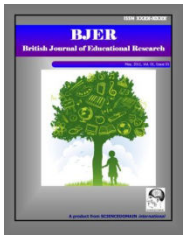

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A Reflective Assessment of My Practice as a Geography Teacher in Inclusive Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers, through a review of literature, the nature of inclusive higher education, and the contributions that Maslow, Bloom, and Kolb, and learning styles, have made to enhance the function of this educational setting. Within this context, I appraise key learning and teaching strategies, towards a critical reflection on my own practice as a teacher of Cultural Geography at the University of Nicosia in Cyprus. This study highlights that after World War Two increasing access to higher education led to diversified student populations. This facilitated the rise of mass higher education to challenge college and university professors towards more inclusive education theories, to underpin comprehensive educational practice, which attempts to cater for diverse student cohorts. Obviously learning, teaching and assessment ideas and strategies, have undergone considerable development in these post-war decades from the liberal influence of inclusive educational ideas, theories and practice. The challenge for higher education teachers, and me, is to align our ideas, attitudes and good-practice to enhanced teaching, learning and assessment strategies within liberal inclusive approaches, and accept student differences as equal, with the right for each student to be encouraged towards excellence in education.

Keywords: Inclusive higher education; learning; teaching; strategies; reflection; good practice; Maslow; Bloom; learning style; Kolb; Geography;

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1. INTRODUCTION

I was born in the 1940s, a baby boomer. My generation's higher education paralleled the revolutionary movement's successes for mass higher education to emerge in the 1960s, and begin to be significantly installed by the 1970s. New and innovative approaches, to educate students with diverse backgrounds and abilities, would be needed for inclusive mass higher education.

Over the last forty years I have been witness to and experienced this educational revolution. As a part of this burgeoning educational arena, inclusive education, with its promise to successfully cater for all students, gained in popularity. But this revolutionary innovation demanded change in the thinking and practice of university and college teachers. Hence, there would eventually be a change to a wider range of pedagogic approaches to encourage across-the-board success of diverse student populations with different learning styles. This approach eventually became the "received wisdom" replacing the previous orthodoxy that in higher education "one method suits all" for a fortunate few.

Just after World War Two I was educated in a traditional educational environment, before innovation began to significantly appear. I entered higher education as a student at The University of New South Wales, Australia in 1969, and have been a student on and off ever since, earning four degrees and a diploma from a three universities. I am a student again, in 2011, studying for a "Post Graduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education" at the University of Hertfordshire in the UK. As a teacher and professor for almost four decades, and a university student for a total of 12 years, I can view the movement toward inclusive education from both sides of the academic divide – as a professor and student. This is helpful to reflectively ponder my practice as an educator in Cyprus where current European ideas in education are being adopted (Angelides and Leigh, 2004).

In this paper I consider the nature of inclusive higher education, and what contributions Maslow, Bloom, and Kolb, and learning styles, have made to enhance the function of this educational setting. Within this context, I appraise key learning and teaching strategies, towards a critical reflection of my own practice as a university teacher of Cultural Geography.

2. WHAT IS INCLUSIVE HIGHER EDUCATION?

Inclusive higher education rooted in liberal humanistic philosophy promotes egalitarianism and integrates it with compatible learning and teaching strategies. These lay a foundation to build a compliant educational environment working effectively for the learning of all students, whatever their socioeconomic or ethnic backgrounds or learning styles, or even attitudes and levels of motivation may be (Dyson, 2001).

This approach limits, or ignores, the deterministic role of heredity and socioeconomic legacy, and emphasizes the power of social and educational environments to produce graduates with the knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate for a Bachelor of a discipline.

Inclusive education is not universally accepted partly because teachers may have to rethink the purpose of education, and their roles and practice (Smailes and Gannon-Leary, 2007, p. 37) towards "instructional methods with applicability to all learners" (Florian, 1998, p. 8).

