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Words Matter

Sustaining talk in education

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A call for change

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BBC2, *Hospital,* Series 1, Episode 6, first broadcast 29 May 2017

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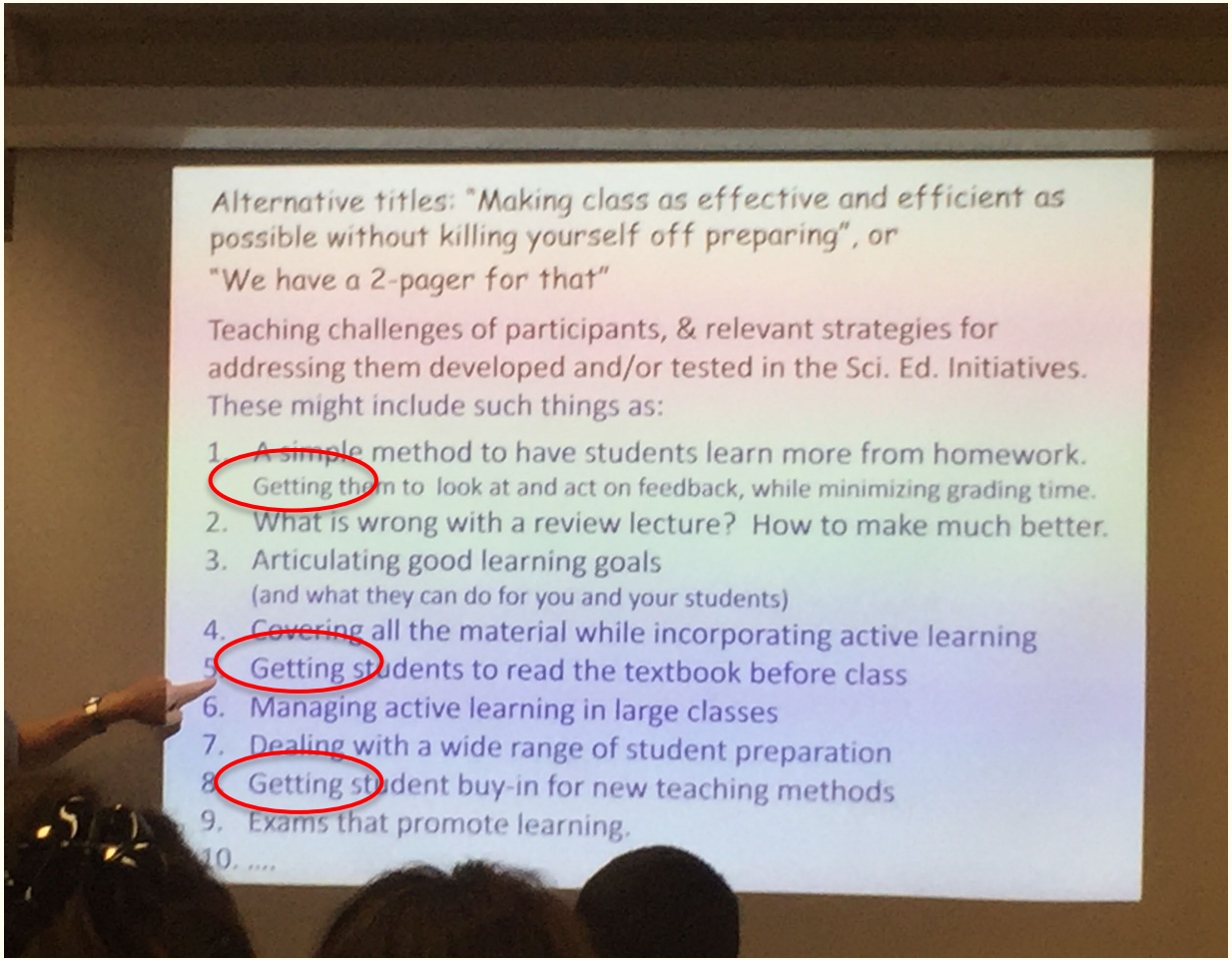
Alternative titles: "Making class as effective and efficient as possible without killing yourself off preparing", or
"We have a 2-pager for that"
Teaching challenges of participants, & relevant strategies for addressing them developed and/or tested in the Sci. Ed. Initiatives. These might include such things as:
1. A simple method to have students learn more from homework.
Getting them to look at and act on feedback, while minimizing grading time.
2. What is wrong with a review lecture? How to make much better.
3. Articulating good learning goals
(and what they can do for you and your students)
4. Covering all the material while incorporating active learning
5. Getting students to read the textbook before class
6. Managing active learning in large classes
7. Dealing with a wide range of student preparation
8. Getting student buy-in for new teaching methods
9. Exams that promote learning.
10. ....

