

# EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS



The Magazine of the Staff and Educational Development Association Ltd (SEDA)

Issue 14.4

December 2013 ISSN 1469-3267

£9.00 Cover price (UK only)

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## Beyond celebration: Student engagement's coming of age

Liam Jarnecki, with Debbie McVitty, National Union of Students

If you perform a simple literature search on the term 'student engagement' and review the most recent interventions in this increasingly popular field of study/practice, you will uncover a tension. One part of the literature is focused on describing pedagogic interventions intended to engage students with titles like 'Online learning communities: developing student engagement in the life sciences in one university in the Midlands'. The other (rather smaller) part is full of abstracts decrying the absence of adequate definition and rigorous theories of student engagement. This latter part is full of articles with titles like 'Towards a typology of student engagement'. By the way, both article titles are invented.

From outside the specialised world of pedagogical theory and practice this tension can appear bizarre, as if numerous experts have enthusiastically embraced a concept that they might be hard-pressed to explain or justify. Alternatively it could be seen as the beginnings of a coming-of-age for student engagement in the UK, in which an idea of students as partners in learning can build on its roots in pedagogic practice and become an established lens through which various potential stakeholders in 'the student experience' can partake of a major conversation, subjecting higher education cultures, practices and processes to critique. If such a conversation is to happen, we will need to build on work that is taking place to celebrate and raise the profile of student engagement initiatives and focus on describing how we imagine student engagement will transform higher education and student learning.

Our higher education context here in the UK may have points of similarity with systems of higher education in other countries, but one major point of divergence is the extent to which a collective student voice is an established part of our institutional structures and processes. As such we must be clear that when we say 'student engagement', we are speaking of the idea not just that students are personally invested in their learning experience, or adopting deep approaches to learning, or showing up to lectures, but that they have a role in shaping their experience. They have a 'student voice'.

Student voice, despite the habitual singular, is complex and multiple, occurring formally and informally, through individual or collective representation, within university structures designated for the purpose and occasionally outside them. Any prospective typology of student engagement must account for students' voices, on how and when students are 'heard' in their learning environment. The students' union as an organisation may also be conceived as distinct from student voice; even

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## 2013 (Vol.14) Annual Subscription Rates

Individual subscriptions are £36 sterling per year (4 issues) within the UK. Overseas subscribers should add £5 sterling postage and packing for delivery within the EU or £8 sterling for the rest of the world.

Packs of 10 copies (each copy containing 4 issues) are available for £270 sterling.

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as students self-organise via their union to express their collective voice, the culture and practice of the students' union includes much beyond merely expressing the will of students. It is also a means by which students seek expert advice, engage in various forms of conviviality, gain employment and associate in a club, society or sports team that interests them. The students' union is itself prospectively a vehicle for student engagement that extends far beyond the concept of student voice.

'Voice' is itself insufficient to account for the types of practices emerging at UK institutions where students or students' unions back up their expression of preferences through contributing the necessary labour to make their ideas a reality. Thus, the recent publication by staff and students at Birmingham City University describes initiatives in which students work with staff to create resources, design curricula and so on (Nygard *et al.*, 2013). The *NUS Manifesto for Partnership* makes the argument for students and staff to be empowered at course level to make pedagogical and curricular decisions and to share responsibility for the enactment of those decisions (NUS, 2012).

'Partnership' is hopefully a meaningful term to capture the effect of institutional efforts to engage students in learning *plus* listening to their student voice *plus* taking collective action between students and staff to bring about a desired end. However, too narrow a focus on any one dimension of partnership, student voice mechanisms for example, runs the risk of neglecting all the other psychological, social and policy interactions and processes that might contribute to, or be an outcome of, student engagement. As Kahu (2013) has proposed, a theory of student engagement is needed that can take account of the structural context (curriculum, institutional policy), the psychosocial context of students (identity, expectations) and university staff (workload, teaching cultures), the cognitive, affective and behavioural states of an engaged student, and the proximal and distal prospective outcomes of student engagement (learning gain, citizenship, employment), in addition to accounting for the wider political and social environment. If to this useful model we add student voice and working in partnership, the field is complex indeed, and there is much work to be done in extending our knowledge and in understanding and developing practice. It is not possible to address all these dimensions in one short article, but it is possible to propose some fruitful areas for future exploration.

### Who engages?

At the most basic level, there are far more students in higher education than much current student engagement literature or practice acknowledges. For example, students who have been elected as representatives, or engaged as researchers, co-producers or ambassadors constitute a tiny minority of the sum of students. The work these students do is exceptional and by definition, so are they. The benefits of schemes like these are established – students report developing essential skills and know-how, a better understanding of their institutional culture and environment that enables them to exercise more agency and the satisfaction of making a valuable contribution to their academic community and helping their peers (e.g. Carey, 2013).

Institutions benefit from the labour these exceptional students contribute – labour that generates knowledge that is not available by other means, particularly of the affect dimension of students' learning experiences, or how students feel about their courses. Other students benefit from their peers' work to engage them in providing their feedback or responding to their research, an intervention that conceivably increases their belief in their ability to shape their environment. They also, arguably, benefit from the qualitative improvements to the learning environment that student-led change can bring about. Published work that explores how the election or appointment of student engagement 'leaders' among a cohort of students can or should be evaluated in terms of its impact on learning for the whole cohort, would be a welcome addition to the evidence base.

There are, however, significant challenges to the model of student engagement facilitated through a single representative or appointee. The danger is that such schemes have a tendency to create engagement opportunities for those students whose academic backgrounds, expectations, motivations or current mode of participation already dispose them to effective engagement in learning. A distinct

but potentially related point is that not every student has the time or disposition to take on such a role, which can be demanding and labour-intensive. We are not inclined to make generalisations about the types of students who might have a predisposition to engage in this way, but we would like to raise the possibility that socio-economic or cultural factors could play a role. The worst case scenario is that student engagement practice replicates and intensifies existing educational inequalities.

The question at stake here is what an inclusive student engagement practice might look like. It is not confined to the problem of which students take up specific opportunities to become student engagement leaders. Best practice must surely create such opportunities out of a wider culture of engagement. The 'students as producers' model in development at Lincoln and a number of other institutions is a useful example of a project that seeks to embed the principle of inquiry-driven learning for all students across the whole institution, for example. The Leeds Partnership establishes an expectation of engaged behaviour among all students and staff which underpins all student voice activity.

More could be done to understand how best to induct a diverse and often geographically distributed student body into a student engagement culture, and the relationship between institutional cultures of student engagement, and the practice of individuals with a responsibility for championing a student-led enhancement agenda. To the extent that student engagement is framed as certain behaviours on the part of students, how comfortable do we feel about imposing these across a student body with diverse backgrounds, subject interests and aspirations?

### Who are our stakeholders?

It is not enough to confine our attention to students and their behaviours and experiences; they are just one stakeholder in a partnership that extends across UK higher education. These days when we speak of UK higher education we are talking about institutions and students that are globally mobile and active across national boundaries. Higher education institutions serve multiple purposes, undertake multiple activities and engage with multiple communities of which the teaching of students in formal learning environments forms one part – albeit a highly significant part.

If students are to be engaged in their education, teachers and the professional educational development staff who support those teachers in their practice must first be engaged. This conversation is increasingly well established through schemes like the Higher Education Academy Students as Partners projects. There is exciting work to build on here, not least in continuing to develop understanding of what pedagogical approaches best support students to engage in and be confident in acting to shape their learning.

But there are many other potential stakeholders in higher education institutions who may be aware of student engagement discussions and excited about their own potential to work in partnership with students, but who may need to be drawn into the conversation in a more organised and welcoming way. Higher education institutions are full of people who care about learning and about their

institution and who might themselves benefit from increasing their engagement and their sense of having a stake in their institution. It is important that the contribution and potential of these staff is not overlooked in the creation of student engagement plans and strategies at the level of the subject, school or institution.

Librarians and online learning resource professionals are one such group of staff. The contribution to student learning that these staff make is immense and much of their work involves direct engagement with students. There are some fine examples out there of partnership work – open educational resources co-created with students, for example – that deserve more of our attention and to be brought under the student engagement umbrella.

Staff who work on admissions, marketing and recruitment and widening access, on knowledge exchange and community liaison, could draw on ideas around student engagement to support improved partnership work to develop institutional policies, create student-led community-facing projects and activities and tell a compelling story to those outside the institution about how students being partners can mean being engaged citizens. Student engagement should not be confined to the classroom or the lab.

Staff who work in careers services, equality and diversity, staff whose focus is on the international market or who manage estates, all these are prospective stakeholders in new and innovative partnerships to develop student engagement and student voice. 'Partnership' should not be confined to describing relationships between staff and students but be generous enough to encompass association between diverse staff and student groups. There is little in the world that is more satisfying and more instructive than working with others on some shared goal or project and seeing that goal achieved. On the other hand, there is little that is more professionally challenging than overcoming cultural difference to find a way to work with another person who does not share your preconceptions or ideas about how things are.

Higher education institutions can be characterised as sites of several distinct and clashing cultures. It has been argued that institutional student engagement discourse is predominantly situated in a traditional collegiate higher education culture in which academic values predominate (Van Der Velden, 2012). As such, the student engagement ideas and practice that are established in an institution may be at odds with the wider culture of the university, parts of which will be formally bureaucratic (governance by committee, management of process) and, increasingly, some of which will be overlaid with a culture more akin to that of a corporate enterprise (efficiency, performance, responsive to the market).

Analysis at this level ignores the cultural differences that may exist across different academic disciplines or between those that are theoretical and those that are more practice based. The students' union is an entity with its own distinct values and culture, its goals in some cases closely aligned to the wider university and in others preserving some level of distance. The extent to which students' unions should adapt

to changing university cultures and practices is the subject of lively, if not absolutely explicit, debate within the student movement.

'Culture' is pervasive yet not wholly visible to the naked eye and less so to those embedded in it. Even talking across cultural divides is challenging because culture is one of the primary ways by which we interpret reality. The immediate impact of diverse cultural practice and values within a single institution is that 'student engagement' is likely to mean different things to different groups of people. What looks like reasonable attention to student voice in one department or at one level of governance may look like outright tokenism to another.

This phenomenon is one of the reasons why 'best practice' is so hard to establish. Practice abstracted from cultural context can only tell us so much. Examples of practice may inspire and may build our understanding but will not readily export into a different subject, institution or group of students. It takes conversation to build consensus and then it takes personal and professional development. The first step has to be the willingness of all concerned, from the student representative to the senior managers, to recognise that they are speaking from a culturally-determined construct of authority.

### What outcomes do we seek?

Turning back to the literature we find that supporting students to adopt positive behaviours and attitudes towards their learning is associated with better learning outcomes. The intended or expected outcomes from student engagement range widely from enhanced curriculum, to social justice, to a greater institutional appeal to prospective students (Trowler, 2010). The potential for student engagement to lead to improved retention rates was demonstrated through the What Works project on retention (Thomas, 2011). Academic success, employability, even pure enjoyment on the part of students and teachers are reasonable outcomes to expect from investment in working in partnership to improve student engagement.

The evidence of the benefits of student engagement is mounting but we could do more to understand how it works in a UK context and to sense-check what are the outcomes we hope for. Students' unions and education developers have a shared goal to improve higher education, but we do not have much of an evidence base exploring how student voice makes education better and under what conditions the effect is maximised. The prospective benefits of developing partnerships to support student engagement are compelling, which is why building the evidence base is so important. In the meantime it must also be recognised that specific goals are aligned to a particular policy environment. The idea that our conceptions of learning itself could be changed through student engagement is not necessarily on the table, but it could be.

External policy drivers and the wider political context will inevitably shape how student engagement develops, but it should be possible to formulate a response that achieves an appropriate balance of pragmatism and authenticity.

Student engagement can be 'for' the university as an institution as well as being 'for' students. Development of higher education communities where diverse students and staff work together and share a stake in the success of their institution, and where success is understood to include educated, inspired students well equipped to progress into the world, is a laudable goal. To achieve it, our institutions must be able to operate in the world they are in and we must continue to generate and develop the evidence base for how this goal can become more true.

Universities have to respond to the external policy environment, but they also have the potential to transcend it – they can hardly help themselves, given the way they structure and resource the extension of knowledge. As student engagement comes of age, it must also be possible for education practitioners, students, academics and anyone else who cares about the future of higher education, to also sustain a conversation about how we might work in partnership to transcend the present and imagine the future.

### About the Student Engagement Partnership

The Student Engagement Partnership was announced in July 2013 and was launched in October 2013. It is hosted by NUS and funded by HEFCE, NUS, the Association of Colleges and GuildHE. The unit will work to support a vision of students and their representative bodies as partners in the educational experience. It will support students' active involvement as partners in the development, management and governance of their institution, its academic programmes and their enhancement, and in their own learning. In 2013-14, the Partnership will be undertaking a national review of student engagement and developing student engagement practices in college higher education.

