Work smarter: ten ways to improve your teaching

A book review of Smith, J. (2010) *The lazy teacher's handbook.* Edited by Ian Gilbert. Carmarthen: Crown House Publishing Ltd.

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As educators, we constantly strive to improve our teaching methods. Our focus centres on improving the scholarship of learning and teaching, entailing the design and implementation of innovative teaching and assessment strategies. Students are appreciative of novel approaches that encourage learning and understanding, as compared to solely witnessing didactic teaching. Any educator reading this will testify, teaching is a wonderful and rewarding career, even though we constantly search for the perfect teaching formula.

In general, being 'lazy' with one's teaching cannot be condoned, as it would certainly impact negatively on student learning. However, depending on your interpretation of the word 'lazy', this belief on 'lazy' teaching versus effectiveness can be changed. In 2010, Jim Smith published a superb resource entitled 'The Lazy Teacher's Handbook' with the catch line:

> how your students learn more when you teach less.

Firstly, it's important that this title is not misinterpreted; the book does not promote general laziness but instead professionally focuses enthusiastic educators on teaching smarter, rather than harder. A hidden strength of this resource is that after reading through it, you will automatically reflect on your teaching practice whilst also being provided with numerous creative ideas and activities, each described concisely, to improve learning amongst your students. The book is written in a manner that it can be either read as one piece, or easily utilised as a 'go-to' resource. It is divided into eleven themed chapters, with each one presenting ideas to encourage learning: the chapters focus on teaching, lesson

outcomes, IT, social and emotional aspects, marking and language, amongst others. While aimed at a classroom setting, many of the methodologies outlined are easily transferable to a third-level environment. In fact, many of the activities centre on developing metacognitive, critical thinking and reflective skills, ensuring students take responsibility for their own learning, a goal of most higher education research (Boud, 1989; Black and Wiliam, 1998; Taras, 2001). Once armed with these activities, your planning will certainly commence, as the book states:

> plans are nothing, planning is everything.

From reading this book, I generated a list of ten concepts I could easily introduce in my teaching. There were so many to choose from and I believe every reader will identify different combinations of ideas. Below, I will outline each one from my list and explain why each may be worth considering.

1:   *Think, pair, square, share (p.18)*

Peer learning is regarded as an ideal method for improving student learning, understanding and motivation (Brindley and Scoffield, 1998; Falchikov, 2007). Here, students initially, in silence and individually, think and write down their key points/ideas on a topic. In the second step, the student pairs up with the student next to them and they discuss their key points/ideas. To 'square', two pairs group together to compile the important and quality responses from the initial discussions and elect a speaker. The nominated speaker presents to the student group the high-level key points/ideas generated. This simple task merges quantity in the first two steps with quality in the latter two steps.

2:   *Group work – allocate roles (p.22)*

While group work is often utilised in various programmes and disciplines, the format of how it is implemented can vary greatly. However, after reading this book, allocating roles is a key aspect I will employ going forward. The book recommends the following: a facilitator to keep the work/project progressing and record what's happening; a time keeper to act as

the team clock; a resource manager to collect and return any required resources; a quality-checker to maintain the teams' focus on the primary task/project and finally a team-'rep' who can represent the team at meetings with the lecturer. You can add extra roles depending on group numbers. The concept is about allocating the student a focused and responsible role, in addition to the main project/task. The book provides ideas on how to get the most from each of the roles, for example, the team 'reps' could be summoned to receive extra information to be fed back to the group in a clear way. It is important to rotate roles over multiple projects so that no one becomes stereotyped.

3:   Praising students (p.85, p.92)

Lecturer feedback is the key to student improvement (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Brown, 2007; Price et al., 2010; Quinton and Smallbone, 2010). Feedback often points out any errors made in a piece of work and how to improve them (feed-forward). However, sometimes there can be a notable absence of praise for what the student is doing well (echoed in Brown, 2004). A suggestion is made to correct some pieces of work only focusing on the good points. I think this 'praise' aspect should be integrated in every form of feedback. Pointing out what is being done well can be extremely motivating to any student.

