

Editorial: Learning Development as ‘Engagement’

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The Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE) was founded on a values-based approach: a commitment to the widest possible access to HE, and pedagogies informed by the student experience, with the aim of demystifying academic language and practices where possible. Our constitution stresses the notion of working with students as partners in knowledge creation. These themes are prominent in the UK in the light of the Browne Review and, as Phil Race points out in his article in this edition, increasing concerns about who will foot the bill for university education under the new fees regime mean that “... *the spotlight continues to focus ever more sharply on student satisfaction.*” At least in this respect, a Learning Development approach might be seen to be coming of age. Issue 3 of the JLDHE offers some powerful signs that this is indeed the case – and for reasons that go beyond instrumentalist or consumerist views of HE.

Race argues that diminishing budgets for teaching will mean that further pressure on class sizes and on tutorial provision is likely; his response to the challenge of engagement advises learning developers to take account systematically of key aspects of learning, including motivation, ownership, active involvement, feedback and using evidence of achievement. David Baume’s article also urges us to treat engagement systematically and to look beyond mere ‘activity’ to ensure that issues of motivation, and notions of what it means to produce ‘good’ work, are given greater attention. He argues that intended learning outcomes should not only be made explicit to students, but that they should “... *embody or be accompanied by an account of what it means to achieve that outcome to an appropriate standard*”.

Glynis Cousin and Paul Brett from the University of Wolverhampton call for “... *a paradigm shift in the shaping of student learning to take account of peer-peer and teacher-peer partnerships beyond those owned, supervised and instigated by institutions*”. They remind

us that the hugely popular and pervasive technologies used by students, such as 'smart' phones, set new challenges and offer new opportunities for the academy to offer relevant 'blended' learning for effective participation in modern social and economic contexts.

Carol Edwards (University of Leicester) asks if the work of Meyer and Land on 'threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge' (2003) can be utilised by learning developers in working with students to learn about learning generically. She finds the model useful but identifies some important differences in working beyond the level of the discipline. She raises questions that may extend the relevance of the Threshold Concepts model by problematising the notion of consensus about disciplinary knowledge, implying questions about what is troubling, for whom, and for what reasons.

Helen Bussell and Lesley Mulcahy of Teesside University Business School show the importance of collaborative partnerships between HE and FE institutions, involving students at all stages - not only to improve access to HE to put 'bums on seats' but to ensure that the quality of the students' experience is as high for those whose HE journey begins in an FE setting as for those from more traditional routes.

Anna Magyar, Daniel McAvoy and Kathrin Forstner's article describes learning development (and more specifically a writing development) approach that engages students in the development of a module. Their work shows that harnessing the discipline-specific insights of postgraduate students leads to discernible improvements in teaching and learning.

Jamie Wood, Sabine Little, Louise Goldring and Laura Jenkins present research from two Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) based at the Universities of Sheffield and Manchester, involved in developing inquiry-based learning. They explore the under-researched area of skills development through extra-curricular inquiry, providing insight into the potential benefits of inquiry-based approaches within and outside the curriculum, in terms of student engagement and personal development.

Monika Foster of Edinburgh Napier University offers a case study that illustrates the value of online resources dealing specifically with pre-arrival induction as a way to prepare students, especially those from international backgrounds, for effective engagement with

university. The implication of this extended view of transition adds further weight to the argument that universities should be valued for the cultural and social learning opportunities they afford as well as for purely academic endeavours. Susan Wilkinson (University of Wales Institute Cardiff) continues this theme, discussing how socially constructed technologies (e.g. wikis and blogs) can enhance learning, provided their collaborative aspects are given precedence over their more technologically determined features. Karen Murrell's case study from Thames Valley University also demonstrates the value of preparing students for Higher Education, in this case using simulation to introduce BTEC students to the demands of studying on a practice-based professional programme at HE level.

In the first of two opinion pieces he has written especially for the JLDHE, Gavin Fairbairn of Leeds Metropolitan University describes the process of 'shared live editing' in academic writing groups. The supportive and nurturing environment created in such groups also helps underpin a partnerships approach and stresses the value of collaboration in learning. Dave Burnapp of the University of Northampton develops a fascinating analogy with the notion of 'cargo cults' to offer a view of the importance of staff and students engaging with knowledge actively through research. This acts to counter the strong tendency to see knowledge as fixed or consisting only of 'skills', in an increasingly marketised context for HE. In a similarly challenging vein, Helen Bowstead (University of Plymouth) in her insightful and innovative paper, 'Coming to writing', encourages us to consider the ways certain forms of discourse are privileged, and how this can act to exclude important and relevant aspects of students' voices and identities from their academic writing – especially 'voices from the margins'. This paper challenges us as learning developers to keep up our questioning of how students can make sense of and participate legitimately in academic thought and knowledge production – asking again what criteria are being used to judge in questions of validity, truth, power, rationality, and objectivity.

A further fanning of the 'flames of non-conformity' comes from James Derounian (University of Gloucestershire) who argues that we should encourage students to explore and construct their own meanings in the interests of developing self-reliance. Drawing upon Ron Barnett's notion of 'supercomplexity' (1998), Derounian believes that fostering creative and positive non-conformity is appropriate for life and work in a "messy, disordered, rapid, ever-changing and complicated world".

This brief overview of some of the key themes that readers will encounter in this edition of the JLDHE illustrates that 'engagement' is a multidimensional notion. The papers, case studies and opinion pieces in issue 3 range in character from the more pragmatic to the more critical; and from those focussing on new possibilities for engagement via our increasingly rich technologies for communication, to those drilling down, through discourse, to reveal the complexities of student identities, and the need for a university education to promote the questioning of orthodoxies. There is ample evidence here that the learning development community continues to produce innovative and challenging academic work of relevance to everyone interested in the student experience and the significance of university education.

Producing an issue of a journal obviously involves a great deal of work on the part of all concerned. The writers' and editors' names are visible, which is part of their reward - but there are many others who contribute whose names do not appear. We would like to take this opportunity to thank all the peer reviewers of material published in this issue. Their work makes a huge difference in ensuring that the published material is of a good standard. We would also like to say a huge thank you to Natalie Bates from the University of Bournemouth, who put in many hours of proofreading and formatting for this and our previous two issues.