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### Websites

- HEA Students as partners: [www.heacademy.ac.uk/students-as-partners](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/students-as-partners)  
 Leeds Partnership: <http://partnership.leeds.ac.uk/>  
 Lincoln Student as Producer: <http://studentasproducer.lincoln.ac.uk>

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# The UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) – Implications for educational developers

**Julie Hall**, Roehampton University

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) has been developed by the four UK higher education funding bodies (HEFCs) to assess the quality of UK research. Importantly for universities, it also informs the selective distribution of public funds for research (known as 'QR') by the HEFCs.

As I am writing this, there are research offices in universities up and down the UK that are in frenzy. Those with responsibility for REF are honing final submissions for the four-yearly audit of research quality. Meanwhile academic colleagues are either smiling at being chosen for REF or more likely are seething at not making the cut. But we will have to wait until 'REF 2014' – the year in which the assessment process will actually take place and the results will be announced.

Strangely, I find myself now looking after learning and teaching enhancement and the research office and from this vantage point I thought it might be helpful to share some observations with SEDA colleagues, particularly as REF has become a complicated and important measure.

## Should educational developers take any notice of the REF?

The short answer is 'definitely yes – if you are on an academic contract'. This is because the REF calculation involves an assessment of the numbers of staff on an academic contract at each university and the volume of research emanating from this number. For this reason, some universities will come out of this REF cycle keen to cut the numbers of staff on academic contracts to improve their ratio and/or keen to ensure that those on academic contracts produce outputs of 'REF-able' quality.

Educational developers have argued that an academic contract ensures we retain the same conditions as our academic colleagues; we are seen as academics and we have more credibility. However, after REF this may be difficult to sustain if people aren't able to secure research time, funded projects and regular publications. I suggest that colleagues talk to their line manager about their future research plans and ensure that research is seen as a priority if they wish to remain on an academic contract.

Also, do take a look at your university's Code of Practice for Inclusion in REF. Some universities are reportedly looking to move people to teaching-only contracts (see blog posts such as <http://telescopers.wordpress.com/tag/research-excellence-framework/>). However, other universities are also keen to recognise a wider definition of expertise and will ensure that academic staff who don't appear in the REF remain valued.

We should also take note of REF demands in supporting new academics through our certificates in learning and teaching. It is only fair that any discussions about their lives as new academics should include an awareness of the REF. And as universities become cautious about having academic staff on the books who may not be research-active, at the recruitment stage, we are more likely to have this as a focus rather than teaching.

## How might I make my research REF-able, even if I am not on an academic contract?

People already engaged in pedagogic research who would like to aim for the next REF have to take a number of steps:

- Align yourself to a 'Unit of Assessment' – a subject grouping identified by the REF with its own REF criteria for excellence. Universities choose which units of assessment they are entering and so you will need to see which are entered this time round and which may be entered in four years' time. The obvious one for educational development work would be Education, but there is also Social Policy and Sociology.
- Take a careful look at the criteria because for most units the only research that counts is that which fits a scientific model – *i.e.* findings written up/developed from a piece of original research. Policy papers, text books, articles like this won't count as research outputs.
- See who is on the panel for your unit of assessment and take a look at the kind of work they produce.
- Consider where your research outputs will be published – find out the esteem factor of journals such as SEDA's *IETI*, the *International Journal of Academic Development* or the SRHE's *Studies in HE* as this will count. It will be better to focus on fewer higher quality pieces than many of lower quality. A full-time member of staff in most universities needs four outputs meeting the criteria for international excellence over four years. HEFCE are currently consulting on Open Access – the controversial idea that researchers will pay for their articles to be published in journals (GOLD open access) or allow it to be freely available online (GREEN open access).
- Find out how many people were entered in your unit of assessment. Again a neat bit of HEFCE algebra

means that for each impact case study (see below) a unit can offer a certain number of staff (for fewer than 15 staff, it is two case studies; for 15-24.99 staff, it is three case studies – and then for each additional ten members of staff entered a further case study is required). This has been critical this year and has limited some units of assessment just because they have not had enough robust impact case studies. It has also meant that some people with top-class research outputs have been excluded.

- Consider contributing to an impact case study. Case studies need to relate to original research but they are designed to show how the research has transformed understanding, practice or policy. The impact, however, can't be within your own university. To claim impact you will need to show how many people engaged with your research and the ways in which it transformed things. We are already seeing universities investing in public engagement officers and impact co-ordinators to build effective case

studies next time round. Higher education research has the capacity to contribute well to impact case studies.

- As you produce your research outputs get them evaluated by external colleagues using the REF criteria, who can give you an honest appraisal of the kind of REF grade it might attract. Find a research mentor if possible.

### What are the implications of not engaging in the REF?

There may be no implications. It depends on your university and the way learning and teaching is conceptualised. It has been fascinating to me to see that educational development approaches have been identified as those which might also enhance research culture. There is plenty of work to be done with the professional development of research supervisors, PhD students who teach, the development of early career researchers and research-teaching links. My own experience (and I know I am not alone) has been that the synergies emerge more strongly each

week. Although I have had a struggle understanding the acronyms and getting to know research-orientated staff whom I have rarely met in seven years here, the processes for engaging staff and students, celebrating diversity and excellence, and creating levers in the system to monitor and evaluate things while promoting values, all feel very familiar.

Since becoming a Director I am no longer on an academic contract, but that doesn't stop me engaging in research, attempting to secure bids and publishing and encouraging my team to do the same. For me it's about professional scholarship more than being in the REF.

### Websites

<http://www.ref.ac.uk/> (A partial, qualified, cautious defence of the Research Excellence Framework (REF))

<http://socialscienceresearchfunding.co.uk/?p=375> (the dark side of the REF)

<http://telescope.wordpress.com/tag/research-excellence-framework/>

**Julie Hall** is Director of Learning, Teaching and Research at Roehampton University.

## Of pot plants, dreams and toxic hairballs: Some thoughts on mindful self-nurture

**Neill Thew**, BIMM Brighton

*To hold to the work of not knowing;*

*To value the particular over the abstract;*

*To stand open to the present moment,  
and the present person;*

*This is life's shingle against the world's tide.*

Some conversations stay with you. Several years ago, I remember talking to a senior education developer who had recently been diagnosed with a serious, stress-induced illness. 'It's terrible what our jobs do to us,' they said, then after a rueful pause added, 'Or what we let them do to us'.

I know. I really do. I ended my tenure as the Head of Teaching and Learning Development in a research-intensive

university burnt out, exhausted and ill. And – anecdotally at least – it appears that dealing with notably high levels of stress and pressure is far from uncommon, at all levels in our profession. It's not for nothing that 'resilience' is appearing on person specifications for education development jobs with increasing regularity – though it often seems that 'resilience' is mistakenly assumed to be primarily a personality trait, rather than a developable set of skills and strategies. All of which begs two big questions. Where do the stresses of our jobs come from? And how can we look after ourselves – and each other – better?

But the problem with big questions like these is that they're impossible to answer meaningfully in global terms. Your answers won't be the same as mine – which observation in itself is hardly going to get us very far either. So, by way of sneaking up on the big questions from behind, let me ask three smaller questions instead:

Where are the pot plants?

How are you being dreamed up?

And do you orbit your toxic hairballs, or land on them?

As a way of trying to help each of us into answering those questions, I'll share my answers with blunt honesty – not because I think they'll be universally, or even perhaps widely, shared, but to model some of the thought processes that I think will help us all find our ways to more mindful self-nurture.

## Developing mindfulness

Professionally, I exist on the margins of (or perhaps in the spaces between) two professions – education development and therapy. I therefore belong to two arrestingly different professional communities, which gives me the opportunity of trying to see each with an insider-outsider eye.

What connects my work across these professions and communities, I think, is the attempt to be as mindful as possible, and the endeavour to help other people become more mindful as well. By mindfulness, I mean the attempt to be fully and calmly aware of the reality of the present situation, moment by moment. Such awareness encompasses head, heart and gut feeling – rational thought; emotions, fears and fantasies; and intuition. Mindfulness is the ongoing attempt to stay aware, to treat each moment as new, and not be blinkered by memory and assumption – to try to stop painful experiences in the past and fantasies about the future from running the show and unconsciously hijacking our responses in the present.

Leaving aside the uncomfortable fact that trying to cultivate truly skilled mindfulness is to set ourselves up for a lifetime of trying, failing, trying over and – perhaps – failing better, it remains true in my experience that the first step towards more successful functioning in the situations we find hardest is to become more aware of the dynamics of the situation itself (including awareness of the other participants in the situation) and of our previously programmed responses to that situation.

I also trust from my own experience, and that of others, that an open process of inquiry into these questions – an exploration without a predetermined destination, if you like – can yield the most startling and liberating benefits. Additionally, I recognise that it really helps me if someone asks me the questions I've been avoiding – so, without asking you to lie on my couch and tell me your dreams, I am led back to wondering with, or for, you...

## Where are the pot plants?

I once had a boss whose office was filled with beautifully tended pot plants. They were her passion. Occasionally, she would gift one of these to a member of her team. Given that it wasn't her style to be lavish with praise – or even positive feedback – these gifts came to have huge symbolic significance for the recipients. The plant meant you'd done well; you were valued.

The only thing was...the plants seemed to appear out of the blue, and nobody could ever quite work out why exactly they'd been given one at that specific moment. It was never clear exactly what we'd been valued for.

It seems to me, from talking to many colleagues, that unclear or conflicting values underlie a great deal of the stress and tension we experience. A lot of us education developers are strongly driven by our values. We've advocated for values statements to be included in the Professional Standards Framework. Values matter to us.

The institutions for which we work also say that they value teaching and learning; diversity; and the opportunity for all staff and students to flourish. Of course they do. I don't know of a single university or college that would say otherwise – to do so would be ridiculous. And yet...and yet, I've lost count of the number of conversations I've had over the years with staff and students which stem from their bewilderment, frustration, distress or anger at the gap between rhetoric and behaviour – or between espoused and enacted values, if you prefer that kind of language. (And, yes, lest I be accused of hypocrisy here, I know this is often true of us on an individual level as well – congruence is a work in progress.)

So, it's worth asking ourselves: what do our institutions say they value? Then, if I were a visitor from Mars, and I looked at what actually happens in your institution, what would I conclude was most highly valued? Who gets the (metaphorical or real) prizes? Who gets the resources? And how does all of this line up with what we ourselves value (in speech and action)?

Strong feelings of anger and abandonment can arise from the profoundly uncomfortable experience of having to live in the dissonant gap between what institutions say and how they are experienced. This is particularly true if what is said lies closer to our own values than what is experienced. I sense that we developers often find ourselves stuck in that gap to an unusual degree: am I right? Or, more particularly, does this resonate with your own experience?

Several years ago, I undertook a helpfully revealing exercise at a development workshop for army managers and leaders. First, we were asked to sketch out the 'official' organisational chart for the part of the institution in which we worked. Then we were asked to draw the 'real' chart – to draw our organisation as we actually experienced it. In order to help us do this, we were asked to identify who we went to for information; who we went to for a decision; and who we went to in order to make something happen. Try it. The results were startling, revealing both overlaps and significant disagreements between the two versions. I would suggest that the more dissimilar your two charts, the greater gap there is likely to be between your institution's version of itself and the institution as experienced by staff and students alike.

If our Martian visitors looked at our charts, they might then want to add another question or two: who has power and influence in our institutions? Does that come from their positional authority, or from a different source?

One thing I learned running my educational development unit was that I could only generate the power and influence I needed to help make the change I wanted to see (and therefore make my values more present in the life of the university) through my personal credibility – and mainly my academic credibility at that. Now, that's a scary and exposed place in which to find yourself: feeling a strong sense of responsibility to champion values and achieve goals that I lacked the formal authority to accomplish. This made 'success' or 'failure' in my role feel much more personal than professional. It also took me a long time to see how effectively I'd been set up – not deliberately, or maliciously, but simply because that was the unacknowledged and unaware way of things at my particular institution. There were plenty of other institutional change agents in a similar position – and I regret now that I didn't see that clearly enough at the time to forge more alliances, and reach out to offer and receive more support. (Bells ringing, anyone?)

### How are you being dreamed up?

If there's one thing most people know about classic psychoanalysis – well, apart from the notion that a cigar might not always just be a cigar – it's the idea that the 'cure' somehow depends on the therapist's ability to act as a blank screen and allow the analysand to project feelings onto them that had originally arisen in relationship to other figures in their life. As therapists, we need to be highly aware of which roles we are playing and need to play – and of the ways in which our own patterns and past experiences can become unhelpfully tangled up in the complex and delicate process of playing these roles successfully for our clients. It's no good at all being dreamed up as the rescuer if that's also what you dream of being yourself.

It is therefore really important that people working as counsellors and therapists (which is after all just another form of development work) should themselves have someone to whom they can regularly turn in order to stay clear about how we are being dreamed up by our clients, and which of our strings are being tugged.

