

# *Co-creating Learning and Teaching*

*Towards Relational  
Pedagogy in Higher Education*

**CRITICAL PRACTICE IN  
HIGHER EDUCATION**

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# *Co-creating Learning and Teaching*

*Towards Relational  
Pedagogy in Higher Education*

*Catherine Bovill*

*Series Editors: Joy Jarvis and Karen Smith*

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# Contents

|           |   |             |
|-----------|---|-------------|
|           | <i>Meet the author and series editors</i>       | <i>vi</i>   |
|           | <i>Book summary</i>                             | <i>viii</i> |
| Chapter 1 | Introduction                                    | 1           |
| Chapter 2 | Relationships in learning and teaching          | 10          |
| Chapter 3 | Co-creating learning and teaching               | 25          |
| Chapter 4 | Towards relational pedagogy in higher education | 43          |
| Chapter 5 | What does this mean for my teaching practice?   | 57          |
| Chapter 6 | Conclusions                                     | 67          |
|           | <i>References</i>                               | <i>71</i>   |
|           | <i>Index</i>                                    | <i>79</i>   |

## Meet the author and series editors



**Catherine Bovill** is Senior Lecturer in Student Engagement at the Institute for Academic Development (IAD), University of Edinburgh, and Visiting Fellow at the University of Winchester. At the University of Edinburgh she leads a range of strategic student engagement initiatives with a view to supporting culture change towards more engaged forms of learning and teaching. She also leads the programme and course design team in IAD, supporting colleagues across the university in curriculum work. She is a Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and Fellow of the Staff and Educational Development Association. Catherine is an editorial board member for *Teaching in Higher Education* and has been an editor and advisor on several other international journals. She has published and presented internationally on student engagement, students as partners and student–staff co-creation of curricula. She has also contributed to several international and UK change programmes focused on students as partners in curriculum design. In 2019–20 she was a Fulbright Scholar based at Elon University in North Carolina undertaking teaching and research related to student engagement and the role of student–faculty relationships, and was involved in strategic development work.



**Joy Jarvis** is currently Professor of Educational Practice at the University of Hertfordshire and a UK National Teaching Fellow. She has experience in a wide range of education contexts and works to create effective learning experiences for students and colleagues. She is particularly interested in the professional learning of those engaged in educational practice in higher education settings and has undertaken a range of projects, working with colleagues locally, nationally and internationally, to develop practice in teaching and leadership of teaching. Joy works with doctoral students exploring aspects of educational practice and encourages them to be adventurous in their methodological approaches and to share their findings in a range of contexts to enable practice change.



**Karen Smith** is Reader in Higher Education in the School of Education at the University of Hertfordshire. She has a strong research interest in transnational education, notably in flying faculty models and is author of the *Transnational Education Toolkit* for the Higher Education Academy. Karen spent many years working on lecturer development programmes and is now the Director of the University of Hertfordshire's Professional Doctorate in Education. She

also leads collaborative research and development in her School, where she engages in externally funded research and evaluation and supports the development of scholarly educational practice through practitioner research.

## Book summary

Co-creating learning and teaching involves students and staff co-designing curricula or elements of curricula and has been described as one of six key pedagogical ideas in higher education (Ryan and Tilbury, 2013). In this book, I argue that meaningful student engagement through co-creating learning and teaching relies upon good relationships between the teacher and students and between students and their peers. Equally, co-creating learning and teaching contributes to building good relationships. Higher education classrooms (whether face-to-face or online) are a key site of collegial and inclusive possibility that are currently often an under-utilised opportunity to develop relational and co-created learning and teaching. Drawing on literature from school education and higher education, and using a range of examples of co-created learning and teaching from universities internationally, the book highlights the benefits of relational pedagogy and co-creation. Relational pedagogy and co-creation have the potential to lead to more human and engaged forms of learning and teaching in higher education. These are forms of learning and teaching that challenge accepted power relations between teacher and students, enhance inclusivity, increase the relevance of learning to learners and that enable students to practice and develop democratic skills and capabilities they need in their current and future lives.



