

## Boundary Layers and Comfort Blankets

**M**any organisms rely on a subtle layer of air for thermoregulation. This boundary blanket is invisible and external; not part of the organism but rather part of its environment, although often encouraged by ingenious trichomes, hairs and waxes. Some creatures construct these layers socially, bunching together to generate better conditions. Without this collective, abstract architecture, spun from air, they might die.

The sociologist Richard Titmuss used the term 'gift relationships' for a special class of socially constructed interactions. These depend on reciprocity, trust and shared values, not the bounds of contract, the self interest of the market or the bonds of blood. Such relationships take care to make and are easily destroyed. Like boundary layers they can be encouraged by physical things (the layout and size of a room, the tone of a voice) but remain dependent on and responsive to their wider environment. Whilst no set of prescriptions can guarantee their development, making them happen is a key task for the university teacher.

Why should these 'social boundary layers' be our concern? First, because "to be a student is to be in a state of anxiety" (Barnett, 2007). Proper higher education challenges students' identities and opens them to self-doubt and uncertainty; to a creative anxiety. But without sufficient collective trust only the most confident students will benefit; the rest will refuse to jump in, only paddling in the shallows of education. Second, because higher education should be a 'conversational journey' in which dialogue between different learners – among students and between students and their teachers – transforms how they see the world. Such dialogue requires trust: "The more honest, trusting and open the dialogue and the less distorted by money and power, the more effective the learning" (McLean, 2006). Third, although most of us might agree with these sentiments, there are many things we do – collectively and individually – that make establishing that boundary layer more difficult.

Constructing teaching with a narrow focus on technical and measurable 'outcomes', worrying about the (often spurious) precision and 'objectivity' of marks to the exclusion of the validity and authenticity of what we are

testing, addressing students as anonymous matriculation numbers and entering into quasi-legal contracts with them, with implied threats should either side fail. None of these examples of 'ensuring quality' help the boundary layer; they help blow it away. So why do we do these things? Because our managers ask us to; but that cannot excuse us from the responsibility to argue for the need for dialogue and trust and to demonstrate this in our teaching whenever we can. So perhaps we acquiesce a little too often because it is just easier? Good teaching might place students in a state of anxiety, but teachers too must stand open to all the dilemmas that focused personal engagement brings. To borrow thinking from the world of psycho-therapy: "This kind of engagement demands that I will remain accessible, attentive, ethically aware and knowledgeable in as many ways as I am capable of; that I present myself clothed in my expertise and transparent in my limitations" (Hayes, 2009). Hiding as a functionary in a maze of quality rules is often easier than to stand 'transparent in my limitations' – but it won't lead to transformative teaching.

A 'social boundary layer' might sound like a comfort blanket, but its effect is the opposite. Like garter snakes that hibernate communally, and thus occupy harsh northern latitudes, these social spaces allow students to take the kind of creative risks that open up new possibilities. Asking the question: 'will this help open dialogue?' of all changes in the management and conduct of teaching might help us keep and grow these boundary layers.

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### Contents

- 1 **Boundary Layers and Comfort Blankets**  
Mark Huxham
- 2 **Working Together to Inspire Young People**  
John Johnston
- 3 **eFeedback Gets Personal**  
Paul McLaughlin
- 4 **ICR for Streamlining Assessment**  
Anne Tierney and Ian Reid
- 5 **Science Learning and Teaching Conference**  
Katherine Clark and Dorothy Aidulis
- 6 **The Ed Wood Teaching Award 2009**  
Mark Huxham, Dave Lewis, Debra Bevitt, Momna Hejmadi, Katherine Linehan and Jane Saffell
- 8 **Support for Numerical Methods – NuMBerS**  
Dawn Hawkins, Toby Carter and Jacqui McCarty
- 9 **Engaging in Ethical Thinking**  
Annette Payne and Willem-Paul Brinkman
- 10 **How to Walk Before You Run**  
Sue Bickerdike, Jerry Knapp and John Heritage
- 11 **Intute's Virtual Training Suite**  
Carol Collins
- 12 **Centre News  
Centre Resources**