

Reflections on the First International iPED Conference

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Conference Forum:

Reflections on the First International iPED Conference, Coventry TechnoCentre, UK 10th-11th September 2006

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Abstract

Through reflection on the First International iPED Conference 2006 and its overarching theme of pedagogical research and academic identities, this paper considers the achievement of the wider aims of the conference which were to facilitate dialogue between researchers in order to explore the conference themes collaboratively and to provide networking opportunities which would enable participants to build alliances. The abstracts for all papers mentioned are available via the conference website www.coventry.ac.uk/iped2006.

Key words: Action Research, Academic Writing, Emergent Pedagogies, Pedagogical Evaluation

Introduction

iPED (Inquiring Pedagogies) is an educational community of inquiry based at Coventry University. Established in 2005, it aims to support and develop participation, to advance the field collaboratively and to facilitate international interaction. Both novice and experienced colleagues are encouraged to participate.

The First International iPED Conference enabled practitioners and researchers from around the world to come together to debate and reflect on the theme of Pedagogical Research and Academic Identities. Partly inspired by the work of one of our keynote speakers, Professor Ronald Barnett, into academic identity, this unifying concept proved a strength of the conference enabling participants from disparate backgrounds to challenge orthodoxies and construct knowledge. In introducing this theme, the conference host Professor Paul Blackmore suggested it implied the exploration of such issues as: whether engaging in pedagogical research changes what it is to be academic; how our roles are evolving; and how research into higher education feeds back into our lived experience.

There were three sub-themes: Emergent Pedagogies, Pedagogical Experience and Evaluation, and Academic Writing. While the keynote sessions by Professor Gilly Salmon of the University of Leicester

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and Professor Ronald Barnett of the University of London provided plenary opportunities, the majority of interaction took place in the parallel streams and social spaces throughout the conference. The conference involved colleagues from well over 100 institutions, and from 25 nations, in roles as peer reviewers, authors, presenters and delegates.

Deconstructing the Notion of Conference

Despite the ubiquity of academic conferences, the notion of 'conference' is little explored. Although it may be possible to reduce the mechanics of conference to a collection of 'commandments' (McAleer 1997) or practical guidance such as Zelmer & Zelmer (1991); the essence of conference remains elusive. Gustavsen (2001) provides useful insight into the role of specialised 'dialogue conferences' in mediating the mutual influence and interdependence of theory and practice. As with academic research conferences, these events help participants develop social networks and provide the necessary social structures to support dialogue (breaks, lunches, waiting times).

While the effectiveness of virtual conferences to provide high levels of interaction and accessibility at low cost continues to receive some attention (Anderson 1996; Minshull 2006), a face-to-face conference is likely to enable participants to network more easily. Physical proximity promotes collegiality through contextualisation, visual cues, chance encounters and observation of others' spoken and unspoken responses. Although a virtual conference can emulate many of these, it relies on both sophisticated software (Jones, 2000) and sophisticated software users. Thus while increasing accessibility to one category of delegate; a virtual conference reduces accessibility to others. A matter of interest which requires further exploration is the persistence of face-to-face conferences amongst suppliers of virtual learning environments and advocates of e-learning.

Whether physical or virtual, a conference provides the dedicated time and space for participants to immerse themselves in a given field of study alongside like-minded delegates. While presenters have the advantage of preparing their thoughts on their own area of interest, they may be blinkered to other viewpoints. Non-presenters may not have anticipated the implications of current research for the matters under debate but may benefit from attendance at a variety of sessions. A degree of 'conference fatigue' may be found amongst delegates who have attended an excess of events. Neophytes may enjoy a conference because of its unfamiliarity or may find it difficult to profit from the experience without a mentor. A conference, or perhaps more properly a conference series, establishes its own community of practice.

Keynote sessions usually provide either an overview of current and future developments in the conference subject area or detailed exploration of some specialist topic. They also give insight into the hierarchies of expertise and importance which the roles of speaker, chair and questioner express. Cliques, mutual antipathies and power struggles may all be revealed through these formal sessions as well as through a conference's social events; while the timing of presentation slots and scheduling of parallel streams may provide clues to the comparative importance of speakers or subject matter as perceived by the organisers.

The iPED 2006 Context

The conference team for iPED 2006 was drawn from a diversity of disciplines and backgrounds. In organising the event, we began by considering the potential of this conference to facilitate dialogue between researchers in order to explore the conference themes collaboratively and to provide networking opportunities which would enable participants to build alliances. Taking an Action Research approach, we identified and reflected upon those elements which we felt would most keenly contribute to the achievement of these aims. We drew on our experience in organising and attending conferences, both within our home disciplines and within pedagogical research. We evaluated and modified our decisions according to feedback from collaborators and participants.