Further, Trigwell, Prosser and Waterhouse (1999, p. 57) argue that deeper learning results in inclusive education where "the teacher [is still] … most important" (Guskey, 1988, pp. 3-14) as "good teaching does make a difference in student learning" (Cross, 2005, p. 1). In this accommodating process Lindsay (2003) says inclusive education removes barriers, discrimination, and improves outcomes.

Within the spirit of inclusive education, Fieldman (1976) found eight characteristics of good teaching: concern, knowledge, stimulation, availability, encouragement, clear explanation, enthusiasm and preparation. He raises student-centered teaching, emphasizing whole-person development. So student-centered teaching must be balanced by "a professor with a mission", that is one who has something to give students, with wisdom of how to do it, while taking account of student backgrounds and how they learn best, to best teach (Cross, 2005, pp. 8, 9).

As a part of effective education, Acrey et al. (2005) argues for effective visuals. They also recognize this is not the only way to enhance learning. Prodigious use of visual aids fits well in teaching geography which is a "touchy feely" subject to be experienced with the senses. Maps, charts, photographs, samples and field trips are the teaching toolkit of geography (Rose 2003, p. 212). Also experiential learning with labs, workshops, group projects, and field research and investigations into social surrounds are all excellent strategies in inclusive education.

Inclusive higher education must therefore synchronise diverse educational environments with a varied toolkit and so inclusive education is fundamentally liberal, accepting student differences as equal, aiming to make higher education accessible and attractive to, and appropriate for all types of students, and as many students as possible. This is to be achieved through proven effective policies, structures and pedagogies (Nunan, George and McCausland, 2000, p. 65). All students are to be comfortable and motivated, to "feel good" and a belonging. So alienation which is a major barrier (along with its anxiety) to student achievement can be crushed.

Maslow deals with this in his hierarchy of needs. In Maslow's (1970) terms, students self actualize towards their highest potential, if they are free of the anxieties of lower level survival needs. As depicted in Illustration 1 from Maslow (1970), we see he posited a hierarchy of needs. When lower level physiological survival needs are met along with safety, belonging and self esteem, students can orient themselves to self actualize in developing talents, abilities, skills, understanding and knowledge. Even though lower-needs deprivation may actually be a motivational springboard, and some suggest a modified alternatively sequenced hierarchy, there is a consensus that physiological and safety needs may typically act as a required foundation for higher level needs, in whatever order these last three may interplay (Kunc, 1992).

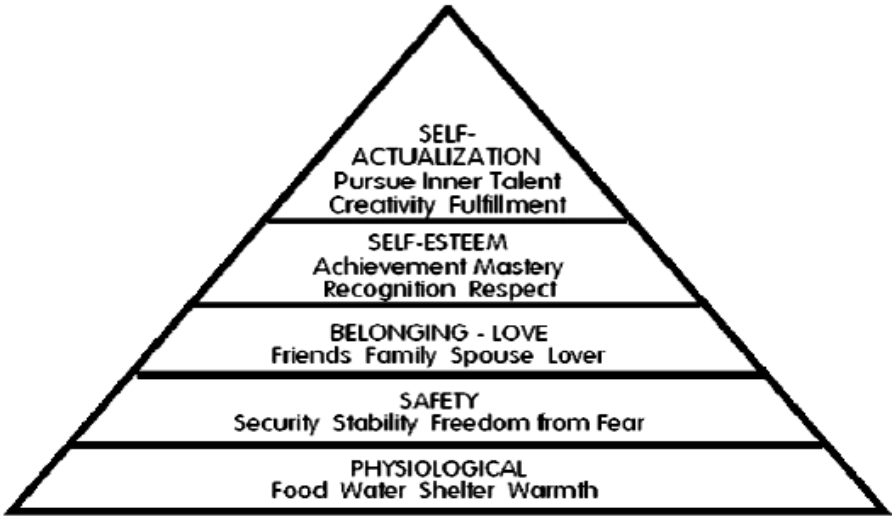

Illustration 1. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (centre pyramid above)

