

# Empowering Excellence in Learning and Teaching – Unscripted Critical Moments and Their Ripple Effect

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## ABSTRACT

The unscripted critical moment that can occur between student and tutor can empower a student to realise their threshold concepts and lead to a ripple effect where the influence on that student can be limitless. As tutors, we need to recognise that excellence in learning and teaching can be more than just the output; it can also be about the powerful and humbling connections we make with our students. However, to be able to generate these unscripted critical moments for our students, as tutors we also need to give ourselves permission to purposefully connect to ourselves and be invested enough in ourselves to mindfully experience our days. This opinion piece puts forward that the strive for excellence in learning and teaching should not be just about the pass rate or in what our students say about us. In the journey for excellence in teaching, tutors need to open themselves to experiencing their day so that they themselves can be a part of their own unscripted critical moments. By investing in themselves and being curious enough to observe and experience their professional world, the tutor can be a part of their own unscripted critical moments that can have the kind of influence that emboldens excellence in teaching.

## KEYWORDS

Reflective practice; Reflective professional; Learning and teaching excellence; Threshold concepts; Quality enhancement

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## A Tutors Influence can be Boundless

*“A teacher affects eternity; they can never tell where their influence stops”* (Adams (1928) cited in Bedeian (2007)). Over twenty-seven years ago I met ‘that’ teacher. He was allocated as my mentor (nurse tutor) during my nursing degree, and years later, he continues to influence how I am and how I choose to be in my personal and professional life. I was that student who couldn’t find the computer room, who seemed to miss all the important information, whose belief in themselves was almost non-existent and who feared every patient I encountered. When I met my mentor, I had just started my final year of a four-year degree, a degree that I was not enjoying and, as I perceived, was not particularly good at. I just didn’t get it. However,

through my mentor, I began to enjoy and understand nursing. The times I would observe him in his job, the coffee and conversation in the car after patient visits, and the discussions after staff meetings were what led to me understanding my profession through my threshold concepts that, with hindsight, I now know to have emerged because of those unscripted critical moments. Unscripted, because they were not prescribed teaching time, they were organic and authentic moments in time. Critical, because through these moments, I was able to make sense of and grasp previously in-accessible ways of thinking and understanding nursing. I acquired comprehension of such notions as 'being therapeutic', 'being empathic', and 'a way of being'. In hindsight, observing the application of theory to practice over time through those critical moments opened conceptual gateways, empowering me to make sense of concepts as being person-centred. This conceptual gateway or portal, which opens us to a new way of understanding, has been previously termed as a threshold concept (Meyer & Land, 2003).

### **The Unscripted Critical Moment and the Threshold Concept**

Those threshold concept flashes which occurred because of those unscripted critical moments led to a significant ripple effect for me. Brookfield (2017) argued that excellence in teaching empowers curiosity within students, supporting them in gaining knowledge and skills they didn't have before. My mentor's excellence in teaching through those unscripted critical moments empowered my curiosity. By asking me questions, being interested in why and how I practised as a student nurse, and being generous with time and knowledge, ultimately meant I found my specialism in nursing, and I connected to myself and began to understand my professional identity. As well as being a superb role model as a nurse, a tutor and a leader by modelling those behaviours and attitudes I valued and wanted to emulate, he invested his time in me by offering me something that I had not had in the previous three years, and I felt I mattered. Because of those unscripted critical moments, I realised my threshold concepts, and the ripple effect of his influence was such that I went on to develop and run services, to be the kind of mentor for my students that he had been for me. Even now, as an academic in higher education, I still try to embody those values of compassion, understanding and fairness he held, and that Brookfield (2017) advises our best teaching should generate within our students.

This opinion piece proposes that tutors, by which I mean personal tutors, professional service staff and academics, can have a significant influence on the student where the limit of that influence is not a known element. That excellence in learning and teaching is perhaps about focusing on quality enhancement, not just quality assurance. (Biggs, J., Tang, C., & Kennedy, 2022) would argue that "*an effective quality enhancement system pre-empts the need for quality assurance*". Looking to the future, reflecting on the potentiality of future teaching experiences, and addressing how we can improve the quality of that teaching, rather than only maintaining quality through a retrospective review of teaching practices against metrics, can broaden the boundaries of what can be perceived as excellence in learning and teaching. Broadening those

boundaries to include the relational quality between student and tutor would ultimately recognise the worth of the unscripted critical moment from the tutor to the student. Emphasis would be placed upon the tutor to be mindful of the influence, positive or negative, they can have on their student an influence which can lead to a significant ripple effect through the generating of threshold concepts. The caveat is that positive ripple effects can only occur if the tutor is a reflective professional (Brookfield, 2017; Clarke, 2024) and exposes themselves to experiencing their own unscripted critical moments.