In 2004, Ray Land published an excellent book (*Educational Development: Discourse, Identity and Practice*) in which he identified a range of different 'orientations to educational development', including the managerial; political-strategic; entrepreneurial; romantic; opportunist; researcher; professional competence; reflective practitioner; internal consultant; modeller-broker; interpretive-hermeneutic; and provocateur. It seems to me that as well as being 'orientations', these are also forms of identity that we take upon ourselves – sometimes consciously, and sometimes less so; sometimes of our own volition, and sometimes in reaction to the situations in which we have found ourselves. However, there's a flip side to this. As well as roles we adopt ourselves, we are also assigned roles by others. In other words, you don't need to be a therapist to get dreamed up by the projections of others.

I've been trying to name the roles I have been assigned by academic colleagues over the years. The first thing that I noticed was how different these have been in different

institutions. In order of how frequently I think I encountered them, roles to which I was assigned when I worked in the education development unit of a research-intensive university were:

Failed academic: *Oh, didn't it work out for you teaching English? Is that why you switched to this education stuff?*

Persecutor: *Why are you doing this to us?*

Rescuer: *It's awful here – please make it better.*

Rejected suitor: *We don't want what you've got to offer.*

Whereas in the music college where I now work, I'm mainly dreamed up as:

Guru: *He who knows everything there is to know about education.*

Ideal teacher: *You've got to take his module – his lessons will change your life.*

I will leave it to your discernment which of these sets of roles my ego gets most enmeshed with...the point, of course, being that it's equally dangerous to lack mindful awareness of either sets of fantasy. It's also worth noting that the classic drama triangle of victim/persecutor/rescuer is writ large across many of the role dynamics in which we find ourselves. So, what are your roles? How are you being dreamed up? And who are you being dreamed up by? Trust me – you will be being dreamed up by someone in a way that matters – so perhaps the root question here is, who might help you answer these questions if you're not sure yourself?

It's not true of my current post, but in other institutions where I've worked I think that some of these projections stem from the conflicted sense the institutions have of teaching itself. It always comes as a considerable shock to my non-university friends when they learn first that university teachers don't need a teaching qualification and second that academics in huge swathes of the sector largely get rewarded, and promoted, on the basis of their research. And this to me is a salutary reminder of the importance of external eyes on a situation. You don't know where your blind spots are until someone holds a mirror up for you.

So – I think this is an area where we could really help each other: in the words of those BT adverts of the 80s, 'It's good to talk'. Well – obviously so, but I'm not so sure to what extent we all really heed this deceptively simple advice. Back in my therapy world, where I am required to have regular supervision, I've been working with an alternative model to the traditional one-to-one supervision. I now work with a peer group of therapists, and we meet every four to six weeks for a whole day to give and receive highly challenging, supportive and (I don't use the word lightly) loving feedback. Each one of us takes time in turn to discuss our current work, and uses feedback and questioning from the group to explore our challenges and blind spots, and decide on action. The process is particularly helpful for flushing out

roles which we are holding unawares – both those we've unconsciously chosen and those that have been projected onto us by others. Once these are brought into awareness, it's very much easier to act with more freedom and flexibility. This is genuinely the richest learning environment I have ever been in. It frequently pushes me right to my edge. Interestingly, even though I value the experience immensely, I also notice my resistance to going each month, which arises as I fight with myself over whether I can 'justify' the time. So my question to us as a group is: can we come up with similar, small-group networks of support? And how can we stop putting self-nurture to the absolute bottom of the pile? Yes – I know I'm making an assumption there, but remember, I've met lots of us, and I know what we're like ;-)

### Orbiting the toxic hairballs

Institutions are like planets. Some are friendly; others have inhabitants with strange and curious customs; and some are toxic hairballs. This may say more about me than anything else – but I seem to have landed on quite a few toxic hairballs in my professional life. (Full disclosure: yes, I do have an overdeveloped rescuer pattern. And then I wind up in swamps. Go figure.)

What I've learned is how important it is to know the difference – and to be able to live the difference – between (crash) landing on my institutional planets, and simply orbiting them. To orbit the planet isn't the same as withdrawing or ceasing to care. Rather, it is to return to mindfulness; to honour my need to maintain the degree of distance necessary for good functioning. (This business of returning to mindfulness, by the way, is very much at the heart of matters. It takes me a time to even notice I've slipped out of mindful awareness, let alone work to regain it.)

I have found two strategies which, if ruthlessly and regularly applied, help me stay in orbit, and not get sucked in to the more emotionally and professionally draining aspects of institutional life. The rub, of course, is 'regular ruthlessness', which I don't find comes easily to me. However...

The first strategy is to work to stay clear about my sphere of influence and my sphere of concern (the idea originates with Stephen Covey). Our sphere of influence encompasses all the things we can actually make happen; our sphere of concern includes all the other things that drive us crazy – our frets, worries and frustrations – but which we can't change. The more I let my emotional reactions and concerns pull me into my sphere of concern, the more disempowered and anxious I start to feel. Indeed, this can lead to a downward spiral. Paradoxically, the more I stay in my sphere of influence, the larger this becomes.

I've found that I'm not entirely accurate at judging where the boundary between the spheres lies, so having someone to help me see this is both necessary and invaluable. It's also very helpful to become aware of what exactly does pull us out of our sphere of influence into the potentially damaging sphere of concern, so that we can learn to notice when those pressures are bearing down on us, and have a plan in place to deflect them and hold solid to our influence.

The second strategy is to try to notice what resources me, and what drains me. It's like that old maths question about what will happen to water levels in a bathtub when water is flowing in through the taps at one rate, while simultaneously draining out of the plug at another rate. Are you currently emptying or filling? Why is this? And to ask a slightly more pointed question: who energises and supports you, and who drains you? And who occupies more of your time?

So – there we have it. Pot plants; dreams; and toxic hairballs. They won't go away, but we can tackle them – individually and together – with at least a measure of mindful self-nurture. Be gentle. Be brave. And good luck.

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# Modelling a future for educational development: A 'crafty' approach

**Marcella Kean, Tom Duff and Claire Mackie**, University of the West of Scotland

As educational developers, we are accustomed to being encouraged to think creatively about our professional practice. Whether this involves adopting innovative technology, implementing new pedagogical initiatives or simply shaking up entrenched modes of behaviour, creativity has long been considered an essential part of our

role. Often, however, this creativity is carried out by individuals rather than teams: we download the app, flip the classroom or introduce social media into our practice, but there is less attention to applying creativity on a broader scale by breaking down barriers and encouraging hands-on development of new ideas, processes or plans.

This article will explore the development of a model of creativity which attempts to fill this gap by encouraging a focus on what Piirto (2011, p. 1) describes as '21st century creativity'. This model adopts intensive, applied and collaborative activity using cheap, easily available craft materials to design, interpret, evaluate or plan, according to the

situation under discussion. This article will outline the theoretical background to the craft model and explore its implementation during the Scottish Higher Education Developers' (SHED) three-day annual conference on Skye in June 2013, where it was used with the aim of mapping the future of the organisation at a time of funding and operational change. The benefits of the model will be explored, along with challenges which could be encountered during its operation, and colleagues will be encouraged to adopt the approach themselves and report back on their experiences.

In a previous article in *Educational Developments*, Boon *et al.* (2012) commented on the central role of educational developers in dealing with the ever-changing landscape of higher education in Scotland. Of particular interest was our contribution to the quality enhancement process, supporting busy academic staff while developing their awareness and understanding of effective pedagogy. These factors can be seen in the new model which is underpinned by the principle of 'creativity in making', an interactive process that shifts participation from a perspective of thinking about a topic to physically making it. Previous conference sessions on the future of SHED had focused on traditional group discussions, presentations and workshops, but using the new model, participants were required to take a holistic view of the subject whilst using craft materials to make the discussion physical. The juxtaposition of high-level strategic discussion whilst at the same time using modelling clay, pipecleaners and pom-poms is a defining feature of the craft model and contributes to its effectiveness in both educational and operational terms.

### **Creativity and the craft model**

Creativity in education is frequently defined in a variety of different ways (Craft and Jeffrey, 2001), from economic and political imperatives or individual empowerment to creativity's ability to contribute to effective learning. These approaches tend to work by breaking down the issue into smaller chunks and focusing on these at different levels – societal, individual

or subject-led, to name a few. The new model approaches the question in a more holistic way, encouraging participants to take a broader view of the topic under scrutiny and collaborate intensively to build physical representations of the questions posed, as well as designing possible solutions through implementing hands-on creativity.

The ability to come up with new and innovative ideas is central to the concept of creativity. Robinson (2010) argues that creativity is necessary to generate different ways of interpreting and answering a question, what De Bono (1990) called 'lateral thinking'. However Piirto (2011) re-interprets creativity for the 21st century, identifying a range of skills which are more suited to the current environment. She cites these skills as thinking creatively, working creatively with others and implementing innovation, all concepts which are integral to the craft model.

Thinking creatively is evident in the different approaches and attitudes which participants at the SHED conference brought to the task. Some pounced on the craft materials; others initially put great distance between them or expressed reluctance to engage as they did not feel they were creative enough to participate. One of the inclusive features of the model, however, is that it is open to all: the use of materials that are familiar to pre-schoolers encourages a non-hierarchical approach which breaks down barriers and stimulates involvement. Traditional authority roles are ignored as people reach for the craft materials which interest them and begin to shape a 3D model of their thoughts while at the same time engaging in the debate around the topic in hand. This links to the second of Piirto's principles of 21st century creativity: working creatively with others.

The dialogical approach of the model allows collaborative, creative working which is enhanced by giving thoughts physical shape. Instead of focusing on words, linear concepts or familiar approaches, participants are freed from conformity and allowed to

*'The session run by Marcella Kean and Tom Duff at our Scottish Higher Education Developers' annual conference was both highly informative and wonderfully creative. Using an assortment of tactile and colourful props, we were enticed and encouraged to think creatively, designing displays that offered an opportunity to abstract from our own understanding and experience. This led to some genuinely interesting discussion – to re-imaginings and re-envisionings – both within our groups and as a whole. It was a nice piece of transformative learning, at once challenging and rewarding.'*

**Stuart Boone**, SHED Chair, Strathclyde University

have free rein. The level of energy and enthusiasm in these workshop sessions is practically palpable. Discussions spring up, are continued across different parts of the table, dwindle and resume as modellers create a physical representation of their debates. This dynamism is one of the most noticeable differences between the approach used at the SHED session and traditional strategic planning events. The integration of thinking and making allows the topic to be unpicked in new and innovative ways, conceptualising the challenges and leading to potential solutions which might not otherwise have been considered in a more traditional meeting format. This ties in with Piirto's final concept of implementing innovation.

This trajectory was recognised by one of the participants at the SHED conference:

*'As someone with absolutely no artistic talent, I was pretty sceptical at first. But when I saw that it was easy and fun, and what a great way it was to get people talking and get everyone involved, how it brought out ideas that we might not have had with just a written list, I was converted.'*

(Anne Campbell, project co-ordinator, Open University)

## Analysis of the craft model

This article outlines the use of the craft model in a forward-planning situation which would normally be approached through the use of a conventional, agenda-driven meeting with a chairperson, participants and minute-taker. The model can be applied to a number of different scenarios, from planning to evaluation, but some key points need to be highlighted.

Although the process seems unstructured, it still needs to be planned and organised before the event takes place. The function of the meeting, the topic to be explored and the resources necessary to facilitate the event must be decided beforehand. The pre-planning is structured, but what happens during the session is in the hands of the participants. This approach can initially engender a level of uncertainty compared to the more familiar structure of traditional meetings with their emphasis on hierarchical, mostly verbal discussions with some visual input in terms of presentations, flipcharts or mind maps. However, we would argue that encouraging participants out of their comfort zone is central to the success of the approach. The collaborative, free-flowing discussions that emerge during the modelling process allow people to contribute in ways that would not occur in a conventional meeting format. Ideas conceived in anonymity become central to the debate and instead of formal minutes, the artefacts created by group members stand as the record of discussions. This is a clear example of creativity as a social process (Neelands, 2011) and is one of the strengths of the craft model.

At the SHED conference, the juxtaposition of creativity and content was evident. Team members 'played' with modelling clay while expounding on the fundamental principles of



SHED goes viral

*'Engaging in the activity was stimulating and thought-provoking as the shared physical – and very tactile – activity and common goal engendered strong discussion and weighty debate. The fun aspects of using colourful and creative kids' craft materials belied a deeper purpose but made the whole process very enjoyable. An important aspect was the constraints of a fixed time limit and the requirement to feedback to others as it concentrated the mind to deliver something meaningful but with humour – I hope! Thanks to Tom and Marcella for enabling me to engage in this and encouraging me to use it within my own working context.'*

**Fiona Campbell**, Head of Academic Professional Development,  
Edinburgh Napier University

educational development. The resulting object seemed simple – see photograph below – but represented a sophisticated and broad-ranging discussion about the nature of SHED's future communications strategy covering internal and external communications, enhancing links with stakeholders and promoting the organisation to a mass audience, both nationally and internationally.

