Chapter 3
Quality Teaching in the Social Sciences

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter is about discipline-based teaching and students' active engagement in learning-by-doing. It notes threshold concepts in sociology, highlighting the development of critical thinking and academic study and research skills. It shows how student-centred, authentic learning pedagogy and a student learning journey perspective was applied to social science teaching, in particular, sociology, and offers practical examples of teaching strategies revealing the importance of curriculum alignment, planning, and reflective practice for university teachers and students.

INTRODUCTION

This case study tells the story of quality social science teaching in a suite of three sociology subjects—one in each year of a three-year degree program—in the applied field of health studies. These subjects (also known as units or modules) were focused on researching and understanding the social context of health, including topics such as ethnicity and health, Indigenous health issues, social class, and rural health. The case study is based on a national, Australian award winning teaching portfolio, which is adapted here as a case study in order to share good, discipline-based teaching practice and to explore the nature and meaning of quality university

teaching and learning (see Salter Chapter 1). The aim is to inspire, rather than to impose a quality road for sociology teaching in universities, for, as Arendt (1968, p. 105) famously observed, 'Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it'. The chapter explores what and how to teach and assess, highlighting core social science skills including critical thinking, academic study skills, and research skills. It carries a number of messages: that it is important to know why you are doing what you are doing (pedagogy); that students should be engaged actively in learning; and that university teachers are 'meddlers in the middle', which means actively sharing with students in their learning processes:

Specifically it means: (1) less time giving instructions and more time spent being a usefully ignorant co-worker in the thick of the action; (2) less time spent being a custodial risk minimiser and more time spent being an experimenter and risktaker; (3) less time spent being a forensic classroom auditor and more time spent being a designer, editor and assembler; (4) less time spent being a counsellor and 'best buddy' and more time spent being a collaborative critic and authentic evaluator (McWilliams, 2008, p. 263).

McWilliams' meddlers' approach has much in common with Cousin's (2009, p. 270) 'transactional curriculum inquiry,' an approach 'which becomes neither student-centred nor teacher-centred but something more active, dynamic and in-between … [the] pursuit of shared understandings of difficulties and shared ways of mastering them'. In this case study university teachers and their students are active in the mutual process of enhancing learning.

BACKGROUND

The elements of quality university teaching have been clearly identified through the scholarship of learning and teaching (See Prosser Chapter 2; Trigwell, 2012). Angelo (2012), for example, advocates careful curriculum design. Others focus on university teachers and teaching (Hunt, Chalmers & Macdonald, 2012). For example, studies of outstanding university teachers (Bain, 2004; Kember and McNaught, 2007) reveal that they treat teaching as a serious intellectual endeavour through which they engage students in critical thinking and authentic learning tasks. It is a process that Barnett describes as unsettling: 'The student is perforce required to venture into new places, strange places, anxiety-provoking places. This is part of the point of higher education. If there was no anxiety, it is difficult to believe that we could be in the presence of a higher education' (Barnett 2007, p. 147). Already, this

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