

Introduction

The Proceedings of the 5th ECE conference have been grouped under three themes:

Theme 1 Giving Voice to the Student Experience: methods, approaches and evidence

Theme 2 Emergent Technologies, the Curriculum and Student Engagement

Theme 3 Student Diversity and Critical Pedagogy

Central to the concerns of the 5th ECE conference was the concept of criticality and the view of the ECE committee that these are critical times for students entering Higher Education. Critical times in a number of ways because of the tensions inherent teaching, learning and assessing in an expanding system that requires students to pay part of their tuition fees and to take a student loan to finance their period of studentship. An expanding and more diverse higher education system, the development of new technologies that challenge the basis of the production of new knowledge (Castells, 1997) and the internationalisation of higher education are all present in many higher education institutions. The more recent collapse of neo-liberal financial capital and the effect that the implosion of this bubble has had on employment in many sectors that graduates would normally expect to seek employment are all critical areas for both students and teachers to contemplate. 2009 was seen as a critical time because of the imminent review of fees and funding and the envisaged further encroachment of market relations into higher education.

Our view, however, was that many of the issues that would be raised in the conference such as diversity, emergent technologies, formative feedback, transitions, learners' identities, engagement with and enhancement of student learning required different critical perspectives. Many of the ECE committee were influenced by a perspective that drew on the importance of the pedagogic relation rather than those of the market and customer. It was for this reason that we invited Professor Sue Clegg and Professor Murray Saunders as keynotes to address these and other issues from a critical perspective. It was a bonus for the committee that the Vice Chancellor, Professor Martin Hall, accepted an invitation to give a keynote and added a different dimension of critical thinking through his involvement in the area of open access. The three keynotes addressed different aspects of higher education from their critical perspectives and these are welcome and informative approaches to our understanding of change and higher education.

Professor Sue Clegg, in her keynote, talked of 'extending the boundaries of research into higher education' by using an extended and critical perspective to examine both old and new practices such as the 'student voice'. Professor Clegg indicated the need for a more complex theoretical approach to interrogating the changing practices of higher education and argued that a new book by Paul Ashwin (2009) 'extends the repertoire of theoretical resources brought to bear on analysing teaching and learning interactions in higher education.' Professor Clegg argued that different theoretical framing illuminated different problems and indeed in her own work on Personal Development Planning she demonstrated how by critically examining what would appear to be an innocuous concept aimed at benefiting the student, this could provide fertile ground for exploring issues of policy and wider social issues around studentship itself. In reframing and pushing boundaries she argued that we need to draw on a range of critical theories and perspectives to examine the social practices that have developed around an expanding system where the student is framed as a customer. This is an extremely useful conference address around issues of theory related to pedagogic practices which we are all involved developing, prolonging or changing.

Professor Martin Hall, in his address, made the case for open access by drawing on the image of Mickey Mouse as intellectual property. This has dominated cultural industries through the extension of patents that ensure the licensing of the image and its use for a rent exchange. This he argues is akin to the business practices of large pharmaceutical industries. Professor Hall referred to this as a closed system of intellectual property in which value and profit dominated the relations of exchange. In opposition to this he argued for an open system based on the sharing of knowledge across institutions. In detailing the shift of education as a public good to education as a private benefit he argued that we needed to reconceptualise the production and sharing of knowledge across higher education institutions to ensure the maintenance of education as a public good. The alternative of education as a private benefit, in an age when complex social, political and economic problems require an interdisciplinary and cooperative approach from different experts to find solutions, is a negative and backward step. The recent near collapse of neo-liberal financial institutions in the banking sector and the emergence of the taxpayer as the lender of the last resort means that the expansion of public goods and services will suffer. If we add to this the increase in fees to students and the increasing number of private universities in the UK combined with a cap on student numbers then education as a private benefit becomes more of a possibility. Professors Clegg and Hall bring a range of critical perspectives to the examination of the social practices in higher education that have been driven by policy over the past thirty years and their keynotes remind us of the importance of a critical gaze at those aspects of our daily practice that we take for granted.

