

Identity Crisis: Working in Higher Education in the 21st century

Liz Marr and Rachel Forsyth (2011) Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books
ISBN: 978 1 85856 467 8 (pp.176, £20.99, pb)

Review by MIRIAM BIRCH

This book is an essential handbook for all new lecturers, since it gives an excellent overview of how a typical UK university operates, as well as explaining what is involved in the role of the lecturer. It also answers many of the questions which new lecturers are likely to have, but might be afraid to ask. This book will also be a useful resource for more experienced lecturers and other university staff in management and administrative roles, as it describes how all the different functions fit together to ensure that the university functions effectively. The book begins with a description of the different types of universities in the UK and the awards available, as well as explaining the funding of higher education. The differences in the Welsh and Scottish systems are also helpfully covered. An overview of how admissions to universities are handled, as well as the role of the QAA (Quality Assurance Agency) for HE in ensuring the quality and standards of awards in the UK is also given. The chapter then finishes with a brief description of the political and economic drivers affecting universities.

In the second chapter, the purpose of a university, together with the management and committee structures of a typical UK university, are explained. This chapter concentrates on the main functions which directly affect students, including the types of courses a particular university might choose to deliver, and why, in addition to the processes involved in developing and delivering new programmes. The authors also show how different areas of the university engage in each of the steps, thus helping to put everything into context.

Chapter three discusses the massification of higher education and the diversity of students attending university. This includes a description of the characteristics and behaviour of different generations of students and the impact that this has had on academic practice. Globalisation and internationalisation of the curriculum and the impact of diversity and equality legislation on staff and students is also covered.

The fourth chapter describes the general role of a lecturer and covers lecturing, tutoring, marking, research, student support and administration. This chapter gives good practical advice for new lecturers on areas such as how they can plan their classes, information on different delivery techniques, plus advice on marking student work and providing feedback to students. There is also a small section on the importance of research and making funding applications. This chapter also details a range of ways in which academics can support the diverse student body and concludes with a section on the administrative tasks required of an academic and why they are necessary.

Chapter five expands on the role of the lecturer and begins by discussing the different aspects of using group work, including the management and assessment of group work. It then covers the various types of technology that can be used, such as virtual learning environments (VLEs), Blogs, Facebook, Twitter and wikis. This chapter also gives advice on how lecturers can use case studies, problem-based learning, simulations, external speakers and visits, as well as work placements to show how their material relates to real-world situations. The chapter concludes with a discussion on assessment and feedback to students and gives some good examples of constructive feedback.

The final chapter covers a number of areas that new lecturers will become more involved with as they gain experience, including how to develop both modules and programmes so that they become a cohesive whole. The authors explain how lecturers should think about the learning and teaching activities, as well as the assessments that they intend using, when developing new modules, so as to ensure that students will meet the aims and learning outcomes at both the modular and programme level. This chapter ends with a discussion on publicly available data and the ways that it can be used to enhance the curriculum.

This book is a valuable reference document for all those involved in higher education, and particularly those new to higher education. It is structured in such a way that the reader can dip in and out of it as required. The breadth of topics covered means, understandably, that the book only touches the surface of some areas; however several links and references to additional material have been provided, although more of these would have been helpful.

To conclude, I found this to be a very readable, informative book which will be a useful resource for anyone who wants to know more about higher education and the role of academics.

Primary English Knowledge and Understanding (5th edn).

Jane Medwell, George Moore, David Wray and Vivienne Griffiths (2011)
Exeter: Learning Matters.

ISBN: 978 1 84445 790 8 (pp.323, £19.99, pb)

Review by MARY KNIGHT

This is a new edition of this text which has been updated to include extension work for Masters level students and an additional chapter on self assessment. It is one in a series of books on 'Achieving QTS' which focus on theory and practice in primary education. The authors are renowned in their fields, giving the text a degree of credibility. The book primarily focuses on the reader's subject knowledge with the aim of encouraging the competence and confidence to teach language and literacy within the primary classroom.

The book gives a clear, concise introduction to language and grammar and the first nine chapters focus on the grammatical and structural elements of English

Language. These provide a firm foundation for the subsequent chapters which focus upon function and use of language. The 'Self Assessment' chapter gives students the opportunity to test and re-test their knowledge to identify any weaknesses in their subject knowledge and understanding of grammar, punctuation and structure, and to take steps to improve their own competence. There is considerable stress on the subject knowledge and the function of language, its development through history, and significance in contemporary education. This emphasises the responsibility of the student teacher to ensure that he or she has a firm understanding of the subject.

While each chapter deals with an aspect of language, giving opportunities for students to develop their theoretical knowledge, there are also many practical tasks. These help readers to build and develop knowledge and understanding of different genres, to practise skills in reading and expression and to become confident in making choices for children in varying stages of primary schools. As well as tasks to build on students' own competence, pedagogical links are made explicit in order to enable them to identify the relationship between their own subject knowledge and the practical delivery of language. Furthermore, this enables the reader to understand the importance of links between the teacher's understanding of a subject and the ability to teach that subject.

In addition to practical tasks and pedagogical links, each chapter makes explicit links to theory, enabling the reader to recognise how theory underpins practice. This also enables students to access further research to gain a wider knowledge and understanding of concepts.

The book is well organised. All chapters are structured in a consistent way, making explicit links to QTS, which can be equated readily to S.I.T.E (Standard for Initial Teacher Education) and Curriculum for Excellence outcomes – before then identifying a curriculum context and explaining ideas further. A summary of the main points is given at the end of each chapter, providing opportunities for the reader to consolidate understanding of the content. The ideas in the book are developed well, from basic information about speech and punctuation to more complex grammatical structures, enabling students to build on and extend their knowledge and understanding. This book makes explicit what the reader may know implicitly – or indeed, what they may not know at all.