4:   5-3-1 (p.72)

This activity gets students to initially generate numerous ideas/points on a topic and subsequently focus in on more high-priority aspects. Initially, the students write down five points on a topic; they are then asked to prioritise three. For one of these points, they are asked to expand on it or justify it, depending on the topic/task. The author shows how this could be developed further when he suggests students walk around the room aiming to find two people disagreeing with them in their justification.

5:   Word/time limit on how long you can speak for (p.116)

The author recommends that educators not only consider **what** they are saying, but also **how much** they are saying. Filling a lecture with one-way traffic comprising an educator's

voice can often block learning opportunities. Therefore minimising the time a lecturer spends talking can help promote student engagement and allow time for integration of further learning opportunities. Using a time limit, or even a word limit, the author stated that students inadvertently listened to him more closely than before. You can even use software packages, such as 'Crazy Talk' mentioned in the book, to animate images and verbally communicate to your class.

6:   Self-assessment wording/reflection (p.123)

Self-assessment is a major concept in education (Boud,1989; Dochy et al., 1999; Taras, 2001; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Having students reflect on their work before submitting it generates a life long skill, embracing improvement. There are numerous work sheets available for self-assessment, but there were samples here that resonated with me. For example, asking the students to:

> put a star by the three things that you do not want me to miss and show that you have achieved your target;

or

> tell me three things you are really proud of with your work;

might obtain more information than simply asking for them to identify the strengths of the work. Each of these statements can provide an opportunity to allow students to meet goals/targets.

7:   Pick a letter and a number (p.68)

A student is asked to pick a letter from the alphabet and a number between one and ten. Then they must come up with the selected number of words relating to the subject/topic being covered beginning with the chosen letter. The goal is to get the students engaged in an activity identifying key words in an enjoyable atmosphere.

8:   Create your own report card (p.74)

In another approach based on self-assessment, students are asked to reflect and comment on themselves as learners and what aspects of their learning they are currently working on to improve. They then put this in a named, or addressed, envelope and give it to you. The author recommends giving them back the envelope after approximately one month with your comments. This task will assist students in identifying strengths/weaknesses in their learning approach and then subsequently allow them to reflect on how they have progressed.

9:   'I resign' (p.77)

While every teacher believes they use the best method to teach and deliver a topic, student input has the potential to assist you in ensuring you select the most effective approach for a particular group. In this exercise, you announce that you are 'resigning' and that the students had to teach the next five classes, what is it they would like to learn? What teaching approaches would they use? This exercise can assist in revision of a topic, constructive application of the material and also add ideas to teaching methodology that students will enjoy and appreciate, all without a requirement for the educator to speak.

10:   Motivating language (p.118)

As educators, we have the opportunity to guide a classroom. The language we employ is critical in communicating our message, engaging the student group and promoting learning and understanding. The author presents phrases/activities that can enhance aspects of a student's life, e.g. their self-esteem, motivation and behaviour (and insists these phrases/activities are delivered with the right body language and in a genuine, heartfelt way by the educator). While many lecturers will automatically be using some of the phrases mentioned, it is a good reminder of how the language we employ can also be critical in generating a motivated classroom reaching their learning potential.

Overall, this teaching resource comes highly recommended for anyone in a teaching position. Jim Smith's thought-provoking and professional guidebook will make each reader think about, and reflect on, their own teaching. It will ask the reader to consider things from

the students' point of view and demonstrate how introducing simple, creative exercises could vary their day and promote a metacognitive and reflective learning environment, containing additional peer learning activities. The author leads the educator to recognise that, through the implementation of these creative exercises, one can become a more effective teacher by actually doing less, instead focusing on facilitating independent learning in the classroom. So start your planning now!

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