Report from the 10th International Improving Learning Symposium held 4th – 6th September, 2002 in Brussels

From: Elisabet Weedon

The aim of this conference is to bring together researchers and practitioners who have a common interest in improving student learning. It was the second time I attended and presented at this conference. The conference provided an excellent opportunity to meet with colleagues from other institutions in Britain and abroad.

Our presentation (see attached abstract), which was submitted as a research seminar, attracted a good number of participants and the debate which followed was lively and informative. It is perhaps worth noting that of the papers submitted only 1/3 were accepted – this 1/3 included two UHI contributions. Our presentation will be written up as a paper which will include the contributions to the debate from those that participated in the session. It will be published in the conference proceedings (as was the paper we presented and submitted last year).

In addition to presenting a paper I also attended a range of presentations and the three process groups that were organised at the conference.

Presentation 1 focused on interventions that can impact on student learning and achievement. This paper was presented by Chris Rust and colleagues from Oxford Brookes University. It described how an exercise based on a marking workshop had made a significant contribution to students' grades on subsequent assessments. The marking workshop outlined in this presentation was relatively simple to organise and run and it is something that I feel would be worthwhile for our institution to test out. Such an intervention could also provide us with an opportunity to carry out some small scale research which could be published. The Oxford Brookes group were starting research into feedback to students and expressed an interest in my work on feedback to students.

Presentation 2 explored student ratings of courses and instruction. This paper provided further proof that methodology needs to be sound if results are to be taken seriously! However, the debate around the issue of student evaluations was interesting and wide-ranging. One particular issue was the outcome of such evaluations in relation to time of collection. One report was of changes (towards positive evaluations) as time elapsed. So evaluations collected months (or even a year or two) after a course is completed provides a different evaluation from one collected at the end of the course. This finding suggested some possible ideas for level 3 project work.

Presentation 3 came from a group of practitioners and a staff developer from Lund University in the south of Sweden. They outlined the development of a 'pedagogical academy' in their institution as a means of stimulating and rewarding scholarly teaching. The academy admits staff on the basis of a portfolio. This portfolio is assessed (by peer assessors) through a review by a scrutineer and by interview. The discussion in this session focused on the validity of the criteria for assessment, it also considered the support required during the portfolio completion phase and issues in relation to those that fail. It was interesting to note that this initiative was supported by funding – any member of staff admitted to the academy (on the basis of his/her portfolio achieving a pass) was given an immediate salary rise and the faculty benefited in the form of an extra grant.

The keynote speeches were:

- An overview of the papers presented in the 10 years since 1992 – by Graham Gibbs. This keynote outlined the initial aims of the symposia – which were that if you take student learning seriously and make changes based on a set of principles learning should improve. It also emphasised the importance of the phenomenographic method of studying student learning. The papers presented over the past ten years were explored and classified according to internal vs external factors. GG argued that there was still a lack of evidence (or poor evidence) in terms of demonstrating that intervention and change leads to improvement in learning and that there was a need to address these issues. Interestingly he offered no explanation as to what constitutes 'valid evidence'. The subsequent discussion in the process groups also noted this lack of offering any suggestions for a way forward and commented on the tension between theory and practice that was also evident in the speech.
- An exploration of learners' narratives by Marcia Magolda from Miami Univ., Ohio. This was an interesting presentation which focused on interviews with students using a story telling approach. The speaker had developed a framework which aimed to trace development from dependence on an external authority to 'self-authorship'. The presentation provided some interesting ideas for students' project work; however, it was also interesting from the point of view of the reactions it raised with the audience. There was a general sense that the speaker had ignored (or at least not referred) to similar research in the 70's and the 80's and also that it focused on a very narrow ethnic group (i.e. young white Americans, mainly male).
- Qualitative and quantitative approaches as complementary when studying student learning. This paper was presented jointly by Keith Trigwell and John Richardson. Each provided an overview of their own approach and Keith Trigwell's use of concepts from chemistry to explore and explain students' learning were fascinating. However, the presenters did not really explore the complementary aspect of the approaches – they tended to focus on their on approach and on explaining its merits. For example, statistics were used to demonstrate important differences between student groups but no mention was made about possible differences within these groups.

To summarise – this conference provided a range of interesting debates and also some ideas for both student project work (which will feed into delivery of level 3 Interdisciplinary module on the BA Social Science), some good ideas for our own research, some contacts in relation to such research and also some interest in the action research that I have undertaken (with requests for references).