

# **Practitioner Research in Higher Education**

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## **Editorial**

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This issue of Practitioner Research in Higher Education presents a range of evaluative case study papers focused on aspects of teaching, learning and assessment in higher education across a number of subject disciplines and professional fields. The papers adopt a range of different standpoints and perspectives. The action oriented enquiries into teaching, learning and assessment presented in the issue illustrate the commitment of lecturers in higher education to enhancement of the student experience. This raises a challenge for leaders at programme, departmental and institutional levels; to what extent is this 'bottom-up' energy drawn upon and disseminated into wider enhancement of the student experience at programme and institutional levels?

There is considerable benefit to a wide audience across the higher education sector of in-depth small-scale evaluation of a generic teaching strategy applied within a subject specific discipline or professional field context. In the first paper Janice Bell focuses on problem-based learning, in this case within a Masters level programme in Occupational Therapy. The analysis of the apparent successes and failures of the strategy become more grounded because the author has a clear grasp of the nature of the student group and of the professional field. In this evaluation it is refreshing to see the problem-based learning used as a collaborative learning strategy and not directly linked to the final assessment of the module. Although in her conclusion the author considers moving to stronger alignment, it appears that much learning occurred for the majority of students in a lower stakes activity with formative feedback from peers and tutors. Perhaps moving to constructive alignment may lead to more strategic approaches but less collaborative and in-depth learning by students?

In the second paper John Cowan & Diane Cherry present an innovative and collaborative piece of writing to evaluate practice and propose an innovative and collaborative approach to assessment of higher level thinking through writing a reflective diary. The paper gives voice to the experiences of a student in evaluating the contribution to learning of a reflective diary. It proposes and applies principles in developing an approach to supporting learning from a reflective diary and combining self, peer and tutor assessment of higher level thinking. The reader is invited to consider how practicable the suggested approach could be for wider application across higher education programmes.

The paper by Paul Sutton presents a thought-provoking essay that analyses assessment in higher education from a political economy perspective. In particular the essay focuses on the issue of instrumentalism, of students adopting a strategic approach to assessment. It points out that within the current context of higher education it is not surprising that tutors tend to teach to the test. Using an example from his practice the author considers a course in which the assessment included a judgement on the effective use by students of earlier feedback in order to improve their final assignment. The students also had to devise their own question for the final assignment. The paper argues that a pragmatic response to the political context of higher education is feasible, in which tutors engage with students in a dialogic struggle to teach for the test.

Lisa Murtagh investigates induction to university by investigating the perspectives of potential students through their response to a pre-university workshop focused on concepts of independent learning and assessment in higher education. The evaluative case study provides useful insight because of its engagement with student voice and through its involvement of 'friends or family' who accompanied potential students to the workshop. This evaluation argues convincingly for a more interactive and engaging approach to the design of university visit days.

Integrating formative feedback opportunities into the early stages of modules is a strategy that aims to support student learning with timely and relevant support for improving their work. The evaluative case study by Caroline Burns and Martin Foo investigates the impact of such an intervention on international final year students. The paper argues that the intervention motivated students to engage in writing earlier in the course, even if the contribution to raising achievement as measured by grades was difficult to establish.

Increasingly higher education involves blended learning, a mixture of face to face activity, online activity and independent study. Evaluation of the online learning element of student programmes is just one part of an increasing interest in Internet Based Research. In the final paper of the issue Ian Convery and Diane Cox discuss the particular ethical challenges of this field. They present a pragmatic set of ethical guidelines but warn that rapid change and wide variation across the field means that researchers need to maintain a questioning approach. The authors propose a negotiated ethics approach that recognises the need to consider the particular context of the online interaction, the methodology and the research question.

Overall this issue illustrates the value of situated and subject discipline specific studies especially where they focus on analysis of student voice or working collaboratively with students to enhance learning.

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