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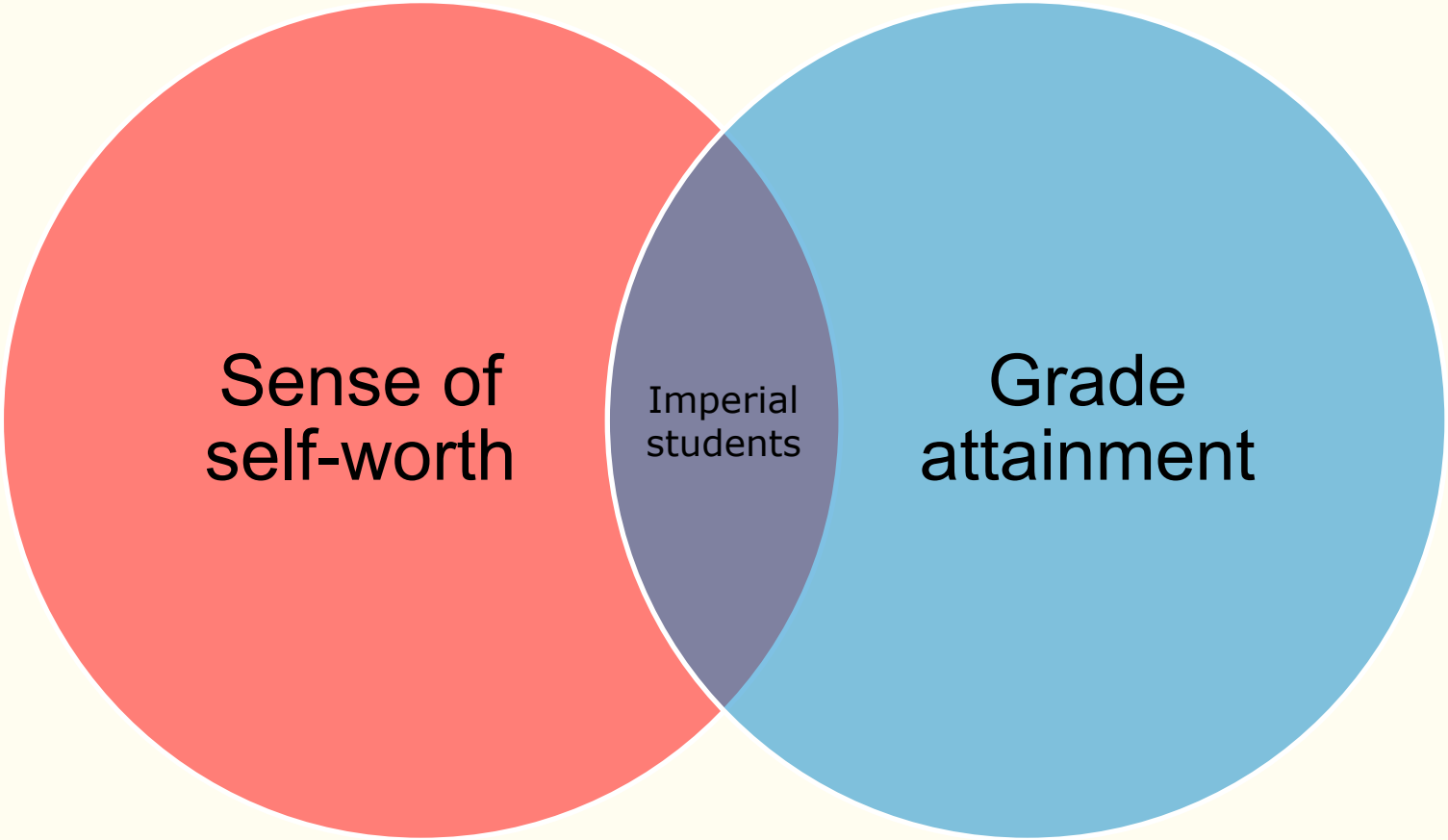
Provocation 1

Let’s stop using the language of coercion when we speak about education


Sense of self-worth
Imperial students
Grade attainment

Although degrees are awarded to students, it is unhelpful to refer to students as if they **are** their grades, e.g. ‘she is a first-class student’ or ‘assessment criteria should distinguish between first-, second- and third-class students’.

We can help students separate their identity as learners from the grades assigned to their work by giving nuanced feedback that refers to the work rather than the student.

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An example of feedback

Your analysis suffered a little from being too focused on specific points, particularly for the first source. What you said about these points was sensible, but you could have had a slightly wider focus at times just to alert us to your awareness of context.