The synchronicity of participants discussing detailed concepts while at the same time shaping 3D representations of these ideas generated a high level of energy and also promoted unconventional thinking. This was identified by another participant at the SHED conference, who said the approach was:

*'...surprisingly stimulating – an effective way to tease out new ideas from different members of a group through the use of image and metaphor, and to encourage sharing.'*

(Charles Neame, SHED Vice Chair)

One side-effect of the model is that participants can become more aware of their own creativity and how it operates. One researcher at the SHED conference commented that he developed papers in this way all the time, but did not realise it until he was utilising the craft approach. Uncovering these personal insights is a regular occurrence, allowing participants to realise their own latent aptitude and creativity are greater than they may have originally thought. Allowing people the opportunity to reflect on their personal growth

promotes greater understanding of their own development and contributes to encouraging staff to 'think dangerously'. This links directly to national and international themes surrounding creativity and challenging boundaries, stimulating innovative approaches to how we, as educational developers, carry out our everyday jobs.

One of the key issues facing our profession is lack of time. In an increasingly demanding role with people being pulled in a number of different directions, educational developers are tasked with the delivery of vital staff training requirements as part of our commitment to continuous professional development (CPD). The craft model is surprisingly efficient in terms of delivering desired results. In one short session of around 60-90 minutes, a model can be produced offering a range of solutions to required needs.

Where traditional meetings generally finish with a list of actions to be taken forward by individuals or small groups, the craft approach culminates in a holistic model that identifies solutions to ingrained challenges. Because all group members participate in the creative process, agreement is more achievable and a sense of ownership is established. The shared experience of creation benefits the participants in many ways. It generates goodwill between team members; creates a positive impact as a result of making an artefact in its entirety within a given time; promotes reflection in many ways – individually, institutionally, professionally and in a collegiate environment; and contributes to the formation of long-term supportive

relationships conceived as a result of the emotional link to the creative activity. This is not necessarily present to the same degree in the traditional away-day or meeting, where creativity is not a hands-on part of the experience.

This is one essential difference between the craft model and the conventional agenda-driven approach. Where participants in traditional meetings tend to feel relief that a task has been completed, those involved in a creative activity have had a much more personal engagement which helps to maintain their enthusiasm for both the task and any follow-through actions that might take place. As Education Scotland point out, '... creativity is not simply about coming up with big ideas, but coming up with practical solutions to everyday problems and then applying them to real life situations' (Education Scotland, no date). Implementing innovation is one of the key points identified by Piirto (2011) as essential for 21st century creativity. As educational developers, we should be embracing new approaches which will have a positive impact on our practice, our staff and ultimately our learners.

In conclusion, this article has explored the development of a new approach to 21st century creativity which combines intensive, holistic discussion with hands-on problem-solving, using a range of craft materials to construct both a model of the challenge and outline possible solutions. This craft model has been identified as an innovative addition to an educational developer's toolbox as it is able to be used in a number of different situations to stimulate unusual and creative approaches which might otherwise be unexplored. The participatory, collaborative atmosphere, allied to the fun of using deceptively simple

*'I found this approach to exploring complex and challenging topics very innovative and creative. The interactive approach certainly helped to unpack the main topic and to explore and find solutions through a creative media in a collegiate and, dare I say it, "fun" environment. It is an approach I would recommend to others and will be using myself in my engagement with staff and students.'*

**Dr June L. Leishman**, Head of UK Academic Partnerships, Abertay University, SHED

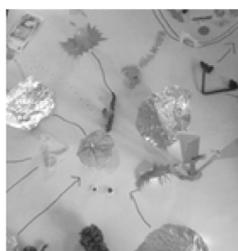
craft materials, promotes in-depth discussion and allows the exploration of creative solutions which might not otherwise be considered.

We would encourage educational developers to use the craft model for themselves. This paper has outlined the forward-planning approach adopted for the SHED conference, but the model has also been used for a number of different tasks including planning, reflection, evaluation, team-building, producing timelines, identifying challenges and encouraging collaboration as an icebreaker. There are no doubt many more applications of this innovative and flexible approach promoting creative thinking via action. Even individuals who claim not to be creative at all can, with encouragement, participate and enjoy the benefits of the craft model; its simplicity and flexibility can be adopted by anyone willing to 'think dangerously' and take the plunge:

*'...the pause, the thought, the making of links, forming questions, the dwelling on, the sparking off, the going off at a tangent. The vital key is to take what is offered and then make it your own.'*  
(Francis, 2009, p. 35)



Getting crafty



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## Information for Contributors

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# 'Working and developing learning communities': SEDA Value Number 3

**Debbie McVitty**, National Union of Students

Throughout history, from the discipline, to the faculty, to the university itself, higher education institutions have organised themselves around the principle that learning and teaching are to some extent communal activities. The very books in the library are in conversation with each other. Through technology clever people can talk to each other, share ideas and argue across local and national boundaries.

Despite the charge of 'ivory tower' that is sometimes laid at the door of the universities, universities have a long history of recognising 'the community' that lies outside the environs of its buildings. From the great Victorian civic universities to today's 'third mission' of community engagement and knowledge exchange, 'the learning community' in higher education has always extended outside the roster of students and academics.

The role of students in a learning community is contestable, but much has been said about whether students are apprentices, partners, practitioners, stakeholders or something else. This article does not rehearse that territory. Instead, it asks why it is that the learning community is not in every case a place where every student is enabled to succeed?

The findings of the recent HEFCE study of the outcomes from full-time undergraduate study for the 2006-07 cohort should be a wake-up call to the higher education sector (HEFCE, 2013). Assuming the cohort studied is not anomalous, it is unacceptable that characteristics like educational background, ethnicity, POLAR quintile or gender should be predictors of progression and success in higher education. Success is a contestable idea, of course, and students have diverse aspirations and capabilities. But data like these suggest that our learning communities are places where disadvantage is replicated rather than mitigated.

Drawing on the findings of the study of student retention *What Works?*, creating ways to support academic engagement for the full diversity of the student body is obviously a priority for improving retention and academic success. For a student to benefit as an individual from higher education they must be enabled to participate in and engage with a learning community. But the challenge of retention and success demands that we consider in more depth what cultural beliefs and practices shape the learning communities we are inviting students to be a part of. A developed approach to retention and success that focuses on creating inclusive institutional cultures is surely needed, one in which expert staff and academics retain a clear sense of which student groups may experience barriers and disadvantage, but focus on shaping an environment that supports

widespread participation and engagement rather than trying to target too closely or redress perceived deficits in students who may not find the prevailing culture accessible.

An approach like the one described requires paying close attention to the experience of students and allowing students to tell the stories they want to tell. Issues of confidence, exclusion, expectation and shared or different languages that underpin cultural considerations are hard to capture in student survey data. Increasingly, institutions are mapping and exploring student journeys, considering points of transition and considering what categories like 'ethnicity', 'gender' or 'first in family to go to university' actually mean for the lived experience of students. More and more new categories and factors are coming into play such as 'time-poor', 'lives at home/commutes onto campus', 'cares for a child or disabled relative', 'estranged from parents' or 'returning to higher education'. Factors like these may intersect with other forms of disadvantage or they may just be the reason why students don't feel completely at home with the prevailing higher education culture.

Achieving academic engagement must be the driver for consideration of how inclusive cultures are created and sustained. There is limited value in reforming student services or extra-curricular opportunities if the classroom itself is a space in which students feel excluded or disadvantaged. Overlarge class sizes, bureaucratic and inflexible procedures and lack of supportive induction into the academic environment could all potentially contribute to a sense of alienation. Just as student engagement offers new opportunities to students to shape their learning environment it poses new challenges to academics to support students to become adept at associated expected behaviours such as giving feedback, working with academic representatives, using technology and social media to support their learning or becoming a producer of knowledge. This work cannot be done without working with students to understand their perceptions and expectations and how they experience the development (or absence) of a student identity.

The learning environment is larger than the structured classroom environment and we should give consideration to how informal learning opportunities are constructed and how they support the development of an inclusive learning community. Group work and peer learning require students to take the initiative to organise their learning not as individuals but in community, a practice that brings its own opportunities and challenges. Phenomena like academic societies, student-led teaching awards, the engagement of students in learning and teaching research and projects, student enterprise societies and graduate spin-offs, and on-

campus student employment or internship opportunities, all cross the divide between 'academic' and 'non-academic' experience.

There is advantage to keeping co-curricular initiatives student-led and relatively unstructured but there is also evidence that the instinct to engage in CV-boosting activities is not evenly distributed among the student body. Students should not be forced to engage if they don't want to but we should be careful about the extent to which we construct desire as unmediated by class, educational background or identity characteristics. Still worse if the desire to participate is there but stamped out by a sense of exclusion. Students'

unions and institutions can work in partnership to encourage the proliferation of interesting opportunities to students and support the endeavours of students to develop themselves and others. With this work comes a responsibility to hold these initiatives to a reasonable standard of accessibility and inclusivity.

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# Flexible, accessible professional development: Try bite sized!

**Colin Gray**, University of Abertay Dundee

I'm sure you've heard the excuses. Busy schedules, overloaded teaching time, research papers to write... They're endless, and quite debilitating. The term 'excuses' might actually be a little harsh; in most cases, every one of them is a legitimate reason why fitting *just one more thing* in would prove very tricky indeed.

So, on top of this pressure, how do we persuade academic staff to do just that, fit in *just one more thing* in the form of a professional development session? Make it easy, that's how.

## How do we make professional development easier?

I have been using bite-sized teaching approaches to offer professional development courses at Edinburgh Napier for around four years now, and have found it to be a really effective way of encouraging busy, time-limited staff to participate in our professional development offerings. I inherited the approach from a colleague of mine, Dr Keith Smyth, who inherited it from Dr Christina Mainka, and I've developed the format constantly since then based on student feedback and my experience.

I'm now starting to use the same techniques in larger courses, open to the wider community for free.

These are not quite MOOCs (maybe KLOOCs: Kinda-Large Open Online Courses) but follow the same principles of openness, participation and collaboration, only in short-form format. Also, in my new role on the Design in Action project (Design in Action, 2013), I'm trialling it with entrepreneurs and business users who, it seems, have a lot more in common with academics than either side might be willing to believe.

## What is bite-sized learning?

Bite-sized courses involve teaching a group of people in a fully online format over a very short period – normally one or two weeks, perhaps up to four. The group learns about a particular topic, a really focused set of skills, through a series of 20 to 30 minute tasks, delivered on a daily basis. This approach brings together some of the benefits of flexible, short, just-in-time learning (Simkins and Maier, 2010) and the benefits of social learning approaches, such as those offered by a learning community or community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

As I mentioned earlier, this isn't a new approach, and there are others out there doing similar work. Helen Webster from Anglia Ruskin University, for example, runs a course called

'10 Days of Twitter' which aims to introduce academics to the ever-evolving world of social media. Her approach was inspired by the '23 Things' course pioneered by the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library back in 2006, which covered a task a week, for 23 weeks.

But, despite this, I find that most people haven't come across similar types of courses, so hopefully this article will serve as a good introduction.

## Why do I use bite-sized learning?

Bite-sized, to me, comes with four main benefits:

1. Flexibility
2. Accessibility
3. Engagement
4. Creativity.

To go back to the introduction, my most commonly heard barrier to professional development (as has always been the case, I'm sure) is time. Academics struggle to schedule in a half-day, in-person development session. Quite apart from the time they have to allocate towards the session, simple logistics often get in the way. Even if an academic has a large amount of flexible time – say

20 flexible hours in their week – that leaves a roughly 50% chance that they'll be teaching or in meetings when the session runs. Really it's higher than that owing to the large block of consecutive time required.

The way around this is to make the course flexible; allow academics to participate at a time of their choosing. Online learning, of course, isn't new, but even flexible online tasks present a barrier when it takes one or two hours to complete a session. This still means finding that block of free time, and not feeling pressed by other commitments.

So, make the course not only flexible, but accessible. Accessible, to me, means a very low barrier to completion, and a big factor in this is taking a very short time to do so. If a task takes 10 minutes to complete, then it's much more likely that a lecturer will see the task on her to-do list and think, 'Well, I'll just do that now, quickly, before I pop off for lunch'. Of course, using very short tasks requires more regular delivery if you're going to get through any amount of deeper learning. That leads to our third advantage, engagement.

Engagement isn't something that comes as standard with the bite-sized approach, but I find that it comes with a much higher base level than normal online learning. Online learning has always struggled with retention, some reporting drop-out rate at an average of 50% (Carr, 2000). Attrition is even higher in the world of open education, in MOOCs in particular. For example, Edinburgh University reported an average completion rate of 29% (MOOCs@Edinburgh Group, 2013) across its recent run of courses.