In **Theme 1** papers address the issue of student voice from different perspectives. As Sue Clegg argued in her keynote the issue of voice is complex and contradictory and in times of league tables and value for money student voice, whether through the NSS or within different evaluation contexts of higher education, can be used by different groups in pursuit of their own increased power base. In paper 1, Brown addresses the issue of University School Connections (USCs) and takes a critical approach to the development of the concept itself. If, she argues, this is perceived as a partnership the resulting practices are at odds with the expectations. This is in the area of student teacher education and she draws on qualitative research with students to describe their experiences and suggests that connections is a more useful term in describing partnership activities. In doing so she uses student voices to detail the different ways in which the practices developed between universities and schools are both used and experienced by student teachers. In paper 2, Bolt and Dickie describe the development of national and institutional evaluation tools that have been established to improve the feedback loop from the student to the teacher. However, many of these are inadequate as they are carried out subsequent to the completion of module or programme. They argue that a multi-method approach is appropriate in their own institution, given the diverse nature of the student population at universities and this is offered as a contribution to the critical approach to the theme of student voice in this conference.

In paper 3, Lok, Fox and McNaught explore the concept of experiential learning offered at the Chinese University of Hong Kong by using a qualitative methodology to carry out interviews with alumni. The aim of this project was to identify the value of these learning experiences when viewed a year or two following graduation for selected participant experiences. The analysis of the data was then used to understand the areas of experiential learning that appeared to have the most significant effect on the development of the students. In paper 4, Dale and Holyoake use an ethnographic approach to explore the voices and experiences of student nurses from Child Branch. In doing so they open up questions of hierarchy, positioning within a faculty of nursing and narratives of worth

as understood by the students. This is an interesting approach, the use of ethnographic practices to observe and explore understandings, and has been a useful addition to our knowledge of schooling systems in education in the past. Hill, on the other hand, in paper 5, is interested in understanding the issues involved in entering a community of practice and draws on qualitative research carried out with students in Prosthetics and Orthotics. Through placement in professional contexts these students indicate that they are already being socialised into such practices prior to employment in the professional context. This is a key aspect of becoming in terms of professional engagement. In paper 6, James and Wintrup draw on the experiences of Foundation Degree students who are work based learners to argue that the tensions involved in work based learning can bring problems related to identity. Studentship on Foundation Degrees such as this draw on competing narratives of employee and student and the certainties of habitual work routines can give way to uncertainty in acquiring new knowledge in a higher education context.

In paper 7 O'Doherty draws on Critical Realism and the work of Archer (2003, 2007) to explore a quite specific group of voices normally on the margins of higher education. What are the constraints to engaging in higher education for working class adults and how are these experienced by Access students? How do they go about negotiating difficulties in study and their changing role as a developing nurse or practitioner? How do they use support mechanisms, family and peer groups and how do they experience constraints that may well have been aspects of their identity since schooling? In exploring working class experiences he draws on the concept of site of engagement and explores agency through the narratives of success that these students draw upon. In paper 8 Schweitzer and Mather explore the reasons for an elite group of students from the UK wishing to study at undergraduate level in the USA. The students in the United Kingdom who are considering undergraduate study in the United States are interested in universities in the United States based upon their perception of the quality of education, the ability to delay choosing a major, the opportunity for a liberal arts education and their perception of the availability of scholarships and other financial assistance.

Theme 2. New Technologies and Student Engagement

There are four papers in this theme and paper 9 by Boyle, Brady and Broadbent reports on a research project that aligned with the priorities of the National Centre for Science, ICT and Mathematics Education for Rural and Regional Australia (SiMERR), which, in 2006, was established to improve educational outcomes in Science, ICT and Mathematics for students in rural and regional schools. The Centre also aimed to ensure that teachers working in rural and regional environments would feel professionally connected and supported. Situated within the research literature on teacher self – efficacy and the use of new technologies they describe two phases of a research project that worked on teacher development in the use of Interactive White Boards (IWBs) in pedagogic practice. The research involved qualitative interviews, observation and survey. The outcomes from this project also show clearly the benefits that accrue when teachers in regional and rural communities receive specifically tailored professional on-site learning opportunities that address identified needs. These experiences allowed the teachers to move from the 'novelty factor' in using new technology in their classrooms to a clearer pedagogic understanding of the impact that ICT can have on their day-to-day work in the classroom. The interesting aspect of this is that the research attempted to evaluate the articulation of a development programme of IWBs and the effects on teacher self-efficacy and changes in student learning.

This issue of how new technologies enhance engagement and improve student learning is reported in paper 10 by Bolt and Garber. In this paper, the researchers present their findings about the relationship between students' different levels of engagement with discussion boards and their learning outcomes. Also, consideration is given concerning how best to enhance students' learning through the use of discussion boards. They are interested in the pedagogic implications for using blended learning and conclude that to use the technology effectively pedagogical consideration must be given to the nature of student participation and instructional design issues. In paper 11, Legetter and Sapsed use both face to face and new technologies on an online MSc in Public Health to teach students. The major challenge identified is enabling the distance-learning students to engage with the attending students and the teaching team to enhance their learning experience. They used an action research approach to evaluate differences and change pedagogic practices to enhance learning. They situated the enhancement of learning within the communities of practice literature. Findings suggest that knowledge and understanding of the research process is a challenge for a large number of students regardless of where they were previously educated.