Lindsay (2003, p. 3) says that inclusive education "is championed ... to remove barriers, improve outcomes and remove discrimination" and therefore reduce anxiety and stress. Florian (1998,p. 107) argues that inclusive education caters for all students to placed in the mainstream as part of an international human rights agenda which calls for full inclusion of all people with disabilities in all aspects of life. Inclusive education is about all students learning and socializing together, in discrimination-free environments without exclusion or separation because of disability or learning difficulty (CSIE, 1996, p. 10).

Williams, Berger and McClendon (2005, p. iii) suggest that the all encompassing nature of inclusive higher education includes changes in: recruitment, admissions, curriculum, administrative structures and practices, expanded ways to measure excellence, incorporation of research findings as they relate to learning and assessment, and structures which attribute and moderate accountability. And in multilayered processes and a student-friendly organizational culture the pursuit of excellence may be reached through researching teachers who can structure learning for student development, engage the community, and utilize training and development opportunities in the workplace.

The full implementation of inclusive higher education, guided by the best research findings and practice for learning, teaching and assessment, is for all students irrespective of differences. This may not just require a system readjustment, but a metamorphosis to educate students in an egalitarian milieu of equality, without discrimination based on individual or collective differences. Ultimately, in full-blown liberalism, difference is to be celebrated and catered for as variety, and not discriminated against as deficiency, or ultimately not even as disability.

Many see the emphasis on good practice as a strength to enhance the learning of poor and mediocre students, and even the best students. However, this laudable characteristic may also be an Achilles Heel when masses of students enter higher education who are not equipped to even begin to succeed. From my experience and observations, in spite of the

best teaching and learning activities, probably too many students, even though they "pass", gain little out of higher education beyond familiarization level. Actually inclusive higher education to be effective must have students entering with at least a base-level motivation and abilities. Too many students are below that baseline and unable to rise above it, even in liberal egalitarian education, although they may qualify for a degree. In confirmation of this, Professor Alderman (2008, 2010) suggests that the lowest level for passing to get a degree has declined in recent years in the UK.

Such students may pass to obtain their sheepskin, but they are in reality academic "failures". However, this is not inclusive education's fault and should not detract from its inherent soundness which gives all students possible the opportunity to succeed. Languishing students may not be "losers" but more appropriately, and better served, in other pursuits like apprenticeships or on-the-job training where they can be "winners" through success in industry or commerce.

From a previous university where I worked, I would like to give an account of what happened some years ago. The head of the department, a senior academic in the university, who later was made emeritus professor, approved the failure of 50% of the first year students. He was subsequently disciplined and punished for several months to the point that he said, "I will never do that again". As the knowledge of such events becomes widespread, this tends to put pressure on university teachers to make sure that they are "reasonable" in their standards and the number of students they fail. The message is obvious: "high" failure rates, in many institutions, are not acceptable even if justified. And even more subtle behaviours and policies in educational institutions may put the same pressure on faculty.

It may also be that the demise of mass higher education is imminent, as worldwide economic malaise deepens, forcing income and budget cuts to topple educational innovation. Kenny (2011) predicts that the higher education bubble is likely to soon burst in the USA, and this could act as a harbinger for Europe and the rest of the world. These are vital issues, but to deal with these is outside the ambit of this paper.

3. LEARNING, TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT

Inclusive mass higher education assumes a broad array of teaching strategies to cater for the diverse students of various legacies of socioeconomic class or ethnic background, or physical or mental disability (Smailes and Gannon-Leary, 2007).

A fundamental assumption of inclusive education is that students have diverse backgrounds and preferences, so a variety of teaching and learning strategies are needed for all students to have the best possible chance of success (Nunan, George and McCausland, 2000). This array of teaching and learning strategies, offer students at least a partial "best fit" for their preferences. This should be motivating for students and enhance their attitudes towards learning to even pursue it actively.