For example, to encourage a range of contributors, we provided a choice of output format: short or long paper, workshop and poster. We asked authors for only a short abstract, removing the hurdle of a full paper, and ran a workshop to encourage less experienced researchers to submit to the conference. The double-blind peer review process was designed to provide constructive feedback to authors, whether accepted or rejected.

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To encourage networking during the conference, we took particular care over programme planning, conference location, accommodation and social events.

Theme 1: Emergent pedagogies

Having chosen the conference themes for the 2006 conference we began to interrogate them: what, for instance, did we mean by emergent pedagogies? This strand was introduced by iPED Research Fellow Lynn Clouder, whose interpretation of emergent pedagogies was of 'a range of approaches to teaching and learning that continue to evolve as they are used in different disciplines and in various educational contexts'. Kathy Courtney (2006) adds to this interpretation by reminding us of the ultimate aim by providing a rationale which motivates us to experiment with these pedagogies. The aim is to promote and exploit student engagement.

The papers within the theme were diverse but fell into broad categories addressing contemporary issues. For instance, several papers focused on research-led learning. Lewis Elton (University of Manchester) facilitated a workshop in which he explored concepts and practices implicit in research-led learning and its consequences for institutional management. Internationalization also featured strongly. Meeri Hellsten (Macquarie University, Australia) explored the notion of sustainable pedagogies for the global internationalization of higher education. Developing this focus Sarah Graves and Angela Maher, from Oxford Brookes University, examined research from different countries on graduate competencies and considered the concept of the 'global graduate' and the implications of employability for higher education.

Given that 'emergent' suggests 'evolving' or 'coming into being', it is not surprising that a good proportion of the research presented focused on the ways in which technological advancement is shaping teaching and learning. The use of technology and e-learning is bound up with cultural, pedagogical, technical and organisational factors which were widely acknowledged in the papers presented. For instance, Marie-Thérèse Barbaux (University of Sydney, Australia) considered mobile learning in the context of teacher education. Through studying patterns of social communication of young people using a range of new technologies, Barbaux is searching for a pedagogy that can both exploit emerging behaviour patterns and the technologies on which they rely for teaching and learning. Continuing a similar theme of considering learning in its social context, Aisha Walker and Rebecca O'Rourke (University of Leeds) shared the preliminary findings of a study exploring the use of message boards exploring the 'social semiotic space' as a site for formal and informal learning. Finally, a presentation by Stephen Roulston, from C2K, Northern Ireland, reported on the fairly standard use of a virtual learning environment but in a creative context: having pupils from Protestant and Catholic areas in Northern Ireland working collaboratively online. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this project was the student feedback that the collaboration that occurred would never have happened in a face-to-face context. These papers, and others unfortunately too numerous to mention, illustrate how colleagues are harnessing the opportunities that new technology has to offer but not in an unconditional way. The experimental work of colleagues presenting at the conference was convincing of rigour and commitment to researching and evaluating interventions to provide conceptual and theoretical underpinning for new approaches.

However, not all presenters spoke of new technologies or approaches. Jenny Moon's quest for understanding stories, what their essential qualities are and how they might be used for teaching purposes, can also be closely linked to the drive for student engagement. One of the strongest features of stories is their power to engage the listener and in her workshop, Moon, from Bournemouth University, focused on the potential for harnessing this power for pedagogical purposes. Her session provided a stark contrast to those that focused on 'new technologies' by illustrating the power of a very 'old and traditional technology' that is widely used in higher education albeit that its value may not be fully recognised. Presenters in the emergent pedagogies theme seemed to illustrate with reference to their research that both old and new approaches have the power to engage students.

Theme 2: Pedagogical Experiences and Evaluation

In contrast to the emerging pedagogies theme, with its identification of "what might be", the pedagogical experiences and evaluation theme sought to represent "what is". Theme Leader, Frances Deepwell noted that the papers captured the state of the art in higher education practice, with its

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diversity and richness. This strand of the conference demonstrably, and constructively, critiqued the value of learning encounters in contemporary higher education.

The papers represented a fair mix of the student voice and the faculty perspective. Students were typified as creative entrepreneurs, as users, as enquirers, self-assessors, action researchers and as outsiders. Teaching colleagues were presented as intellectuals, as practitioners, as judges (of fitness to practice), as innovators, as entrepreneurs and as “significant others”. The explanatory nature of the papers broadly addresses the question at the heart of Pawson and Tilley’s realistic evaluation approach: “what works well, for whom and under what conditions” (Pawson & Tilley, 1997).

