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Paul is Director of the MA programme. He convenes the 'Researching Learning, Teaching and Assessment' module on the Doctoral Programme in Educational Research

Before coming to Lancaster, Paul spent four years researching students' experiences of learning at the Institute for the Advancement of University Learning, University of Oxford and, before that, seven years implementing and researching peer learning at Newham College of Further Education.

He is currently Chair of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Committee on Ethics in Research and a member of the University Research Ethics Committee.

His research interests are focused on teaching, learning, and assessment in higher education. His recent book 'Analysing Teaching-Learning Interactions in Higher Education' focuses on ways of conceptualising teaching-learning processes in higher education that support a consideration of both structure and agency.

His current research projects include an Economic and Social Research Council funded project looking at pedagogic quality and inequality in undergraduate Sociology degrees.

Paul is a member of British Educational Research Association's Online Resources Editorial Board and a convener of the Society for Research in Higher Education's Higher Education Close-Up Network. He is also a member of the Economic and Social Research Council's Peer Review College.

Conceptualising and researching the new communities, spaces, places and futures of contemporary higher education

The theme of this year's SRHE Newer Researchers' Conference encourages us to think about new communities, new spaces, new places and new futures in relation to higher education. In doing so the organisers are inviting us to look anew at higher education. There are three aspects of this 'looking anew' that I would like us to explore in my contribution to the conference that relate to a number of issues that I have been exploring in my recent research (see particularly Ashwin 2009; in press).

First it is worth exploring an ambiguity related to 'looking anew'. Are we looking at new things or looking at old things in new ways? In research, these issues are about the relations between the nature of the phenomena we investigate and the ways in which we conceptualise them. Clearly these are intimately related but they are not the same because we can conceptualise broadly the same phenomena in different ways. One of the strengths of higher education research in recent years has been a significant increase in the ways we have of conceptualising the phenomena that weave together to create higher education. As our options increase, how do we decide between these ways of conceptualising the objects of our research?

Second, there are questions around the methods that we use to look anew. Do the new aspects of, and ways of conceptualising, higher education behave us to find new methods for investigating these phenomena? What are the relations between our new ways of conceptualising higher education and the ways in which we generate and analyse data about higher education? One of the weaknesses of recent higher education research is that too much research appears to be tautological, with research giving the impression of simply using empirical data to restate the theories that were used to inform it. Are there ways of out of this in-virtuous circle?

Third, how can we relate 'looking anew' with the wealth of existing research into higher education? Should we simply ignore older research as irrelevant to the new communities, spaces, places and futures of higher education or should we learn from the collective endeavours of those who researched higher education before us? Is it possible to relate these new and old ways of thinking about higher education?

In my contribution to the conference I will explore these questions and ask you to engage in discussion of them and of their implications for how we conceptualise and research the communities, spaces, places and futures of contemporary higher education. I look forward to discussing all of this with you in December.

Paul Ashwin

References

Ashwin, P. (2009) Accounting for Structure and Agency in Researching Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Higher Education. London: Continuum.

Ashwin, P (in press) How often are theories developed through empirical research in higher education? *Studies in Higher Education*, 38 (1) February 2013 (available as an iFirst article online).