*Real learning does not happen until students are brought into relationship with the teacher, with each other, and with the subject. We cannot learn deeply and well until a community of learning is created in the classroom.*

(Palmer, 1983, p xvi)

# Relational pedagogy as the foundation for co-creating learning and teaching

The higher education (HE) environment today is highly complex. Increasing numbers of students are coming to university to study at the same time that resources are reducing in many contexts, placing growing pressure on institutions that are attempting to maintain or enhance the quality of what they offer. Universities are also challenged to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse range of students. Governments around the world have influenced a neoliberal agenda to take hold in universities, where business and management models now dominate HE, with emphasis placed on efficiency and outcome measures. In the UK, this neoliberal agenda has led to the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in 2017 – to mirror the existing Research Excellence Framework (REF): tools that aim to measure teaching and research performance respectively. However, there are widespread concerns that the metrics being used to calculate teaching excellence are unsuitable (Cuffe, 2019; Kandiko Howson, 2016).

With the massification of HE, all staff in HE institutions face the challenge of how they can support students to feel that they belong and are valued. How can we get to know students when student numbers are so high and when we regularly teach students in large classes? The managerial and economic priorities of many universities which create large classes and a reliance on transactional language to describe education lead to a tension for many staff who aim to adopt more personal approaches to teaching and supporting students. Biesta critiques the current situation and argues:

*To think of education as an economic transaction, as a process of meeting the needs of the learner – something that is made possible by the new language of learning – is therefore first of all problematic because it misconstrues both the role of the learner and the role of the educational*

*professional in the educational relationship. It forgets that a major reason for engaging in education is precisely to find out what it is that one actually wants or needs. It also forgets that educational professionals have a crucial role to play in the process of needs definition, because a major part of their professional expertise lies precisely there; a role that precisely distinguishes them from shop assistants whose only task it is to deliver the goods to the customer.*

(Biesta, 2006, p 22)

There are encouraging signs that some people are taking a different, more social, human and nurturing approach within HE. In this book, I explore some exciting alternatives to an impersonal customer-focused version of HE. Co-creating learning and teaching is becoming more widespread across the world and the beneficial outcomes that are being demonstrated are compelling (Bovill, 2019b; Cook-Sather et al, 2014; Mercer-Mapstone et al, 2017). Co-creation of learning and teaching is where students and staff share decision-making about the design of whole curricula or elements of curricula, and this approach has been described as one of six key pedagogical ideas in HE (Ryan and Tilbury, 2013). Alongside co-creation, a growing number of teachers are excited by the possibilities of teaching in ways that help to build meaningful relationships between staff and students.

This brings me to the two key arguments I make in this book.

1. There is a two-way, mutually reinforcing connection between co-creating learning and teaching and positive relationships. You need positive relationships between teacher and students, and between students and their peers, in order to establish the trust necessary for co-creating learning and teaching. And through co-creating learning and teaching – involving shared decision-making, shared responsibility and negotiation of learning and teaching – teachers and students, and students and their peers, form deep, meaningful relationships;
2. HE classrooms (whether face-to-face or online) – which are one of the most common places that staff and students meet in universities – are a key site of collegial and inclusive possibility that are currently often an under-used opportunity for relational pedagogy and co-creation.

Currently the ideas within my first argument tend to form two distinct bodies of research literature – developing co-creation of learning and teaching, and relational pedagogy. This book attempts to draw these ideas together. The second argument is largely absent from the expanding literature on partnership, co-creation and relational pedagogy. Drawing on literature from school education and HE, and using examples of co-created learning and teaching from universities, the book highlights the benefits of classroom-level, relational pedagogy and co-creation, including:

- » development of more human and engaged forms of learning and teaching;
- » enhanced learning and positive outcomes for students;
- » greater inclusivity;
- » increased relevance of learning to students;
- » enabling students to practise and develop democratic skills and capabilities.

## What are relational pedagogy and co-creation?

I explain what is meant by relational pedagogy and co-creation in the next sections and throughout the rest of the book.

### Relational pedagogy

Relational pedagogy puts relationships at the heart of teaching and emphasises that a meaningful connection needs to be established between teacher and students as well as between students and their peers, if effective learning is to take place. Yet, establishing trust between staff and students in the classroom can be challenging where many current practices alienate students (Mann, 2001). Indeed, before students are able to trust or respect teachers, teachers need to build good relationships and demonstrate that they care about students through effective communication of an interest in, respect for, and belief in students and their capabilities.

Noddings (2010, p vii) argues that '*reactions of students invited into a caring relation often include increased interest in the subject matter...; enhanced self-esteem...; and concern for others*'. How can we expect to have positive learning and teaching experiences without mutual trust or respect? Plevin (2017) goes on to argue that there are two essential factors for building positive relationships:

1. showing students that we care;
2. communicating frequently with students.

