

*Gavin Jinks illustrates his use of human givens principles to maximise the effectiveness of his university teaching.*

# Learning imaginatively in higher education

**S**TUDENTS are arriving in a steady stream for a lecture on feminism. They are all a few weeks into their first semester of studying for a BA in applied social work at the University of Derby, and this lecture falls within the applied sociology module. As they walk into the lecture room they are surprised to see, on the big screen up at the front, a YouTube video of Cyndi Lauper singing, “Girls just wanna have fun”.



To their further surprise, I greet each student by name as they file in, even though there are 50 or 60 of them – very early on, I print out the photos and names of all the new students and make a point of learning them. With the lively, upbeat music playing, everyone is smiling and laughing and even singing along by the time they take their seats. Then the music fades out, the room becomes quiet and I ask, “What’s the definition of irony?” Before anyone can say anything serious, I answer my own question: “A bloke giving a lecture on feminism!” This generates laughter and encourages a few light-hearted boos, as the students pick up the informal mood created by the less than traditional approach to the start of a lecture. I then continue, “So let’s have another piece of music with a hint of a sociological message relevant to today’s subject.” Cue a video of Candi Staton’s “Young hearts run free”.

In 2012, I became a senior lecturer in social work at the University of Derby, after spending most of my career in social services at Derby City Council. I worked for the local authority for 28 years, initially as a social worker and then, in the final eight years, as a training and education officer, because I have long been fascinated by how people learn. Having attended many training and education events over the years, I have always enjoyed reflecting on how well or badly these events had been facilitated, and seeing what I could learn from that, as well. For instance, I have lost count of the number of times I have attended presentations where the facilitator simply reads the words on PowerPoint, when it would have been simpler just to provide a handout, and particularly recall one when a leading social work academic attempted to plough through 60 packed PowerPoint slides in an hour. With just 10 minutes to go, she was only half way through, so tried to rush through the remaining 30 in the time that was left. Not conducive to effective learning. On the positive side, one event that sticks in my memory was the use made of video recording during a

communication skills course. Actors had been employed to take on clients’ roles and a key feature was to pause the action and review what had taken place before deciding how to progress. It was a very effective tool for embedding the importance of reflecting on action *during* the action, as well as after it, and is one that I have often employed successfully since, and that I can now understand and explain in terms of the observing self.

I am not exaggerating when I say that studying for the Human Givens Diploma in 2001 remains the most significant piece of formal education I have ever undertaken, notwithstanding the fact that I hold a law degree and a Masters in social work. Central to the value I place on the human givens approach is the enhanced understanding it gave me of human needs and resources and the crucial part these can play in helping people learn more effectively. This has been massively important in my current role. I am not teaching history or Classics, subjects that enhance students’ knowledge and cognitive skills but don’t have a life-changing impact on the worlds of other people. I am teaching social work students, who will go on to intervene in hugely important ways in real people’s lives and thus how they can best learn is not just an academic question.

## Imagination

It was from the human givens that I learned that imagination is a vital innate resource. This was strongly reinforced when, as a new appointee to the university, with no formal teaching qualification, I was required to undertake the Post-Graduate Certificate in Higher Education. In the course of this, I learned that an innovative thinker on university education, Alfred North Whitehead, had spoken compellingly of the power of the imagination as long ago as 1927, in an address to the American Association of the Collegiate Schools of Business: “The justification for a university is that it preserves the connection between knowledge and the zest of life, by uniting the young and the old in the imaginative consideration of learning,” he said. “The university imparts information, but it imparts it imaginatively. At least, this is the function which it should perform for society. A university which fails in this respect has no reason for existence. This atmosphere of excitement, arising from imaginative consideration, transforms knowledge. A fact is no longer a bare fact: it is invested with

all its possibilities. It is no longer a burden on the memory: it is energising as the poet of our dreams, and as the architect of our purposes. Imagination is not to be divorced from the facts: it is a way of illuminating the facts. It works by eliciting the general principles which apply to the facts, as they exist, and then by an intellectual survey of alternative possibilities which are consistent with those principles.”<sup>1</sup>

