Being subject-centred: A philosophy of teaching and implications for higher education

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Being subject-centred as a higher education teacher offers a rich and illuminating philosophical and practical understanding of learning. Building upon previous research on subject-centred learning, we draw on reflection, literature review and a phenomenological approach to show how our ways of being infuse the teaching and learning environment. Philosophically, it is our way of being with our subject as teachers that influences the learning within our students. We show how posing the question: 'What is the best way to teach this subject?' helps a teacher find the best way to enhance the learning experience. It entails moving away from reliance solely on approaches that simply 're-present' content, such as lectures and online learning management systems, to interactive classrooms where space is created for the students to enter into their own engagement with the subject in a shared pursuit with the teacher, resulting in more effective teaching and learning. We illustrate this with personal accounts of our own journeys as teachers. We acknowledge that it takes courage to teach and to fully be subject-centred in the face of prevailing trends and pressures for other ways of teaching currently prominent in the higher education sector. But, ultimately, it is who we are as teachers that matters most, and being subject-centred provides the most effective way for us to most meaningfully reach our students.

Introduction

To be effective as a teacher within higher education institutions it is necessary to bring a scholarly approach to the ongoing development of 'extensive professional skills and practices and high levels of disciplinary and other contextual expertise' (Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2010: 111). In part, we argue that effectiveness as teachers in higher education is linked to *being* teachers of higher education. The method we have embraced to meet this ongoing challenge of having 'the courage to teach' (Palmer, 1998) is to listen to the voices of our disciplinary subjects and ask of them: How can we as teachers help bring into being the values of a higher education? Our personal answers to this question are encapsulated in the notion of *subject-centred learning*.

Being subject-centred, we argue, offers higher education teachers a philosophy and practical pathway to navigate the challenges of teaching in difficult times. For us, it also represents the most personally satisfying way to be with our students and with our discipline subject. Through inquiry and reporting we have previously communicated several fundamental notions of subject-centred learning (Morrison-Saunders & Hobson, 2013; Hobson and Morrison-Saunders, in press 2013) and how we believe it can benefit the university sector. The purpose of this paper is to explore via deeper inquiry into the

philosophical underpinnings of this approach and to reflect on how it might serve higher education teachers in a more practical sense. We attempt to peel back some of the onion layers on this beguiling topic.

In short, our aim is to address the question: What are the philosophical and practical characteristics of subject-centred learning? In answering this question, we draw upon our personal experiences and are especially centred upon what it means to be a teacher and to be a student in this context. We outline our methodological approach in the next section before commencing our focus on the philosophical underpinnings of subject-centred learning followed by reflections on the implications of this approach for teaching practice in higher education. Our conclusions return to our starting premise that being subject-centred is fundamental to who we actually are as teachers and beings in our own right.

Methodology

There has been a resurgence of interest in qualitative research methods into higher education, in part due to a reaction to an over reliance on quantitative approaches (e.g. Haggis, 2009; Tight, 2011; Kelly & Brailsford 2013). Part of the push for methods that allow for subjectivities of understanding and an understanding of the complexity of subjectivities, is because teaching is personal. As Harding (1993) observed, what we 'know' is inextricably bound up in our own value positions and experiences which are always understood from a particular and embodied standpoint. There is a complexity of the weaving of subjectivities and research of higher education because as teachers we are always part of the research; we are researching ourselves as teachers of higher education and we are researching that which we create, the knowledge that is taught as higher education. As stated in Scutt and Hobson (2013, 18): 'our research practice then helps co-create the university itself'. It is thus impossible to get 'outside' the subject of our research; we are inherently part of the system, simultaneously observer and participant. We acknowledge, therefore, that the beliefs of authors and researchers affect what they research and present to the world (Fox et al., 2007) and indeed this is equally our point about re-framing teaching as being. Thus, our methodology can in part be considered as autobiographical narrative (Campbell et al., 2004) which seems appropriate since as Clegg and Stevenson (2013:7) wrote:

> most research about higher education, and, more broadly, tertiary education, is
> produced by academics who, by virtue of their position, have insider knowledge
> of the systems they are researching. This holds whether or not the research is
> confined to the researcher's immediate environment – we are, as it were,
> studying ourselves.

