



An Underutilised and Overlooked (But Powerful and Long-Term) Teaching Tool: Role Modelling in Higher Education

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Introduction

Our curricula are full of learning paths, clever assessment designs, and feedback opportunities to allow students to meet learning goals and develop their skills to enter the job market. Decades of research underpin what modern day education is about. With the rise of (gen)AI in education (see Nikolic et al., [1]; although many more examples can be listed), students have a toolbox at hand to meet the goals set out by teaching institutes and/or their personal goals ([gen]AI has been explicitly introduced here for later use). One tool in this toolbox is often overlooked in higher education, namely role modelling by teachers. This tool does not belong to the students per se albeit students need to reflect upon what they see and hear. Below I outline what role modelling is (including the reflection required by students) and what value it holds for/in (higher) education. I want to put emphasis on the fact that role modelling is considered suitable for all educational levels and phases, not just higher education. I even dare to say that it is a way of or for long-term or lifelong learning, placing emphasis on values, skills and resilience, especially with the availability of (gen) AI. Since my experiences draw from higher education, this will be

the context in which I place this powerful tool.

Role modelling is defined as “A significant other, upon which an individual patterns his or her behaviour in a particular social role, including adopting appropriate similar attitudes” [2]. Role models are often put forward as motivation to move students towards (ambitious) goals [3]. Role modelling consists of both conscious and unconscious components of learning and is considered a way of being and doing [3,4]. A role model does not need to be known to the student and is often context-dependent (one might have different role models pertaining to different contexts; Scott, [2]). Originally prominent in moral and character education [5] and medical education [4,6], I reason that role modelling should be at the heart of higher education—regardless of field and even more so with (gen)AI available. As a matter of fact, teachers are often overlooked as role models. Former teachers are—in hindsight—considered role models, but not current teachers (students often look at their parents and family members as role models; Sanderse et al., [5]).

¹ Individuals with special needs (e.g., ADHD, autism, dyslexia) often attend higher education with support offered by institutions, nullifying the distinction between special needs and ‘regular’ education.

As an explicit teaching tool/method, role modelling is rarely explicitly used. Teachers would not exhibit behaviours in front of students that they do not want their students to adopt. This also means that teachers can show students things (gen)AI cannot teach them. The use of role modelling as a teaching tool/method comes with a few conditions, because not all teacher's traits are admirable and suitable for role modelling, and sometimes traits are not modelled effectively [5]. Moreover, role modelling is a long-term tool: learning from it does not occur overnight. As a result, consistency and repetition is required. In/with role modelling, certain aspects need to or are made explicit (rather than remaining implicit) and through social interactions and support systems valuable lessons are learned. And yes, it is part of social learning because it stimulates dialogue, placing emphasis on characteristics that (gen)AI has difficulty mimicking and/or obtaining. In practice, this boils down to logistical means such as taking the time and providing a stage for the modelled behaviour [4], but it also requires to display transparency and vulnerability (e.g., things that went wrong, that you forgot but are crucial to the task at hand). The latter aspects can be exercised by a think-aloud methodology [7,8]. Whereas research has utilized this think-aloud methodology as a research methodology, it can 'simply' be used as part of role modelling because thinking aloud will make explicit what otherwise remains implicit. For example, when you explain where and how students can find scientific literature. Rather than sending them to the search database with an instruction to search for relevant literature, go through an example of how you would do that by starting with a brainstorm about the search terms, the choice for a search database (and why!), and how to select relevant hits for your task. Also consider going over erroneous steps or less effective/efficient steps.

Students subsume a crucial role when teachers are role modelling. To avoid an overly complex and detailed explanation of that process (i.e., it is past the scope of this paper), I want to address critical thinking stemming from reflection. As De la Croix and Veen mention [9] "Reflection is an ambiguous and profoundly

complex human activity" (p.394), yet it is indispensable for learning and teaching. Students should not be conditioned to follow predetermined (or rather conditioned) thinking steps, leading to the risk of becoming 'reflective zombies' [9]. In addition, depending on the modelled behaviour, students' self-efficacy can be boosted if role models have overcome challenges and persevered (Nwankwo, 2024). The latter refers back to the vulnerability teachers can use in their role modelling.

Summarized, role modelling has potential as a teaching tool/method in higher education. Despite that teachers are often not considered role models [5], it remains crucial that role modelling can be used as a teaching tool/method. Utilise think-aloud practices to support this process. Following the implications of De la Croix and Veen [9], the diversity of reflection (and in role modelling) should be considered. Reflection nor role modelling is a 'checklist activity' (it is not superficial learning; Panadero et al., [12]). The reflection and role modelling are personal. In other words, intra- and interpersonal characteristics of both the student and teacher play a role and, as a result, awareness of personal styles is necessary. Let authenticity be there and use it for professional development (or learning). Last, both reflection and role modelling are processes and should not be considered an end point. Thus, in an educational environment, the objective of role modelling remains "to be as consistently good as a [teacher] can be [4]. Create an environment that allows for role modelling, for both students and colleagues. That way, teachers secure a safe and inclusive learning environment [6,13], and provide a foundation for both students and teachers to develop academically/professionally (and personally) [14].

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Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

²I am referring to behaviour, but in this paper that also encompasses thoughts, values, skills and other aspects, such as argumentation, emotion, and motivation. I also consider resilience or buoyancy (see e.g., [10,11]) part of this.

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