

## INTERVIEWS AND DIALOGUE

### Teaching and learning and the first-year experience: Interviews with Brenda Leibowitz and John Gardner

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#### *Introduction*

The South African National Resource Centre for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition (SANRC) conducted interviews with two leading scholars in the field of teaching and learning – Brenda Leibowitz and John N. Gardner – in order to begin a conversation about the role of teaching and learning in the first-year experience (FYE). Both interviews were conducted in August 2015 by Gugu Wendy Khanye, and were designed to elicit insights about the effectiveness of teaching and learning support for first-year students in the higher education system, from both a national and international perspective.

Brenda Leibowitz is the Chair in Teaching and Learning at the University of Johannesburg (UJ), having previously served as the Director of Teaching and Learning at Stellenbosch University. Leibowitz's work in the area of social justice and the scholarship of teaching and learning (e.g. Leibowitz, 2010) is well read in South Africa and inspires and enriches the academic field of teaching and learning and student learning and development.

John Gardner is currently Senior Fellow and Distinguished Professor Emeritus at the University of South Carolina (USC) as well as the President of the John N. Gardner Institute of Excellence in Undergraduate Education. In his role as founding Director and Senior Fellow at the National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, Gardener has engaged in a range of teaching and learning activities and initiatives including advising, facilitating, mentoring and developing new research topics.

#### *Interview with Brenda Leibowitz*

**Khanye:** *In one of your seminars you presented on “The roles of values and concerns in Professional Academic identities”. In closing, you ended by saying “Society doesn’t change that much. Social differences remain, inequality persists.” In the South African higher education space, can the scholarship of teaching and learning contribute towards establishing equilibrium of the three above-mentioned aspects? Elaborate.*

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**Leibowitz:** There are waves of change in society – waves of wealth, times when society is more impoverished. We never reach a time when things are absolutely perfect or even excellent. In relatively egalitarian societies, there is some inequality. South Africa is one of the most unequal societies in the world; we have one of the highest Gini coefficients in the world, which is the gap between the richest 10% and the poorest 10%. In an article in the *Journal Higher Education Quarterly*, David Cooper [2015] discusses “South African Higher Education as a stalled vs. skewed revolution”. It appears that the racial inequalities still exist but have moved to be more class-based. The fact of the matter is that there have been huge changes in higher education since 1990/1994. There is a large task to be achieved, with some room for celebration but more concern and hard work.

Simon Marginson [2015] states that we have had the notion that education and higher education can change social inequality and therefore serves as an equaliser or provides for social mobility. The hard fact of the matter is that society changes, education/higher education is not the key lever in creating social inequality. However, education must obviously play its role as well as it can. Given this, there is a huge job for educators to make higher education as accessible as possible and as effective in various ways. In terms of teaching and learning, the primary responsibility of learning rests with students and lecturers/academics to make that learning possible or to make it such that students can exercise that responsibility. Furthermore, there is a huge role in the sector for student counsellors and individuals working in support divisions. It is a distributed responsibility and there is a role for managers, DVCs [deputy vice-chancellors], rectors and all staff. Everyone has a role to play.

The role of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning [SoTL] within this matrix depends on a few things: (1) it needs to be an effective scholarship, relatively rigorous and relatively informed by data, theory and prior reading of what others are doing, and be systematic; and (2) what is extremely important is that it is a scholarship that is underpinned by a vision of social justice, it is not just any kind of scholarship.

**Khanye:** *Carpenter and Curran [2013] have come to agree that “academics have a core role to play in the student experience during and beyond the higher learning phase”. What do you believe is the actual role of academics and should academics be directly involved, or is this the role of the institution?*

**Leibowitz:** Every grouping within the institution has a role to play, e.g. the vice-chancellor and deputy vice-chancellors need to lead the institution, they need to make it possible for academics to flourish and to teach as well as they can. Academics need to be part of crafting the vision of the institution. One can make a distinction between management and leadership within the institution because it is the leader who helps to provide a sense of the way forward, but it is the manager that makes the environment conducive.

Research conducted has shown that when academics work hard and are really flourishing, it is the general conditions, the interpersonal relationships between staff and also in the lecture halls, that make a difference in encouraging and discouraging academics, so they too have a huge role to play. Support divisions such as Academic Development

Centres and Centres for Teaching and Learning also have a role to play, whether it is in providing formal courses and workshops, which research has been proven to play an important role in an academic's professional development, or whether it is in supporting academics in more informal ways. There is a synergy between what academics learn from formal workshops/ courses, plus this broader issue of the environment in which they teach and from which they learn a huge amount.