I believe that engagement is increased, however, by running short courses (hence the one or two week period) focusing on a small number of specific, related skills and utilising tasks that keep people involved every day. This is borne out by qualitative evidence gathered from previous participants, and I'm currently collecting quantitative data in an attempt to evidence the trends more clearly. Engagement and retention is, however, still a challenge, and one I hope to

improve upon. I'll discuss ideas for this later in the article.

Finally, the last advantage stems from the first two. I find that the flexibility involved in this approach, and the accessibility it provides, allows a huge amount of creativity in delivery. Because you're delivering short tasks on a regular basis, they can be hugely varied from day to day, and delivery methods equally so. I have used video, audio, web2.0 technologies, collaborative tools and many more methods to deliver the daily tasks. I also encourage participants to be just as creative, and learner-created content is a key feature in this approach.

Of course, these media-based approaches aren't required, and my early courses worked well with just simple text- and image-based courses, most of the creativity going into activity design. It's up to you how you apply bite-sized learning, but I hope the benefits above provide enough motivation to try it out.

### What is it suited for?

I believe that bite-sized learning can be used effectively in almost any discipline. Myself, I've used bite-sized approaches at Edinburgh Napier primarily to develop technology-enhanced learning skills. This included teaching the use of Cloud Applications, Podcasting and Web 2.0 skills, among

others. With Design in Action, I'll be teaching business management skills, such as online marketing, leadership, innovation and design thinking. Other examples, discussed above, include Helen Webster's social media course, and the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library's Learning 2.0 course.

As you can see, the majority of uses so far are technology based: using technology to teach technology. But, as shown by my Design in Action work, I believe this approach can be used to teach soft skills just as well, and can easily be adapted to teach information-based topics with a little creativity.

The approach is limited only by your imagination. A cliché, I realise, but with creative tasks and a concrete aim for your one or two weeks, you can teach any subject with bite-sized learning.

### Not-so-bite-sized challenges

Of course it's not all sunshine and rainbows. After all, rainbows require a little rain.

The biggest issue with this approach is one that I've mentioned already – retention. While I've found that the bite-sized approach has some advantages over traditional online learning, it still suffers from attrition issues.

To illustrate, the first course that

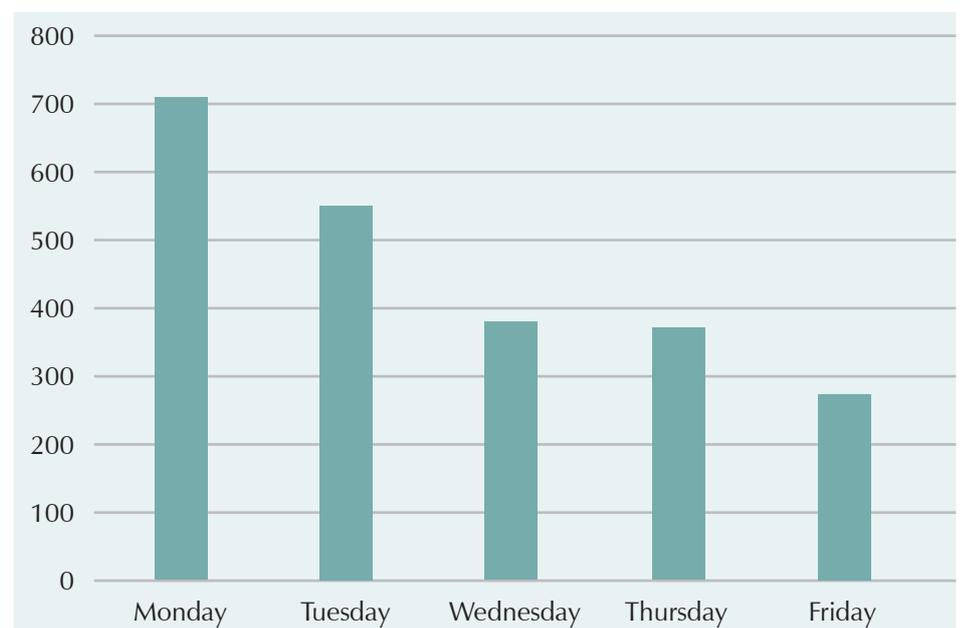


Figure 1 Cloud applications course activity

I ran on Cloud Applications for Education attracted 18 sign-ups. Of these sign-ups, all participated in the course at some point, but only 61% of participants took any action in the course on the final day, leaving an attrition rate of 39%. Worse, though, was the level of participation, measured by the number of actions taken by each student each day. This dropped by 62% from day 1 to day 5 (see Figure 1).

Another course, this time on Web2.0 technology, showed a smaller drop, with activity on the final day 42% lower than on day 1. This course showed a much sharper drop on average, though, with week 2 seeing around 10% of the activity seen on week 1. A sharp drop indeed, so certainly there is still much work to be done on this aspect of bite-sized learning.

Another challenge of this approach, not to be ignored, is the time investment for the tutor. Through experience, I have found that it's possible to run a course of this type with 10 to 20 participants in around one hour per day. This includes management of questions, problems and discussions only, not course design. So, one hour of facilitation per day taught, roughly. This is almost certainly longer than you would spend teaching the same topic face to face. Taking my Cloud Applications course as an example again, I believe the material included there would constitute a two-hour face-to-face session. So, this very rough example equates to a teaching time of more than double.

Taking design into account, once you get the hang of the format, and assuming a reasonable competency with your VLE, I think that design time is roughly equivalent. Knowing the subject well, I can design a five-day bite-sized course on Moodle (roughly equivalent to a two-hour session, I believe) in around a day. I think this is roughly equivalent to how long it takes me to design and create materials for a two-hour face-to-face session, again, when I know the material well. Lastly, we should include the preparation required in the week

leading up to the course, and the follow-up, evaluation and support required in the week(s) following the course, and you probably have another 0.5 to one day of work on top of the in-course facilitation and design time.

It's clear that bite-sized teaching isn't the easy option – it takes at least as long, almost certainly longer, to design and facilitate than an equivalent face-to-face session. But, I believe that the benefits are well worth it.

### Lessons learnt

Over the past four years, and still today, I've always been refining my approach in bite-sized teaching. Every session that I run is followed by a survey which looks into pros and cons, benefits and difficulties. There are a few things I've learned along the way that really seem to benefit engagement, learning and retention. I hope these tips help you avoid the early mistakes that I made.

#### Prime your participants by email

I've experimented with a few approaches over the years and the best way I've found to get everyone started promptly and efficiently seems to be a double email approach.

Send an email to your participants the week before your course is due to start. This is something I'm still testing, but I've tried both Fridays and Thursdays, and I plan to test Wednesday in the near future. There's a balance between 'too soon and they forget again' and 'too late and they have no time to keep the time free'. There's more to this time period, but I'll cover that in a minute.

First, the second email: send a second reminder email on the first morning, as early as you can. So, when your participants come into work on Monday morning, they know the course is starting this week, but they have a quick reminder telling them to get involved right now. The earlier the better to kick-start discussions.

#### The email contents: be not afraid!

In the first email you want to lay out the basics: the format of the course,

how they access it and any other admin stuff you need. But, the most important part is to tell participants what you require of them. Ensure they know what's expected of them, and that it is an expectation, not a choice. It's easy to be a bit soft on them at this point for fear of scaring them off, but I've found that people respond well to some solid rules.

I tell them the course will only work with full participation; dropouts and lurkers harm the experience for everyone else. Peer pressure works wonders, and it's all true.

In the second email you want to keep it short and sweet: course starts today, here's how you can log in, and a short reminder of the rules. 'We need you to play your part!'

#### Build social, and be social

The first email has one more job to do, as alluded to in the first tip above. And that's to kick-off the slightly sneaky extra task that comes in the days leading up to the course.

A five-day course is short. Very short. There isn't enough time for introductions and 'getting to know one another', so I've taken to asking people to log in and introduce themselves in the few days before the course starts. Sending the first email out on Thursday gives plenty of time for this, and allows everyone to state their allegiances, along with an aim or two for the course.

This helps to build social presence on the course which is vital for engagement and retention. The biggest success you can have is entering the course on Monday morning and finding that everyone has introduced themselves, and conversations have started already.

And that leads to the second part of this: be social. You need to lead by example. Be in the course every two or three hours, answering questions, spurring on conversations. Add in new resources that build on people's questions and include pointers to external resources that might help. Of course, you all know this already, it's called good teaching, but it's

even more vital in making these short courses a success.

### Be responsive

Above, I listed flexibility as one of the biggest benefits of this type of course, and that goes for you as well as the participants. Build engagement by asking questions mid-week, or if you're doing two weeks, use a discussion or a poll to shape activities next week.

Nothing builds engagement better than participant input into their own learning. Give them the choice of what material to cover, or what type of activities to take part in. This, again, is old hat, but the bite-sized approach makes it so much easier since designing a new 20-minute activity simply doesn't take very long.

Take hints from participant discussions and questions to include a new lesson, shifting your old plan back by a day. Then sit back and watch engagement grow as they see you offer exactly what they're looking for.

### The future

I plan to do a lot more bite-sized teaching in future, offering it to much wider audiences and improving my practice along the way. My research into this area looks at not only bite-sized approaches, but how they compare to the longer-form MOOCs that are exploding around the world.

I have already started to quantitatively analyse participation, engagement and attrition, all using learning analytics approaches, and I'm exploring how small changes and different techniques change how people interact with my courses. I already think that this approach works well, but I know it can get a lot better. I believe that by doing this small-scale analysis, not only will I improve the bite-sized approach, but we can develop techniques that will help MOOCs reach their potential by retaining more students and delivering more learning to the masses.

If anyone's interested in working with me on this, I'd love to hear from you. If you already run a similar course and

would like to share analytics, or you'd like to start running them and would appreciate the help, let me know. And if you run a MOOC and are willing to make your data open, that would be amazingly appreciated. Thanks for your time!

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# An enhanced approach to peer observation of teaching

**Helen Vosper, Alyson Brown and Ruth Edwards**, Robert Gordon University

## Introduction

The prevailing political and economic climate has generated a new breed of higher education student, often described as a 'consumer,' determined to receive a good return on their investment (Buckley, 2012). One response to this has been the strengthening of quality assurance (QA) processes and the adoption of a quality enhancement approach. An almost universal element of this QA has been the development of professional qualifications, with a consequent need to capture tacit behaviours in order to address the issue of what exactly constitutes 'good teaching'. Peer observation of teaching (POT) is often seen as a cornerstone of developing 'good' teaching skills, although such schemes are often viewed in a more negative way (Donnelly, 2007; Purvis *et al.*, 2009).

Successful POT develops relationships based on trust, where feedback is delivered constructively. It is also a two-way process and is – as Donnelly (2007) observes – 'approving of dialogue, encouraging of open debate and supportive of risk taking in teaching'. Effective POT schemes should also require

the observer to articulate how they themselves benefited from the process, as this underlines the collaborative nature of the undertaking.

A problem with POT is that it very often focuses on an arguably subjective interpretation of a final teaching output (such as a lecture) rather than giving any insight into the processes driving that output. This interpretation is likely to be influenced by the observer's view of 'good practice', and the idea of reviewer as 'expert' is thus called into question (Gosling, 2005).

Other criticisms include a staff view that it is 'an unwanted intrusion into their professional autonomy' (Blackwell, 1996), a deficit model which can be reinforced if the reviewer lacks the appropriate 'debriefing' skills. However, one of the greatest benefits of POT is the opportunity for the process to reveal tacit assumptions or theories that may be at odds with actual practice, such as misalignment between learning outcomes and assessment methods.

Gosling (2005) describes three models of POT: 'management,' 'development' and 'peer review'. The 'management' model is a one-way process, often used to support tenure and promotion decisions, as well as to identify under-performance. The 'development' model is led by an educational developer and the output is usually a report to submit as part of a portfolio fulfilling the requirements of a PgCert course or similar. Both models are associated with potentially significant negative consequences. The third model is much more collaborative: the relationship between the reviewer and reviewee is based on equality, and requires the negotiation of a shared understanding of both process and outcomes. Compared to the first two models, peer review is less judgemental, and more likely to support future progress through constructive feedback and genuine engagement with reflective practice. In theory, most POT processes claim to be based on Kolb's model of experiential learning, or similar frameworks, all of which demand multiple opportunities for learning within an authentic context, with ample time (and support) for reflection. Furthermore, the development of competence is not only about actual teaching ability. Performance is also closely linked to perceived ability, and the mentoring element of peer review is effective at developing the skills of self-management and resilience that underpin this perceived ability.

Examples of effective transition from the management/development model to peer review include the institutional approach developed at Sheffield Hallam University (Purvis *et al.*, 2009) where 'like-minded' colleagues work together on developing a specific area of teaching, learning and/or assessment and, while reviewer/reviewee roles are clearly demarcated, both are required to reflect on the developments that have been made. While this move to 'peer-supported review' has generally been well received and demonstrated to be effective, one potential problem is that the more informal nature of the engagement makes slippage more likely, and both partners have to actively ensure this does not happen.

