

Learning and Pedagogic Development: Journals and Collaboration

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Let us introduce ourselves. We established and edit the University of Bedfordshire's *Journal of Pedagogic Development*, a publication that appears three times a year in hard copy and online. Its first issue was published in July last year, its launch taking place at the university's annual learning and teaching conference. The timing of the launch was carefully chosen because we wanted to establish that pedagogic development and learning and teaching in higher education are inseparable. Academics are knowledgeable and passionate about their disciplines, but how to communicate that knowledge and passion in a way that will engage and inform their students rarely forms any part in subject specific undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Why should it? How many of us thought, when settling down bleary-eyed to a 9 o'clock Monday morning lecture, that one day that slightly out-of-focus figure next to the lectern would be us? But that was then, and this is now. Taking an existentialist perspective, university teachers will always arise from different times, environments and perspectives to their learners. Pedagogic development is essential to close the gap of time and place so that the focus of the *JLDHE*, how students learn and how they make sense of academia, can be understood and realised.

This resonates with Chris Rust's message in the *JLDHE*'s first publication in 2009. He called for a paradigm shift to put learning at the centre of the student experience of a chosen discipline, and suggested that notions of 'threshold concepts' and 'graduate attributes' (Rust, 2009, pp.2-3) could inform progress. Threshold concepts offer conceptions of how we might close the gap, effectively supporting students through areas of 'troublesome knowledge' (Rust, 2009, p.3) on a journey of transforming knowledge, increasing confidence and the attainment of graduate attributes. But paradigm shift

involves academics going on a similar journey through pedagogic development. To us, pedagogic development is not just the transmission of learner-centred teaching strategies. It is true that the *Journal of Pedagogic Development* was established to provide a forum where good practice in teaching and learning, underpinned by research, could be shared to stimulate a 'can do' environment. We wanted our readers to put down their copy, or shut down the window, with the thought, 'If they can do that, I can too. I'll give it a go!'. But sausages on a one-pronged fork tend to fall off into the barbecue. It occurred to us that a process that combined several 'prongs' might have more chance of success.

One of these is our annual writing retreats and we are delighted that John Hilsdon has agreed to join us at our Easter 2013 event as the external Guest Editor. The aim of the writing retreats is to provide early career researchers and writers with the support necessary to bring their work up to a publishable standard. The first stage is for prospective participants to submit a 300 word abstract by the end of October. Successful authors are then asked to write up the full paper. They submit the first draft in January for constructive feedback from us. They then work on their papers for a second submission in March, prior to the retreat. At the retreat, authors peer review articles, attend seminars to improve aspects of their work, and work with us and our external editor to complete the honing of their papers. At the end of the retreat we encourage participants to 'press send!' – to dispatch their papers electronically to their chosen publishers.

We look forward to talking to John about the next stages in learner development. Ideas promoted by contributors to the *JLDHE* and through the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE), as well as by Chris Rust and his colleagues at Oxford Brookes, have been at the forefront of putting the student at the centre of the learning/teaching interface over the last few years. However, at the *Improving Student Learning through Research and Scholarship* (ISL) conference at Lund University in Sweden, organised by Oxford Brookes, Chris Rust (2012) told delegates that ISL was at a crossroads. He suggested that this conference, celebrating twenty years of disseminating research into student learning by delegates past and present, may be the last because of his semi-retirement and the uncertainty of continuing engagement by Oxford Brookes. Also, the keynote lecture, by Professor Graham Gibbs (2012) of Winchester, advised that papers presented over the twenty years showed inconclusive evidence of student learning processes, learning performance and learning gains having been improved. His analysis showed that presage variables such as funding, research performance and institutional

reputation do not explain much of the variation in educational gains identified between institutions. Neither do products such as degree classifications, retention and employability, as these are predicated upon presage factors. The best predictors are measures of educational process, what institutions do with resources focused on student engagement to make the most of what their students have. Gibbs highlighted class size, student effort and engagement, who undertakes teaching, and the quantity and quality of feedback as valid process indicators. These factors are aspects of teaching and learning and as such are the remit of academics. This is a massive expectation for the academics who came into higher education to spread the good news of the subject that they love.

If any of the above sounds downbeat, this is no reason by itself not to acknowledge it. Whether our primary field of interest is learning development or pedagogy, our student body is of paramount importance, and previous defeats can be inspirational – albeit after wounds have been licked. Indeed, we advocate that journals like ours and the *JLDHE* have an essential part to play in continuing the work of closing the gaps between inspiration, expectations and practice.

We were also heartened in our role of editors and writing retreat leaders by other messages coming from the conference. Clearly heard was the call to work with teams to disseminate individual good practice. Swedish colleagues, for example Roxå & Mårtensson (2012) from Lund University, reported that substantial funding in Sweden on projects to improve student learning had done little to change practice. They suggested that the dreams and strategies of past conferences may be in need of fresh perspectives and/or interpretations, whilst emphasising that teaching through research is as much needed as before. The good work that was being done by individuals had ‘to come out of the silos’, and reach all teachers. They suggested that research should become a joint enterprise using common language, not left to individual endeavour. Their key message was ‘don’t talk to individuals, talk to the teams’. We see the writing retreats and the *Journal of Pedagogic Development* as ways of reaching not only individuals, not simply teams, but communities of enquirers whose everyday lives are embedded in scholarship and research. We fully endorse the need to encourage colleagues to come out of their silos and see both the *Journal of Pedagogic Development* and the writing retreats as encouraging this. Both initiatives aim to disseminate and embed individual good practice, based on research.

We believe that our relationship with the *JLDHE*, through this editorial and our writing retreats, will support us in our pedagogic endeavours to deepen our knowledge and understanding of the exciting and fruitful developments in learning and teaching that are taking place beyond our silo. Furthermore, although our respective journals might not seem, at first glance, to share much of a common readership, we believe that the *JPD* embodies ideas and ideals similar to those promoted by the *JLDHE*: to encourage scholarly work in the field of learning development from the UK and elsewhere; to inform our readers of good practice emerging from other continents; and to represent the breadth of ideas in learning development and contemporary pedagogy. For these reasons we believe that our readers could learn from your readers and the papers that you publish; and vice versa. Like the *JLDHE*, we are focused on identifying and strengthening the links between research and practice in learning and pedagogic development; and we are grateful for the opportunity to express our views through this guest editorial!

For more information about our projects, please go to:

www.beds.ac.uk/learning/support/jpd.

References

- Gibbs, G. (2012) 'Improving student learning: where should we direct our effort?', *Improving Student Learning through Research and Scholarship (ISL) Conference*. Lund University, Sweden 29-31 August.
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