Ron Barnett speaks about the "will to learn" (2007): that it remains the students' responsibility to learn, but they tend to learn when the environment is more conducive, more encouraging, if there is something exciting that they get the point in learning. It is thus the responsibility of the academic to show students what the learning is that is so exciting and so important, and to a lesser extent but very important, that learning is possible. If the student feels that they cannot learn, it is beyond them, then they also will not learn. As academics, we create the opportunity for students to learn. It can thus be summarised to be called an "ecology" within the institution, everything in the process interacts.

**Khanye:** *It is often said student learning occurs more outside the classroom than in the classroom. If this is so, do you believe that good teaching practice makes a difference in student learning?*

**Leibowitz:** Yes, there is an interesting complementary relationship between formal learning and informal learning, where informal learning occurs mainly outside the classroom, while formal learning is the result of the taught curriculum. They balance because the formal curriculum can set off like a catalyst: if you learn something exciting from the taught curriculum, the student may have an interest to follow it up on their own. In the instance of an informal environment, it can be a drag because if there is nothing there that supports what is happening in the formal environment the counter messages coming from there can limit the effect of the formal learning – then growth does not occur. A "savvy" lecturer thus takes cognisance of what is happening in the informal learning environment and taps into it and inducts students into that formal world. Ensuring the student gets into the world of formal learning is dependent on the student – a minority of students are truly self-starters.

**Khanye:** *Teaching has been compromised by pressures upon academics to pursue research; moreover, the reward system for academics has favoured them doing research over good teaching. Would you say that teaching and research are sometimes incompatible? Can one be both a great teacher and a great researcher?*

**Leibowitz:** There are examples of individuals who are both a great teacher as well as a great researcher. For example, Carl Wieman, an American physicist and Nobel laureate who has advised extensively on teaching and learning matters, set up a Science teaching centre. Having served on the board of the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA) teaching and excellence awards, I have been aware that there are individuals who are excellent teachers as well as excellent researchers, thus it is possible to be both. There are no two ways about it, although this may be a minority as it requires a lot from you.

Some people are excellent teachers in the traditional sense in that they teach well intuitively, and do not really spend much time in professional development or conducting research on their teaching. But it is becoming increasingly difficult to get the label “excellent teacher” without doing some research on your teaching – which is a challenge.

But anybody who has pride in their work and teaches should be good at it, so logically there should not be a clash between teaching and research. There are numerous examples in the country. One professor of Mathematics nominated as having made an impact on top-performing first-year students at the previous university where I worked, said that he became an excellent teacher from conducting more research in his field because it allowed him to go to conferences and network with others who have a strong understanding of the subject. That further allowed him to “see the wood from the trees”, i.e. to distil what is the essence of the subject and use that in teaching. He is an example of someone who goes to great lengths for their teaching, spending a great deal of time preparing his lectures, fine-tuning his notes on Blackboard, and obtaining feedback from his students. With regard to the balance between being both an excellent teacher and an excellent researcher, there is a difference in the case where you have a huge teaching load and it is difficult to be a good teacher. This is a challenge faced by many institutions in the country where teaching loads are much higher, so that would mitigate against being good at both or having enough time to devote to both, so it is not about quality necessarily. There is also a neoliberal approach of throwing money and incentives, which in some instances skews the view of the profession because when you can get more funds through research and there is pressure for research, it could lead to a neglect of teaching. Research from a project I have led on professional development at eight South African universities has shown that at each of the eight institutions documents and academics attest to research being pushed and incentivised, thus resulting in the skewed effect. On the other hand, some universities are also starting to incentivise teaching through their promotional systems.

If you see teaching as scholarship, then you would conduct research on your practice because we must be systematic and scholarly and engage in debate about something we do, whether it is about teaching or the discipline, it does not matter. Higher education needs to view an academic career as an integrated one.

**Khanye:** *The focus of the work of the SANRC is the first year of study and the succeeding transition within higher education. Active teaching and collaborative learning is a key goal in the teaching and learning space. Given high student numbers and large classes, is it possible to create an active and engaging learning environment for large classes during the first year?*

**Leibowitz:** Yes definitely, in my experience, I have come across numerous academics that are excited about their teaching, and in interviews and conversations have given great examples of handling large-class teaching. A great deal of academics are in fact positive about teaching “large classes”. There are two meanings of “engagement”. There is the notion of engagement where the lecturer creates opportunities for the student to engage actively in their own learning, to be active about their learning and to succeed academically.

