Editorial – Autumn 2018

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One of the clearest signs of Autumn is the throng of new students appearing in a crush on the landing between the CELT office and the lecture theatre, waiting excitedly for their first lectures of the new academic year. Squeezing my way through the buzz of lively, chatty, nineteen-year-old expectancy, what I see is not embryonic accountants, historians, chemists, business managers, teachers, designers or sociologists, but people.

In a speech in 1867, which would have perplexed Universities ministers of the 21st century, John Stuart Mill said that:

"Universities are not intended to teach the knowledge required to fit men! for some special mode of gaining their livelihood. Their object is not to make skilful lawyers, or physicians or engineers, but capable and cultivated human beings... Men are men before they are lawyers, or physicians, or merchants, or manufacturers; and if you make them capable and sensible men they will make themselves capable and sensible lawyers and physicians." (Mill, 1867)

Of course, a successful lawyer needs to learn the law, but in forgetting that lawyers, chemists, designers or whatsoever are people first, and lawyers, chemists and designers second, universities risk failing in their purpose of transforming lives and society for the better.

In forgetting Mill, the relentless twenty-first century focus on skills and metrics, whilst an understandable consequence of economic uncertainty, drains the human being out of being human. Many of the papers in this edition of LTiA (and others) report on some of the 60 or so projects funded by Manchester Met through CELT since 2014. This has encouraged a welcome and energetic infusion of great people-centred ideas for our pedagogy, which sits happily as a counterpoint to the day-to-day policy-driven emphasis on systems and process. I do not believe that many of the UK’s Higher Education Institutions yet fully understand the distinction between

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1 This was 1867. It was predominantly men only at most universities then, unfortunately, apart from UCL. These days the sentiment applies to everyone of course…
quality assurance (QA) and quality enhancement (QE). The former is about making sure we meet agreed sector standards, achieved by devising effective and appropriate systems, regulations and protocols. The latter is about pursuing improvement in learning. The Scottish HE sector, which has long led the way in defining and pursuing quality enhancement, has defined QE as “taking deliberate steps to bring about improvement in the effectiveness of the learning experiences of students” (QAA Scotland, 2017: 3). Even this can be problematic, however, as teachers tend to interpret it as exploring and implementing the kind of innovations reported in the papers in this volume, and university administrations tend to interpret it as a call to beef up regulations and metrics. However, “effective learning experiences” are qualitative phenomena which take place in classrooms, coffee shops, and in reflections on reading on the bus home; all promoted by discussion and interactive ways of exploring theoretical ideas and empirical knowledge. That is all largely immeasurable, and is enhanced, not by a revised regulatory process, but by scholarship.

CELT’s Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL) projects are a first-class example of scholarly practice in the university. Lee Shulman, one of America’s great educational scholars, defined scholarship as follows:

"… scholarship … should manifest at least three key characteristics: It should be public, susceptible to critical review and evaluation, and accessible for exchange and use by other members of one’s scholarly community."

(Shulman, 1998)

The papers in this volume exemplify that scholarly practice: colleagues undertaking work which we can now all see and review, and then use for the benefit of ourselves and our students.

One of the UK’s equally eminent HE scholars, Ron Barnett, put scholarship less formally, and in a way which makes it accessible to all of us, whatever our research and teaching roles. Barnett said (2010 - my paraphrase) that being scholarly simply requires reading, writing, thinking and sharing. Nothing too grandiose or difficult about that!

Universities, as institutions, tend to misunderstand scholarship (which is rather unfortunate) and present a false dichotomy between scholarship (vaguely defined as something that careful teachers do
to check the quality of their practice) and research (which is what brings reflected glory to department heads and vice-chancellors). From Shulman and Barnett’s definitions we can see that scholarship is common to both teaching and research. And if we refer to another great American scholar, Ernest Boyer (1990), we remember that in fact every great university embraces the unity of scholarly teaching and scholarly research. When we seek to separate them as distinct functions, then we fundamentally misunderstand the purpose and nature of the university.

One feature that many of the papers in this issue appear to have in common is their presentation of accounts of human drivers and responses to the various disciplinary challenges and endeavours they describe. Above all, whether teachers or students, the participants in these stories reveal that once the institutionally prescribed attempt has been made to learn more stuff, or to learn the same stuff more efficiently and effectively, the continuing, quintessential story of education is about being and becoming human.

I define education by three core values, relating to purpose, people and process. First, the **transformation** (of people and society through education), is the value defining the purpose of education. Second, **community** is the idea that puts people at the heart of education. Third, **scholarship** is the process by which we ensure that education serves people by supporting their transformation.

Without the kind of commitment to transformation, community and scholarship that these papers illustrate, our education will fail. This is my final editorial before I leave Manchester Metropolitan University, and through it I warmly thank all the colleagues who have demonstrated, through their scholarship, their unstinting commitment to our university community and the transformation of its people.

I’ll leave the last word to John Dewey (1893) – feeling rather sad that it still seems relevant today:

"If I were asked to name the most needed of all reforms in the spirit of education, I should say: ‘Cease conceiving of education as mere preparation for later life, and make of it the full meaning of the present life’."
References


