

Editorial

This issue of *Learning and Teaching: The International Journal of Higher Education in the Social Sciences* concentrates on approaches to learning, teaching and assessment in the social sciences and features contributors from universities in many different parts of the world. Themes that run through the whole issue include learning from experience, responding to students' needs and making space for creativity and risk-taking.

In the first article, Megan Thiele, Yung-Yi Diana Pan and Devin Molina describe and evaluate an experiential learning activity about Marx's theory of alienation. Students were asked to produce a work of art or a poem and then to explain what inspired their creation. The tutors then shocked the students by telling them they were going to sell their work at a profit and the students would receive just enough wages to cover their living expenses for one day. Next, the students were given three minutes to make six miniature versions of their original picture or poem. Many students reported feeling stressed and disconnected from what they produced. The test results of these classes were compared with a control group and indicate that this simulation of alienation had increased students' understanding of Marx's concept.

In the second article, R. William Ayres explains how he was prompted to change the organisation of a conflict resolution course when he realised that paid work commitments made the students at a large, public university less able to complete the pre-class readings than the students at his previous institution, a small private college. Inspired by the concept of the 'flipped classroom' and by a desire to make the course more applied and practical, the author switched from setting readings on theories of conflict resolution that were then discussed in a traditional seminar format to providing case-study materials, both written and visual, that provided the basis for problem-focused group discussion in class. The new approach not only generated more student engagement with the materials but raised the average grade on the two assignments that were identical to those on the previous version of the course. Students' theoretical understanding of conflict resolution, learned through collective analysis of different examples of conflict, was just as good as that of previous cohorts who had focused on theoretical readings.



In the third article, Cary Bennett critiques the use of assessment rubrics in higher education. Although criteria-based assessment rubrics are promoted as ways to increase the efficiency, consistency and effectiveness of grading and feedback, the literature indicates that any gains in these areas come at a cost for both assessors and students. Academics are discouraged from responding to the individuality of each student's efforts and students' creativity, imagination and deep thinking can be dampened by pre-established criteria. The restrictions imposed by the grade descriptors included in many assessment rubrics make the experience of giving and receiving feedback even more standardised and impersonal. The author concludes that rubrics end up justifying the marks given and their use may be more concerned with regulating the behaviour of course teams that include academics on temporary contracts than with ensuring equitable grading for students.

The fourth piece is an essay by Jennifer Dodge, Richard Holtzman, Merlijn van Hulst and Dvora Yanow in which they explore the application of interpretive research methods and methodologies to teaching. Drawing on their participation in a roundtable discussion on this issue at the Interpretive Policy Analysis International conference of 2014, the authors argue that ideas central to interpretive approaches in research, such as the centrality of meaning-making, the importance of situated knowledge and of enquiry being sparked by a puzzle or surprise, can and should be applied to teaching. Valuing students' own knowledge, experience and perspectives, involving them actively in knowledge creation and making classrooms more open and egalitarian are just some of the ways in which academics could adopt interpretive approaches to teaching. The authors are aware that there could be practical difficulties in implementing these principles and are interested in hearing about readers' experiences of interpretive approaches to teaching. If you would like your response (no more than 1,000 words) to be considered for publication in *LATISS*, please send it to the editors. We will also be inviting responses from a selection of scholars and publishing them in a future issue of *LATISS*.

In the fifth contribution, Kristina C. Marcellus reports on how she approached the problem of teaching introductory sociology in Abu Dhabi using a textbook produced in the U.S.A. It was not possible for her to change the adopted textbook easily so instead she presented it to students as something that could be challenged and contested. She used confidential reading journals and open class discussion to encourage the multi-national student group to compare and contrast the textbook material with their own lived



experiences. This not only promoted intercultural understanding but developed the students' ability to apply sociological ideas to everyday life.

The issue ends with a review article by Corina Balaban tracing the evolution of debates through three books about PhD education and an extended review of a book on African higher education by Sintayehu Kassaye Alemu.

Our thanks go to the authors of the articles, essay, report, review article and book review, the anonymous referees who commented on the manuscripts, the publishers who provided review copies of the books, our own publisher Berghahn and the Editorial Board.

Penny Welch and Susan Wright