### **Institutional and school context**

In the School of Pharmacy and Life Sciences staff must complete Module 1 of the PgCert in Higher Education Learning and Teaching and although many more do go on to complete the full course, this is by no means universal. POT is part of the portfolio requirements for both modules, but the process follows the 'development' model described above. While the reviewee is invited to reflect on their experience of the process, there is no requirement to share this reflection with the reviewer, and such reflections are only rarely seen within final portfolio submissions. Anecdotal evidence indicates that staff share many of the concerns described above and, furthermore, suggest that they are uncomfortable with the public nature of the observation: students often ask why another member of staff is observing a session.

Craig Mahoney, during his time as CEO of the HEA, described an 'outstanding learning experience' as one which

'requires curriculum design and approaches to teaching, learning and assessment which promote the development of attributes...which contribute to wider society' (HEA, 2012-16). This need is reflected in RGU's commitment to 'engage[ment] with employers and professions to develop workforce skills and capabilities to meet the needs of the economy and society'. In the case of the MPharm, the profession is represented by the regulatory body (the General Pharmaceutical Council (GPhC)), which has shifted the emphasis of the curriculum towards the development of clinical competencies (GPhC, 2010). For its pedagogical model, the GPhC has selected Miller's triangle, and in order to achieve the higher outcomes, the new educational standards underline the importance of Bruner's spiral curriculum. Fundamental to such an approach is an awareness that each piece of the curriculum exists as part of a much larger whole. This, of course, has implications for students (who must retain knowledge and skills at each stage) but perhaps greater ones for staff who must fully understand the context in which they teach. One of the major requirements, therefore, for successful re-accreditation is the demonstration of integration between science and practice.

Anecdotally, science and practice staff report that they often work in isolation from one another. This is something we have certainly experienced and it is interesting to reflect on the potential causes. Dr Catherine Duggan, the Director of Professional Development and Support at the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain, suggested in a presentation at Glasgow University in 2010 that undergraduate pharmacy curricula are particularly challenging simply because the 'new' evidence-based 'pharmaceutical care' model draws on so many different scientific disciplines: she identifies 32 separate sciences as underpinning such an approach. Furthermore, success in the course requires competency in a number of skills including both the 'hard' skills often associated with science courses and the 'soft' skills required for delivering effective patient care. While such a panoramic curriculum makes for interesting and challenging study, it can cause problems both with professional identity and student workload. Students perhaps align themselves with particular aspects of the curriculum, being more comfortable with either science or practice modules. It seems reasonable that students are not the only ones affected by these pressures: staff may feel similar anxieties.

Furthermore, existing mechanisms for course development did not always support integration between practice and science. Module teams tended to be drawn from areas of appropriate expertise meaning that 'science' modules were taught by science staff and *vice versa*. One of the approaches to the development of the new course was to form mixed teams, which was helpful, but we thought this could be developed further and suggested the adoption of a 'buddy pair' scheme that would allow science and practice staff to work alongside each other in a mutually supportive way to develop genuinely integrated learning experiences for students. We felt that this approach

married the advantage of the peer-supported review process described above, but by linking it into a specific activity (preparation for a re-accreditation event) that was both time-limited and of critical importance to the institution, it prevented the slippage that is one of the dangers of these less formal processes. In this way, convergence of individual, school-level, institutional and national agenda provided a compelling argument for engagement.

The MPharm teaching team comprises approximately 30 members of academic staff. A number of opportunities for the whole teaching team to get together are provided each year, and during 2011-12, most of these meetings were concerned with events relating to re-accreditation. One such meeting was used as a forum to introduce the 'buddy' scheme, and invite those interested in participating. Three buddy pairs were formed, which represented an uptake by 20% of academic staff. In the run up to re-accreditation, these pairs were encouraged to work together, pooling their discipline-specific knowledge to help generate modules that offered students truly integrated teaching, learning and assessment activities. As this process involved a review of existing practice, they also worked together in delivering existing activities on the course during the session 2011-12. They were also invited to informally discuss, analyse and reflect on both their own teaching approaches and each other's. It was hoped that mentoring and supporting roles would grow organically out of these interactions. Buddy pairs were encouraged to reflect on both the process and the outcomes, but particularly on how peer support had influenced personal practice.

### Reflections on the process

All of the reflections were extremely positive and describe a rapid transformation from a position of unease, to comfort with the process, borne out of a shared understanding of common goals:

*'Initially I was a little unsure of what I would get out of [the buddy scheme] and...of what I would be able to offer. However, I began to see the benefits with informal feedback from both of us on how teaching sessions had been delivered allowing us to consider developing these for students' benefit...by bringing different experiences to teaching, we could enhance the learning experience for students.'*

*'Initially, I was slightly nervous about having a staff member I did not know very well observing my teaching practice. However, because we were in effect observing each other, there was a real feeling of equality that rapidly dispelled any sense of threat.'*

*'These initiatives have had a clear impact on the delivery of the curriculum and the staff involved have found it a positively transformative process. I can speak from experience as a member of a buddy pair.'*

Some of the reflections also suggested that one of the aspects that negates any power imbalance is that both members of

the pair were able to articulate ways in which the scheme had enhanced their own practice:

*'Y can take all the credit for introducing me to social media and how this may enhance the learning of our students.'*

*I was unsure...how [integrated teaching] could be delivered effectively for the benefit of the students. After working closely with X, it has allowed me to not only observe how it can be done, but also be involved in the process. We often work in our own "discipline" groups, but this process has highlighted...how a more "universal" approach can...enhance the learning process for students.'*

Weller (2009) discusses the notion that enhancement activities are best implemented within a peer context 'that acknowledges the disciplinary culture as the defining criteria for evaluating practice'. One danger with this approach is that it can exclude multiple perspectives that may improve the quality of the outcome. One of the advantages of this practice-science buddy pairing is that the pair do share a discipline culture to some extent (in that they teach on the same course), but they also have very different perspectives based on what may be referred to as their 'discipline of origin'. This effectively provides a 'fresh pair of eyes' for each other's educational practice:

*'This [buddy pairing] gave me a much deeper insight into the practice role. I thought devising a cardiovascular risk assessment was a simple matter of following a guideline. However, there were so many things I was unaware of. For example, I didn't know that pharmacists didn't have access to GP records. [This led to an] interesting debate!...'*

*'I believe that this shared approach and better understanding of our roles (and how they contribute to the development of the student as "an emergent pharmacist") has made us into different people. We have developed a much more holistic teaching style and an improved perception of what it means to be a pharmacy teacher. This can only strengthen our skills in producing well-rounded graduates, fit for the world of work.'*

It can also be appreciated that another aspect is an improvement in confidence and perceived ability, as well as benefits that extend beyond the enhancement of student learning. However, it is not envisaged that the buddy pair process should be linked in any way to promotion and performance agenda, as this may well undermine the developmental aspect of the scheme (Blackwell, 1996). However, the reflections and enhancement actions developed may well form part of reflective portfolios and submissions for reward and recognition schemes:

*'My confidence has rocketed...and I have had opportunities above what I would have ever imagined.'*

*'X has encouraged me throughout the buddy scheme to identify my strengths both in teaching and research and has given me confidence to present my work at a national level...X has encouraged me to think long term about my career aspirations.'*

*'The process goes above and beyond the delivery of teaching within the course. One such example is working towards senior fellowship of the HEA...being able to have the opportunity to work so closely with someone else has given me the opportunity to be able to learn from them and their vast experience. This has led to me starting to put together my portfolio for senior fellow – and I have no doubt that my "buddy" will be there to support me throughout the process!'*

Evidence from the literature suggests that POT activities often work best when they are driven by departmental 'champions' who lead by example (Blackwell, 1996). Perhaps one of the unexpected benefits of this pilot has been the emergence of such leaders:

*'Other members of staff have begun to recognise what the buddy scheme can offer through the successes that have been achieved through our "buddy" relationship.'*

*'It seems reasonable that the natural "next step" is for us [the buddy pair] to split up and each take on a new "buddy", so they can benefit in the way that I certainly feel we have.'*

In addition to these positive reflections, there were also a number of tangible outputs from the scheme. Some of the collaborations gave rise to teaching and learning activities that were included as examples of good practice in the MPharm-specific Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategy that was prepared as part of the evidence for re-accreditation. One of these 'snapshots' has also been accepted for publication in the HEA 2nd Compendium of Effective Practice. Finally, the 'buddy' scheme was commented on very favourably as a model for supporting both science/practice integration and staff development by the re-accreditation panel.

### Conclusions and future work

The pilot phase of this approach indicates that the process was extremely effective in supporting staff development. Beyond supporting the improvement of teaching skills, there have been additional benefits. One buddy pair member is using her experience of the process to support her in undertaking a PhD, while another pairing has led to a successful collaboration securing £100,000 of funding from NES Pharmacy to undertake a scoping exercise in partnership with one or more Scottish Schools of Medicine in order to identify topics for future teaching collaborations, in areas such as basic anatomy, physiology and pharmacology, at an undergraduate level.

Following the success of the pilot, it is now the intention to roll this scheme out further as part of the five-year school plan, hopefully linking it in to the wider institutional staff development programme. This programme is currently under review, although it seems likely that any future scheme will be closely linked to the UK Professional Standards Framework, and we believe that the reflective

practice developed through the buddy pairings will support achievement in this framework.

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### New member of the Editorial Board of Educational Developments

The Editorial Board of *Educational Developments* is looking for a new member. Ideally this would be someone who brings new elements to the group, whose members at present have a range of interests in managing or being part of units, running PG Certs and other courses, educational development consultancy and the application of new technology, with links to the Higher Education Academy and the National Union of Students.

The magazine works through four planning meetings a year at which proposals are made, ideas are discussed and articles are commissioned. There is a lot of email traffic as articles are followed up, read and edited. One or two of the group take responsibility for editing each issue, which involves dealing with any problems, preparing the articles for printing and reading the proofs after the issue is designed.

We are looking for someone with a broad knowledge of the 'world' of educational development and who is attuned to our readership and their needs. The crucial skill is commissioning: persuading busy educational developers to write articles quickly! *Educational Developments* is a topical magazine with quite rapid responses.

Forthcoming meetings will take place on 6 March 2014 (at which all applications will be considered), followed by 29 May and 4 September 2014.

If you are interested in joining the board, please describe your interest and what you might bring to the task in an email to [office@seda.ac.uk](mailto:office@seda.ac.uk) by 28 February 2014.

# The International Consortium for Educational Development (ICED)

**Kristine Mason O'Connor**, University of Gloucestershire

The aim of the International Consortium for Educational Development is to advance higher education worldwide. It is unique in promoting, sustaining and increasing knowledge and understanding internationally of all aspects of educational and academic development in higher education. ICED operates as a charity and currently its membership comprises 23 national networks or organisations committed to promoting good practice in higher education. SEDA has been an active member since ICED's inception in 1993. In Stockholm in June next year, ICED will be celebrating its tenth biennial international conference, 'Educational Development in a Changing World'. The founder of ICED, Professor Graham Gibbs, will be giving a keynote lecture.

It was 20 years ago, in the summer of 1993, that Professor Gibbs, then Director of the Oxford Centre for Staff Development, secured funding to convene a meeting of leaders of six national educational development networks to share interests and explore possibilities for greater international collaboration. Dr David Baume recalls the evening after the inaugural meeting of ICED:

*'The first Council dinner was held in a floating restaurant on the Oxford Canal. Unfortunately the motor in the narrow boat had failed, so the promised cruise did not happen. However, participants generated their own momentum – it was clear that the idea underlying ICED was sound, and huge benefit was to be gained through leaders of national educational development networks and organisations getting together and talking to each other.'*

That initial 'getting together and talking' was the catalyst to ICED



*The members of the ICED Council after the seminar at Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto*

developing and sustaining a range of activities over the ensuing two decades in fulfilment of its visionary aims. Activities have included: the continuous programme of biennial ICED international conferences which have taken place on four continents; the initiating, by David Baume, and continuous publication of ICED's international refereed journal, *The International Journal for Academic Development* (IJAD), now publishing four issues a year; the provision of support for the creation and sustainability of new national educational development networks through workshops, symposia and sharing of experience and best practice.

ICED's Council meets annually and comprises the chair or president (or representative) of its member organisations and its work is supported by administration contracted with the Association of Commonwealth Universities. Professor James Wisdom, who joined

ICED Council in his capacity of Co-Chair of SEDA, is now serving his second two-year term as the elected President of ICED.