From an insider and immersed researcher position, it is appropriate to use a phenomenological approach to re-frame taken-for-granted concepts and re-frame the questions we ask of teaching, to questions around value and meaning. Phenomenological research begins with the 'lived world' and explores meaning, interpretation and understanding, rather than making claims for external, objective forms of knowing (van Manen, 1997). Such a method allows for a rich and thick description and analysis that

includes the relationships of embodied and embedded subjectivities in a learning experience, and has been developed in higher education in the form of phenomenography (Marton, 1986; Entwistle, 1997; Saljo1997; Svensson 1997). This method tends to focus, through the analysis of students' texts, on student experience and often removes the intentionality of the teacher, as the research data collected is the text generated by the students. The first-hand point of view of the teacher may be discounted as only 'personal'. By placing the subject at the centre of the inquiry into the experience of learning neither the student nor the teachers intentions are removed, but they are viewed through the lens of the 'third thing', the subject, and what that demands we should do. Our approach is more in line with the originating spirit of inquiry of phenomenography which as Saljo (1997: 188) reflected began:

> ... as an attempt to scrutinise and understand human learning by focussing on *what people are in fact doing in situated practices* and when studying. In particular, the approach was driven by an attempt to replace the abstract and empirically unverifiable conceptual frame-works such as those that implied that people "process" or "store" information in various processing devices of dubious ontological status [emphasis added].

We have previously argued (Hobson & Morrison-Saunders, in press 2013) that 'teaching is being'; our personal reframing of the observation by Palmer (1998, 2) that: 'we teach who we are'. Thus, our approach to this research is necessarily reflective in nature, and we model Kreber's (2002) notion of an effective teacher who not only reflects upon their own personal teaching experience but equally reflects on the framework of the educational theories that explains these reflections (Lupton, 2013; Clegg, 2012). Woven into our line of argument is engagement with literature, which not only provides previous understanding of our topic (e.g. Reardon 2006; Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008) but frequently accords with our own views as well as having helped to shape them.

Philosophical underpinnings of subject-centred learning

Here we summarise some of the key arguments we have previously advanced on the topic explaining what we mean by adopting a subject-centred approach in higher education. We then flip the concept around, so that we view the world of teaching and learning through the lens of 'the subject' rather than vice versa as we find this to be a useful way to illuminate what actually happens in a classroom. This approach in turn helps us to understand what approaches represent effective teaching. Following our reflections on the philosophical underpinnings of subject-centred learning, we present some of our experiences in relation to practice.

What is subject-centred learning?

We derived our inspiration and terminology for subject-centred learning from the work of Palmer (1998), who places at the centre of teaching the relationships between the three 'beings' involved: the teachers, the learners, and the subject. Palmer's (1998) notion of the subject as 'a being' changes the way that learning is framed, because it is both multi-

relational and celebrates the primary bond as with the subject. The difference between subject-centred learning and learning of a subject is the distinction that: 'The subject-centred classroom is characterised by the fact that the third thing has a presence so real, so vivid, so vocal, that it can hold teacher and students alike accountable for what they say and do' (Palmer, 1998: 117). Gathering around the 'third thing', students and teachers place at the centre of their experience of learning and teaching, and learning about teaching, the subject. 'The "third thing" is the world speaking to us. We may hear that voice through the sounding boards of environmental science or philosophy or psychology or politics or engineering: and so hear or respond to different words, but the world does speak' (Hobson & Morrison-Saunders, in press). In the context of Western philosophy, this notion is not new; for example a dialogue of Socrates recorded by Plato (cited in Kahn, 1996) illustrates his fundamental definition of learning through encounter and engagement of the learner with the subject. Rowland (2006) takes a short walk through 2,000 years of educational philosophy to show how much debate has focussed on 'the most ancient of unresolved pedagogical problems: What is the relationship between discovery and instruction?' (p105). This is a point we return to later in reflecting on our own teaching practices.