Relational pedagogy is explored in more depth in Chapter 2.

### Co-creation of learning and teaching

Let us now consider what is meant by co-creation of learning and teaching. In work I conducted with colleagues from the UK, USA and Ireland, we defined

co-creation as occurring ‘*when staff and students work collaboratively with one another to create components of curricula and/or pedagogical approaches*’ (Bovill et al, 2016, p 196). Co-creation recognises that students have valuable perspectives and contributions to bring to teaching and learning (Cook-Sather et al, 2014), and implies deeper engagement – such as shared decision-making – than might be found in common forms of active learning and interaction (Bovill, 2019b). While the term co-creation has been used quite widely in business and management literature, and the term participatory co-design is also considered a related term – in these cases there is more of a focus on co-creation with employers or user-testing in marketing of new goods or technology (see for example, Di Salvo et al, 2017).

Engaging students deeply in discussions about learning and teaching enhances understanding of learning and teaching processes, increases motivation and enhances the learning and teaching experiences – for students and teachers (Cook-Sather et al, 2014). Co-creation also leads to increases in students’ academic performance and grades, a greater sense of belonging and enhanced relationships and trust between students and staff, and between students and their peers (Cook-Sather et al, 2014; Mercer-Mapstone et al, 2017). Cook-Sather, interviewed in 2015 at Uppsala University (cited in Barrineau et al, 2019, p 174), explains the importance of discussing with students the value of students’ perspectives. She envisages having a conversation with students where she might say:

*I value your perspectives on what learning is like in my classroom, I can’t know that, I can only know what it’s like to teach in this classroom but only you know what it is like to learn in this classroom. So you have a perspective that I don’t have and that I would benefit from hearing so that I can make sure that the learning is the best experience that it can be for you.*

She goes on to add:

*And again it isn’t about what students like – it’s about what best facilitates their learning, and that distinction I think is really key. Because the what students like and don’t like plays into the consumer model of education... but analysing what makes for good learning, that’s a very different conversation.*

Many different forms of co-creation exist, from involving a small number of students in co-designing the entire curriculum or selecting a course text book as part of a curriculum planning group, to involvement of a whole class of students in creating their own essay titles or designing their own course evaluation (Bovill et al, 2010; Cook-Sather et al, 2014; Mihans et al, 2008). More examples of co-creation are explored in Chapters 3 and 4.

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# Index

- active learning
  - class sizes and, 27
  - contrasted with co-creation, 30
  - defined, 26
  - research on, 26
  - student resistance to, 28
- Apple, M W, 6
- arithmetic of engagement, 69
  
- Barrineau, S, 7–8
- Beard et al, 17
- Biesta, G J J, 1–2, 18, 40
- Bron, J, 6–7, 48
  
- Chambliss, D F, 69
- Chickering, A W, 13–14
- class sizes
  - active learning and, 27
  - co-creation and, 35, 60–1
  - reduced class sizes, 60, 69
- co-creation learning and teaching
  - alongside relational pedagogy, 43–4, 51–5
  - benefits of, 35–7
  - challenges of, 37–40
  - class sizes and, 35, 60–1
  - colleague engagement with, 64
  - concept of, 2, 3–4, 6–7, 30
  - contrasted with active learning, 30
  - ensuring inclusivity, 39
  - examples of in practice, 4, 32–5
  - expectation management, 62
  - first steps towards, 58
  - implications for academic developers, 68
  - implications for senior managers, 69
  - implications for students, 67
  - implications for teachers, 68
  - importance of good relationships for, 48–9
  - within institutional structures, 38
  - missing perspective approach, 60
  - negotiation within, 48
  - in relation to partnership, 31–2
  - as a shared endeavour, 49–50
  - staff–student power relations, 50–1
  - staff–student relationships, 2
  - student engagement with, 62–3
  - student perspectives within, 4
  - student–staff concerns over, 38, 39–40
  - sustaining the initiatives, 64–5
  - teachers' role within, 32
  - time pressures and, 40
  - as a transformational experience, 41
- collective challenges, 22
- collegiality
  - radical collegiality, 50
  - term, 30
- critical pedagogy, 5, 12
- curriculum design
  - curriculum planning groups, 28
  - emancipatory emphasis in, 21
  - ladder of student participation in
    - curriculum design, 29, 60
    - missing perspective approach, 60
    - participation matrix, 30
- Cuseo, J, 27
  