Of course, assessments must match the learning outcomes of the course and the learning and teaching strategies utilised. Probably continuous assessment is more related to inclusive education in spirit and nature than just assessment by an exam or two. All the items completed in a course can be part of continuous assessment. That does not necessarily rule out quizzes and exams but they would not be the only assessed activities in the course.

The type of learning activities utilized should not be alien to the assessment format in any quizzes or exams. Quizzes and exams, in content and format, should be an extension of the course lectures and activities and continuously assessed items in the course. For example, if maps and charts, and tables of data, are typically used in the lectures, and activities of continuous assessment, then the format of quizzes and exams should reflect the same presentation, or at least not be alien it.

High in the "preferred" learning and teaching strategies in inclusive education are approaches requiring students to be actively committed and involved by using all senses in experiential activities through group work and information collection for collating, comparing, synthesizing and solving problems. Hence group work, labs and workshops should have a "pride of place" in inclusive education. Of course all this may be in addition to lectures using visual material (like PowerPoint presentations and videos), discussions, and question and answer sessions.

All this must sit within an integrated and logically assessed curriculum. Illustration 2 shows Bloom's taxonomy (1956), in wheel format. It supplies a good basis for the integrated development of students within the six cognitive domains. Even though the domains may be contrived and have blurred borders and definitions, they are widely used and helpful in developing curricula.

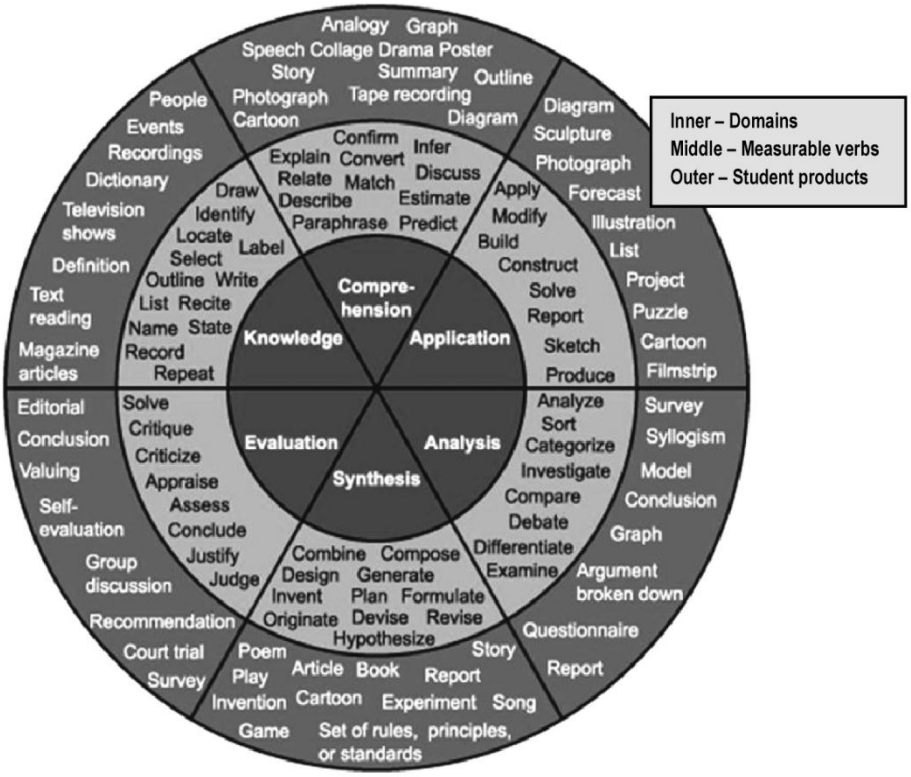

Illustration 2. Bloom's Taxonomy Wheel

Each domain with its appropriate measurable verbs (for learning outcomes) and activities (for student products) must be matched with different levels in higher education. This influences the learning outcomes and their learning activities. For instance, “identify” for “knowledge” would be appropriate for level four (freshman or first year); the higher level “devise” for “synthesis” for level six (senior or final year). Learning outcomes use the second circle of measurable verbs, to guide the assessment strategies as indicated in the activities (student products) in the outer circle.