To implement subject-centred learning a teacher asks the question: What is the best way to teach this subject? This opens up teaching to a diversity of approaches and adds richness to pedagogical research. Rather than reducing this diversity to an educational theory model of 'one size fits all', we agree with Stierer and Antoniou (2004: 277) that:

> notions of pedagogic research in [higher education] HE are largely subject-specific, and shaped by the particular pedagogic and methodological trends within each discipline. This could well comprise one of the great strengths of pedagogic research in HE—that is, that methodologies for pedagogic research within disciplines are informed, at least in part, by the methodological traditions within those disciplines.

As we reported in Morrison-Saunders and Hobson (2013), encountering Palmer's (1998) description of subject-centred learning resonated directly with how we had each intrinsically been teaching for the past two or three decades. What is particularly liberating about the concept for us is that the subject is a neutral thing (i.e. politically) and serves to unite the teacher and student in a common goal, as learning by each stakeholder never ends. By holding up our subject as the focal point for a 'classroom' (of course we don't literally mean a physical building here, as subject-centred learning invites excursion into the 'field' to whatever setting is most suited to the subject), the teacher and student alike is engaging in ever-deeper learning about it; thus it is a shared enterprise or journey.

Where previously we asserted that teaching is *being*, we suggest that only when a teacher is genuinely engaged or beguiled by their subject will this way of *being* inspire their students to enter into their own similar or appropriate relationship with that subject. This is borne out in the research about student evaluations of teaching where a teacher's enthusiasm for a subject is typically one hallmark characteristic of an effective teacher (e.g. Devlin & O'Shea, 2012) and this certainly matches our own personal experience (e.g. Box 1).

Box 1: Our dialogue on learning about teaching [Angus and Julia]

In order to learn about (or at least to start to understand) our own learning of our teaching we began a dialogue across environmental science and educational theory; a dialogue that was robust, critical, intuitive and wide ranging over a number of years. What was significant about us adopting this method of learning is that it allowed for open inquiry. It was outside of our set tasks within the university and was pursued out of passion and pleasure for the subject of teaching and learning and in that inquiry unexpected and 'lucky finds' emerged. Often these discussions occurred in the social and relaxed context of our university staff cafe. Yet, the emergence of these serendipitous moments was in fact called for and supported by the openness of the dialogue. We often remarked that if we, as two academics, exploring the concept of teaching and learning found this the most effective way to learn: 'Why were we not doing this with our students? and How does this seemingly natural method of dialogue and dispute fit within the normalised method of teaching via a set curriculum?' Our conversations often resulted in one or both of us gently 'challenging' the other to try alternative approaches to our teaching, as well as musing on ways in which we might influence or at least extend our conversation to colleagues and/or to similarly challenge the prevailing teaching culture in our university. Daring to seek publication of our ideas is our way to open up the conversation to the wider higher education audience.

Another way to think about the merits of subject-centred teaching is by considering alternative paradigms. The notion of teacher-centred learning (notwithstanding what we have said previously does imply an important role for teachers) we can quickly dismiss as unsuitable, on the grounds of becoming an 'ego-trip' for the teacher, who is held as the subject 'expert', most likely to engage in 'instruction', teaching via minimally interactive didactic lecture-style performances (Biggs 1999). Obviously an effective teacher in the context of subject-centred learning must have a sound knowledge of their subject (e.g. Kreber, 2002; Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2010) and correspondingly a curriculum that develops a command of the field really matters (e.g. Barnett & Coate, 2005; Clegg, 2010). We advocate teachers being appropriately qualified and engaged with their subject, but caution against slipping over into the 'dark side' of having too great a focus on the teacher themselves. Similarly, as we have previously documented (Morrison-Saunders & Hobson, 2013) taking a student-centred learning approach, which is the current paradigm most widely promoted (e.g. Trigwell & Prosser, 1991; Ramsden, 1992; Biggs, 1999), may end up degenerating into 'student-centred teaching' where too much attention is brought to bear on the apparent needs or wishes of students themselves. As Biggs (2012, 41) noted, it is a fine line between 'focusing attention precisely on how students go about learning in formal, institutional contexts [which] is now designated as "student learning" research', and normalising their activities into the curriculum. Part of the difficulty of walking such a line arises from the power of the concept of a 'curriculum'.

