The Gift of Not Giving: On Pedagogical Parsimony

Teaching Fellows Conference

Edinburgh Napier University, Craiglockhart Campus

Jan 2015

Introduction:

I speak as a lecturer who teaches mainly academic arts and humanities subjects, notably film history, theory, and criticism, literary theory, philosophy, and increasingly photographic theory and criticism, and the culture of copyright law. I worked as a sound engineer and have taught sound production for film, television, radio, and theatre. I have interests in both practical education and developing students' scholarly abilities. I have been employed at Napier since 1997. Over that time I have witnessed a significant change in studentship in Arts and Humanities students.

From the outset I should mention that the direction of my presentation, based on its title, should be clear. I state in my abstract the following:

> In the laudable spirit of improving the student experience, and in acknowledgement of our culture of immediate access to online information, we provide students with PowerPoint presentations, referencing guidelines, lecture notes, on-demand support in email and social media, and a perpetual 'open door' office policy. We then craft assessments to respond to our assumptions about how we think students think, work, and learn in a culture dominated by digital media. While all of these practices can have pedagogical value, they do not have it *necessarily*. Reliance on such support mechanisms can result in a pedagogical culture of dependence.

Any of these can be useful pedagogically where they meet specific objectives. However, my concern is these and other teaching and support techniques have become default pedagogical practices, and are expected by students. When used as default practices, rather than as targeted pedagogical techniques, these can undermine students' education rather than support it because they have a tendency to present reason as information rather than as a process. As recently as 31 December 2014, Andrew Denholm, in *The Herald*, explains that in a recent Advance Higher English exam students repeated materials from study guides. He quotes an SQA spokesman: "The use of ready-

made notes to prepare for exams can lead to a situation where the candidate tries to fit their

memorised notes into an answer, potentially losing marks due to not really answering the set

question." Much of the research I have undertaken on this project repeats this concern,

characterising student reliance on notes not just as a means to achieve qualifications with the

minimum effort, but also as a relatively low-risk strategy to demonstrate the learning outcomes.

Students enter university with established behaviours which they attempt to continue. To encourage

this behaviour with support materials defeats the objective of a university education, at least in Arts

and Humanities, which aims to instil in students and graduates the capacities for independent

scholarship and critical evaluation, amongst other skills, within the methodological frameworks of

disciplines. I have therefore pulled back from support materials such as lecture notes and on-

demand email, and resisted the questionable assertion that students assimilated into Social Media

learn differently than previous generations. 140 characters does not make an argument (except

perhaps in Logic), and 'likes' are not reasons. This is not a question of me being a Luddite or lazy. I

am quite adept with technology, and the proposals I make below can take more time than

succumbing to default practices and student expectations. Rather, my reasons for largely avoiding

these support aids rests in the need, and indeed obligation, to improve students' critical thinking,

and reasoning skills, which Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa argue in *Academically Adrift*, are central

to the purpose of a university education. Stefan Collini, somewhat colourfully, paints a clear, if

hyperbolic, picture of the problem.

> [W]e should be seeking to ensure that those now entering universities in still increasing numbers are not cheated of their entitlement to an *education*, not palmed off, in the name of "meeting the needs of employers," with a narrow training that is thought by right-wing policy-formers to be "good enough for the likes of them" […]. ("From Robbins" final paragraph).

Elaine Keane, in a study of studentship and student experience at an Irish university,

characterises the problem well. She notes that studies, by both her and others, report students to be

ill "equipped for HE […], insufficiently qualified and prepared […], highly dependent and instrumental […], reliant upon rote-learning 'to the test' approaches, unable to think for themselves, and […] expecting to be 'spoon-fed', having experienced this approach in schools […]" (708). Certainly in my teaching I recognise much of this description, especially with, but not limited to, first and second year students. Numerous other studies such as those by Bailey, Millican, Petrovic and Pale, van der Meer, and Hill, Arford, Lubitow and Smollin all come to similar conclusions. Articles in the *Times Higher* by Furedi, Ramsden, and Brabazon also lament the detrimental impact that student dependence on lecturer-supplied notes has on students' *abilities to process information to develop knowledge and critical skills*. More general arguments about Higher Education in the US and UK, such as Arum and Roksa's *Academically Adrift* and Collini's *What are Universities For?*, similarly discuss problems with studentship.