What works for students at London Metropolitan University on a foundation programme for international students, according to research by Digby Warren, are cross-cultural interactions between student peers as they attempt to reconcile their differing world views. Warren questions, however, whether this can be achieved in the short time span of the foundation frameworks that often characterise this type of international student activity. Similarly, for Joanna Tapper of the University of Melbourne, Australia the diverse student body can find shared understandings through structured participation in group assignments. With a different set of students, Janet Hughes (University of Dundee) advocated student participation in assessment, where the benefits of the assessment innovation were measured by an increase in student performance and appreciation by students of the process. Less clear cut findings emerge from research by Ruth Taylor (Robert Gordon University) into the first-year experience and curriculum change.

If we consider what works for faculty colleagues, Graham Steventon (Coventry University) applies theories from his home discipline of criminology in order to explore the educational value of the relationship between the student and the lecturer, as a ‘significant other’. This ties in with the research of Marilyn Dorman, Pauline Collins and Jill Lawrence (University of Southern Queensland, Australia) into whether explicit commitment to a set of values are a significant indicator in determining good teaching practice. Several papers addressed the challenge to academic values of entrepreneurialism, for example, Andy Bissett (Sheffield Hallam University) who argues that the pressure to engage in “third stream” activities is fundamentally changing academic professionalism, and the paper by Adrian Bromage and Gurnam Singh (Coventry University) on whether academics believe themselves to be intellectuals.

As with the other conference themes, many papers reflected on the use of technology in higher education and there was variation in the evaluation of effectiveness. For academic colleagues engaging in innovations in e-learning at the University of Southampton, quality emerges from genuine collaborations, according to Karen Fill’s interview-based research. Whereas the personal inquiry approach taken by Philip Watland (Coventry University) raised questions about the sustainability of networked theory-led pedagogies in even small-scale entrepreneurial e-learning programmes. Research by Martin Oliver and Sara Price (Institute of Education) also indicated how pedagogical practices, and academic identities, were transferring into new media, whilst remaining largely unaffected by the introduction of e-learning. The transformational power of e-learning appears not yet to be established.

From a reflective analysis of their own practice, and the evaluation of the practice of others, many of the authors under this theme were able to build localised theories that found resonance amongst the audience. The tendency was not to generalise beyond the specific context of the inquiry, but rather to identify qualities within the study that in some measure represents new knowledge. In this context, the case studies presented were therefore able to make what Stake calls ‘petite generalisations’ (1995:8), or tentative assertions of contextualised knowledge.

Theme 3: Academic Writing

Academic Writing was a strong theme at iPED 2006 and brought together a community of writing scholars from around the world. The theme leader, Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams, and its host, Mary Deane, highlighted the emergence of Academic Writing as a vibrant field of research within higher education. The Royal Literary Fund, a charity dedicated to improving student writing, sponsored the conference reception and distributed copies of *Writing Matters* (Davies, Swinburne and Williams 2006), a report on strategies for teaching writing at university. Conference participants were also

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offered a tour of Coventry University's Centre for Academic Writing, which researches and supports both staff and student writing.

The four sub-topics within this strand are inter-related. The first centred on the use of e-learning to teach writing and the effects of new technologies on traditional writing pedagogies. Focussing on the concept of writing genres and drawing on Kress's (2003) work on changing literacy practices 'in the new media age', Erik Borg (Northumbria University) explored whether new technologies are ending the era of 'perceived regularities of written texts'. Arna Peretz from Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel examined the impact of online forum discussions in Academic Writing courses. Similarly, Magnus Gustafsson of Chalmers University of Technology, Sweden collaborated with Art Young and Donna Reiss of Clemson University in the United States in a presentation addressing the challenges and opportunities of using an interactive weblog to promote cross-cultural online writing and discussion. Mary Deane and Karen Bull (Coventry University) showcased their innovations in e-learning designed to enhance students' critical thinking and writing in Art and Design. Together, these thought-provoking presentations raised timely questions about effective and efficient means of exploiting e-learning to strengthen students' writing in a variety of cultural contexts.

