Introducing Ian

I met Ian in his office. Although he says he is in his mid-40s, Ian looked much younger. Ian is a Senior Lecturer in a provincial university and he is known for his research and teaching. Ian teaches advanced undergraduate courses and supervises PhD students. He has a reputation for being great fun but expecting a lot from his students.

The 4Es of employability

Ian listened attentively while I explained the 4Es of Employability and the research literatures that inform this deceptively simple model. Ian was happy to listen and to ask questions about the model. He had no difficulties in relating it to his practices. Ian thinks that thinking and communicating are the capabilities students' will need in the future and he focused most of our conversation on these attributes.

Enthuse

Ian says that students are neither enthused nor excited by dreary lectures that do not relate to them or their lives. He says, in Arts, students are passionate about things, they want to make a difference but they all have different passions.

Ian believes that you have to get to know your students and speak to their hearts as well as their minds. Ian described his approach to developing thinking. He reckons that what students think about is less important than how deeply and critically they think. Ian has students work in small groups on topics they are enthused by and which they select for themselves.

At the start of his course Ian shows students the work done by previous students. He says that inspires them and builds confidence. Sometimes a past student comes in and explains how they chose their topic and worked in a group. Ian says students ask his previous students the most peculiar questions, things he would never have thought to tell them.

Each person in Ian's class is expected to think about what skills they want to develop during his course. I was impressed by the report Ian seemed to have built with his students' and by how much he knew about them.

Explore

Ian begins his course by inviting students to solve a series of problems. Students make errors, or form biased judgements or simply get stuck. Some of the situations are taken from past events and students can explore the outcomes for real decision makers. Ian says this makes students aware of their limitations (and it makes then keen to know more).

Ian told me that he shows students holistic rubrics showing the level of performance expected of graduates and asks students if they can perform at this level. After discussion they invariably conclude that they do not. Ian is then ready to explore with his students how they can develop from their current state of thinking to graduate level thinking. Ian says the more he makes the reasoning behind his course design transparent the more students buy in and the more he gets them to plan their learning journeys the more they 'own' their learning.

Ian explicitly teaches critical thinking techniques and points out their application in employability contexts. He find it hard to understand why many colleagues think critical thinking will develop (or not) but do not provide lessons in how to do it.

Extend

Ian's courses involve individual and group work. Ian explained that he begins by having concepts worked through in groups, where students can support each other, and then they often move on to working alone. This way he is sure that everyone has gained skills.

Ian spends a long time designing exercises and almost no time making 'fancy' PPTs. His exercises are initially well defined, contained and solvable. Students share ideas, analyse their won performance and identify the principles applied. These exercises rapidly become more complex and students are expected to use a range of thinking techniques and research their selected topics. Ian tries to simulate the challenges that students might face in their careers and is keen to bring in ethical issues and ambiguity.

Ian comes across as deeply committed to his discipline and sees university as a safe place to develop intellectual muscles that will serve students well in the future.

Exhibit

Ian's students do not take exams and tests. They produce websites, posters, blogs and other visually rich materials. Ian asked 'What is the point in asking students to write essays in word when all powerful communication takes a different form?' There were several samples of posters in Ian's office and he proudly showed me his students' work. It was refreshing to see the quality, variety and level of creativity inherent in the work.

Ian explained that most of his assessments are staged so that students report in, receive feedback and then move to the next stage using their feedback. Ian says there are skills in receiving and acting on feedback. He believes that many people have learnt to block out information that is not wholly positive. He noted that 'In the workplace they will be given feedback and expected to use it, and it's not gonna be sugar coated'.

Opportunities and challenges

I asked Ian about the opportunities and challenges he faces in embedding employability in his courses.

He says he has been lucky in teaching History a discipline with direct links to employability with many lessons from the past that are pertinent today.

Ian says that the most difficult thing about developing employability capabilities is throwing out disciplinary content. He says that while you can aim for a win-win by changing the way you structure learning, if you want deep learning and are trying to build skills that last then you have to recognise that it takes time and that might mean throwing out your favourite theory!

I asked what his colleagues thought about this reduction in content. Ian said that he has heard a few rumblings but he's not too bothered. He said 'What's the point in stuffing your course full of content that nobody can remember 2 weeks after the exam?' How right he is!