Two main, inter-related causes seem to arise in the literature. While these causes are not my principle concern, having an overview of these causes will help point to ways in which students' culture of instrumentality and dependence can be addressed. First, it is no secret that HE has become increasingly consumerist. The "market-economy" at the heart of neo-liberalism has resulted in an instrumental view of the university both for students, and for society more broadly. Arum and Roksa state that "A market-based logic of education encourages students to focus on its instrumental value – that is, as a credential – and to ignore its academic meaning and moral character" (16). Crudely put, the university is now viewed in terms of its economic benefits, notably through employment, developments in sciences, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine (STEMM), and its benefits to local economies. As Collini laments, a university education is now rarely seen as intrinsically valuable. He quotes Robbins to remind his readers that the purpose of universities should be "to preserve and advance knowledge and to serve the intellectual needs of the nation" ("From Robbins"). Arum and Roksa note that this instrumental attitude towards universities has extended to students who aim to achieve a qualification by routinely seeking out easy classes and limit coursework as much as possible, rather than by establishing and undertaking a

plan for intellectual development (see Chapter 3). Students view the university as a route to employment and good pay, but have limited comprehension of how the university can help them to achieve that aim. They focus on grades and credits rather than knowledge. Juliet Millican contends that "Students' priorities globally have become increasingly instrumental, focusing on 'employability' with a direct link between learning and financial gain […], and a student culture of doing the minimum for the maximum reward" (636). Although discussing FE in the UK, Gillian Bailey nevertheless sums up the situation well: "The emphasis on grade acquisition has resulted in a move from **inquisitive** learning to **acquisitive** learning" (665, emphasis added). The growing emphasis of student satisfaction surveys, module feedback, and KPIs, in turn risks fostering an instrumental approach to teaching. Good feedback and KPIs are seen as good teaching, regardless how much students learn. Arum and Roksa make evidently clear that many students pursue the easy path through HE, for various reasons. Catering to that student demand, though, does not fulfil the critical purpose of higher education.

Before exploring pedagogical parsimony, it will be useful to consider a few common terms in academia. Doing so will help make clear the nature of the problem, and a means to address it.

"Knowledge" and "information" are terms we use frequently in HE. Often, it seems, we treat them as synonyms, or indeed use the former in place of the latter. If either can be considered pejorative in pedagogy, it is "information," which seems to be knowledge's poor cousin. Thus, we have "Knowledge Transfer" and "Knowledge Exchange." As educators in HE we could say something like

> We impart our knowledge to students, they develop their own knowledge, and earn both an education and a degree.

It is important to note, though, that "knowledge" and "information" are both nouns, and nouns name objects and qualities. As objects, knowledge and information can be exchanged, or even sold.

> In exchange for our wages, provided through taxation and fees, we provide students with knowledge.

Put in such mercenary terms, this description seems somewhat unpalatable, and less like what we as educators think we do. Why, then, do we use the nouns "knowledge" and "information?" To educate is not to deliver a product, but a service, and one which requires the student as equal participant. To understand the nature of that service it will help to consider the verb form of our troublesome nouns: **"to know"** and **"to inform**." I will provide working, provisional definitions for both, as they apply to education.

> **To know:** to understand something consciously, based on an awareness of facts, reasons, and experience (not necessarily an experience of the object of knowledge, but possibly the process of reaching cognizance). **"To know"** differs from **"to believe**." One can believe without facts, reasons, or experiences supporting a belief.

> **To inform:** to impart facts, and/or reasons. Informing presumes minds capable of comprehending the facts and/or reasons.