The focus on the subject brings into relief the assumption of a set curriculum as both normal and 'natural'. Whereas our own experience of learning as dialogical allowed us to recognise that the concept of curriculum is historical and political, beginning with Peter

Ramus (1515-1572) who developed a method of teaching logic through reducing information to small, easily memorisable amounts, and presenting students with a set of rules which any student could easily acquire (Doll, 2002, 2008). It was a move away from the process of finding logic through dialogue and disputation to having that logic re-presented as a product which is then accepted without question.

Yates' (2009) 30 year review of her own involvement in researching curriculum and pedagogy illustrates both the changing relationship between these two terms in higher education research, and also the difficulties of finding a balance between the need for accountability, replication, systematic coverage (the instruction aspect of education), and the need for exploration and open enquiry (the discovery aspect of education). Where that balance lies at any particular time within institutions such as universities is always changeable. However, curriculum necessarily lies on the side of the systematisation of content where: 'Power or control flows from the top (the most general) down to the bottom (the particular)' (Doll, 2008: 192).

In our dialogues it became apparent that the drive for empirical inquiry in science (for the experience of discovery) creates a tension between pedagogy and curriculum. There is a constant rub and realisation that what is professed is not what is practised and only through the experience of practice can the practicalities of a scientific education be achieved – at which point we arrived back at subject-centred learning.

Whilst there has been much research 'from a relational perspective into relations between students' conceptions of learning, their perceptions of the learning environment, their approaches to learning and learning outcomes in higher education' (Trigwell & Prosser, 1997: 243) this focus places the emphasis on the student. In either of these alternative paradigms (i.e. teacher-centred or student-centred learning) to our emphasis in this paper, it is the subject that comes second. This is ironic given that it was probably a particular subject that called each university student and academic into the academy in the first place (Palmer, 1998; Rowland, 2008).

In short, the notion of being subject-centred represents a re-framing (Hobson & Morrison-Saunders, in press 2013) of learning by bringing together the best qualities of the teacher and students through a focus on a 'great thing' (Palmer, 1998). Not only have we found this approach to best describe what we already happen to do in our own practice, and to help us guide the design and implementation of our teaching (addressed in the section 'Subject-centred learning in our teaching practice' below), we also find it a useful lens through which to evaluate existing university 'learning activities' in order to understand their utility; i.e. a process of 'flipping' the concept of teaching around.

What happens when we flip the concept around?

Flipping around the concept of subject-centred learning means taking it as a given that doing so is the best or even only way in which learning occurs; for those reading this who are not convinced, we suggest simply pretending that this is the case, i.e. akin to the 'suspension of disbelief' most people will happily apply when watching a movie.

Evaluating a (so called) learning activity for its utility becomes a matter of identifying the 'true' subject in any given situation. In short it involves answering the question: "What is the 'subject' in this particular 'learning' environment?'. We illustrate this firstly with two examples through the eyes of the student learner: a lecture situation and online learning management systems; and secondly, a personal reflection through the eyes of the teacher.

In a lecture hall situation, especially for large-class situations, the learner is one person in a large audience of fellow students. Unless the lecturer is especially engaging or the topic itself absolutely riveting (e.g. like *TED Talks* type of presentations, http://www.ted.com/talks, which we suggest are probably relatively rare in a university setting - i.e. the exception rather than the rule), it is likely that the students will be distracted by what is going on immediately around them. The subject is by definition relatively remote; it is what the lecturer is talking about and probably attempting to also communicate visually using electronic data projection technologies in some way, but it is happening 'over there on the stage'. Meanwhile the student is surrounded by peers who are probably engaged in a variety of pursuits, some of which may not be related at all to the subject (e.g. surfing the net, talking or thinking about personal/social matters etc). Using our flipped model, the 'subject' here being experienced by the student is along the lines of "being stuck in a lecture theatre amongst my peers watching some academic waffle on…". It is no surprise then that a lecture has the least knowledge retention characteristics of learning activities (Rogers, 2009), that attention spans are notoriously low in this passive environment situation (Jones 2007), or that there are numerous guides available about how to lecture more effectively to large classes (e.g. Kelly, 2012), all of which revolve mainly around engaging with students in order to break down the didactic and passive impasse that otherwise exists.

