

# **Practitioner Research in Higher Education**

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## **Editorial**

Sue Bloxham  
CDEPP@cumbria.ac.uk

For many years as an educational developer and researcher, my suspicions have been that the success of so much pedagogical innovation is largely down to the committed and passionate tutors concerned rather than the innovative practice per se; their relationships with students, the time they've invested, the enthusiasm that they've exuded and other characteristics of excellent teaching. In addition, we have been bedevilled by innovations disappearing from view once the project team is disbanded or the enthusiastic champion moves on. This is rather dispiriting for those of us concerned to enhance higher education learning through exploring new approaches. Consequently, it is satisfying when innovation is tackled in a more pervasive way. In the case of the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI), perhaps there has been no choice but to embrace innovation in distributed learning at the institutional level and this edition of the journal provides an insight into that experience at both the strategic and operational level.

This edition of the journal explores two, inter-related themes; firstly the use of evaluation studies to investigate innovation and develop practice and, secondly, the development of blended learning methods and resources to enhance distributed education. The papers are located in a range of educational contexts from work-based learning linked to a campus university, through a partner college system, to distance learning programmes in UHI and other institutions.

Simco and Campbell's paper discusses the specific institutional context for three of the papers, that is UHI; an educational context which is significantly different from the traditional university model. The paper sets the strategic context for the evaluations of operational practice that follow. It describes the pedagogical model and aspirations of UHI including raising questions about the challenges it faces in achieving these ambitious aspirations.

The first of the three UHI papers, written by Engstrand and Hall, evaluates the on-line streaming of video-conferenced classes for later viewing by students. They identify the importance of ensuring students are aware of resources and know how to access them. Interestingly, this small study found no reduction in knowledge acquisition when comparing attendance at video conferenced classes compared with only viewing a recording of the session. Consequently, they suggest that future efforts need to focus on developing other aspects of these resources such as how their design might support student 'engagement, enjoyment and group cohesion'.

Likewise, Summers and Douglas have explored how the lecturer's role changes in distance learning and evaluate how well various on-line tools can be used to address the challenges of learning and teaching remotely in the UHI context. They found that their students' existing use of information and communication technologies, particularly social networking tools, provides a positive context for the development of on-line learning. Whilst this experience makes remote learning 'quite natural' for some students, it is the lecturers who face the greater challenge. Interestingly, for those working in more conventional contexts, they found that tools used initially for distance learning have been found to have real benefits for traditional higher education provision.

For Murray, the importance of the social and physical context of learning is also important and she describes how these considerations influenced the development of the first masters degree at UHI. The programme, for academic staff engaged in teaching UHI programmes, adopted a social constructivist philosophy as a basis for selecting its approach to on-line teaching. The paper raises interesting issues about the potential advantages of on-line learning in employer-based programmes. The programme context and the work context for students is overlapping and therefore the incentive to participate and build networks supports and is supported by the networked learning experience.

Hurford and Read continue the theme of evaluation by researching the impact of resources used to facilitate tutors and students' journey towards a 'common understanding' of academic and practice-based learning on a distance-learning based teacher education programme. Supporting students' academic writing and professional practice, they were concerned to find resources which encouraged student autonomy rather than adherence to tutor prescription. The tutors developed several audio and visual resources that students could listen to and watch via the VLE. These were positively received by the students and the work raises the interesting issue of how on-line resources can generate a sense of 'social presence' which is considered influential for student engagement.

Eliahoo, in the context of mentors for lecturers on a teacher education course for the life long learning sector, raises significant questions about the difficulties of impact measures in evaluating practice in the complex field of education. The evaluation methodology interestingly asked the mentors and mentees to decide on and gather their own quantitative data to show impact of their relationship on the learning of students in the mentee's classes. Whilst Eliahoo challenges the robustness of much quantitative data in measuring impact because of the problems isolating 'directly measurable short term' effects, the methodology of this project used that data in a more interpretive way. It involved the participants reflecting on and mediating the data. She argues that it is the perceptions and reflections of the mentors and mentees which gives a more 'nuanced' interpretation of how the mentor-mentee relationships influenced student learning. This was a small scale study but the outcomes in terms of both our understanding of mentoring in this context and in developing an innovative evaluation methodology is important.

Finally, whilst there has been considerable evaluation of innovative assessment methods, more traditional methods such as essays and examinations have not faced the same scrutiny. Whelan and Brown's paper addresses the evaluation of a seen examination in terms of how students perceive it and how it influences learning. Their study revealed conflicting views about how much it encouraged learning and the 'seen' nature of the examination did not appear to reduce staff fears about examinations encouraging a surface approach to learning.

Across the piece the papers continue to report the benefits of practitioners evaluating teaching, learning and assessment initiatives in higher education; working in a context which is bound at one and the same time by both tradition and the need to adapt to changing demands and purposes.

***Sue Bloxham***