The second category of presentations argued for the need to characterise and teach disciplinary writing conventions. This is particularly salient in the UK context because of early subject specialisation at university. Hilary Nesi (University of Warwick) reported on BAWE, an ESRC-funded project constructing a corpus of student writing assignments. The purpose of this corpus is to facilitate research into the characteristics of proficient student writing. It is designed to expose the generic similarities and differences between disciplinary conventions at different levels of undergraduate and postgraduate study. Rebecca O'Rourke and Miriam Zukas (University of Leeds) also investigated relationships between academics' disciplinary identities and pedagogical practices. Richard Bailey (Northumbria University) explored pedagogical practices within student writing support in a range of disciplines in relation to Lea and Street's seminal theory (1998) identifying three paradigms of writing support. These papers argued that by being explicit about disciplinary conventions tutors can increase the confidence and performance of student writers.

In considering 'the implications of these findings for [developing] institutional practices in teaching Academic Writing', Bailey's presentation also contributed to the third topic addressed by presenters: innovation in writing support. John Heyda from Miami University in the United States explored the question of how the teaching of reading strategies might inform the teaching of writing in higher education while Jonathan Worley of St. Mary's University College, Belfast reported on the establishment of his peer writing tutoring programme. Mark Evans (Coventry University) introduced a model of teaching processes of writing whereby students actively participate in the generation of knowledge. Umme Salma Mujtaba of Knowledge Horizon in the United Arab Emirates discussed institutional structures and the provision of writing support for her students. Mary McKeever and John Wrigglesworth (University of Plymouth) also explained their model for integrating genre-based discipline-specific Academic Writing courses into university curricula. This sub-group interrogated established pedagogical methods and showcased successful innovative projects with varied implications for the academic community.

The final category of presentations focussed on the increasingly global requirement for academics to present and publish research in English. Research into this area has recently been brought to the fore by scholars such as Lillis and Curry (2006), and conference presenters investigating this line of enquiry showed what a widespread and significant concern it is for Academic Writing research and teaching practice. Presentations by Sonia Vasconcelos, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and by Lawrie Hunter, Kochi University of Technology, Japan, discussed models for teaching conventions of scholarly writing in English to post-graduates and academics. Magnus Gustafsson outlined how the Bologna Agreement's decision that English be used 'as the "medium of instruction"' on Master's programmes 'affects the identity of higher education professionals in Sweden' and other European countries. These papers prompted thought about the choices Academic Writing specialists are making across the world, and the political initiatives to which we are all called to respond.

Discussion

Our conference aims were, firstly, to explore the conference theme of Pedagogical Research and Academic Identities collaboratively, and secondly, to provide networking opportunities for pedagogical researchers. To gain insight into delegates' impressions, feedback sheets were provided. The heterogeneous delegate profile (nationalities, research focus, experience) provided a challenging range of expectations and interesting responses which have been reviewed in preparing for the 2007 conference

We ourselves feel that the first iPED conference was successful in achieving its aims. One of our most important realisations, however, was one which we had not anticipated: that the conference highlighted the constraints under which certain colleagues labour that bar them from this kind of collaborative engagement. Economic constraints clearly play a part in enabling academic colleagues to take an active role in pedagogical research activities, including attendance at international conferences. However, other, more subtle, factors also play a part. A review of the hits on the conference web-site and investigation into peer review outcomes indicate that colleagues in high income countries were much more likely to submit, to be accepted and to attend this event than colleagues elsewhere. As noted within the Academic Writing theme, an English-language requirement imposes academic writing expectations or cultural barriers which may prove troublesome to some colleagues. This places peer reviewers in the difficult position of having to reject papers that have potential but are unrecoverable within the time available. As a result of this finding, we are considering an iPED research project to investigate ways in which some of these difficulties could be overcome.

Conclusions

iPED 2006 generated much debate regarding the mutual influence of pedagogical research and academic identity. The overall view of those involved was unsurprising – to be an academic in this context means to be continually challenged.

Each theme leader has identified a key issue raised through the conference which requires further exploration.

For Emergent Pedagogies: While new technologies need to be explored in order to discover their usefulness, should not older technologies be revisited and their potential mined in new ways?

Pedagogical Experiences and Evaluation: How can the educational community theory-build from evaluations of contextualised pedagogical experiences?

For Academic Writing the key question is how to address English language barriers.

Regarding the more instrumental question of what makes a successful conference, we have arrived at a holistic view: each aspect of a conference contributes separately to its overall success but it is their interaction which is most important in creating an event which promotes useful academic exchange and which is fondly remembered by participants. Our own involvement with this conference has enriched our understanding of the themes explored, provided a range of contacts and potential collaborators and supplied a wealth of lessons on which to draw for iPED 2007. This article provides a means through which to share our understanding with the wider community.

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