

Collecting like-minded people together has always been seen by us as a valuable way of exchanging and hearing about new practice. ESCalate supports many events and here we ask two event leaders to tell us their stories.

Learning dialogues

John Butcher

On 13 May 2010, 120 academic colleagues from as far afield as Australia and the United States gathered in Northampton to share ideas around the importance of learning dialogues in Higher Education at the University of Northampton's third Learning and Teaching conference. The conference featured keynotes from Professor Neil Mercer (University of Cambridge) and Professor Mark Schofield (Edge Hill University), as well as 35 paper and poster presentations and 6 workshops exploring the theme of learning dialogues as a strategy to enhance the student experience.

Neil Mercer talked of three models of Higher Education (HE) learning: apprentice-scholar; lecture; student-centred; and the necessity to construct an active role for learners within these through a sociocultural perspective. Following this, Mark Schofield advocated the alignment of purpose, audience and form through learning dialogues.

Throughout the day four key issues, framed within a commitment to understanding the value of *dialogues for learning* and to *learning-focussed universities*, emerged:

Researching the student experience through learning dialogues

The student voice in HE is still little heard in educational and pedagogic research. We learned about the value of working with undergraduate students as researchers on innovative pedagogic projects. For example, in the URB@N scheme (University Research Bursaries at Northampton), students use dialogue to gather authentic evidence of learning processes through peer engagement (Butcher and colleagues) and at Sheffield Hallam undergraduates are involved in skills research (Glover and colleagues). We heard about the effectiveness of Socratic techniques in mathematical education (Fradkin) and the way our understanding of learners' responses to assessment feedback can be enhanced (Lumsden et al, 2010). Also, as universities seek ever more creative ways of extending their teaching environments, it was fascinating to hear research findings which analysed students' gravitation towards certain spaces which brought in affective dimensions to learning (Powis, 2010).

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Event page: University of Northampton Learning and Teaching Conference: <http://escalate.ac.uk/6845>



Virtual learning dialogues

Technology enhanced learning has galvanised opportunities for students to learn from one another, and new learning theories have developed as collaborative online learning has been investigated across a range of disciplines. We learned how dialogues through technology prompted more effective student engagement with assessment feedback (Khatri; Ringrose), and opened up opportunities for a more playful pedagogy utilising video (Gordon & Fitzgerald).

Learning dialogues as talk in HE settings

Recognising both the power of socially constructed knowledge, and the increasingly diverse range of HE students, learning dialogues have facilitated a more egalitarian and inclusive pedagogy (peer learning, peer mentoring, peer assessment, shared knowledge construction through dialogue in inclusive settings), while raising the challenge of assessing these dialogues. We learned about the effectiveness of dialogue in tutorials (Attenburrow), including the creative use of drama (Wu) and

drawing techniques (Rogers) to complement skills development through problem solving (Adams and colleagues). Importantly, the crucial significance of dialogue with learners in the context of those universities aspiring to a more inclusive culture was highlighted, especially to identify learning needs more effectively and to implement fairer assessment systems (Butcher et al, 2010).

Learning dialogues as a professional development tool

The accreditation of professional competence increasingly recognises the importance of communities of practice, of working and learning alongside a 'knowledgeable other' and of recording 'agreed' evidence of professional competence electronically. Lastly, we learned of the value of dialogue with colleagues to elicit evidence of the sustained impact of continuing professional development (Northcott, 2010).

References

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- All other citations refer to the conference above, abstracts of which can be found here: <http://www.northampton.ac.uk/learningteachingconference2010>



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The University of Northampton's fourth Learning and Teaching conference *Learning Global* takes place on 10th and 11th May 2011: <http://www.northampton.ac.uk/info/20278/continuing-professional-development/1062/learning-global-fourth-learning-and-teaching-conference>