So in the curriculum development process Bloom’s wheel is a good guide for the sequencing and harmonising of learning outcomes leading to subsequent student products which should manifest the attainment of those learning outcomes.

4. LEARNING STYLES, LEARNING AND TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR GEOGRAPHY

Another fundamental assumption of inclusive education is that it must be effective in spite of diverse students who have different learning styles or prefer different senses or types of media through which to learn. The best chance of success for students is achieved by teachers offering the “best fit” for student learning styles, with a variety of educational activities in the curriculum. This should be motivating for students and enhance their attitudes towards learning to even pursue it actively.

Probably there are three main learning styles – Visual (V), Auditory (A) and Kinesthetic (K). Learning styles are not completely mutually exclusive, for example, VARK’s Reading and Writing (R) style (Fleming, 2010) seems to be embedded and shared into both the Visual and Auditory of the more popular three-mode system. Some students have a preferred learning style – the way they learn best. Other students may have a combination of two learning styles, and some other students may not have a dominant style at all, but select from all three according to the particular learning activity at hand (Student Development Centre, 2009, p. 1).

There are benefits to considering how learning styles impact teaching. Students learn most effectively when teaching strategies are more closely matched to their learning style. Teachers can also use other strategies, for learning to be multi-styled, enabling students with the opportunity to not neglect their less dominant learning styles. As different situations and learning environments require different learning strategies, learning style has important implications for the content and skills required for specific disciplines. For example, a student with dominant auditory learning style and low preference for visual and kinesthetic learning may find geography, which is touchy feely and visual, very difficult.

Students who learn visually learn by seeing material presented with print in visual context, pictures, charts or diagrams. They also focus on body language and have a strong visual connection to the environment’s colours and shapes. Students with auditory learning style learn by hearing conversations and lectures. They remember what is said and have strong language skills, both verbal and written (particularly if read aloud), and so easily listen to follow lectures and directions. Students who rely on kinesthetic learning style learn by doing, and talking things out, and interacting with others in the class. These students learn by using their hands and being involved in body movement and physical participation. (Student Development Centre, 2005; Fleming, 2010).

Another dimension to better understand student learning is the well known theory of David Kolb (1984) on experiential learning. His theory has been specifically suggested by many for geography education and is a model providing a framework for selecting a broad range of class activities based on a four-part learning process, each of which must be passed through for most complete learning. The cycle, shown in Illustration 3 (Kolb, 1984), begins with the 1) learner's involvement in action or experience, leading to 2) reflection on the experience in the search for meaning. This reflection's 3) logical conclusions (conceptualization), then guides 4) active experimentation to new experiences, as the cycle begins to replay (Svinicki and Dixon, 1987, p. 141; Healey and Jenkins, 2000, p. 185; Dunn, 2002).

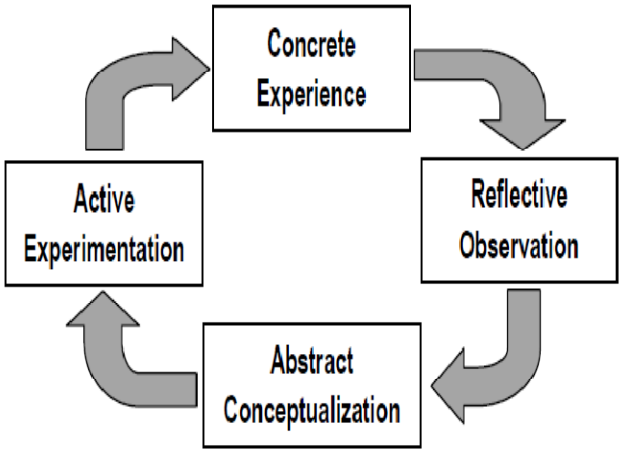

Illustration 3. Kolb's Learning Theory

Yeo (2009) puts Kolb's theory succinctly:

> "As we encounter the world, we gain concrete experiences [which] ... may be forgotten, so we need to reflect on our observations to tap ... [the learning and] teaching potential. These reflections .... yield ideas ... to generate frameworks and make sense of the world .... Kolb's cycle explains how experience is transformed into knowledge as a continuous process".

Kolb supplies a useful framework for teaching through sequential phases, based on experience, leading to reflection which leads to logical conceptualized conclusions for subsequent active experimentation. This is a variant of the scientific method of: hypotheses, tests, results and conclusions. This approach integrates well with modern Geography, "a social science discipline emphasising process and systems within scientific method" (Leigh, 2005). This modern geography, the progeny of the 1960s revolution, takes a positivist approach of inductive or deductive reasoning. And so generating hypotheses, testing data, statistical analysis and interpretation, and report writing, are the processes through which geographers may spatially understand the world (Kent et al., 1997, p. 316).

Geography teaching should be based on actions and experiences which can be seen and touched quite readily by students in various learning activities. As shown in Illustration 4 (Svinicki and Dixon, 1987, p. 144), with slight modification for learning activities in

geography, the learning cycle could be described as: 1) experiencing, 2) examining, 3) explaining and 4) applying.

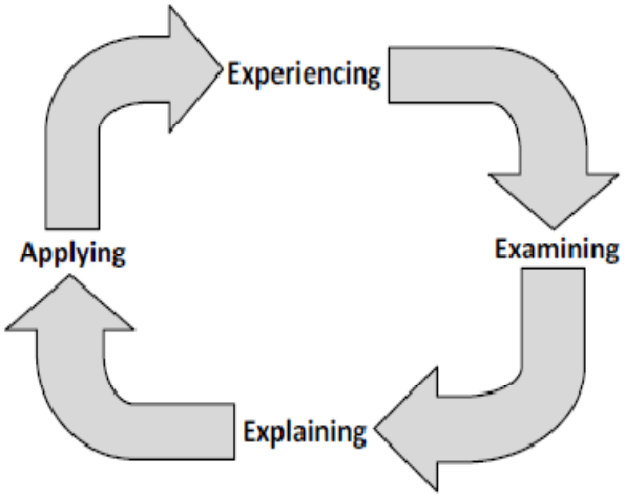

Illustration 4. Kolb's Theory Modified

Obviously, both learning styles and experiential learning have implications for teachers' strategies. Teachers should use a multi-strategy approach, with opportunities for experiential learning to best cater for all students with variously tuned mixtures of learning styles.

Cultural Geography sits well in inclusive education, as inherently a subject to be learned and taught by many inclusive education "preferred" strategies. Cultural Geography is highly visual (Rose, 2003; Driver, 2003), and very touchy feely, and an experiential discipline for teachers to incorporate various strategies of good practice principles of inclusive education.

Teachers and educational institutions need to make learning their palpable educational aim. We shouldn't teach or just cover the material of Geography, but facilitate learning through educational environments that actively engage student experience. And in mass higher education a diversity of students requires a diversity of learning and teaching strategies "[G]ood instruction requires a tremendous degree of instructional diversity" for Geography students (Parker, 1989, pp. 41, 43). And of course there is the old adage, "We learn best by doing" and also "Experience is the best teacher", both of which confirm experiential learning.

5. REFLECTING AS A DUAL PROFESSIONAL

Here a macro review of the forgoing will be taken to set the context for subsequent reflection on my practice.