According to Wood & Su (2017) excellence as a tutor means you have the skill set and attitudinal qualities to create safe learning spaces that engender "*motivational learning relationships*". They advise that the excellent tutor has a significant subject knowledge base for their professional role and is dedicated to the creation of a safe learner environment where the learner can realise thinking independence and critical thought. But as a tutor, to develop a desire to learn in another person, I would argue we need to emanate to the student a desire to share our knowledge, a passion for our subject, and a motivation to learn ourselves. As I experienced from my mentor, we need to model those values and behaviours we want for and in our students. Clarke (2024) argues that what empowers a person to be the best version of themselves is knowledge of self as "*understanding your vehicle, learning to drive the vehicle of self with knowledge and authority, is what will enable you to be an amazing practitioner/professional*". What is recognised as excellence in learning and teaching should not just be driven by metrics, but it should be driven by who we are, how we are and how we embody the notion of excellence in our teaching practices. This, for me, requires us to find our own idea of excellence, to know who we are as tutors and educators, and to create space for the potentiality of our own unscripted critical moments to occur.

### **Experiencing the day - Being a Reflective Professional**

This paper argues that it is imperative we deliberately experience our day. Excellence has been noted as a "*process of growth, development and flourishing; it is not just an endpoint*" (Nixon, 2013). So rather than focussing on the metric output, or how well we applied technical rationality, we need to mindfully focus on the experiencing and processing of each day by becoming reflective professionals (Biggs, J., Tang, C., & Kennedy, 2022; Brookfield, 2017; Clarke, 2024; Schön, 1983). Reflective professionals are present with themselves where they connect to the self and focus on mindfully experiencing their days, not just getting through them. For personal tutors, this would mean listening to and hearing our colleagues and students. We would observe what is occurring around us, paying attention to how we move and behave through the everyday. We would pay attention to our own thoughts and feelings about what we are part of. We would explore what our thoughts and feelings can tell us about how we process our experiences. Immersing ourselves in our experiences, where every moment counts, is where we can experience those unscripted critical moments and our own idea of excellence in learning and teaching.


## Pursuing Excellence

In the pursuit of our own understanding of excellence, we need to reflect on our own teaching practices. We need to be attentive and open to learning, experiencing others' teaching and allowing others to observe our teaching. We need to engage in professional discourse through communities of practice or just authentic conversation in the office. Several of my unscripted critical moments that have occurred in the past ten years are from these types of conversations. The influence that my colleagues have had on me in those moments has been profound and has altered how I think and behave within my own teaching practices. We also need to observe how our students respond to us and how we to them. Most importantly, we need to be observant of ourselves and give ourselves permission to be authentic, potentially imperfect practitioners with room to grow and develop. Even as a seasoned professional, it does not mean we have nothing more to learn. We need to create reflective space that recognises unscripted critical moments still have a role to play in the development of our own ideologies, the realising of our own threshold concepts and of what it means to be an excellent teacher. It is also important to remember that you could be someone else's unscripted critical moment and be influential in the generation of the boundless ripple effect that could lead to teaching excellence. My challenge to you therefore is, to take time to reflect, immerse yourself in your experiences, connect to and journal your thoughts and feelings, explore those experiences through a critical lens, and ask yourself what sense can you make of those experiences that may have been your unscripted critical moment.

## About the Author

Nicola Clarke is an Associate Professor in Reflective Academic Practice within the faculty of Health, Education and Life Sciences at Birmingham City University. Nicola has over two decades of learning and teaching experience within a higher education institute. She teaches reflection, reflective practice, academic skills and early in her academic career taught mental health nursing. Nicola is also the manager of the Academic Development Department and acts as the faculty Recognition of Prior Learning and Continuing Professional Development advisor. She has authored two student text books, a number of articles and has presented at international conferences on reflection. She is an avid country music fan, has one amazing daughter and loves cats.

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