

## Preface

The scope of this book is both broad and narrow. It is about learning, and contains ideas of fundamental importance to all those who are interested in how people learn. The book has a narrow focus insofar as it presents the results of research from a series of related studies into the way students learn in higher education. Its claim to generality, however, stems from the radical nature of both the research methodology and the emerging conceptual frameworks. It provides a way of understanding student learning which has very direct implications for teachers and students in schools as well as colleges and universities, and also for psychologists interested in the phenomenon of human learning in its own right.

The similarities in the types of learning demanded of students attending universities and colleges in different countries make the findings of this research relevant across most educational systems. Or at least the effects of any major differences in the systems can be readily inferred from the variety of educational situations described by the twelve authors. Their experiences cover both Swedish and British universities, and both conventional institutions and the Open University with its emphasis on distance learning. The main teaching methods - lectures, tutorials, practical work and comments on returned assignments - will be found throughout tertiary education, and in a modified form across the senior classes of secondary education or high schools. The theme of this book is thus of relevance and potential interest to educators in different countries and of different age groups, although it applies most directly to teaching and learning in higher education.

The evidence presented in the book derives mainly from interviews. Thus there is little in the way of complex statistics which would be off-putting to readers who are not familiar with social science research. Rather the findings are built up through the systematic presentation of representative extracts from interview transcripts, so the learners are speaking directly to the reader about their experiences. Of course there are conceptual frameworks derived from the data, and these bring in technical terminology. But the new terms are carefully explained, and are often self-explanatory. The book is therefore a research report—it justifies its conclusions carefully on the basis of data which has been systematically collected and analysed - but it is also intended to be accessible to the non-specialist.

Although the structure of the book follows the design for a research monograph or symposium - a general introduction followed by chapters by researchers talking about their own research findings, with a series of more integrative chapters to pull these findings together - the level of writing and the amount of detail presented is intended to make the ideas accessible to a wider audience. There has also been a considerable effort put into creating overall coherence in the monograph. Coherence was easier than usual to obtain because similar theoretical perspectives and research approaches had been adopted by all the contributors. But in addition it was possible to bring the contributors together on two occasions, thanks to financial support from both the Swedish and the British Social Science Research

Councils, to discuss first the structure of the book and then to have lengthy and detailed discussions of the draft chapters. The result is a research monograph with a difference: we hope that difference shows.

Since the First Edition of this book was published, one of the main ideas it contained has had a substantial influence on both the direction of research into student learning and staff development in higher education. That idea is the distinction between a *deep approach* to learning, through which the student seeks personal understanding, and a *surface approach*, where the student is content to reproduce the information presented during the course. Although deceptively simple, this dichotomy has had a marked impact on the way many academic staff have come to think about their teaching. They have come to realise that the way they teach and assess, directly affects not just how much students learn, but also the quality of that learning. To departments in many parts of the world which are having to demonstrate the quality of their teaching, these research findings convey an important message by inviting them to consider higher education from the student's perspective.

The original research studies were carried out in the 1970s and early 1980s, but their findings are still relevant to the situation in higher education today. For this Second Edition, the introductory chapter has been substantially expanded to provide an overview of the concepts to be introduced in the subsequent chapters, while a more theoretical and technical chapter discussing the inter-relationships between concepts and research methods has been dropped. Most of the authors have taken the opportunity to update or amend their chapters, and three completely new chapters have been added.

In the final chapter, the opportunity has been taken to relate the findings to the current context of higher education, in which Quality Assessment has become an important issue. The research on student learning described in this book provides substantial evidence on which to judge quality in higher education, besides describing key concepts used in qualitative research.