The difference between these terms is significant. I presume that as subject specialists in our chosen fields we all *know* a fair bit about them. We also have reasonable comprehension of the limits of our knowledge. When we teach we inform students about our disciplines' subject matter, methodologies, and forms or reasoning. Possessing minds capable of comprehending the information we impart, students are able *to develop our information into their knowledge*. Note, though, *there is no direct way for us to develop knowledge in students by informing*, precisely because **knowing** is something one must do for oneself, unlike **informing,** which we do for others. For students to gain knowledge, they must come to know the material.

Knowing differs from **believing**, as previously noted. One of our biggest challenges in education is to distinguish between student knowledge and student beliefs. The research I have undertaken for this presentation repeatedly points out that students are very adept at repeating information provided in lectures, in handouts, in PowerPoint slides, and even in research materials. To assert without awareness of evidential and epistemological foundations is to assert a belief, not knowledge. We are not meant, as far as I understand, to instil beliefs in students or award them credit for repeating these beliefs. To address this challenge we need one last term.

> **Critical reflection:** to evaluate whether we know what we think we know or believe what we think we know.

"Critical reflection" is really just an aspect of knowledge, but worth highlighting, since it is a significant part of the process of knowing. As evidence, reasons, and experiences change, so does the knowledge one can know. As educators, we are tasked not just with conveying subject information, but also teaching students how to evaluate and question so they can know their subjects too, rather than just believe the received wisdom. Assessments need to test not just that students have the relevant information, but that they have seated this information in evidence and reasons, and can articulate and defend the evidence and reasons. In other words, one of our key tasks is to help students to become critically reflective so they can develop their knowledge and know their subjects. To achieve this, education must remain dialogic, where ideas and their supporting reasons and evidence can be tested and improved, and not reduced to the transmission of information.

Pedagogical Parsimony

Through my pedagogical research I have become persuaded that students need to take more responsibility for their education, since only they can develop their knowledge. I will be able to discuss today only one, possibly two instances of pedagogical parsimony. Refusing to distribute lecture notes is, I feel, the most valuable instance of parsimony, and also the most contested in my module feedback. I will first outline my reasons for withholding lecture notes, and also the pedagogy that replaces them. If I have time I will discuss my more recent experiment with a partial email ban.

No PowerPoint Slides or Lecture Notes:

Students request lecture notes. I have seen this in my module questionnaires increasingly in the last few years. Research on this subject indicates I am not alone. In a *Times Higher* article, Frank Furedi states that "the current custom of distributing lecture notes […] symbolises the growing

estrangement of universities from a culture of studying." It also "serves as a disincentive to attend

lectures." In *The Guardian* Harry Slater warns students that the "guarantee of availability [of

lecturer's lecture notes] gives you an excuse to zone out and let the lecturer's words drift over you.

While this is tempting, it's better to listen out for the in-depth explanations that aren't on the

presentation – the bits you can't access later are usually the most valuable." Tara Barabazon, also

writing in the *Times Higher*, found problems in students' essays because they had not learned to

take notes on their readings, and have too often been presented with PowerPoint notes in class.

Copying slides, she argues, gives students the impression that they are taking notes, but these notes

show little sign of interpretation and critical engagement. She illustrates the problem.

> When examining and moderating assignments and dissertations, I read bundles of papers
> that are unerringly the same. This is much more than the same teacher presenting a singular
> view to a class. The students have restated, and rarely reordered, the bullet points on
> lecture slides. When reviewing the teaching file, I match the PowerPoint presentation to
> paragraphs in the assignments. The students were attaining learning outcomes. Whether
> they actually learnt anything is debatable.

My research goes beyond opinion and anecdote in *The Times Higher* and *The Guardian*. Hill,

Arford, Lubitow and Smollin, in an article for the journal *Teaching Sociology*, convey the results of

their extensive survey on the use of PowerPoint in undergraduate Sociology courses in a "medium-

sized private university in New England." They surveyed both the students and their lecturers (244).

