classes. A cursory glance through the literature reveals multiple articles discussing how PBL has been used in classes, and documenting the results of student work when PBL has been applied. Some are quite good, others less so. For the novice, these studies can certainly be useful; for the expert seeking to publish on the use of PBL, they are essential in framing an understanding of the literature. But many people, particularly those new to college teaching, can use a short yet comprehensive introduction to PBL—what it is, what it can do for them, and how they can start using it. Lyn Brodie’s contribution, one of the particularly strong ones in this collection, provides such a chapter.

In truth, it was difficult to find a weak contribution in this volume. The authors are all leaders in the field of teaching and learning, mostly (but not exclusively) in Australia and

the U.K. On a wide range of topics, including assessment, online and blended learning, teaching international students, and research-based curricula, the authors consistently provide compelling reviews of the literature, as well as practical advice for how the insights of the chapter can be used to help teachers improve their practice, and improve student learning. The book does not skimp on references, nor on reviews of the literature, but it also does extremely well in making sure that the book will improve practice. (And, I hasten to add, the lively and engaging writing in the book will make sure that it does not cure insomnia!).

I commend the editors particularly on the inclusion in the book of a section on “Quality and Leadership.” This section, which features chapters on a quality approach to education (by Kerri-Lee Krause), on the scholarship of teaching and learning (by former ISSOTL co-president Keith Trigwell) and on leadership in teaching (by Paul Blackmore) represents an acknowledgement of a critical aspect of teaching in higher-education. The job of leading—of making our universities more teaching-friendly and student-focused—falls to the faculty. Upon assuming a faculty position, new hires (the main audience for this book) must begin to find their voice as teachers, among other critical early-career tasks (such as establishing a research agenda and settling in to their departments). The early sections of this book provide a helpful guide on how students learn, how to design classes, and how to assess student learning. They discuss techniques for particular circumstances (such as teaching online or hybrid courses). This is all relevant to, and is quite important for, new faculty. But the final section aims at helping faculty to become leaders in the teaching enterprise. Academics who teach well, and enjoy teaching, have an obligation to the profession to help advance the field of teaching, to help raise its profile and prominence, and to ensure that good teaching “counts” in decisions on things like tenure and promotion. These chapters provide useful examples for new faculty in how they can envision themselves in these leadership roles.

Overall, I am glad I had the opportunity to review this book. It was a good read, and provided a nice review of some topics I knew well, and an introduction to some less familiar areas of inquiry. Even the chapters focusing on material I thought I knew provided interesting insights and different perspectives on familiar material. New faculty, as well as experienced teachers, would do well to have this book on their shelves, and its insights in their head. The editors have done a fine job compiling a useful and important volume.

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