But the second meaning of “engagement” is encouraging students to engage more actively in the community, the outside world, and with social issues. In my view both are extremely important. For academics, to have an impact and engage the students both inside and outside the classroom, it is critical to understand what is being done during the lecture, what assignments are required of students and the influence of what students do outside the lecture, depending on what they have learnt and apply in tutorials and other situations.

For the first-year specifically, there are four main elements that stand out as highly important for me: firstly, the notion of cognitive or affective contact, being able to acknowledge the first-year student and establishing meaningful contact – “I see you”. Secondly, the cognitive scaffolding and creation of bridges for the student into the knowledge – an assignment structured specifically to ease the student into comprehending the theory, providing building blocks required to do the assignment; showing students the rules of the discipline and allowing them to practise the learnt rules. Thirdly, experiential learning. I believe learning is not only about formal and cognitive processes, it is more modern theory around embodiment and affect; you want students to feel the new concepts and ideas and grow with them, especially for students who have not had good schooling. You cannot just teach formally and according to the rules and precepts, because it becomes superficially acquired; it needs to be owned and acquired and integrated. Your passion needs to be evident, as a lecturer, if you show enthusiasm, that you are excited by the knowledge and see its relevance, some of that ought to infect the students. You model being a professional, being a scholar to students, and lecturers need to be “polished”. The fourth and final theme has to do with more immeasurable attributes; we often talk about students as “them” as if they are something different from us – we need to see ourselves as learners and model to the students what we would want them to be.

**Khanye:** *“The Role of Values and Concerns in Professional Academic Development” seminar that you gave at the University of the Free State is based on the autobiographies of three academics working in the field of academic development. It explored the possibilities of critical reflection for creating agency and enabling conditions for students and staff in higher education. Please can you share three key findings from this research? How can teaching and learning contribute to creating enabling conditions for the first-year experience?*

**Leibowitz:** The seminar has led to a paper by Leibowitz, Garraway and Farmer (2015): “Influence of the past on professional lives: A collective commentary”. The paper was based on critical and social realism. The research suggests the importance of biography, and that your prior experiences do not necessarily determine what you become, but they do provide enabling opportunities for your next stage of development. How one interacts with one’s immediate environment makes the next stage possible. An example would be a situation which is challenging and forces you to respond creatively and critically. This might make it easier when you need to be critical or creative in future situations. Similarly, for students, their biographies influence how they learn but these do not entirely determine what happens next, it just makes certain things easier or more difficult.

Reflexivity is another theme. It suggests that when you do find out about yourself, your values and how you got to be where you are, you extend this reflexivity to your educational experience, thinking more carefully and understanding the enabling factors. This should enable you to strategise how to proceed more effectively, thoughtfully, or ethically. The third finding is around the importance of values, as all human activity is influenced by our values, including our teaching and learning. We need to be sensible, as Rudyard Kipling said: “God give me the strength to change what can be changed, to accept what cannot be changed and to know which one is which”.

Departing thoughts: I imagine the SANRC as a resource providing support more broadly in the field of higher education. This is an opportunity to provide resources that practitioners and researchers can draw on.

### *Interview with John Gardner*

**Khanye:** *FYE programmes and activities are often conducted independently by different stakeholders at universities. Who are key stakeholders that should be collaborating across institutions to make FYE programmes and activities a more collaborative effort and experience?*

**Gardner:** Over the past 40 years, increasingly, much of the leadership has been taken by academic leaders, and so ideally institutions need to have partnerships between academic administrators, student services administrators, and faculty, because they have more contact with new students, people that do assessments, institutional research; most importantly, partnerships with students themselves; and, moreover, with the top leadership of the institution (rector or vice-chancellor). It is also very important to have partnerships with the government agencies as they have an interest in terms of what is happening in universities to help those beginning university studies. Alumni should also have a vested interest in anything that is good for students, and so they too should be involved. There are also financial investors who can invest in education, like corporate leaders, foundations – for example what the Kresge Foundation is doing in South Africa around promoting access and success in higher education and graduating the next generation of knowledge workers, because they are interested in student success work. There are multiple stakeholders and of these some are more important than others; and no work on the first-year experience is going to proceed beyond a certain level of effectiveness without the faculty, the faculty have to be involved in this because they stay longer in institutions – and, unlike administrators, have greater opportunities for contact with students.

