

THE OPEN PLENARY DISCUSSION

Nicholas Mayes

The discussion in the Plenary brought together many of the themes that had emerged during the day's programme. As Chair of the Plenary, Terry Mayes reminded the delegates that one of the purposes of the day was to attempt to influence policy. Terry introduced some key issues that had come into focus during earlier discussion and the Plenary considered each in turn, attempting to derive practical messages for policymakers.

The first of these looked at the impact of what Richard Hall had termed "external literacies". These refer to skills, knowledge and attitudes that students acquire in their online activities outside the formal settings of education. Bringing these into their learning activities within the curriculum can produce a range of effects that influence their own, their peers', and even their tutors' approaches. Richard gave some examples of students at De Montfort: game design students working with SMEs beyond the formal curriculum; computer science students working on scripting and finding technical help in Second Life; a psychology student with thousands of vlogs on YouTube. In each of these examples students were exploring their learning in networks that went well beyond the institution's VLE, and were exploiting expertise that in many cases went beyond that of their tutors. Clearly there is a subset of students who are highly digitally literate, and these learners are highly 'connected' in a way that implicitly widens their learning environment. For these students the notion of flexible learning is taken for granted, though such flexibility provides a challenge for institutional procedures built on an assumption that the institution controls the learning environment so that it can assure quality. Such digital natives also challenge the conventional relationships between students and their teachers. Some of the discussion around this topic concerned the expectation of learners that they need to choose their own social networks. Though these networks might be used for learning, the students may not be comfortable sharing such networks with those who will be responsible for assessing the quality of their work.

A counterbalancing view was put by Joseph Maguire who reported on the low level of digital literacy of many of the students in the course in which he had attempted to introduce an element of co-creation. However, Steve Draper reported evidence that a survey of digital awareness amongst students had revealed a higher level of familiarity with social networking tools for level one students than for level four, so the level of digital literacy of incoming students is probably increasing rapidly. Nevertheless, Steve reminded the group that merely being fluent with one or two social networking tools, like Facebook, does not necessarily imply digital literacy in the sense that Richard Hall's examples implied. Kerr Gardiner, though, put the view that our idea of digital literacy is changing all the time. For example, it would no longer be regarded as necessary to write HTML.

The discussion widened to consider how far HEIs are responsible for ensuring that all students are fully equipped with the skill and knowledge that would allow them to exploit Web 2.0 possibilities for enhanced learning. The fact is that the set of required skills and knowledge is changing too fast for a curriculum that

might be intended to last for four years. A certificate of Web 2.0 competence gained in year one would seem quaintly out of date by year two. Nevertheless, the digital divide is real and the more we encourage the idea of co-creation the more disadvantaged are students who fall on the wrong side of the divide. This takes us right into the debate about generic skills and the extent to which they can be embedded in mainstream teaching of disciplines. What attributes should a graduate in the 21st century have, and how far should HE go in supporting them?¹ Some participants in the discussion saw a deficit model driving this agenda, and expressed concern about the negative consequences of this.

The Chair introduced the term 'academic literacy' into the discussion. This is intended to widen the concept of digital literacy to include the skills of critical thinking and enquiry. Not all the discussants were convinced that this term would convey what was intended. Steve Draper wondered whether social skills should be regarded as important here. He admits to finding it challenging to work in a "leaderless herd" and assumes that many undergraduates also find this difficult. As the discussion about academic literacy continued it became clearer that there are many components of '21st century literacy' that should be addressed. Fluency with all aspects of modern technology is a key requirement for the building of successful performance in every area of modern life, associated as it should be with social and personal confidence, awareness and sensitivity to social and political agendas, and the ability to make informed judgements. Academic literacy refers to a basic flexibility to adapt to rapid changes and it is perhaps not very well served by the teaching of a standard discipline-based curriculum.

The discussion moved on to the challenge of equipping staff with the confidence to move in the direction this symposium was trying to encourage: Christina Mainka's workshop had revealed this as a key issue. Martin Oliver suggested that current strategies had alienated staff by emphasising their "deficiencies". Mark Johnson and Kerr Gardiner both contributed to the discussion around this point, emphasising the need for institutional policies to grasp the importance of encouraging staff to explore and discover for themselves the pedagogical possibilities. Geoff Goolnik raised the concept of a "sandpit area" for staff, though Nicola Cargill-Kipar reminded us that so long as institutional policies offer more reward for research than for teaching, we will continue to see a low level of engagement in such approaches. Angela Benzies described how hard it is to make progress in a single area of teaching – a module, say – when the individual is embedded in a teaching culture that hardly changes from year to year.

The Plenary then focused on the central topic of the symposium: the co-creation of knowledge. The Chair suggested that the term raises several questions by its ambiguity. The co-creation of what and by whom and for what purpose? In her keynote Betty Collis had emphasised the learning benefits students derived from the act of creating materials. The discussion centred on the need for this task to be purposeful and authentic for each learner. One example is to ask students to produce materials from which others will learn: placing the learner in the role of teacher is a powerful constructivist device. But will the materials produced really

¹ The nature of 21st century graduate attributes is the subject of the latest Scottish HE enhancement theme, aiming to integrate all previous themes. See www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk

be used for teaching others? Indeed, Terry Mayes questioned the pedagogical rationale for this since delivering materials for learning is not in itself an effective pedagogy for the recipient, only for the creator. In Joseph Maguire's example he had to rethink the intention that video podcasts would be reused by the following year's students, although the reason for this had more to do with the need to assure the quality of the content than to enhance pedagogy. Betty Collis suggested that having stages of feedback prior to video production would have helped in this case. Terry's suggested approach was to capture the process of creating the materials, and reuse this (e.g. video diaries and records of discussions) rather than the actual content itself.

Finally, there was an interesting discussion about online communication itself, and the importance of the affective dimension of this. Mark Johnson noted how we are all revealing more and more about ourselves through technology-mediated communication and wondered how far this should go in educational organisations. Steve Draper put the view that academic discussion actually precedes social bonding, rather than the other way round, as is usually assumed. Linda Creanor agreed that these issues were important in Web 2.0 pedagogies, but not yet properly understood. The group agreed that this was one of many issues of importance highlighted by the symposium that needed deeper understanding. The possibility of holding further symposia on this topic received general support.

The Chair concluded the Plenary by thanking the participants for a successful day. He particularly thanked the TESEP Project for its sponsorship of the event.