A strength was your analysis of diction, especially for the second source. Your weakness was in not fully explaining some points. I was disappointed, too, that you didn't define "doctor fallacy".

The analysis ~~suffered a little from being~~ was too focused on specific points, particularly for the first source. The elaboration of these points was sensible, but ~~you could have had a~~ slightly wider focus at times would show an awareness of context.

A strength of the essay was the analysis of diction, especially for the second source. ~~Your weakness was in not fully explaining~~. Some points needed a fuller explanation to be convincing. Always define concepts like "doctor fallacy".

Provocation 2

Let’s take care not to conflate students with the work they submit for assessment

Why is subjectivity a ‘dirty word’?

“[With respect to knowledge-making] the categories of the objective and the subjective are arrayed in opposition, both in description and in evaluation. Subjectivity is then called upon to deflate objectivity. The two notions go together, but as doppelgänger, the good child and its evil twin, where the one is the positive image, the other the negative: a disruptive and disordering influence on knowledge; a trickster figure making a mess out of everything. Subjectivity is seen as a philosophical trouble; it’s what pollutes objective knowledge. … We take objectivity as an ideal to be historicized and subjectivity as what we’re sadly stuck with if we don’t watch out.”

Steven Shapin (2012), The sciences of subjectivity, *Social Studies of Science* 42(2): 170–184

What are the consequences of ignoring or denigrating subjectivity?

- By pretending that research has ‘objective outcomes’ and viewing subjectivity as a ‘limitation’, we fail to openly discuss the *effects* of positionality and subjectivity in analytical work
- Seen as an avoidable source of bias, but the scientific process has multiple points of subjective decision making that do not invalidate the outcomes
- By characterising subjectivity as a contaminating threat to be quashed/dismissed, an opportunity is missed to view it as a strength, e.g. lived experience is a compelling and important form of data
- Suppressing first-person pronouns in written work is a pointless proxy for objectivity and should be discouraged

Provocation 3

Let’s encourage reflexive, positionality statements, and push back against the denigration of subjectivity

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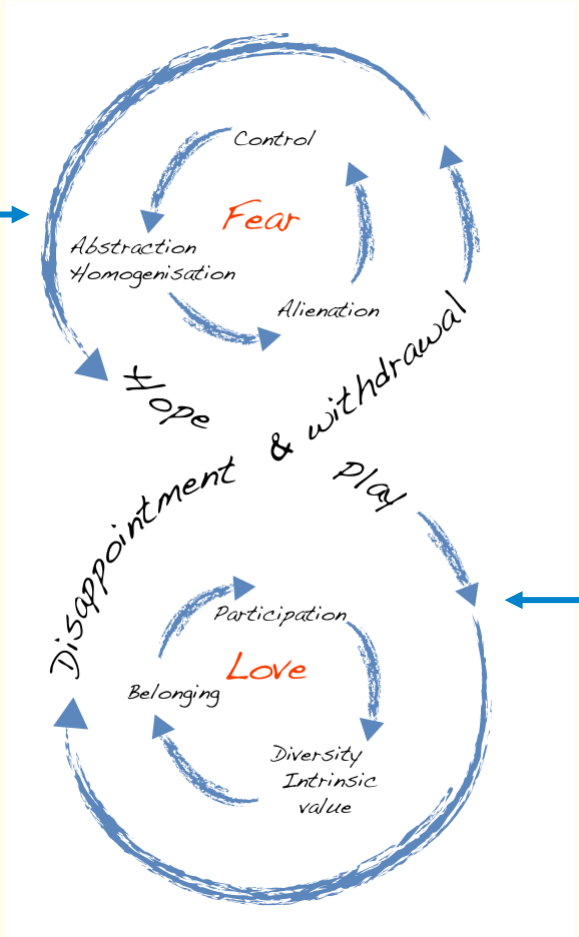
Knowing by gaining control
We treat things as objects, standardised and categorised so that we can treat similar phenomena as being the same. Self-reinforcing cycle driven by anxiety, insecurity and fear.



Knowing through participation
We accept complexity and uncertainty as inevitable and instead of avoiding or controlling it, participate in it. We relish diversity, welcome surprises, and appreciate the richness and uniqueness of all things. Driving this cycle are love, empathy, compassion and relationship.

Love and fear loops as ways of being in and knowing the world (from the SHINE report on changing the cultures of care)

Provocations

1. Let’s stop using the language of coercion when we speak about education
2. Let’s take care not to conflate students with the work they submit for assessment
3. Let’s encourage reflexive, positionality statements, and push back against the denigration of subjectivity