Our second example involves the extensive use of learning management systems. These unit webpages simply document various learning materials for a particular unit of study in largely written form (albeit supplemented with audio recordings of lectures, and increasingly audio-visual aids and various so-called 'interactive' online materials, such as tests which are increasingly administered by the technology, not a human being). Our key point, however, is that essentially they are 're-presentations' of material. A bit like the lecture theatre scenario, they are one step removed from the subject itself. From a student perspective, the real 'subject' here is operating a web browser (i.e. clicking and navigating), although hopefully also how to research.

We do utilise both lectures and learning management systems in our own teaching; we find positive attributes in them both. However, we see them mainly as supplements to the main teaching activity, in which we seek to create those wonderful moments when 'thinking enters the room' – in the words of Scutt and Hobson (2013: 23):

> Hopefully, this occurs when I am teaching a class (but I have to admit, not always) but when thinking does arrive – often sitting quietly in a corner – everybody in that room, whether they are talking or listening or writing or reading, perks up a little. There is a general rise in the level of intelligence and it is a collective rise, like catching a wave: we are all carried along to a greater height.

In these situations, the teacher and students alike are caught up in the thinking, and we argue that it is the united focus and interest (or passion) in the shared subject that is the catalyst for the learning 'reaction' that takes place. Knowing how wonderfully rewarding these situations are, they have frequently featured in our dialogues and we have mused extensively on whether and how we can ensure (or at least increase the likelihood) that they will occur in our respective classrooms. Increasingly we are of the view that there is little that we can actually 'teach' to our students, but that our own personality and way of being is the most influential factor for our students (Box 2).

Box 2: Teaching is being - what I do is teach who I am [Angus]

Through reflection on my practices and in applying the flipped, subject-centred learning approach to my teaching, I have realised that what I mostly teach is one step removed from my subject of environmental impact assessment (EIA). Because logistically I cannot take my students out into the field and have them engage in actual real-life practice (i.e mainly because of the prevalence of external student enrolments drawn from all around the nation, but also due to other university constraints), all I can offer them is the review and critique of secondary sources about practice. In other words, what I mostly teach is actually critical thinking, reading and writing skills all of which are one step removed from my official 'subject' (i.e. curriculum focus) of EIA. Thus written and oral communication skills are now an overall unit learning objective in consort with the environmental subject specifics. It is no surprise then that I now actually specifically run journal article writing workshops for higher degree research students and younger academic staff (Morrison-Saunders et al., 2012), as it is a natural extension of much of my teaching practice within formal university units, and it also aligns with my own research practice and professional service as a journal editor. Thus, what I have recently realised is that what I do is 'teach who I am' and that particular 'being' in my own case could be encapsulated in terms of 'being an EIA thinker and researcher'.

Just as the emotions of people we come into personal contact with affect our own emotional state to some extent, it is the attitude or relationship of the teacher to their subject that has the greatest potential for influencing the student's own relationship with the subject (i.e. as per major findings of student surveys of teaching mentioned previously). Layered on top of the fundamental way of 'being' of the teacher in this way, comes the way in which a teacher structures the learning activities and learning environment, which is a combination of procedural and substantive considerations. By procedural we mean the teaching format employed, for example, interactive workshop versus (didactic) lecture, while the substantive matters relate to the material that the teacher focuses their attention upon (Box 3).

Box 3: Learning as being confused [Julia]

> As an academic language and learner advisor working in a student learning centre, my subject has become the analysis of the re-presentation of the subject by discipline academics. So I teach students how to read between the lines of assessment tasks, how to get behind the learning outcomes to understand the hidden curriculum that operates in higher education. At one level I am teaching the critical thinking and academic reading and writing necessary to succeed at university; at another level I work hard to not reduce the complexity of learning to a set of transferable skills, or at that point, I know, the subject of thinking will leave the room! In a sense, I attempt to teach my students how to 'learn how to learn' and how *to be* in and with the open space of not-knowing, how to allow themselves to be confused.