Paul Ramsden, policy analyst and consultant in teaching and learning in higher education, referred to this idea much more recently, when he wrote in *The Guardian*, “A university education is nothing if it does not ignite a burning desire to learn. Imagination illuminates the facts and structures them. It makes the dull and obscure parts of learning a challenge to be overcome rather than a burden to be endured.”<sup>2</sup>

Sadly, increasing pressures on students and on teaching staff have made this much less likely to happen. But, fortunately, the human givens approach points the way to making learning come alive, even within the constraints of today. It particularly opened my eyes to the power of metaphor and the understanding of the brain as a pattern-matching organ. I firmly believe that metaphor is the strongest of all teaching tools. For this reason I almost always begin my lectures with a piece of popular music relating to the theme of the lecture, as well as a piece of drama (usually from film or TV), which provides a metaphorical representation of ideas I wish to convey.

So, playing Cyndi Lauper’s “Girls just want to have fun” leads into a discussion of the fact that, far from suggesting that women are concerned only with empty-headed fun, the song is about girls and women wanting to be allowed to express themselves and not be dictated to about how they behave. The students are fascinated to learn that, when Lauper’s record company gave her the original lyrics to sing, she found them misogynistic, so she rewrote the song as an anthem for young women. Candi Staton’s “Young hearts run free”, recorded in 1976, is about breaking free from oppressive relationships and, again, can be regarded as a women’s anthem. I get the students to consider whether it was even possible that it could have been written any earlier and to come to recognise that it was very much a song of its time, enabled by how far the women’s movement had by then progressed.

Another example: in a recent lecture on stereotyping, I started in lighthearted fashion with the song “Barbie Girl” by Aqua, as the producers of this record wanted to make a point about the way that the makers of the Barbie Doll were representing women. I then showed some clips from the BBC drama *The Best of Men*. This programme was made before the London Olympics in 2012 and tells the inspiring story of neurologist Ludwig Guttman and his work with severely disabled soldiers at Stoke Mandeville Hospital after the end of the Second World War. When Guttman told his colleagues that he in-

tended to set up the Stoke Mandeville International Games, he was laughed at. Such games, they said, celebrated athletes who were the best at what they did. What could cripples possibly be best at? “They are the best of men,” he said, “who have overcome extreme disability.” Guttman’s work led ultimately to the creation of the modern Paralympic movement and swept away many of the stereotypical ideas about disabled people. What comes home to my students is that starting to question stereotypes can lead to massive, not just minor, changes.

## Relating to experience

I try to ensure, wherever possible, that new ideas are related to the existing life and work experiences of my students. For instance, the theoretical concept of the ‘strengths perspective’ refers to focusing on clients’ abilities, talents and resources (a key feature, of course, of the human givens therapeutic approach), instead of on their problems and deficits. When teaching the strengths perspective, my starting point is the football training session scene from the film *The Blind Side*. In this scene the football coach cannot understand why hulking teenager Michael, 6ft and weighing 14 stone, is half-hearted about stopping his team mates from being tackled. (We are talking American football here – more akin, in tackling terms, to British rugby.) The coach is shouting at him but Michael is baffled, completely failing to understand why he is supposed to do this. Then Leigh Anne, Michael’s adoptive mother, steps in, recognising that he needs to be taught in a way that begins with his strengths – and his major strength is a highly developed protective instinct. She interrupts the training session to remind Michael how he always protects other members of their family, in one case saving her younger son’s life, and tells him he has the ‘family protector’ role in the football team. Michael instantly grasps the idea and fully takes on all opponents. This fits clearly with Pat Williams’ powerful “Which you is you?” idea, about ways to identify which of our many ‘sub-personalities’ we need to take into particular situations.<sup>3</sup> I have found this to be a far more useful introduction to the strengths perspective than the textbook explanation.

