



For the Love of Learning: Innovations from Outstanding University Teachers

Bilham, Tim, ed.
Palgrave Macmillan Springer Nature, 2013

Book Review

Tags: engaged learning | student learning

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Date Reviewed: March 26, 2015

For the Love of Learning: Innovations from Outstanding University Teachers is a compendium of thirty-six essays which describe various aspects of innovative pedagogy. The essays were submitted by educators who have received recognition by the United Kingdom's prestigious National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS), that is designed to recognize excellence in learning and teaching in higher education. Many of the essays describe the results of projects funded by NTFS grants. As Bilham makes clear in the introduction, the collection is an attempt at inspiring fresh and creative approaches to the challenge of shaping students through education.

In many ways, this is a collection of case studies as much as a collection of essays. The contributions focus on the description of pedagogical tools which the author has used successfully. None of the specific examples elicited apply directly to the disciplines of theological and religious studies, but the educational theory and the spirit of innovation which lay behind these specific practices are readily transferable.

There is a consistent call to engage students, which rests on the supposition that an engaged student learns better, and is retained. Several strategies for this type of engagement are presented. Essays 1 and 9 advocate for the involvement of students in the production and presentation of new content. Essays 11 and 27 suggest the employment of problem-based learning models, in which students seek out their own answers to real-world problems often with limited interference from the instructor. Essay 15 argues that humor in teaching can boost engagement when treating particular difficult or confusing topics.

Several of the essays advocate refining the nature of assessments. For example, essay 13 argues that if constructed well, assessments can be an important educational tool serving to teach not just to assess learning. Essay 17 identifies several problems with current models of assessment: they often do not measure the types of thinking that the course requires, or reflect the ability the students develop as thinkers through the course, or consider the fact that all students are different. Essay 18 discusses the benefit of formative assessment, which seeks to encourage deeper thinking and correct misunderstanding early in the educational process, rather than penalizing students at the end of the course, as summative assessment often does. Essay 33 argues that assessment can be viewed as a means for enhancing the employability of students. While none of these essays provide answers to the problem they do provide important conceptual steps forward to aid faculty in thinking through the design of learning experiences and strategies for assessing what has been learned.

Finally, the impetus to spend time developing the employability of students is a point well taken (see Essays 4, 24, 27, and 31-26). In many American universities there is an increasing emphasis on the acquisition of job skills - making sure college and university courses contribute to student employability. This trend directly impacts the teaching of theology and religion.

In conclusion, this volume is a tremendous resource for someone looking to enliven their teaching. It is not a roadmap to an innovative religious studies course, but it highlights proven pedagogical approaches which are shaping the lives of students in the United Kingdom, and are worth considering for anyone who takes the task of education seriously.

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