Subject-centred learning in our teaching practice

In any teaching practice there are assumptions about learning theories. To understand what it might mean to 'teach' effectively, it is necessary to first understand what learning entails. To welcome the subject into the class and to allow us all - subject, students and teachers - to discuss together, takes time. Relational learning cannot be rushed; we cannot press a button to upload information and call it learning. We find the work of Bell and Lane (1998: 632) to be particularly useful here, as they noted that 'Education comes from *educe* which in turn is derived from the Latin word *educere* which means 'to draw forth' [and] in *educing* we recognise that people contain the elements of the answer to the problems which confront them'. This notion is not new; these authors drew upon the philosophy espoused by Socrates some 2,500 years ago. In a dialogue within the *Meno*, recorded by Plato (cited in Kahn, 1996), Socrates demonstrated how learning comes from within the learner, through interaction with a slave boy who subsequently demonstrated some principles of geometry simply by responding to questions put to him. To translate this philosophy into practice comes the realisation that:

> Knowledge cannot be transmitted so teachers must make learning possible and students must learn. The teacher must give up the idea of transmitting knowledge by lecturing or by prescribing books to be learnt. Communicative ways of learning make education a joint project for teachers and students. (Hagström, 2012)

A personal reflection of this realisation is provided in Box 4.

Other higher education authors have made similar observations. For example, Bryk et al. (2010:88) suggested that teachers are in a 'joint social enterprise' with their students. Ashworth (2004) stated that 'learning is best considered participatory', where 'the learner is primarily an inquirer' (p147), and that this approach to education acknowledges the 'common cause' (p154) shared by the learner and teacher.

**Box 4: Relinquishing control: empowering my
students to interact with the subject [Angus]**

Having learnt, reflected and published about subject-centred learning, I now increasingly relinquish control and empower my students to learn about and engage with the subject for themselves. So, in the opening 'lecture' of my Principles of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) unit, early on, having only just covered an introduction to the overall unit learning objectives, I present a slide entitled: "Welcome to *your* world of EIA!". My accompanying discussion is about the multiple systems that exist for making meaning in the world (e.g. psycho-analytical, logical reasoning, economic rationalism, spiritual etc), and I end with the statement that: "It is up to you to figure out what EIA is and how it works in light of these (i.e. in 'your world')". In relation to a subsequent slide entitled: "The bare bones of EIA… a skeleton analogy for teaching" I make the point that beyond outlining the 'skeleton' of EIA which is all that I hope to achieve with my 'lecture' content, their learning is dependent upon the journey or research that they choose to pursue in combination with their own life experience (I teach at postgraduate level and some students are working professionals in the field already).

What I have experienced personally from taking this approach, is that there are no longer (or at least far fewer) cases of 'right or wrong' answers to subject-related questions and that I am not held to account by my students as the 'gate-keeper' of knowledge in the unit. As a consequence (and in addition to engaging in-class discussions) I have discovered that much more lively online Discussions occur within the learning management system. In short, my reframing of my teaching as subject-centred learning has not only changed my own approaches to teaching, but also seemingly the learning culture of my students. I consider this to be a 'win-win' situation.

That common cause is the subject. We suggest that an effective teacher is one who is able to inspire or empower their students to willingly engage with their subject such that they enter into their own meaningful (and hopefully beguiling) relationship with it. We have found this is best achieved through creating 'space' or opportunity within formal classes for our students to find their own voice or way with the subject (Box 5).