There is a scene from the film *Made in Dagenham*, which is about the fight for equal pay for women, in which the lead character Rita is incensed because her husband wants to take credit for the fact that he does not drink away their money nor raise his fist to her, like other husbands. She responds by telling him that this is as it should be: “Rights, not privileges, it’s that simple, it really bloody is!” Students tell me that this scene made the concepts of feminism come alive for them in a way that lecturing purely from theoretical concepts about the empowerment of women and entitlement to equal rights could never do. In human givens parlance, such concepts are nominalisations, with no obvious



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substance. But when brought to life through film and put into context, students can easily make sense of them. Evaluation forms that students complete suggest very strongly that the use of music and films both helps them engage and also make an initial connection with theoretical ideas.

### Speedy rapport building

Because students relate so strongly to ideas presented through the media of music and film, I am more quickly able to build rapport with them. As someone versed in human givens thinking, I am well aware of the importance of building rapport as a means of connecting constructively with those that I am teaching. That is why I have paid particular attention to learning the names of all my students. In a setting where students can all too easily feel swallowed up into anonymity, I believe it provides them with confirmation that they are still individuals and are valued for what they each bring to their learning. First-year students frequently comment on the fact that I know everyone's names. When they do, I am happy to say that I make it a priority to learn their names because I believe it matters.

### Learning how and what to learn

Modern teaching theory in higher education suggests that the role of lecturers is to teach how to learn rather than to transmit knowledge.<sup>4</sup> While there is still a place for the simple conveying of facts – such as important pieces of social work legislation and policy – most teaching is best done by developing students' ability to come to their own professional judgements, where learning is occurring at the level of understanding rather than learning by rote. It is the type of learning that allows a person to hold a proper discussion on a subject, rather than simply churn out the contents of a book or a webpage, and involves *applying* concepts and ideas. Thus it becomes impossible to forget what is known. As one student actually said, "Once we truly understand something, we cannot de-understand it."<sup>5</sup>

Somebody who has a proper understanding of compassion, for example, will know that it goes far beyond being nice or kind. It may be about driving another person forward to achieve their potential and/or to overcome difficulties, some-times in ways that shock them into understanding. Again, examples can help convey this. There is a great example of the fact that real compassion is much more than being nice in the film *Good Will Hunting*, when the lead character Will Hunting, a self-taught genius who chooses not to acknowledge his talents and is a bricklayer like his friends, is told by one of those friends that he is wasting himself. The friend doesn't pull his punches: "You are sitting on a winning lottery ticket and you are too much of a pussy to cash it in. If you are still here on a building site in 20 years time, I'll fucking kill you!"

Teachers need to facilitate students to use higher cognitive processes spontaneously – such as the imagination, reflective thinking and asking oneself good questions – to move them away from memorising and describing.<sup>6</sup> This is exactly what happens in human givens teaching, where practitioners must demonstrate real understanding that translates into action, instead of hiding behind ideologies.

### A place for passion

I am fortunate that the subjects I teach (such as applied sociology, human growth and development, attitudes and values, and communication skills) are those that I feel genuinely passionate about, and I firmly believe that it is helpful for students to witness this passion. As we know, we have better memory for things that have elicited an emotional response and that we connect with emotionally. Passion inspires intrinsic motivation, the desire to learn for its own sake rather than simply to pass exams. The fact that this might increase student satisfaction or even bump up scores in surveys and league tables is, to me, simply a side benefit.

I routinely explain the organising ideas of the human givens in a lecture on anxiety and depression, which is entirely based on HG principles, and it is one hundred per cent obvious that I believe in them. Social work students are able to recognise that many of their clients will be highly aroused and that calming them is essential for effective work. They are also able to see that an approach which encourages traumatised clients to tell and re-tell their stories is likely to traumatise them even more, leading to embedded depression. Some of the staff working in our university student wellbeing service are human givens trained and use HG knowledge to underpin their one-to-one counselling with students. So I invite one of these HG counsellors to illustrate, through anonymised and partly fictionalised examples, how they use the principles that I have just been teaching. This backs up my theoretical input and give students a flavour of the powerful application of these principles with others like themselves.