The book is written specifically for trainee teachers, so the level and the assumptions about knowledge are consistent with the knowledge and development of a beginning student. It is suitable for 1st and 2nd year students as a guide to the functional and structural aspects of language. However, this book is also useful in subsequent years as a reference for students and teachers who need to develop subject knowledge or remind themselves of some functional aspects of language. Furthermore, each chapter gives opportunities for extensive work at Masters' level. Consequently, the text works equally well as a handbook for the more experienced practitioner.

Where the first nine chapters deal with functional aspects of language, the final four deal with types of texts, focusing on the different functions and structures of fiction and non fiction texts, including electronic texts. In relation to fiction texts, this book considers the significance of children's literature in developing an

understanding of life from a cultural and historical perspective, giving the reader a greater understanding of the influence of texts upon our lives – and vice versa.

The book is written in simple, clear language and, although at times dealing with complex ideas, these are presented well, leading the reader through the text step by step. Each chapter gives suggestions for further reading, focusing the reader on important literature related to the context. The authors recommend that this book is used in conjunction with *Primary English Teaching: Theory and Practice* (coincidentally written by the same authors), a text which considers aspects of practical application of knowledge in the classroom. In my view these texts do complement each other effectively.

Unlocking the reader in every child

Susan Elkin (2010) Winchester: Ransom Publishing Ltd.

ISBN: 978 1 84167 970 9 (pp.233, £19.99, pb.)

Review by SHEILA NUTKINS

This is an important text, relevant to all those involved in teaching, whether as a qualified teacher in Primary, Secondary or beyond, or as a parent. All texts written about how to teach reading are, in my opinion, important and relevant to all educators. However, this book has been written for a very wide audience and, although it is clear, accessible, informative and full of practical suggestions, it does not provide the depth of discussion I would expect in an academic text. I feel that, in trying to write for both parents and professionals, at times the style falls into the trap of being too simplified for some and too complicated for the other. For the professional audience there is a lack of critical analysis of the approaches. For example, there is no real suggestion that the reader should question or consider the use of synthetic phonics. The author states that this is one approach that may not work for all and acknowledges it is not a '*universal panacea*' – but then states that this approach is now compulsory in all English schools and '*therefore*' is the '*best approach*'. As a teacher educator using this text with students, I would expect to discuss the pros and cons of synthetic phonics at length and develop their understanding. Parents and others reading this are unlikely to benefit from wider reading and discussion. They are likely to take this as a 'how to' manual' and miss the point, made repeatedly by Susan Elkin, that children need a mix of approaches; they do not all learn in the same way and many learn to read perfectly well without synthetic phonics or, indeed, explicit phonics teaching of any kind. There is a strong emphasis on phonics teaching in the first two chapters, and placing this material first provides an implicit message that the necessary starting point for every child is phonological awareness through discrete teaching of synthetic phonics.

Throughout the book the author provides a wealth of ideas and these are presented in a very accessible format. I feel that from chapter three, 'Helping struggling readers', Susan Elkin really gets into her stride. As a practical, 'how to', source book

for teachers across the Primary/Secondary age range, and a support for parents and others, it may be helpful. However, for experienced or specialist teachers it would probably be too simple – and perhaps irritating. Even for undergraduate students in ITE there is a question mark against the risk that it is seen as *'the'* way to teach children to read. The reiteration of the idea that children need a mix of approaches gets lost in the mix of emboldened statements and jaunty 'pin-boards'. For example, noting on the 'pin-board' on page 43 that "Research by Wray and Medwell (1999) found that the most effective teachers of literacy put decoding into context by using meaningful texts" seems to rather diminish the importance of this rather than emphasise it to a reader. Another aspect that seems to have undue emphasis is gender preferences and differences. It is true that boys often prefer non-fiction and girls are often 'chattier' than boys and 'like pink'. Again, this whole issue appears over-simplified and the reader can be left believing that all boys only read non-fiction and all girls read books with pink covers about 'fluffy' stuff. In a few hundred words under the bold sub-headings 'boys' and 'girls' the author could put back the equality debate and agenda by decades. The statements are not untrue, but the language and writing style provide a powerful message beyond any facts. The picture of the brain with 'bubbles' for 'right brain' and 'left brain' on page 98 are a case in point.

My first impression was that Susan Elkin had tackled a complex and contentious subject well and produced a useful practical guide. On further reading and consideration I find I am getting a picture in my mind of a keen educator, whether parent or teacher, throwing 'alphabet raps', tongue twisters and rhymes about computers and TV programmes at children whilst making up stories, rushing to the library, writing book reviews and reading poetry to each other. Almost everything written by Susan Elkin is valid and helpful, but the style creates this rather frantic impression. I fear the important messages are 'lost in translation', as it were!

In conclusion, I am happy that this is presented as a useful guide to anyone wishing to 'unlock the reader' in a child, or children, but I think it might be better without any attempt to explain gender differences in brain development, allusions to research evidence or statements on policy. The emboldened statement on page 24 beginning 'We don't *really* know how children (or anybody else) learns to read' is absolutely true, and important for everyone to acknowledge, but it is difficult to follow that with a 'how to' manual aimed at those tasked with teaching children to read. Overall it pretty much does 'what it says on the tin' – and uses this kind of accessible language and style to do it. I will be very interested to test this out with students and others to see how it is received by different groups and what messages they take from it.