To realise ICED's commitment to supporting and encouraging new and emerging national networks, ICED's Council meeting in Kyoto this year was accompanied by two national events. The first was a symposium in Kyoto at which James presented the keynote lecture, 'Themes in Educational Development' to members of the Japanese Association for Educational Development (JAED). In his lecture James explored the similarities and differences in the ways ICED's networks served their national memberships. The lecture was followed by participants engaging in a lively question and answer session with a panel comprising members of ICED's Council. Questions explored a range of issues including the design of compulsory courses on teaching and learning in higher education, links to promotion and probation and moving

from a passive to an active model of learning in higher education. A second symposium, held in Tokyo, explored 'Trends in educational development in the world – futures and challenges', and was attended by academics from different disciplines, members of JAED and higher education policy-makers. James's keynote was followed by presentations from Julie Hall (SEDA network), Riekje de Jong (EHON, Netherlands Network) and Professor Motohisa Kaneko, the President of the Japan Association of Higher Education Research. In her presentation, 'Recent Educational Development in Britain', Julie shared and reflected on the aims and activities of SEDA as a national educational development network, and illustrated the work of educational development units by reference to the growth in staff engagement in formal and informal professional development to enhance student learning at the University of Roehampton. The presentations were

followed by a stimulating and in-depth panel discussion.

Recent publications such as McGettigan (2013) and Brown and Carasso (2013) starkly highlight the competitive regimes which are increasingly governing higher education. Paradoxically in such a climate, commitment to advancing the quality of higher education must rely increasingly on international collaboration, cooperation and enquiry – the bedrock of ICED.

In the company of international colleagues you are encouraged to come and explore 'Educational Development in a Changing World' in Stockholm in June next year. There will also be the opportunity to visit Sweden's famous boat, *Vasa*. Like the narrow boat on the Oxford canal in 1993, the *Vasa* experienced severe problems going forward, but delegates getting together, exchanging ideas and practice can act as a catalyst for

ICED's next 20 years to advance higher education worldwide.

The ICED website (<http://icedonline.net/>) provides details of ICED's aims, objectives and constitution together with information about ICED member organisations, council meetings, conferences (including registration for the 2014 Conference in Stockholm), journal (IJAD), presidents, officers, benefits of membership and history.

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**Kristine Mason O'Connor** was appointed Professor of Higher Education Development at the University of Gloucestershire, and is currently a Fellow at its Centre for Active Learning.

# Feedback in assessment – What's the problem?

**David Ross and Iain Shepherd**, University of the West of Scotland

*'Nothing that we do to, or for, our students is more important than our assessment of their work and the feedback we give them on it. The results of our assessment influence our students for the rest of their lives and careers – fine if we get it right, but unthinkable if we get it wrong.'* (Race et al., 2005)

This article was spawned in a discussion between one of us (David Ross) as an educational developer of nearly 20 years' standing and our new Depute Student President (Iain) on where our Students' Association stood on the question of feedback (an issue they had frequently raised with me in the past). It is also an issue that forms a fundamental part of all of our institution's staff development programmes on best practice in pedagogy.

We started by mulling over the main points in the UK today. Good and bad practice in feedback to students on their assessment assignments is a universal, perennial issue. National student feedback studies such as the NSS result every year in adverse comments from students about the availability, quality and timeliness of feedback provision –



*Henry the German lecturing on Aristotle, University of Bologna, Laurentius de Voltolina, second half of the 14th century*

indeed, the latest results from the NSS show at best marginal improvement and for many institutions none, or even some decline (NSS, 2013). And remember, this in an environment in England and Wales in which the opinions of students paying up to £9000 per year are still developing.

NUS research also shows the magnitude of these problems and that the situation is changing rather slowly (NUS, 2010). Recent writers (e.g. Boud, 2011) have stated that many aspects of current assessment practice have failed us as educators and failed students as learners. There is a tendency amongst many practitioners to be compliant (institutional strategies, QAA practice etc.), rather than being innovative, on assessment. Learners tend to become dependent on their assessors and the ‘institution’ of assessment rather than learning to be their own assessors. Also, much practice on assessment tends to look back rather than give feedback that leads to a ‘feed-forward’ culture in which the feedback encourages change and more effective learning.

Yet, when institutions conduct their own evaluations and check for what happens in actual practice, the results are surprising. In many cases, examples of excellent practice in giving feedback are uncovered and the situation seems to be one of high quality feedback being a principle generally accepted and adhered to. So...what is the problem and why is there an apparent gap in national surveys such as NSS and institutional evaluations?

Before we get to that, let’s go back a bit and look into the mists of times gone by. In the early days of the universities there was so much adulation of and respect for the lecturers, that any feedback, even negative stuff, would probably have been taken by students as fantastic and even caused them to be surprised that the ‘master’ had lowered himself to say something to them! All that was important was paying their money and passing any tests so that they could become doctors, lawyers or priests.

Fast forward to the early part of the 20th century and there seems to have been more emphasis on feedback but mainly in a summative assignment and usually consisting of the mark (Alpha plus, Beta minus etc.) and if you were lucky with a few accompanying words such as ‘Jolly Good Show’, ‘Keep it Up’ and ‘Rubbish’ – the notion of a formative approach to feedback was rare to say the least. Note – some of this type of practice still exists!!

The aftermath of the Second World War may have partly caused a new approach. Post-war, economic growth and a growing number of ex-servicemen and young people created a market for much larger numbers of students going into higher education (Huba and Freed, 2000). This growth gradually led to a need for a more regulated approach to higher education and research into how to make education less teacher-centric and more focused on the concept of student-centred learning. Increasingly, as free higher education became more of a burden on the taxpayer, questions were raised as to the value of higher education – the dawn of quality assurance was upon us.

For example, in the mid-80s reports were issued in USA addressing the need for college reform. These reports stated that higher education needed to become learner-centered, and that learners, faculty, and institutions all needed feedback in order to improve. Further, a report by the Education Commission of the States (Education, 1995)

ramped the agenda up by advocating 12 attributes of good practice in undergraduate education – of these, interestingly, some were concerned with the actual quality of the learning experience, such as coherence in learning, active learning and assessment that delivered prompt feedback.

So, by the latter half of the 20th century, the assessment enhancement movement in both the USA and UK was influenced by the use of quality principles and practices – for example, the growth of the Council for National Academic Awards, which came out of the Robbins Report (Robbins, 1963) in the UK, became the bedrock on which our modern approaches to quality assurance and enhancement have been founded. Principal in this was the advocacy of a shift from a teacher-centred paradigm of instruction to a learner-centred paradigm.

By this time, there was a plethora of USA, Australian and UK scholarly and research articles advocating both a learning-centred approach to higher education but more importantly a formative approach to feedback in assessment. A seminal article by David Boud (Boud, 2000) emphasised the concept of ‘sustainable assessment’ with assessment as part of the learning process, not just for measurement purposes (the so-called ‘duality’ of assessment). This became quite a revelation for higher education as it began the process of making formative feedback much more meaningful for students (increased frequency, dialogic, simplification of language used etc.) and gave educational developers much more scope for driving through the importance of effective assessment to staff.

Somewhere in all of this, a bunch of educational developers in Scottish HEIs, including one of us (David Ross), in the early part of this century, got some money from the Higher Education Academy’s Generic Subject Centre to look into effective practice in giving feedback – the SENLEF Project (Student Enhanced Learning through Effective Feedback) was developed as a useable resource for practitioners wishing to improve their feedback practice or get some new ideas (SENLIF, 2004). The project identified seven basic principles of good feedback practice:

- Facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning
- Encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning
- Helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards)
- Provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance
- Delivers high quality information to students about their learning
- Encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem
- Provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape the teaching.

These principles brought together current research to provide a resource principally for developing staff in the practice of feedback with several of them connecting with the concept of feedback that encouraged dialogue, improvement and

self-esteem. Subsequent research by the likes of Boud, Black, Sadler, Nicol and including the work of two of the highly respected Scottish Enhancement Themes on Assessment (2003) and Integrated Assessment (Hounsell, 2006), stressed the need for a dialogue on assessment in which the language of feedback is simplified to make it easier for students to understand and to therefore increase its relevance and usefulness. Interactive discussion between students and teaching staff is then promoted as a way of embedding the concept of sustainable progress in learning. Additionally, as part of this research, it is also frequently argued that feedback practice should help students not only to learn better but also to build their confidence.

But all of this just reminds us of some of the origins of effective feedback practice. All of us as educational developers have absorbed the modern principles of student-centred learning and the need to develop staff skills to deliver learning-enabling and sustainable assessment feedback. We like to believe we have preached endless mantras in basic staff development programmes and Postgraduate Certificates in Higher Education (and even to student groups) that take all of the research literature and distil it on to teaching staff and students, both new and experienced.

But...it still apparently seems to have a marginal effect on national surveys. Why does all the research on good practice and the efforts of educational developers seem to be having only minimal effect? One obvious reason might be that the NSS only looks at final year students and not necessarily the full complement of those (some programmes in institutions struggle to make the minimum 50% participation level). Results from earlier years of programmes are not included – this may go part of the way to explain why many of the institutional-run surveys show better performance. Additionally, there is anecdotal research that points to these types of survey prompting students with an axe to grind to be more likely to respond than those who are satisfied. So...there is a chance that NSS results are skewed on at least two fronts.

Looking a bit deeper, when we begin to scratch beneath the surface of what students actually have a problem with, we first of all see generic issues such as feedback that is not frequent enough or returned in a timely fashion (even though most institutions have a precise policy on this). Additionally, students will state that they don't even recognise it as feedback! Even when they do realise it is feedback, some will say it is not clear, not precise, not understandable and therefore of little or no use in helping them to learn better.

Research conducted by the National Union of Students shows a number of revealing figures about the actual situation in the UK (NUS, 2010). In a national survey of detailed student views:

- Only 25% of students surveyed receive verbal feedback in an individual meeting with a tutor, yet 66% of these students said that it would be the most useful way to receive feedback
- Only 60% of students agreed that their coursework feedback makes it clear how to improve their performance.

Furthermore, analysis, including talking to students at our own institution, reveals aspects of the above and other issues we feel may be sometimes overlooked by some analysts. Firstly, what counts as feedback to students. Secondly, how feedback is presented. Thirdly, the logistics of physically delivering feedback to students.

The first of these is, to our minds, relatively simple – students differ from academics in what they understand to be feedback. This could be that the student does not see a comment of 'well done' or 'need to improve referencing' to be feedback! What the student is looking for is to be told what to do, what books to read, who to speak to and what to do next time so as not to repeat the mistake. Essentially, the student is seeking directed guidance on how to improve in future assignments as a marker of 'effective feedback'. In other words they want specific, clear action steps (without resorting to 'spoon-feeding').

The second is, we maintain, also relatively straightforward. The student needs to be specifically told they are receiving feedback on an exam or assignment. This does not mean flashing lights saying 'feedback ahead' (though that might help!), more that staff need to think harder about how they flag feedback up to students. This is applicable, for example, if after an assignment which had revealed a common particular difficulty, the lecturer may choose to provide answers and suggestions for improvement to the class as a whole during the lecture. The key here is to make it as clear as it can be to the students that they are getting feedback on that assignment. That may mean literally saying 'I am now giving feedback on A' and 'a common problem was B and it can be solved if you go and do C'. Some institutions, including our own, have published or are developing detailed 'rubrics' that not only specify the 'language' of feedback but spell out situations in which feedback may be presented and also, and importantly, the different types of feedback. An appropriate mix of written, dialogic and online feedback is now increasingly practised by many institutions.

The third of our 'overlooked' areas is also simple to understand and fix and is basically a further step on the way to solving the second issue. We contend that feedback should be presented to students, not just made available to them. The difference here is subtle. Feedback that is 'presented' is given to the students during class time when they would already be there, through explicit e-mails/Facebook comments, via the virtual learning environment etc. Feedback which is just 'available' to students is somewhere where, if they come and ask, they can get it. Only by accepting that feedback will have to be placed into the hands of students with little effort from them can students' perception of being 'given' feedback and the reality of the feedback available to them be bridged.

We also contend that modern research on how to make feedback meaningful needs to be aligned with practice in personal development planning, especially models that encourage students to reflect on feedback received and make action-planning comments in their portfolios – a practice of 'internalising' feedback.

So...much has been made in research and student surveys (internal and external) on what the nature of any problem might actually be – how do we ensure it is fixed?

Firstly, embed better practice for all staff and students. There is evidence across the sector that both national and individual institution initiatives have been instigated that attempt to embed better practice, with some success. For example, the NUS followed up their research in 2010 by developing a ‘charter’ of ten principles of effective assessment and feedback that includes many of the now widely accepted tenets of good practice. As well as some pretty obvious ones such as ‘Formative assessment and feedback should be used throughout the programme’ and ‘Feedback should be timely’, there are by now hopefully well-founded pleas from students for ‘...access to face-to-face feedback for at least the first piece of assessment each academic year’ and ‘students should be supported to critique their own work’.