**Khanye:** *Research and theories around “student involvement” and “student engagement” have come to play an integral role in the structuring of first-year experience programmes for supporting students in the 21st century. Are these theories still critical in initiating structured FYE programmes; are there new theories in the field to consider?*

**Gardner:** This has in recent times become a real challenge, because the dominant thinkers that provided the theoretical base for this work are all “ageing white men” – as in the work

of Alexander Astin on Student Involvement Theory, which was first published in 1984, and other theorists of that time like George Kuh whose key focus is on Student Engagement and emerged around 2000 through the first administration of the National Survey for Student Engagement [NSSE], which is now used internationally. The NSSE has been used to document the effectiveness of a number of what George Kuh has come to call “high-impact practices”, and that I would like to think is attention-getting and very effective. There are all kinds of ongoing research and new studies, but I cannot think of anyone that has achieved the prominence of Astin, or Kuh, or Vincent Tinto with work on the student integration model (1975) – and myself, and hence the problem of the ageing white men with insufficient successors in the wings, let alone already on the stage.

The real challenge is to be able to have the length of time and the research effort to see if a lot of the strategies that these scholars have advanced will be as effective with the changing college student body of the 21st century – students who are much more engaged in using technology for their learning, who are much less likely to be full-time, and are more likely to be on-campus residential students. Much of the early work of the researchers was done on middle-class and upper-middle-class, traditional college students, and so we are still very much in the process of seeing how long this established work will be validated with the newer types of student now in higher education.

The jury is out – although my own sense is that the core ideas of prominent scholars have a great deal of universal validity; I have seen them work and in all kinds of institutional settings. Some of the things espoused – like some of the involvement strategies put forward by Astin – are very difficult to implement with students who are above the traditional age and have children and do not live on campus; but if you look at the work of Tinto – the theory on academic and social integration – we know that is very influential with non-traditional learners as well. So, it remains to be seen. The area we know least about is the use of technology and distance education (online education) and how we are going to adapt these long-standing theories to that growing delivery system.

**Khanye:** *Extensive research has been conducted around the concept of high-impact practices (HIPs). HIPs have been found to lead to increases in important student outcomes such as engagement, academic achievement, deep learning and student persistence and retention [Kinzie & Evenbeck, 2008]. What challenges and opportunities are associated with implementing HIPs in the first year?*

**Gardner:** Challenges in these instances are very similar to challenges you would have starting anything. The real challenge is where the resources are coming from, and most institutions – because of the conditions of the world economy and government priorities – are not getting a lot of new money and are calling for the redistribution of existing money. This means that when you need money to start something new, you have to take it from existing units – which usually results in resistance. There are a number of internal political challenges faced by institutions, also most of the HIPs involve faculty and there are certain challenges like getting the faculty to do things they are not doing now. Most fundamentally, most institutions have tried some if not all of these HIPs, but they offer them for smaller

groups of students, often what we call “boutique programmes”, rather than bringing them to scale. An example would be having a first-year seminar and targeting certain students for the first-year seminar but not offering it to all of the students. I would argue that the first-year seminar can be valuable for all students because it deals with the normal, traditional adjustments to higher education. To offer the first-year seminar to the entire intake class in small groups is a very big resource commitment, so again the challenges shift from an experimental pilot to a fully institutionalised initiative.

This challenge relates to another challenge: that frequently HIPs are started by someone that is innovative, gets some support, and is well regarded, but often these HIPs become so identified and affiliated with that one person that should they leave the institution, or get promoted, or retire, then the question is: What happens to the HIP? The real challenges relate to scaling up: getting more people involved and making them a part of the basic way to do business – instead of offering learning communities for 20 or 30% of the first-year students, you put all first-year students in learning communities. To institutionalise anything, a case should be presented to build support and build allies with those who will support the initiative, from the top down. A lot of it has to do with who ends up being the proponents for these HIPs; if the HIPs are advocated for by well-respected internal leaders, they are more likely to be supported.

**Khanye:** *In your early work, you are cited by various researchers and practitioners in higher education as saying “Many institutions have adopted programs designed to provide a ‘rite of passage’ in which students are welcomed, supported, celebrated, and eventually assimilated into the campus” (Gardner, 1986). What are fundamental theories that support the notion of creating a “rite of passage”?*

**Gardner:** These would come especially from several of the disciplines that have most extensively studied rites of passage – mainly anthropology and sociology. But you know, there are several centuries now – dating back to the nineteenth century – of research on groups that have highly structured processes for inducting new members into the group; and those processes are generally rituals that are repetitive actions often accompanied by music, dance, and other physical activities that have certain sacred symbols that are displayed and accompanied by songs or chants, and are typically designed by older people to move younger people forward into the next stage of life in society. Rites of passage are designed to teach people how to function at the next stage of life, whether it is to be a hunter, a fisherman, a homemaker, or a mother. Societies have had these rites of passage for thousands of years; it is just that in recent decades we have been paying greater attention to the importance of these rituals in higher education for how they bond students together and to the institution. The rituals further support students and how they increase student enthusiasm for being at the university and how they teach the traditions of the university to students so that they feel some sense of historical connection and affiliation.

