Report from the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Conference 11th to 14th September 2002 in Exeter

From: Elisabet Weedon

The BERA conference aims to report on educational research that is relevant to all sectors of education. It tends to focus on the primary and secondary sector but it also includes sections relevant to HE and FE.

The main reason for my presence at the conference was to give a presentation on the work that we are doing on developing resources to support reflective learning. This work is supported by an Escalate small grant and I was invited to take part in a symposium to disseminate the work being undertaken through Escalate. The symposium consisted of a presentation about Escalate and then two presentations outlining work in progress. My presentation led to a range of questions and an interesting debate around the issues of engaging students (and staff) in reflecting on their learning. In addition it led to an invitation to participate in another, LTSN funded project, on student feedback and evaluation.

The conference was organised around a number of symposia with up to four papers being presented in each symposium. The ones I attended fell into two main categories:

1. those relevant to the teaching that I do on the BA Social Science/BA Child and Youth Studies degrees
2. those relevant to general aspects of HE

1. Here I focused on two main areas: neuropsychology and mathematics education.

Neuropsychology. This set of presentations focused on how interdisciplinary research drawing on a bio-psycho-social approach can be used to inform educational practice. A range of papers were presented including focused laboratory research (links between tasks and specific brain function) to wider ranging studies reporting on nurture groups for children with a range of developmental and an intervention programme in communication. All were of interest in relation to both of the level 3 modules offered in BA Social Science.

Mathematics education. I went to three symposia in this area as it feeds directly into the module that I lead in Cognitive Development (our students undertake project work in relation to early mathematics). It was also the topic for my own PhD. These were all interesting and different. The first symposia included papers that explored understanding of mathematics through using a phenomenographic approach. It also included a paper reporting on an intervention with low achievers drawing specifically on Vygotsky's theory – this paper will be used as part of the resources for the degree and the presenter has agreed to send me a further paper explaining how she developed her intervention tasks. These two papers will be useful both in terms of illustrating mathematics education and development of methodology. The second symposia explored a range of issues in relation to teacher perspectives in teaching mathematics. The final symposia offered an opportunity to hear two authorities in the area of cognitive psychology and maths education – Peter Bryant and Terenzinha Nunes. They reported on a range of intervention studies in primary maths education. The final paper was quite different as it reported on a comparison between classrooms in the north east of England and St. Petersburg in Russia. Interesting differences between the way the teacher interacted with the class were reported. These papers will also form part of the resources for the students on our course.

2. Apart from attending and presenting at the Escalate symposium I attended two further symposia in relation to HE:

The Teaching and Learning Research Programme. This aimed to provide information on the government sponsored project into teaching and learning, to report on Phase II and explain how Phase III will progress under its new director. It was informative but did not provide anything that could not have been gained from simply reading the information leaflet provided.

General HE issues. The second symposium included four papers (some of which I have copies of) on grade inflation in honours classification, retention and institutional factors, key skills and employability and the impact on an HEI faculty of the professionalisation of teaching in HEI and the auditing process.

These were interesting papers (despite sounding rather dull!) The honours classification issues and the different ways that this can be carried out may well be of relevance to the Social Science team as we aim to develop an honours year shortly. The paper on retention provided an interesting framework on how we can explore issues around retention (and not simply focus on financial issues). The key skills and employability paper was brief – but explored the possibility of looking at self-efficacy in relation to employability. The final paper reported on work in progress. It explored, using an ethnographic approach, the experience of the members of one faculty in relation to the increased emphasis on teaching and learning within HE.

One interesting aspect of all these presentations was the wide range of methods and data gathering techniques used by the presenters. The papers from the conference should provide useful source materials of 'research in action' for our research methodology modules and possibly also useful for staff development in this area. The presentations could also provide useful ideas for student projects.

In addition to the symposia there were poster sessions (of limited value) and a considerable presence by several of the publishers of educational literature. Getting the opportunity to look at the actual book rather than just a book list was valuable and I have identified what looks like a relevant and up to date new text for our level 1 Research Methods as well as picking up a methodology book on qualitative data handling.

I have copies of the following papers (some in draft form – not to be quoted from without author's pemission):
Pendlington, S. Use of visualisation to scaffold primary children's mathematics.
Wilson, L., Andrew,C. & Below, J. A comparison of teacher/pupil interaction within mathematics lessons in St. Petersburg, Russia and the North-East of England.
Yorke, M. Beyond key skills: employability in higher education curricula
Yorke, M. How are honours degree classifications affected by the award algorithm?
Sabri, D. The (un)Making of the audit culture in a university humanities department.
Thomas, L. Building social capital to improve student success. (quoted in THES 11th Sep)
Whitebread, D. The myths of John T. Bruer: the implications for early years education of current research in cognitive neuroscience
Taylor, D. Prop or poisoned chalice: some implications of primary teachers' use and dependence upon commercial mathematics schemes.