Inclusive higher education is to largely override any "negative" deterministic power of heredity, and "misfortunes" in the socioeconomic and ethnic legacies of diverse student cohorts. This is achievable by focusing on policies, organizational culture and climate, and"good-practice" learning and teaching strategies. These are utilized to bring a "motley bunch" of students, with various learning styles, up to the knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate for a Bachelor of a discipline. Inclusive higher education caters for the widest selection of students by offering equal opportunity in an environment promising policies and

facilities for students to “feel good” and a belonging so that Maslow’s (1970) higher order needs are attained by students self-actualizing through excellence in learning.

Barriers based on discrimination against characteristics of socioeconomic status and ethnicity, and disability, both physical and mental, are to be absolutely minimized. This involves a transformation of policies, institutions and curricula, and teachers’ ideas and strategies. Ideally teachers in inclusive higher education support their teaching by research integrated into a diverse array of learning and teaching strategies.

Measurable learning outcomes, assisted by Bloom’s (1956) wheel of cognitive domains, verbs and activities/products, appropriate for level, should lead to teaching content and skills through a mix of effective strategies to engage students in active learning. In this process various student products are incorporated into a hefty level of continuous assessment. All this actually calls for the “conversion” of teachers to work in a transformed system. Finally Cultural Geography, as a touchy feely discipline, highly amenable to be taught through Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning with a wide variety of strategies within Chickering and Gamson’s “good-practice” principles, integrates well into inclusive higher education.

Now to reflectively assess my practice against the educational arena outlined above.

As a teacher in higher education I have a dual role – a researching teacher. This helps me to be student oriented with up-to-date material within the research process, able to incorporate discipline content and inquiry into the curriculum. So in other words, there are two dimensions within my dual professional role: the pursuit of effective student-centered “good-practice” learning and teaching strategies; and integrating my research into the learning environment’s activities.

There are exciting opportunities for teachers and students when educational environments incorporate up-to-date material along with the research process. Wong (1995, p. 5) suggests that the researching teacher can combine research with teaching to facilitate good teaching. He says “the primary goal of research is to understand; the primary goal of teaching is to help students learn.” All my courses have input from my research and journal publications (about 50) and most of these articles are freely available on my webpage (http://www.freewebs.com/jas4). To further enhance scholarship I am a reviewer of several journals which helps me to be up to date and stimulated.

However, significant research and publishing is challenging as my teaching load is high. There is conflict of how much time to spend on research or preparation. Balance can be elusive.

Good practice relates to soundly developed curricula, the effectiveness of learning and teaching strategies, along with valid and reliable assessment, all within empathetically encouraging relationships with students. Curricula with current content operationalized through measurable learning outcomes which guide a variety of learning and teaching strategies with liberal doses of experiential learning, along with valid and reliable assessments, and empathetic teacher-student relationships, is what I aim for in my teaching.

For students who don’t learn optimally with visuals, I have published a monograph for Cultural Geography (Leigh and Hill, 2007), two monographs for European Geography (Leigh, 2009; Leigh and Vukovic, 2011) and for Geography of Travel and Tourism I am writing a text (Leigh, 2013), and another text on future tourism (Leigh and Webster, 2012). I also supply

journal articles and videos in my courses which have presentation assignments, and the continuous assessment makes up around 60% of the total, so students with disability (e.g. slow workers or anxiety) or who are not good at exams, can build up marks. I have built into the courses optional experience for group work and group projects, for learning by doing in cooperation with others. For dyslexics I offer vivas to supplement assignments and exams.
I participate in on-campus conferences to give students the opportunity to attend. This is a good experience, however, sometimes the content may not have much in common with courses, and lackluster or high level presentations may be boring and above the students.

I try for a holistic dual professional role with comprehensive and integrated teaching. However, I fall short. I need to integrate into my teaching more student interaction. This can be difficult as many students come from cultures where they are fed from “authorities” in unilateral educational strategies.