In our own institution, we published our first Assessment Handbook in 2011, in which one of the fundamental principles was stated as ‘Students should be provided with feedback on each assessment assignment which is timely, which promotes learning and facilitates improvement and which is framed against the intended learning outcomes and assessment criteria’. In turn, our colleagues in the School of Health, Nursing and Midwifery took this by the horns and developed a staff and student project to turn this statement into a practical working model in their learning activities for all programmes. This resulted in an initial series (still being developed) of student- and staff-friendly documents that explain the importance of and types of feedback to both groups. For example, for staff, we have a detailed ‘rubric’ on effective feedback, with mantras such as ‘The feedback must be aligned, with written comments and reflect terminology used in university grades’ and ‘The feedback must be sufficiently detailed so as to inform the student of where they did well, and also where they could improve’.

Similar initiatives have been put in place at other institutions – at the University of Strathclyde (Strathclyde, 2012), students can now call on an excellent resource that spells out to them what feedback is and what it looks like and also why it is important. There is also an excellent resource developed at Oxford Brookes University that has been developed through the Assessment Standards Knowledge Exchange project (ASKe) that outlines a plethora of good practice and discusses at length the new language of assessment, or Assessment Literacy as they put it (Price, 2012).

Summarising other key statements from research that underpin what staff and students need to do:

*‘For students to be able to apply feedback, they need to understand the meaning of the feedback statements.’*  
(Sadler, 2010)

*‘(Feedback) focuses on the impact of assessment on learning as an essential assessment characteristic.’*  
(Boud, 2010)

*‘Assessment that meets the needs of the future without compromising the ability of students to meet their present learning needs.’* (Hounsell, 2010)

Secondly, and this might be a bit more controversial, rely less on national surveys such as NSS and more on evaluations carried out by your own institution where you can examine a wider range of students and ensure a better balanced viewpoint.

Thirdly, and this is one for educational developers, rely on the research and good practice around in the sector – it is sound and gives an excellent platform for programmes of development, particularly when these can be facilitated in a co-creative (staff and students together) environment.

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## SEDA@20 publications

The following titles have been published in 2013, as part of SEDA’s 20th anniversary celebrations.

**SEDA Special 35: SEDA Small Grants: Celebrating the Scholarship of Educational Development**  
Edited by Frances Deepwell and Charles Buckley

**SEDA Special 34: Evidencing the Value of Educational Development**  
Edited by Veronica Bamber

**SEDA Special 33: Supporting Educational Change**  
Edited by Randal Macdonald

All the titles above are available for purchase online from [www.seda.ac.uk](http://www.seda.ac.uk)

# How can we facilitate developing scholarly writing?

**Dr Pam Parker**, City University London

This article discusses the activity undertaken for a SEDA-funded project in 2011- 2012 and how this project has enabled the activity to continue beyond this. I work within the Learning Development Centre (LDC) at City University London and at the time of the project starting there were eight academic team members (seven academics and one research assistant). As a team we were good at the many practical aspects of our work supporting colleagues to develop their teaching through workshops, seminars, our MA Academic Practice programme and mentoring, but we rarely seemed to have time to undertake the scholarly work that provides the evidence to support our practice and develop personally and, we were all concerned about the expectations that we would publish (McGrail *et al.*, 2006; Morss and Murray, 2001; Murray and Newton, 2009). Even finding time to read regularly could be difficult and whilst we were all very active in presenting our work at conferences, we often failed to write these presentations up as articles – hence missing an opportunity to publish when much of the initial work had been done for the presentation.

We had discussed this issue on many occasions in our team meetings and felt that other than time being an issue there was a lack of structure to support this and a need to share ideas with peers (McGrail *et al.*, 2006; Morss and Murray, 2001). Some of the team had published previously but in one of our meetings we chose this as a main issue to address and agreed we would all choose a topic that we wished to explore in more detail and develop some scholarly work which could be disseminated both within our institution and beyond. It was at this point I submitted the bid for the SEDA funding.

We agreed we would work on our individual topics for six months but that we all had to have some form of output at the end which could

include a conference presentation with an opportunity to submit to the conference proceedings or an article for a journal such as our *Learning at City Journal* or another peer-reviewed journal. The funds from SEDA were to be used for a one-day, off-site meeting where we could share what we had produced at this point and provide feedback to each other. We also agreed to update each other on our progress at our monthly meetings.

I had undertaken the writing for publication course which Gina Wisker runs and found that having peers to discuss the work with was very helpful, but had not really acknowledged that the need to write for the assessment for this module was probably what had made me achieve this aim. As a group, although we had our commitment to each other, we did not have the same incentive and continued to be busy, so when we met we tended to give a brief update but there was limited sharing of actual writing and this had not been formally introduced as part of the process. On reflection, developing a 'buddy system' would have been useful and part of this approach could have been an agreement to share some writing before each meeting and report back for each other (Morss and Murray, 2001).

We did, however, have a whole-day event at the end of the six months to share what we had done and so there was a point at which we had to produce something. Some of the group had drafted their article prior to this meeting and had asked peers to provide feedback. On the day when we met everyone was able to share what they had been doing and what their intended output was, but only a few had actually reached this point; again perhaps there could have been a formal agreement sharing work prior to this day. Following discussion at the end of the day about how to proceed, we agreed a further deadline of a few months and eventually the outcome was reasonably positive

with one of the team submitting to an international peer-review journal and subject to amendments the paper has been accepted. A further member of the team had their article published in the peer-reviewed in-house journal. Two developed a workshop for a conference and then had this published in an international journal attached to the conference and two developed conference presentations. It appears that this was a reasonably successful approach for us but we have learnt lessons from this.

The group completed an online survey about this activity and there was a general agreement that working as a group made us more committed to meeting deadlines but also producing something that others could read. This is clearly illustrated by this survey statement from one person 'I thought that undertaking the writing activity as a group provided the added incentive to produce something that could be read by other people. Otherwise I might have produced something that lacked structure and coherence (and so could only be understood by me!)'. There was also a view that we should have been clearer about expectations as one person noted '...next time maybe we should all submit our writings a few days before we have an away day to create more engagement of the work'. One of the survey questions asked how people planned to meet their objective and the majority did identify and block out time to write. One person said they would like to write every day and others have noted the value of planning specific times to write, whether that be daily, or in blocks (Morss and Murray, 2001). When asked about barriers to this activity, as expected time was the key one with workload mentioned the second (Morss and Murray, 2001). Whilst we were all committed to this activity we still did not feel able to identify writing time in our busy diaries – which was a tip given to me on the writing course and one I still need to learn to do.

The last question on the survey asked if people would like to undertake another activity as a group. In the 18 months since completing this project the academic team has reduced to six but with two periods of maternity leave the team has at times been only four, which has impacted on our time to engage in this. However, we have all been conscious of the need to continue to write and that working together does help us. We therefore planned a project that we could all be involved in focused around an evaluation of our MA Academic Practice programme. The project has several areas we are interested in so is a three-year minimum plan for us. This project is 18 months on and three of us have produced a literature review focused on some common issues for our programme as well as some areas we feel are given only limited attention in the literature. This has been submitted to an international journal for review and now needs some amendments but working together, each taking a section, helped us structure our time and provide feedback to each other (Bone *et al.*, 2009).

We have continued to focus on this project and two more members of the team as well as one of our professional staff have been working on another

article which also includes some empirical data from documents related to 'Why staff undertake parts of the MA Academic Practice programme?', particularly progressing beyond the first year when this is not compulsory. This article will be finished in the autumn term and will then be submitted to a peer-reviewed journal. There are other areas and aspects of the programme which members of the team are interested in exploring but some of these need data collecting from the beginning of the new academic year and so will commence in 2013-2014.

It is acknowledged that for many of us working in education development, our roles are varied and busy and so finding time to write means prioritising this and we do not always have common projects. Some of the team have developed articles related to their study and all of us have focused on trying to ensure we write up our conference presentations for publication. Over the last year the Centre has been part of a review of professional services and this has provided a change to some aspects of our work as well as new opportunities. However, as the new academic year starts we need to ensure that we continue to keep up the momentum of writing

and supporting each other through collaboration on writing and/or giving peer feedback.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my colleagues Patrick Baughan, Susannah Quinsee, and Neal Sumner for their comments on the draft article and in addition all in the team who were committed to working together for this project.

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in response to student complaints that they were not adequately prepared for the pressures of a portfolio career. Blog sites, for example, replaced traditional CVs as a way of enabling students to co-create new knowledge with both academic staff and employers in the media industry. The mix of personal interest by the students, coupled with their direct investment in employability skills, emerged as a powerful way to enhance student engagement. Elsewhere Montesinos, Cassidy and Millard describe the 'engagement escalation spiral' which occurs when universities employ large numbers of students across the institution. Based on evidence gathered from 150 student employees, they document how the nature of the purposive conversations between staff and employed students produces a positive change in perceptions of one another. This partnership-working allows students to develop a much stronger sense of belonging to the university and hence commitment to their studies. Here, we see something of the steps that students take to becoming more engaged members of the learning community.

As with any edited collection, the book is uneven. Almost every chapter seeks to identify how its particular

initiative speaks to debates about student engagement and participation, and to the pressures that universities currently operate within. Thus there is much repetition of the work of leading authors in the field of student engagement, with Kuh, Thomas and Trowler being heavily cited, and a great deal of restatement that students should be seen as partners and not as consumers within higher education. A firmer editorial hand would have removed some of the repetition of the same quotes across chapters. Most of the chapters are upbeat in nature with an underlying desire to attribute every conceivable initiative to the broader mission of student engagement. While there is merit in many of the initiatives, I was nonplussed by chapters which made a great deal of commonplace practices, or instances where tiny numbers of students were involved; initiatives where students were employed as demonstrators, for example, being a case in point. This is an interesting book as a case study of how one particular institution is responding to the challenge of enhancing student engagement. Its usefulness lies in illustrating the range of practical initiatives undertaken, and in charting some of the connections between engagement and what students actually do within their institution.

**Hazel Christie**, Institute for Academic Development, University of Edinburgh.

## SEDA News

### Professional Development

We are pleased to welcome John Paul Foxe, of Ryerson University, Canada, to Associate Fellowship of SEDA. Ryerson University is also seeking for recognition through SEDA's Professional Development Framework scheme.

**Course:** There are still places available on the SEDA online workshop: 'Online Introduction to Educational Change', which runs from 24 February to 21 March 2014. A booking form is available on the SEDA website.

### SEDA Research and Evaluation Small Grants 2014

These SEDA small grants are intended to support research and evaluation in staff and educational development with the goal of continued improvement in the quality and understanding of educational development practices. For 2014, we will be offering five grants of £1000 each for research into educational development practices.

See the SEDA website for further details including an application form. The closing date for applications is **31 January 2014**.

### SEDA Committees

SEDA would like to thank Nancy Turner who has recently stepped down as Chair of our Scholarship and Research Committee. Gina Wisker now takes over as the new Chair.



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Books for review should be sent to:

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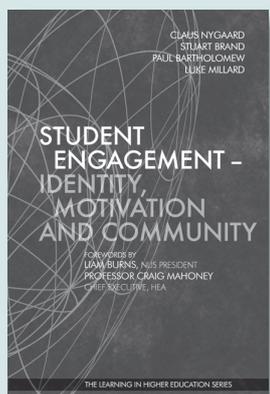
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## Book Review

### Student Engagement: identity, motivation and community

C. Nygaard, S. Brand, P. Bartholomew and L. Millard

Libra Publishing: Faringdon



How to enhance student engagement is a key concern for all university educators. But, as Burns points out in his foreword, the elements of engagement including partnership-working, student-centred learning and co-creation of learning, are not simple concepts, and they are difficult to deliver in practice. Where this book makes a contribution to these debates is in drawing on a range of case studies from across one single institution – Birmingham City University – to investigate what partnership-working between a university and its students might look like, and what kinds of effects it might have. This allows the authors to develop insight into if and how more dynamic learning communities, and therefore more engaged students, can be fostered at an institutional level.

The book has 16 chapters, loosely organised around three themes set out in Chapter 1: identity, or how students are seen as an asset or a resource by staff; motivation, or how students and staff become motivated to engage in a range of learning activities; and community, where student engagement is seen as a vehicle for creating strong learning communities. Each chapter addresses an initiative undertaken within the University with a view to enhancing student engagement. Interestingly, in a book which repeatedly stresses the importance of partnership-working between staff and students, each chapter is co-authored. Staff and students worked collaboratively, beautifully encapsulating the spirit and ethos of the partnership-working they so clearly want to encourage in the sector as a whole.

The array of initiatives reported on is impressive, ranging from courses where students were employed as interns or demonstrators, to projects using social media to engage students in learning communities and enhance their employability skills, and to attempts to introduce problem-based learning and experiential learning to the curriculum. Two chapters stood out for me as especially helpful in exemplifying the drive towards greater student engagement. In an inspiring chapter, Gough, Morris and Hession reflect on how the School of Media redeveloped their curriculum

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