

Whitchurch, C. (2007). “Beyond Boundaries – Finding a New Vocabulary” (Endnote). Higher Education Quarterly 61(3): 406-408.

Beyond Boundaries – Finding a New Vocabulary

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As the incoming Associate Editor of *Higher Education Quarterly*, I was struck by how many of the presentations at the 2006 SRHE Conference demonstrated the ongoing search for a vocabulary capable of supporting discourses at, and beyond, conventionally understood boundaries in higher education. The diversification of working arrangements and identities means that, increasingly, existing descriptors no longer fit, and new ones need to be found. At the most basic level, for instance, it is difficult to count, or categorise, different groupings of staff and students (they may even merge) within available classifications, and there is a vast literature on what it means in professional terms to be an academic.

The inadequacy of existing terminologies was illustrated at the conference, for instance, in the “crude nomenclature” available to describe the multi-level programmes now available in “comprehensive” institutions straddling further and higher education (Bruce Macfarlane); in the need to promote understandings of the “entrepreneurial university” to include niche teaching for under-served markets, as well as traditional ideas of technology transfer (Paul Temple); and in the different perceptions arising of senior institutional decision-makers (do they constitute a “group” or a “team”?) (Steve Woodfield). In a sector that is both expanding and diversifying, the search for increasingly nuanced language to drive forward understandings of roles and identities at the interstices of university life is unlikely to abate.

Descriptors are required that are permissive enough to accommodate diversity, and yet accurate enough to convey the nature of emerging territories, acknowledging that the latter may straddle academic, professional staff and practitioner roles. This is something that is being addressed on a daily basis by both academics and managers, and was reflected across the many areas of debate at the conference about, for instance, professional practice and development; the changing profiles and needs of students; cross-disciplinary activity; links between policy and practice; the relationship between universities and other professional arenas; and the university itself as a workspace. In a weakly contextualised environment, therefore, a language is sought that can accommodate difference, as well as associated uncertainties, relativities, expectations and possibilities. The conference amply demonstrated that new discourses are not only challenging assumptions, but re-defining the components of the higher education enterprise in ways that extend and re-draw existing categories and classifications. They are also spawning new knowledges, technologies, relationships, dialogues and connectivities. As pointed out by Sally Johnstone in her opening address, where does My Space fit into emerging vocabularies relating to the learning environment?

At a philosophical level, Steve Fuller, in his keynote address, pointed to the historical debate about whether teaching and research should be conducted separately or together, asking “on what terms do you integrate?” He saw an overarching role for the contemporary university in capturing and delivering knowledge for the public good (rather than for the sole advantage of those who have funded or even produced it), whether or not that knowledge originated in the university. By constantly re-working new knowledges into curricula, institutions enable beneficiaries to engage critically with, and develop, that knowledge. An essential role of the university, therefore, is in the articulation of knowledge in the public sphere: in translation as well as discovery. Furthermore, as illustrated by Stephen Rowland, trans-disciplinary modes of activity, by creating new fields of ‘Mode 2’ knowledge-in-practice, transcend existing boundaries to focus on super-ordinate problems and issues. Such developments require new forms of language, often out-with the frame of root disciplines. Thus, at institutional and sub-institutional levels, individuals are continually re-defining what they do, how they might describe this, and how it might be articulated and explained to an ever-widening audience of, for instance, potential students, collaborative partners and funding agencies.

It was evident at the conference that a significant start has been made in finding new and convincing vocabularies for activities that are increasingly taking place beyond boundaries in higher education. These included novel ways of describing emergent spaces: “a new academic literacy” linking the development of staff, organisational features, and academic practice (Paul Blackmore); a “braid/plait” model of work-based learning (Pamela Irwin); a “sally port” between the university and the community fostering civic engagement; a “Reinvention Centre” connecting research, learning and teaching at undergraduate level (Cath Lambert and Elisabeth Simbuerger); as well as a “remak[ing of] connections” between research into higher education and policy making (William Locke). As pointed out by David Boud, “in between” space provides new opportunities, and the conference showed that conceptual domains are being created that use boundaries increasingly permissively, and not simply as defining or classificatory constructs. For instance, what one person might describe as “learning”, another might see as routine interaction with colleagues, or even as recreation. Moreover, the language used to describe interstitial activity within and across boundaries is itself, of necessity, in a state of flux. It therefore has a provisionality about it, in that it is valid for the time being, as knowledge and practice develop and re-form, with the possibility that they may, or may not, consolidate and develop boundaries of their own.

Thus, while the number of papers at the conference demonstrated that research into higher education is thriving, there is also substantial evidence of the development of a language with which this activity may be communicated in a dynamic way to the university’s expanding constituencies. This out-turn may, therefore, offer a note of optimism in relation to Ronald Barnett’s comments about the potential for a “splintering of the academy”, reported on the front page of the *Times Higher* on 15 December 2006. I hope that, as these new discourses develop, they will continue to find expression in the pages of the Society’s journal, the *Higher Education Quarterly*.