I think my passion also comes across when I illustrate the use of stories and metaphors in therapy, as part of our module on human growth and development (a whistle-stop tour of therapeutic approaches, which gives students an introduction to some of the techniques that may be useful in any helping profession). I am able to provide examples of clients who have quite literally been transformed by a metaphorical idea, illustrating the enormous power of language. For instance, I tell them about a woman I worked with, in my capacity as a human givens therapist, who was traumatised by something she had done five years previously, which she considered to have been utterly shameful. I recommended that she go home and write the words "Day One" on that day's date on her kitchen calendar. To my amazement, she returned the next week,

smiling and calm. She told me that, as soon as she wrote those words, she knew that the incident five years previously was in the past and could be let go. I may also tell of the headteacher in the grip of an addiction that threatened both his career and his marriage. I asked him, "What hooks you?" He told me some months later that this one question, and the metaphor it contained, was sufficient to break the cycle of his addictive behaviour.

I mentioned earlier a training I attended in which practice sessions with 'clients' were videoed. I was struck by the technique of the video being paused at critical points, so that the social work trainees could reflect on their practice while engaged in it. I have since adapted this idea of drawing on the observing self to enable students to stand back from what they are doing and check whether it is going as it should. I ask them to *imagine* that their role-playing sessions with clients are being videoed, and that they can press the pause button if they want to question whether they are doing the right thing at any point, or would do better to change tack. Anyone else in the room, including me, can also press pause if they have something to contribute or ask, or we might press rewind, to replay a scenario differently. It is a much more refined form of reflection – keeping track in the moment while, say, lecturing or interviewing – than looking back only when too late to make a change. It teaches students not to become so absorbed in what they are doing that they can't remain detached enough to make crucial judgements.



### Creating new patterns

Another key piece of human givens philosophy that I have never forgotten is that we acquire new learning via the patterns created when we undertake tasks designed to embed new ways of thinking and feeling. (The film *Groundhog Day* is, of course, an excellent tool for demonstrating the core human givens understanding that patterns of human behaviour will keep repeating unless and until we do something to change those patterns.) So almost all my lectures are interactive, involving some activity designed to widen students' perspectives. In the last session I led on stereotyping, I asked students to bring in tabloid newspapers and scan them to find examples of stereotyping within the reporting. They produced many examples, such as the stereotyping of benefit claimants, asylum seekers, single parents, people with mental health problems, to name just a few. This led into a discussion about the power of the media to in-

fluence society and the role of the social worker in challenging these ideas, because social workers very regularly come across clients and other professionals who are massively influenced by stereotypes that are created or increased by certain styles of media reporting. Most importantly, students recognise that it is *their* responsibility to ask questions of clients and professionals, to encourage them to consider the evidence base behind stereotypes.

As far as I can, I leave students to make up their own minds about different issues by presenting ideas and allowing them to decide how valuable these ideas might be to them. My aim is for students to develop a sense of competence and trust in their ability to form judgements, based on weighing up the facts. Therefore, when teaching sociology, I do not choose to take a politically neutral stance on the issues we are exploring. I am open about my own beliefs, while constantly emphasising that they themselves must make up their own minds about what they consider to be true.

### Truly stretching

A key HG concept is that we all need to be stretched (not stressed), to fulfil our innate human need for meaning, and I encourage students to aspire to the highest marks that they are capable of achieving. However, research has shown that written assignments are generally an unreliable means of assessing students accurately, especially as one can never be certain who has written an assignment, and they don't demonstrate the level of understanding that a student possesses.<sup>7</sup> Last year I got permission (after consultation with students, team members, senior academics and the external examiner) to change the assessment method for two of the modules that I teach (applied psychology, and human growth and development) from written essays to individual videoed discussions between each student and two tutors on the programme. The discussions allowed a much more genuine assessment of a student's understanding, not least because a discussion is a dialogue rather than a monologue, leading to far greater insight about what the student really understands than an essay. As a consequence, there was a very significant increase in the number of students achieving the highest grades. The external examiner, who watched the videos, commented upon the robustness of this assessment method and even asked permission to introduce it in her own institution.

At the end of every module, students are asked to complete an evaluation questionnaire, which lecturers cannot influence. Happily, I have received feedback in the high 90s on a percentage approval scale. The focus of the positive feedback is usually the level of passion in the teaching and the connection to real life experiences. I am determined to improve even further the teaching tools and methods I employ and I am confident that human givens ideas will remain at the fore-front of these developments.

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