Maslow’s feel-good factor, developed through sympathetic and empathetic teaching, encourages students to more closely identify with the institution, teaching and learning activities, fostering an attitude of ownership, and therefore development and maintenance of their role as successful students. To be more effective in this area, I need to give more attention to student meetings outside normal class hours.

The cognitive domains of Bloom, and particularly the wheel, with measurable verbs and assigned products, offer vital understanding and techniques for curriculum design, from learning outcomes to a wide range of inclusive education student-friendly teaching strategies, all the way through to student products in a continuous assessment milieu. I have come to a greater understanding of measurable verbs and need to revise my learning outcomes, and in a sounder way consider various learning and teaching strategies linked to a logical corollary of continuous assessments.

Understanding different learning styles in diverse student cohorts helps teachers incorporate an array of learning and teaching strategies, catering for visual, auditory and kinesthetic learners. I need to better accommodate students with different learning styles. While I have a good array teaching strategies and materials, as listed above, I need to use them in a more consistently balanced way to equally cater for visual, auditory and kinesthetic learners.

Fortunately touchy-feely Cultural Geography, Kolb says, is amenable to experientially engage students. Geography is ready to be worked upon with the forgoing ideas and principles. Teachers can use visual presentation PowerPoint lectures, experiential learning (group work, labs, workshops, collecting data, research reports and fieldwork), written handouts, books and journals, videos, and visiting practicing researching experts for lectures and talks. I would improve my practice by a fuller use of as many of these strategies as possible in my courses.

For slower or challenged students, or those who have absences, my comprehensive webpage (www.freewebs.com/jas4) houses my published articles (about 50 and many freely available online), around 70 videos, and all my lectures in video recordings with support materials, handouts and videos.

Students may, in the first lesson, adjust the assessment of the course by modifying what each graded item is worth or even change the strategies and student outcomes. This attempts to cater for the preferences of the students as a whole class group.

I must also highlight here the inclusiveness of my webpage (www.freewebs.com/jas4) which in addition to the aforementioned facility of my publications (many of which are freely available online) along with videos, and recordings of my lectures, there are also the following facilities:

- Hyperlinked news sources
- News ticker
- "Leigh Global Crisis Index" (LGCI)

I also have a Twitter account (https://twitter.com/#!/DrJamesLeigh) which acts as a news tablet with hyperlinks to some of the most dramatic geopolitical developments in the news at any particular time.

Both my webpage and Twitter page are good resources for students to develop their assignments and keep up with news and read on world events, energy and geopolitics. These facilities also offer students various media for their learning experiences, with videos, recorded lectures, readings and a crisis index (for consideration, discussion and updating).

This all requires a "converted" teacher, passionate to convey knowledge and skills, and faithful to the ideals of inclusive higher education's good practice, fundamentally to eradicate barriers to pursuing excellence, and to facilitate a love of learning, overriding any negative socioeconomic, ethnic, genetic or congenital legacies students may have.

6. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This paper is witness to my life's exciting journey, as student and teacher, now in my seventh decade. Much of modern inclusive higher education's toolkit was developed after World War II by patriarchs like Maslow, Bloom and Kolb. This was in my time, in the 1960s and 1970s, when I was a university student, being schooled in an educational environment replete with secular, democratic, liberal, humanistic and multicultural social philosophy, all foundational tenets of inclusive higher education.

The development of inclusive student-friendly education also means that sound measurable learning outcomes, level specific, can be operationalised through an appropriate array of learning activities, and experientially engaging learning and teaching strategies. And all this is to be carefully and continuously assessed with integrated assessment outcomes or student products.

Inclusive higher education requires the compatible good practice of teachers to offer all students the best chance to succeed, and while this does not work for some (who maybe should never have entered higher education), it will be optimally effective for the maximum number of students, because it is inherently good practice.

The ultimate challenge for me is to deeply understand all this, and apply it effectively in good practice as a researching teacher.

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