In paper 12, Torshizi and Aski reported on a data mining study for online students. With the growth of e-learning sites and indeed the growth of privately run commercially driven e-learning sites they look at data mining classification techniques to evaluate the predictive capacity of such techniques. They used four classification methods comparing the results that analysed learners' profiles. Their conclusions were that those methods which had used the Simple Bayesian or Decision Tree Algorithms had more accurate results and could be used as useful agents for leading the learners to have better improvements in an E-learning environment. There are several ethical and educational issues with this paper. There is no doubt that data mining is an issue in the modern world from supermarket loyalty cards to international car manufacturers to banks and other financial institutions. However, the use of learner profiles to analyse outcomes in educational systems draws on anonymity as a key aspect of outcomes in relation to social class, gender, disability and ethnicity. In other words the learner profile and outcomes are kept separate from the learner identity in attempting to generalise from the outcomes of specific groups of individuals.

In this way, it may be deduced that under attainment may be the result of policies and practices within the institution if wide disparities are evident. To draw on learner profiles and then to indicate that the individual learner may benefit from feedback via this method seems to me to be a leap in the dark. Such work is normally carried out by individual subject tutors in terms of feedback on essays, assignments and practicals. The practice of teachers is to have knowledge of their students and to strive for ways that

will encourage and engage learners in developing their skills and knowledge in the subject. This is a key aspect of the pedagogical relationship established within higher education and developed most notably in the practices of the Open University through its tutorial based system. There are significant dangers both from the ethical point of view in the use of data mining as the pedagogic relationship, it appears to me, cannot be based on a commercial contractual relationship and from the ways in which the feedback from data mining is transmitted to the student or students there is the danger of students' doubts about their abilities being reinforced. Nevertheless, it is apparent that aspects of data mining are being explored for their commercial value in a number of e-learning sites.

Theme 3 deals with diversity and critical pedagogy and paper 13 by Alexander addresses the issue of preparing staff in a higher education system for teaching a diverse student population. This article reports on how one teacher moved from the “teaching problem” of inadequately incorporation of Multicultural Teaching and Learning (MCTL) in the Preparing Future Faculty course “Teaching in Higher Education” into the “teaching possibilities” that come with attending to practical theory, multicultural teaching and learning theory, adult learning theories, and student voices in a research-driven course redesign. Alexander’s approach is informed by a number of critical theorists including Brookfield.

In paper 14, O’Keefe and Sanders challenge us to view higher education critically through the lens of Further Education by drawing on the experiences of students on a Foundation Degrees. The models developed by FDTL5 “Engaging Students with Assessment Feedback” which was based at Oxford Brookes University disseminated the models and practices and this paper reports on their use and evaluation in the context of a partnership Foundation Degree. In paper 15, Stephens presents a study that utilised scenario techniques to explore possible futures for learners in Institute of Technology (IoT) sector of Irish higher education towards 2020. A six stage modified scenario development design was used to develop and subsequently test a series of sixty scenario statements. The results were presented at a seminar held at the site of inquiry. In order to provide a coherent interpretation of the findings a positive scenario was written. The feedback from the seminar and the work of a Delphi panel was used to guide the writing of the scenario. One of the scenarios proposed, scenario 8 is not considered except in the conclusion where a future shock might destabilise higher education policy within a European Community context. Of course, this is precisely what happened to the bubble in the US and Ireland that was based on construction and the expansion of credit built on the shaky ground of a boom in the housing market. While the Irish higher education system and the public sector, in general, feel the squeeze of reduced salaries and increased tax, unemployment among skilled and professional workers has increased bringing the sceptre of emigration once again. The Irish higher education system will reduce in size for the next twenty years as the Irish taxpayer, as lender of the last resort, pays for the financial sector’s recklessness. In paper 16, Heinze and Wells situate the development of Open Enrolment courses in Salford Business School within the policy developments in higher education over the last thirty years. They argue that this study illustrates a number of university wide issues, which actually reduce the competitiveness of the institution in the executive education market. Recommendations for improvement are included. In paper 17, Heinze and Whatley explore the issue of assessing teamwork and make a series of recommendations informed by discussion in their workshop about transparency and fairness in team working contexts.

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