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Mistry, V (2017) What the dickens! Innovations in Practice, 11 (2). pp. 88-90. ISSN 1757-921X

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What the dickens!

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Whilst browsing an old copy of the *Times Higher Education* (12 June, 2014), I came across a feature penned by the world-renowned historian Richard J. Evans; he was reflecting on becoming Provost at Gresham College. Founded in London in 1597, Evans explains that the College “has no students, awards no degrees, sets no examinations and owns no property.” Further, “there are no permanent teaching posts, and there is no set curriculum for its public lectures.” In all senses – a bizarre state of affairs! It was fascinating to get an insight into this seemingly eccentric institution and Evans recalls the mixed fortunes Gresham College experienced. This was because, by the eighteenth century, some professors insisted on lecturing in Latin, a requirement abolished only in 1811, while others failed to deliver any lectures at all!

Charles Dickens visited Gresham College in 1860 when, as Evans states, “it was still a rather somnolent institution.” Dickens recounts his visit when he was greeted by a “pleasant faced beadle, gorgeous in blue and gold broad cloth”, who told him that the

lecture he wanted to hear was to be delivered “in the theatre upstairs, sir. Come at once and you’ll hear it in English.”

“Isn’t it given in Latin at twelve?”

Dickens asked.

“Lor’ bless you, not unless there’s three people present, and there never is!” He replied.

Reflections on ‘traditions’ and ‘culture’ loom large in the literature on universities. I came across an engaging ‘snippet of a lecture’ delivered by Lund University’s Torgny Roxå (2015) on ‘developing a teaching culture’. Noted for his ‘significant conversations/networks’ conceptualisation (2009), amongst other work on microcultures in universities, Roxå notes how stable university teaching is; it is stabilised by a familiar pattern of culture. This reminded me of Jeffrey Di Leo’s (2017) recent reflections in a book chapter on Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of ‘habitus’:

The academic system is a deeply internalised, if not, unconscious one. It is geared toward the production and reproduction of social and emotional disposition that are fairly stable and homogenous. It is almost as though academe has

a neurosis to repeat what is familiar even if it is bad for us.

(Di Leo, 2017: 64)

In order to develop a teaching culture, and other teaching practices, practitioners must move beyond having just an opinion about teaching. The answer lies in, another stable tradition, research. In research, Roxå reminds us, we have to know our field, know other researchers, to have references to back up any claims; “research constantly seeks more sophistication – better statements, a better fit with reality, [research] moves forward thanks to this process.” Thus, bringing research into teaching is what’s needed to make both the teaching and learning experience a meaningful one.

Innovations in Practice exists to support this research – particularly to those new to research in teaching and learning. The role of the journal is discussed further in my Research in Practice paper that looks at the scale and scope of institutional higher education/teaching and learning journals in the UK. LJMU is one of a very small cluster of institutions in the UK that possesses an open access journal of this kind. As mentioned in a previous editorial, developing the journal further will, as Roxå (2015) advises, develop from “slow, steady and context-specific reform.” The journal represents the outcomes of both the conversations people are having about teaching and learning, as well as their research; small-scale evaluations, in-depth research, or literature reviews.

On the point of literature reviews, we must not forget the ‘naturally occurring data’ that requires synthesis of some kind. It is, therefore, especially pleasing to include an essay by Gerry Diver from LJMU’s Careers

Team. Gerry’s paper, derived from a Masters study on work placements and the student learning experience in Ireland, is especially timely given the current context of higher education in the UK. He poses numerous challenges that merit further investigation. For instance, in addition to the impact of workplace learning on students’ outcomes, how do learners’ emotional responses to their work experiences impact on their ability to develop ‘employability skills’ such as resilience, self-confidence or professionalism?

The ‘exposure’ to work-related opportunities is embellished by Linda Graham, also of the Careers Team. In Linda’s Viewpoint paper is a rich description of student interns’ perceptions of the opportunities afforded them whilst working with professionals in a local enterprise and at their event; in this case the Merseyside Dance Initiative in their prestigious 2017 Leap Festival. Not only do we read about the sense of accomplishment felt by the interns, but also of the enormous benefits brought to the local organisation, and region. As Linda emphasises, the opportunities brought about by the Career Accelerator Internship Programme serves to embolden LJMU as a civic university.

Continuing the creative theme, in 2016, the Teaching and Learning Academy was really excited to install a ‘labyrinth’ at the annual LJMU Teaching and Learning Conference. Alex Irving, of the Liverpool Screen School, unlocks the mysteries of the labyrinth and highlights its application and potential to HE institutions. The labyrinth, I found when I meandered around its winding, yet purposeful, path, is a great way of unlocking any thoughts and ideas. It offered a restful

and contemplative experience – one that I think has benefits to both staff and students.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of our contributors (authors and reviewers) who have dedicated their time to help produce this issue of *Innovations*. The next issue is scheduled for publication in summer 2018 when, as always, we also look forward to another successful LJMU Teaching and Learning Conference, where we shall continue the conversations about teaching and learning and, hopefully, inspire further research.

#LJMUIiP

References

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