

Learning Landscapes in Higher Education - the struggle for the idea of the university: between research and reflexivity (0074)

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Abstract

This paper is based on recent research into the extent to which academics are engaged in the design and development of new pedagogic spaces in universities. The research was carried out across a range of higher education institutions in the UK. The research shows that academics are increasingly involved in the development of new teaching and learning spaces as customers and clients of the project management process, but not necessarily as academics with contributions to make based on their subject discipline expertise. Using Bourdieu's concept of the 'collective intellectual', the paper suggests that academics can assert themselves in these design processes through a research based evaluation of new teaching and learning spaces, and by engaging in a critical and reflexive approach toward the meaning and purpose of higher education. The context for this level of academic engagement is already well defined in the literature as the 'idea of the university'.

Keywords: student engagement; experimentation; effectiveness and efficiency; academic values

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Academics are increasingly involved in the design and development of new teaching and learning spaces in higher education, but there has been little research into the extent of this involvement. The paper is based on a research project that looked at academics' involvement in the creation of new teaching and learning environments in twelve universities across the UK. The research was framed around the concept of 'learning landscapes', a notion used in higher education to describe developments in the provision of teaching and learning spaces (Dugdale 2009, Harrison 2006, Thody 2008, Chiddick 2006).

This research highlights the conflicts and complexities as well as the tensions and contradictions that lie behind the design and development of new pedagogic spaces.

These include:

- Despite the rhetoric on innovation there is, in fact, a reluctance to experiment. The formal structure of university decision making often precludes real innovation, and is sometimes subverted by informal processes that promote strategic experimentation.
- Work on developing a matrix to evaluate the effectiveness of spatial innovation in pedagogic spaces is still under development across the sector.
- There are issues about the relationship between occupational roles involved in the design and delivery of new teaching spaces. While much has been done to promote trust and respect among staff, these relationships can be undermined by negative stereotyping between academics and estates professionals.

- While an innovative new building can be motivating and inspirational they are most effective when there is a system of support and training for academics who are using the new space.
- Student engagement in the design and development of new pedagogic spaces is very important and, while universities are involving students as part of their formal decision making structures, there is some ambivalence about what students can offer to these debates, among academics and students. The most effective spaces are where students have real responsibilities for managing teaching and learning spaces.
- The most compelling spaces are those that recognise tensions within the academic enterprise, most particularly the dysfunctionality between teaching and research. The power of these spaces is the way in which they deconstruct the dichotomy that lies at the centre of the teaching-research nexus in the contemporary university.

The paper highlights the fact that academics are making an important contribution as clients and customers of the project management process. The paper suggests that this involvement could be enhanced by embedding well established academic activities in the design and development of teaching and learning spaces. These activities include developing a culture of research-based decision making in relation to the design of academic spaces, and by promoting a greater sense of critical reflexivity about the spatial dimensions of teaching and learning.

Research is at the core of the academic enterprise and yet the design and development of academic space tends not to be research-based. Indeed, despite the enthusiasm for the development of new teaching and learning spaces in higher education, the relationship between effective undergraduate teaching and learning and innovative new spaces is not well understood. One of the problems that contribute to this lack of understanding is that there has not been much research done in this area (Jamieson 2003, Jamieson et al 2005). The lack of research may be one reason why there is resistance to change among academics in Higher Education (Temple 2007).

Critical reflexivity among academics can be promoted by intellectualising the debate about the meaning and purpose of higher education or, as it is already referred to within the academic literature, the 'idea of the university'. In this way it becomes possible to create a more critical self-consciousness among academics, as subject specialists and as members of the university's academic community, in relation to their own academic space.

The promotion of this kind of collective intellectual activity comes close to Bourdieu's concept of reflexivity. Although Bourdieu is one of the most important theorists of the modern university (Bourdieu 1982), his hyper-critical sensibility does not extend to the university at the institutional level, nor does his work contain a systemic analysis of the idea of the university. However, there is much in his theory of reflexivity that can generate debates about the meaning and purpose of higher education (Delanty 2001). By using Bourdieu's critical framework it is possible to create a collective project derived out of a strong reflexive sensibility, so as to

contribute, in an intellectual way, to debates and discussions about ‘the idea of the university’.

What distinguishes the university as a public institution is precisely the extent to which idealism underpins its real nature. The idea that the university is based on an ideal was a common assumption in the development of thinking about universities (Delanty 2001 39). As Mclean puts it ‘I believe that “ideas” about the purposes of universities have accumulated and are available to us as resources which may or may not be taken up (Mclean 2008: 30), ‘even if it is not possible to claim one big idea for the university’ (Mclean 2008: 38). The responsibility for reformulating the idea of the university lies with academics themselves (Smith and Webster 1997, Mclean 2008).

Academic engagement in the design and development of the pedagogic environment is required to ensure the most effective design and delivery of new teaching and learning spaces. The intellectualisation of the debate about academic space and spatiality is vital at a time when the parameters of what constitutes the core activities of higher education are being increasingly constrained by a particular version of the idea of higher education: the entrepreneurial university. At a time when this market-based model for social development appears increasingly untenable a more progressive and sustainable model is required. A research-based and critically reflexive debate about the new learning landscape might be a good place to start.

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Biography

Mike Neary is the Dean of Teaching and Learning at the University of Lincoln. Prior to going to Lincoln in 2007 he taught Sociology at the University of Warwick since 1994. His recent publications include the co-edited collection, *The Future of Higher Education: Policy, Pedagogy and the Student Experience*, and the soon to be published, *Teaching in Public - Remaking the University in an era of Academic Capitalism*. Current research projects include *Student as Producer - Connecting Teaching and Research in the Undergraduate Curriculum*, funded by the Higher Education Academy. Mike is a National Teaching Fellow.