The results of the survey are significant, but not surprising. Students expect PowerPoint slides

because it was used in their schools. Students further report that they find PowerPoint helpful,

particularly because it was visually stimulating and allowed students to focus on "the important

material" (249). However, lecturers raise concerns that these slides oversimplify materials and

substitute education with entertainment. Moreover, lecturers feel pinned down by the slides. The

content of a PowerPoint aided lecture is established, and the lecturers feel compelled to follow the

script rather than respond to the dynamics of the classroom and student questions and responses,

thereby limiting the lecturer's ability to engage and support students' inquisitiveness (252). Yet

despite the lecturers' misgivings, they use the software regularly, especially younger lecturers,

because of institutional pressure through student evaluations. One of these lecturers' comments is telling, and according to the researchers, relatively common.

> I'm still inclined to use PowerPoint because my future career is dependent upon good teaching evals, which only happen when the students are happy with the class. They like and expect their profs to use PowerPoint. […] I'm troubled by the fact that I often decide to use and post PP slides because my teaching evals would suffer if I didn't, not because I think PP is always the best thing for their intellectual development or understanding of the subject matter. (253)

Jacques van der Meer addresses the question of the purpose of notes squarely. His research echoes Hill et al, noting that students "wanted lecture overviews, summaries at different points and lecturers' emphasis on what was important to know. The use of visuals such as PowerPoint slides and overhead transparencies were also considered particularly useful as guides for note-taking" (19-20). However, his argument is not just about lecturer-provided notes, but note-taking as a valuable skill. He concludes that were it simply a need for students to have notes to review, then lecturer-provided notes would suffice. He points instead to research demonstrating that note-taking is an inherently valuable skill, playing "an important part in cognitive processing especially if notes are used effectively in subsequent review processes" (20). van der Meer does not underestimate the difficulty of learning to take notes, but contends that focusing on the "'meaning' of notes rather than the characteristics of notes" helps students (21).

To improve student's critical abilities I direct my efforts not to providing notes, but to teaching students the importance of notes and how to take them. To facilitate this and other academic skills I established in the first year in two of the programmes on which I teach an academic literacy module along the lines of that advocated and developed by Lea and Street. In this class I contextualise note taking in a number of activities. Students learn at the beginning of the year the basic principles, purposes, and techniques. I then relate note-taking to paragraph and essay structures. The class includes formative exercises, and the first take-home exercise uses Lea and Creme's "focused note taking" (58-9). For their first written assessment students write a 125 word summary paragraph on Brabazon's article. For those wishing further support with note-taking I have

provided a link to an excellent site on the subject from Dartmouth College. Note-taking reappears in numerous classes in the module, such as those on academic conduct, test preparation, putting together an essay, research techniques, analysing arguments, and annotations. Additionally, students are welcome to see me to discuss this and other topics from the class during my scheduled office hours.

Students find this shift from prepared notes to note-taking difficult, and the rewards are not always realised fully within the first two years. However, as an academic literacy skill, its value is seen across the degree, rather than in a single module. Certainly we have noticed improvements in students' comprehension of research materials and lectures by BA3. Challenges remain, though, especially in my BA2 Film Theory class. This class includes, in addition to students' I have taught previously, a wide range of other students, including direct-entry students, exchange students, and students from other programmes that do not teach note-taking skills in academic literacy classes. Although I cannot spend the time to teach note-taking in this class to the extent I do in BA1, I nevertheless provide a lecture on the purposes and techniques of note taking, explain why I will not provide notes, provide articles on the problems of lecturer-provided notes, and provide links to further guidance. Additionally, with numerous readings throughout the year I open lectures on theories with a discussion of how to read and take effective notes on the works. Fortunately, many students appreciate the expectations I place on them and the support I provide. However, the culture of dependence and instrumentality I have discussed here is difficult to overturn. It can be done, and I have seen significant success by BA3 and BA4, and appreciation for my efforts from these students and graduates. It is the hard road, but it is worth taking if we wish to help students learn how to know.

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