

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Learning & teaching in policy and practice: Where has all the criticality gone?

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**Research Domain:** Higher education policy (HEP)

**Abstract:** Learning & teaching (L&T) is increasingly foregrounded in English HEIs but is there a lack of criticality towards policy representations of *good teaching*? This paper focuses on national policy on L&T and its recontextualisation. Drawing on an interdisciplinary framework from the sociology of pedagogy and critical discourse studies, I argue for the contribution that detailed textual analysis of policy can make to understanding the forms of argumentation drawn on to legitimise policy proposals. I trace how national policy discourses become embedded in institutional discourses and explore the connections between policy and practice. In this talk, I focus on the way that *teaching* and *learning* are discussed. Findings confirm that representations of L&T are never value-free but instead reflect the current context. Are we therefore too compliant in accepting these visions of good learning & teaching practices? In doing so, we may perpetuate a narrow, detrimental view of a university education.

**Paper:** Fierce competition in the English higher education sector, increases in tuition fees and the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) have led to a noted focus on the *student experience*. The field of learning & teaching (L&T) has become foregrounded, especially perhaps in those lower-ranking institutions which have significantly more diverse student populations and are usually unable to compete on research. This focus on L&T attracts policy-making agencies e.g. AdvanceHE (formerly the HEA) to engage in discussions around *teaching quality* and their policy documents and guidelines construct certain conceptualisations of what constitutes good teaching. However, these are not value-free representations but are instead informed by government and sector policy agendas such as *employability* and *partnership*. With academics encouraged to engage with best practice in L&T and, for example, to undertake the HEA Fellowship accreditation scheme, there are signs of conformity as everyone jumps on the same L&T bandwagon to prove how much they are engaging in such favoured practices. Certain concepts are reified (Peat, 2015) e.g. “co-creation” and “employability” and reinforced by such discourses being embedded in institutional policy and practice. With academic development units (ADUs) often primarily involved in implementing institutional policy, including engagement with such accreditation schemes as a university key performance indicator (KPI) (Shaw, 2018), and academics participating in such practices

in order to further their career, where are the independent, critical voices within HEIs?

This presentation focuses on the contribution that detailed textual/discursive analysis of policy can make to understanding the forms of argumentation that L&T policy documents draw on to legitimise their proposals (cf. Fairclough, 2013). I trace how national policy discourses become embedded in institutional discourses and explore the connections between policy and practice as evident in lecturer/student interview accounts, programme documents and assignments. Here, I focus on a particular finding which is the way that *teaching* and *learning* are discussed.

The wider study this presentation draws on adopts an innovative framework bringing into dialogue the sociology of pedagogy (Bernstein, 1990; 2000) and critical discourse studies (Wodak & Meyer (Eds.), 2015) to explore the issue of how learning, teaching and assessment practices come to be as they are. The approach involves systematic discourse analysis of selected L&T policy texts and interview accounts using the discourse-historical approach's (DHA) (Reisigl & Wodak, 2015) conception of context and the tools for detailed textual analysis. This analysis encompasses the text level, intertextual relations between texts in different spaces (e.g. national to institutional) and the wider socio-political context. The focus is on identifying how policy constructs problems and solutions and the ideological character of the policy proposals. I use Bernstein's (1990) notion of the pedagogic device and the recontextualising fields to further conceptualise the connections between macro-, meso- and micro-level processes and the different influences on pedagogy as well as to interpret the findings. Analysis of discourses in policy texts is compared with accounts and practices of students and lecturers in the institution under study.

As noted in other studies (e.g. McLean, Abbas & Ashwin, 2017), despite these being L&T policy texts, there is a backgrounding of teaching and teachers. Teaching becomes *facilitation* and learning, knowledge and power are represented as *socially constructed*. This leads to a diminished view of academics' role in L&T; whether intentional or not. There is also a dissonance between the construction of teaching and learning in policy documents and that in interview accounts. For instance, the light-touch facilitation constructed in policy is not evident in practice; instead there is considerable support given to students. I also note the discursive strategies involved in long policy discussion documents becoming guidelines for practice; that is, how ideas become policy and then how this policy becomes embedded in practices. I also draw some conclusions on the forms of argumentation and character of discourses within the field of L&T in English higher education.

The relevance of Bernstein's ideas around the notion of *boundaries* (cf. Donnelly & Abbas, 2019) and influences of the state and aligned agencies on what is taught and how has never so apparent. The notion that representations of L&T are not value-free but are always a product of the socio-political context is particularly pertinent. Yet, in today's HEIs, these ideas are presented as uncontroversial

representations of best practice. While innovative approaches in learning and teaching are to be welcomed, it is timely to examine the underlying messages of such policy guidelines in a critical way. This is also a matter of social justice since certain universities are more likely to embrace these messages thus potentially creating increasingly distinct higher education offerings. Finally, I argue for the contribution that critical discourse studies, in dialogue with the sociology of pedagogy, can make to higher education research.

## References

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