

Introducing Fern

I met Fern in her office down a long and rather dreary corridor in a 1970s university building. The conversation that followed though, was far from dreary, it was pure inspiration. Fern, is a career academic within an Arts faculty. Although still fairly early in her career, she is an Associate Professor in a competitive field. Known for her scholarship and for her employability related teaching, Fern teaches advanced undergraduate and postgraduate courses.

The 4Es of employability

Fern listened attentively while I explained the 4Es of Employability model and the research literatures that inform this deceptively simple model. Occasionally, Fern took notes and nodded, it was clear that the model resonated with her. She was happy to describe some of the practices she adopts.

Excite

Fern believes it is hard to get excited about something that is not relevant, so she makes the relationships between the learning offered in her courses and students' futures explicit. She notes that explicit explanations are essential but they need to be supplemented by additional strategies. Fern invites guest speakers in, often recent graduates, who students can identify with. The speakers are able to inspire students and explain how they use the skills learnt on Fern's courses. They talk about the changes they are trying to make out in the world which, Fern says, is hugely empowering for her students.

Explore

As most of Fern's students are well into their studies she devotes relatively little time to introducing basic academic concepts. However, her students often have very little experience of the professions they aspire to join.

Fern builds students' appreciation of the workplace and potential roles by taking them out to sites. She also builds skills in reflective practice so students get in the habit of constantly evaluating and interpreting what they see. Students watch videoed debates and meetings between professionals. By reflecting on the contrasting perspectives of speakers Fern helps students gain an appreciation of the complicated and value laden world, where there may be no authoritative answers to their questions.

Fern configures her courses so that students imagine themselves in the workplace; they take on a role and then plan and execute a significant piece of work. Fern explains that this approach ensures students are appreciating topics and tasks in a holistic and contextualised sense, which they could not do if they simply had to write about a theory. Fern was at pains to stress that students do learn the theories as they do in other courses, but in her courses they take that learning several steps further.

Extend

In the course assignments and class exercises students work in groups. The courses are highly interactive and social. All the work involves applying theory and is explicitly related to employability. Students present ideas to each other and so gain experience in expressing ideas in public and without opportunities for preparation. Fern explained that

they like to talk to each other, hear what others are doing and receive their feedback. This is an excellent way to prepare students for transferring their learning to the workplace as they get to see concepts and theories deployed in multiple situations.

Fern says she sets high expectations and treats students as adults. By the end of the course students have researched a topic, assessed theory against practice, developed their own ideas and prepared advice for a senior professional. Throughout our conversation Fern's comments consistently reflected her desire to empower and enable her students in preparation for their early careers.

Exhibit

Fern says that anything her students produce should have potential for use in the real world. Reports and advice are written in the style, format and standard that would be expected of working professionals. Fern notes how students 'love' to produce something real.

Opportunities and challenges

I asked Fern if she could point to opportunities she had had that might explain how she has made such tremendous progress in embedding employability into her curriculum. She pointed to the help she has had and mentioned learning support staff, careers staff, past students and employers. She notes that academic staff think they need to know everything but 'we don't know it all, we don't need to'.

Although Fern didn't mention it, I felt that her own determination and willingness to take risks has had a lot to do with Fern's success. In our conversation she explained that she didn't know the authentic formats for official briefings, reports and memos so she asked learning support staff in the university and also approached very senior practitioners for help. Fern also said she didn't know how to reimagine assessments and had work out guidelines over time. This has taken her out of her comfort zone and it has been scary.

When I asked what the challenges and barriers were Fern pointed to a difference between her thinking and that of some colleagues. She explained that some academics feel their role are about passing on knowledge but Fern doesn't focus on this, instead, she gets students working on applied projects. Fern says that she is enhancing her discipline and getting the theories out there. 'It's a contribution to impact' she says, but then notes that this isn't what some of colleagues think.

Fern also told me that her university has no senior positions advocating for employability, nor any rewards systems for risk takers. Far from it, Fern suggests that we have reverse incentives; it is safer to teach in the old way and get your research done. Fern's ambitions clearly run well beyond getting employability in to her own courses: She is on a mission to change our universities.

It was an honour to talk to Fern who came across as an immensely capable and principled academic and a significant mover and shaker. Watch out academia!