- Delpish, A, 33, 50
  
- Felten, P, 16
- Fielding, M, 12, 25, 50
- Freeman, S, 26
- Freiberg, H J, 46
- Freire, P, 5, 6, 49
  
- Gamson, Z F, 13–14
- Giroux, H A, 12
  
- high impact practices (HIPs), 14–15
- Higher Education (HE)
  - benefits of active learning for, 26
  - relational pedagogy in, 2–3
  - relationships in HE settings, 2, 3, 12–15, 18, 19–22
- hooks, b, 6, 12, 49, 62
  
- Kuh, G, 14–15, 25

- learning  
 belonging, role of, 15–16  
 emotions, role of, 16–17  
 importance of good teaching, 10  
 Lubicz-Nawrocka, T, 25, 30
- MacFarlane, B, 20, 50  
 Manor, C, 12, 15, 41, 67  
 Mayhew, M J et al, 10, 26, 68, 70
- Noddings, Nel, 3, 5, 17, 46–7
- parlour talk, 23  
 participatory co-design, 3  
 Plevin, R, 3, 21
- radical collegiality, 50  
 relational pedagogy  
 alongside co-creation learning and teaching, 43–4, 51–5  
 colleague engagement with, 64  
 colleague resistance to, 19–22  
 concept of, 3, 17, 20  
 emancipatory emphasis in, 21  
 in HE settings, 2–3  
 implications for academic developers, 68  
 implications for senior managers, 69  
 implications for students, 67  
 implications for teachers, 68  
 managing expectations, 62  
 planning the first class, 57  
 practical approaches, 58  
 in school settings, 18
- relationships  
 active listening, 47  
 alongside high impact practices, 15  
 for co-creation learning and teaching, 48–9  
 dialogue between students and staff, 46–7  
 first encounters, 44, 57  
 getting to know students, 46  
 in HE settings, 2, 3, 12–15, 18, 19–22  
 maintaining professional boundaries, 20  
 online courses, 45  
 practical relationship building  
 exercises, 22–3  
 within relational pedagogy, 17  
 scholarship on, 5  
 the sense of belonging, 15–16  
 student–staff relationships, 2, 3, 5, 12, 17, 18–19  
 student–student relationships, 2, 5, 15, 17, 61  
 time constraints, 21  
 Research Excellence Framework (REF), 1  
 Rogers, C, 5, 6, 12, 46  
 Romano, R M, 12, 17
- Shor, I, 21, 44, 46, 60, 62  
 student engagement  
 arithmetic of engagement, 69  
 in co-creation learning, 62–3  
 defined, 25  
 motivations for, 7–8  
 transition to partnership, 31
- students *see also* relationships  
 concerns over co-creation, 38, 39–40  
 impact of co-creation learning on, 67  
 perspectives of, 4  
 resistance to active learning, 28  
 the sense of belonging, 15–16  
 staff communication about, 63  
 student–staff relationships, 2, 3, 5, 12, 17, 18–19  
 student–student relationships, 2, 5, 15, 17, 61  
 teaching practice and students' HE experiences, 16, 41, 43, 67
- student–staff partnerships  
 benefits of, 35–7  
 defined, 28, 30  
 project-based examples, 28  
 in relation to co-creation, 31–2
- Takacs, C G, 69  
 teachers *see also* relationships  
 colleague engagement with relational/co-creation teaching, 64  
 communication about the students, 63  
 concerns over co-creation, 38, 39–40  
 dialogue between students and staff, 46–7  
 getting to know students, 46  
 impact of co-creation learning on, 68  
 personal transformation through co-creation experiences, 41  
 resistance to relational approaches, 19–22  
 role within co-creation, 32  
 student–staff relationships, 2, 3, 5, 12, 17, 18–19  
 Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), 1

- teaching practice
  - as delivery, 12, 17
  - emotions, role of, 16–17
  - impacts of massification on, 1–2, 27
  - importance of good teaching, 10
  - knowing students' names, 13, 44, 58
  - processes of, 10–12
  - self-reflection, 64–5
  - and the student experience, 16, 41, 43, 67
  - as the transmission of knowledge, 67
- Thomas, L, 15, 16
- two stage examinations, 23
- Veugelers, W, 6–7, 48