Box 5: Spending more time with my subject [Angus]

One particular practice I now do is to reduce the time that I spend presenting subject content to students (i.e. lecturing) or more generally in 'talking' whilst in class. Firstly, I set myself a personal goal to significantly reduce the number of slides I present in each lecture and secondly, I now specifically schedule some 'Open Space Technology' (e.g. Owen, 1997) time into my half and whole day workshops (intensive blocks of teaching have proved effective for improving class attendance, especially for postgraduate students). Here students choose what topic within the unit or subject area to discuss, how and who to discuss it with; my only input being to create the space for this to happen, as well as being 'on call' to participate in small group discussions as desired by the students themselves or as I see fit on a case-by-case basis. By making space in the 'taught' content I have made time for students to be with the subject.

Part of the way to find a new balance between education as instruction and education as discovery, and between curriculum and pedagogy, is to dialogue about these issues and difficulties. To open the space and find the courage to name these difficulties can sometimes be a significant act. Whilst we do not wish to dwell in the negative we acknowledge that it is only by facing 'what is', that space and calmness for possible different responses become possible. We wonder if in our subject-centred teaching and learning if we need to listen more deeply for the voice of values in higher education, to find the time to ask of the subject of curriculum itself: What sort of spaces should a curriculum be constructed of and in? Box 6 presents a personal reflection on teaching spaces or approaches.

Box 6: The spaces of teaching [Angus]

In my current role, class sizes are not only substantial (i.e. making field work logistically challenging) but around half of the enrolment are external students, many of whom are located in other states of Australia or overseas and rely solely on the learning management system as the means of communicating with me and with their fellow students. While I have always been supportive of offering tertiary studies to external students and have done my best to make online learning materials as thorough and as helpful as possible, I am increasingly of the view that the learning experience is vastly inferior to that which occurs during face-to-face teaching and further that the ethical imperatives to provide an equivalent learning experience for external students as for on-campus students actually ultimately undermines the quality of the on-campus experience (this is chiefly because of the technology limitations of recording classes whereby group discussions are impossible to record, and what works 'best' for external students with respect to lecture recordings is a monologue by the lecturer which is of course the worst learning experience for those attending!).

Challenging conversations around values and approaches to teaching and learning takes time and opens up spaces for thinking. A diversity of approaches that use different disciplinary methodologies and epistemological assumptions enriches these conversations. Being subject-centred throws into the air all the currently accepted approaches to curriculum and pedagogy; it changes the quality of the conversation.

Conclusions on being subject-centred

At the outset of this paper we set ourselves the challenge of explaining some of the philosophical and practical characteristics of subject-centred learning. We adopted a highly personal and phenomenological approach to addressing this topic, woven in with previously published insights. Philosophically we have argued that the subject lies at the core of higher education and it is our very being for both teachers and students alike in relation to the subject that gives rise to learning.

Importantly, content is not the subject. Palmer's (1998) focus on the 'great thing' that we gather around in our learning and teaching cannot be reduced or contained to content. Content changes, theories drop in and out of fashion, information becomes out of date

and is constantly updated. The subject is the question we ask of the world and content is whatever current answer we subscribe to. In asking the question we realise that:

> The individual and the world are not constituted independently of one another.
> Individuals and the world are internally related through the individuals'
> awareness of the world. Mind does not exist independently of the world around
> it. The world is an experienced world (Trigwell & Prosser 1997: 242).

Part of the conclusion to our reflective dialogue has been a sense of disquiet over how far away we have moved from our subjects under the current circumstances of higher education - a realisation which we find uncomfortable. Whilst Angus is happy to teach communication skills (it is a fundamental component of graduate attributes for our university and probably every university), common sense dictates that a unit that purports to be about EIA should actually put this subject first above all else. In other words, there are better ways to ensure subject-centred learning about EIA occurs, but the current university setting is not enabling this.

Julia knows that often all that students gain from her teaching are a thin layer of skills which they use to slide around and between their assignments, staying at a surface level of learning (Biggs, 1999). We do not attempt to offer solutions to these philosophical and practical problems. However, we do believe that there is much to be gained by shedding light upon these issues and in promoting reflection or discussion on them within the higher education community. We wish in the main to allow ourselves (and perhaps others) to notice that what we teach is who we are and what we do. In today's universities that is most often researching and writing *about* subjects, rather than being *with* the subject.

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