The book by Vincent Tinto (1987) *Leaving College* drew extensively on anthropological research to look at this whole concept of integration and how people get integrated into groups. In my own work, when I led the University 101 programme at the University



of South Carolina it was an effort to integrate new students, younger students, into the university – and we coupled it with a number of ceremonies and rituals such as holding convocation, getting all students to read the same book and have discussion groups around that book, providing on-campus tours for students to explore facilities, and all these constitute a cumulative set of rituals. We still have a document called the Carolinian Creed – it is a statement of six core values that have been widely emulated around the world, and on the first day of class we would have this poster with the Carolinian Creed on it, and get each student to sign their name to it, to make a commitment to honour the Carolinian Creed. So those are all different kinds of rituals, and of course in higher education there are other rituals in social groups including secret societies and pledging, athletic rituals, soccer, and so on. Those are all examples of ritualistic behaviour.

In the classroom, students would feel less anxiety and more comfortable if we did something earlier in the term to get them to bond with other students; such activities as giving them assignments that they can do in pairs, trios, or larger groups – anything to make the classroom experience a less individualistic one, less lonely, less autonomous. Also the use of rites of passage in the classroom are more “get acquainted” techniques and pedagogies that can work, early on, to break down some of the barriers for students. In the South African context, I have observed thousands of young people come from rural areas whose indigenous language was neither English or Afrikaans, but were required to learn to use one of these two languages at university, and were mixing with very diverse cohorts of people – one can but only imagine how challenging that is; so anything that can be done to make students who are not first-language English or Afrikaans-speaking feel more comfortable and at home, affords a proactive approach.

**Khanye:** *Given your long-standing experience and acquired knowledge in the field of first-year experience, what role do peer leaders play with regard to HIPs leading to transformational learning experiences during the first year?*

**Gardner:** There is a great deal of research that has been done relating to several of the questions at hand: one question is, that within the higher education environment – everything that makes up the ecology within the university – what elements of the university have the greatest influence on what students decide to do, the choices they make, who they are going to be with, and how they are going to spend their time? And when it comes to major life decisions, is the faculty the greatest influence, or advisors, residence hall staff, parents, siblings, and/or friends? Who has the greatest influence on students in higher education?

We know, factually, that the greatest influence is exerted by other students; students are hugely and easily influenced by their peers. Now in some ways that is a good thing, because students will do things to help students get off to a good start and make good choices; but on the other hand, students sometimes do things to their fellow students that are not really a good thing, they do not always serve as the best example. So what we are realising is that we should not act as if this matter of student influence is not of importance. We should not

leave it to chance; we should try to leverage how students influence students. That means institutional managers should be involved in picking high-performing students and putting them into roles of responsibility and leadership, giving them training and supervision and reward for working with their peers/mentees. It is really a way of translating into action the consensus and research findings in higher education over the past 50 years that show that students have greater influence on each other than any other source of influence; and so now the role of peer leaders is to try to address that.

In the United States, peer leaders are used very extensively; for example, in residence halls, advising initiatives and first-year seminars. Of course, peer leaders are also being used in various forms of informal instruction such as in teaching labs in science courses, and language courses – this has been a long-standing practice for decades and we know through research that it is effective. So this is very promising. We are broadening our effort in using students to conduct courses like laboratory sciences; we are using peer leader influence both in the class as well as outside the class. I personally was the first in my institution to make use of peer leaders in the first-year seminar class and I found it really meaningful to the students; and now in the institution there are over 200 sections of our University 101 course making use of peer leaders. The idea and concept of a support group, which is in effect a group of people that are having a major life transition in common, is a group that is led by someone who also had the challenge but has survived the challenge and flourished in spite of the challenge – the support group is a universal concept and higher education professionals should lend themselves to it and how it feeds into theories of student development and success.

In closing, South Africa got into exploring the work around FYE during the 1980s and many South African academics came to visit the University of South Carolina in the mid-eighties and we kept our doors open for your country to learn from our existing research communities. We have seen an extraordinary amount of change compressed into the country in a remarkably short period of time, but what South Africa is demonstrating is the universality of the applicability of the concept of the first-year experience, which can and will help more. The key is to get more public policy in terms of what government does to support the different types of initiatives that would help first-year students.

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