

Mini-EdPsych Q & A – Dr. Alenoush Saroyan

Quality:

How relevant are university rankings to teaching and learning?

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How does a good teacher instil passion in their students – be they young students in school or professionals in the workplace?

The teacher must have passion before instilling it in someone else. Once this first ingredient is there, then it is a matter of connecting with the learner at his/her level, making the topic relevant and meaningful, modeling thinking and learning processes, scaffolding learning and providing appropriate activities and interactions that can help the student engage in meaningful learning, acknowledging progress and achievement, valuing effort, the list can go on. Passion also grows from positive experiences. For instance, providing authentic contexts for students to apply their gained knowledge (e.g., in a research lab, in a community project) can go a long way in further instilling passion about the topic.

In your opinion, do you feel the university ranking system is a useful feature in choosing a good university?

Some ranking systems provide useful information but the majority don't. There are a number of methodological flaws associated with ranking exercises and many universities, acknowledging this flaw, have pulled out of the Maclean's ranking exercise. When potential students and/or their parents are trying to choose a university on the basis of a ranking, their reference is a global score that represents a particular university. This global score does not provide insight into specific aspects of the university. For instance, a highly ranked university may have a terrible reputation in the program that is of interest to a potential student and/parent but this information is masked in a global score. Moreover, the difference in the order of ranking, in most instances, is not significant statistically. That is the difference between a university ranked #2 with one that is ranked #14 may not be meaningful at all.

The two most important international rankings, QS World University Rankings (Times Higher Education) and Shanghai Jiao Tong University rank universities on their research capacity and not teaching. For instance, The Shanghai Jiao Tong University uses the number of Nobel or Marshall prize recipients as an indicator

of quality. While a high score in this category may indicate the presence of a cluster of world class researchers in a university that gets a high score in this category, it does not mean that quality is good across the board in that institution. In that regard, the ranking of institution may be completely uninformative to a potential student or parent.

One ranking system that is useful is the one used in Germany. Rather than a global score, this system comprises an interactive database with information from 132 universities and 148 technological institutions that provides information on 6 main categories of indicators. Anyone who wants to consult the data (published by the German newspaper Die Zeit and also available online) can look at the standing of each university, or even a specific academic subject, against a particular indicator or set of indicators. Readers can even constitute their own ranking based on the indicators most relevant to them. A more detailed analysis of university rankings can be found in: Salmi, J., & Saroyan, A. (2007). League tables as policy instruments: Uses and misuses. Higher Education Management and Policy, 19, 2.

With knowledge readily available and changing so rapidly today, how do professors have the time to keep their lectures up to date and relevant?

Time is always an issue in universities and there never is enough of it. But knowledge is the tool with which professors carry out their academic duties and this knowledge must be current. In universities where research and teaching are seen as inseparable academic duties, one informs the other and in an inordinate amount of time is not required to catch up with new knowledge. The challenge then is not as much keeping up-to-date with knowledge than it is finding the time and desire to invest time in learning about teaching. Most of us can think of teachers/professors with extensive experience in a system who are not effective in teaching and perhaps even have the perception that they are good teachers. What would make these individuals invest their time in learning about teaching? The first is that they have to acknowledge that there is a need for it. If they think they are doing a good job, then they will never consider spending time learning about teaching. After they acknowledge the need, they must believe that the time and other resources they invest in learning about teaching is worth it. Then, they must have utmost confidence in the credibility of the source who is providing them with this new knowledge. Finally, they must be either intrinsically (e.g., valuing self development) or extrinsically motivated (e.g., reward, merit, etc.) to engage in a development activity.