

EDITORIAL

Teaching and learning in higher education: what does the literature tell us?

The three papers presented here result from literature reviews commissioned by the Higher Education Academy and completed in 2007. The overall aim of these studies was to help our understanding of aspects of teaching and learning in higher education, by exploring relevant issues, concepts and evidence. Matters such as definitions and typologies, as well as strategies, practices and outcomes, were to be examined. The full reviews are available on the Academy's website at <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/research/litreviews>. I am the author of one of these papers.

The three papers each represent different detailed approaches to the method of literature reviewing, and will be of some interest on this account alone. All three, though, adopted the same broad review strategy, the one that is probably inescapable in fields where the literature is very varied in character: conducting an initial database search using very broad criteria; examining briefly what has been found and then applying more precise inclusion and exclusion criteria; examining the resulting material in detail to produce a map of literature types as against topics; producing a synthesis of themes and reflecting on these; and finally identifying areas where further work is needed. The Higher Education Academy has made a detailed study of the methods adopted in these reviews, and in other literature reviews that it has commissioned, and its findings, *A Comparative Study of Methodological Approaches to Reviewing Literature* (forthcoming), will offer valuable guidance for anyone planning a literature review, not least doctoral students.

Maggi Savin-Baden and her colleagues, in their review of the influences on thinking and practices about teaching and learning in higher education, adopted an approach they describe as interpretive meta-ethnography. This method aims to use meta-analysis tools more commonly applied to systematic reviews of quantitative studies to examine qualitative work, in order – in line with interpretivist traditions – ‘to recover the social and theoretical context of research’. Hubert Ertl and Susannah Wright and their collaborators, in their review of literature on the student learning experience in higher education, used a straightforward systematic review approach. Here, inclusion and exclusion criteria were set, to reduce the 500-plus items identified in the initial database search to some 250 items for more detailed examination. This allowed them to classify work into six categories – by far the largest of which was, perhaps inevitably, ‘descriptive’. My own study, produced with the assistance of Ourania Filippakou, on learning spaces (in the physical sense), adopted a similar approach to that of Ertl and Wright, though many fewer (and more varied) relevant studies were identified once reasonably precise criteria were applied. All the studies produced an analytical map, in the form of a grid locating studies in terms of their method/perspective on one axis, and subject area/topic on the other.

The study by Ertl and Wright on the student learning experience offers a clear picture of the topics of interest to researchers in this central area of policy and practice: how students approach learning; assessment and feedback issues; the curriculum and different approaches to learning; technology-based approaches to learning; and other matters. Savin-Baden et al. offers a rich context to help understand how these functional activities, centred around the university

curriculum, may be changed: through, she proposes, the formation of the 'pedagogical stance' of the individual academic; through understanding how ideas about improving practice may come about; through the roles of communities of interest; and other matters. My own study might be thought of as adding a further contextual layer to understanding the student learning experience, by examining what has been found out about the effects of the physical environment on the learning occurring within it; and concluding that surprisingly little is known about linkages between the two, in higher education and more widely.

All three studies, as summarised in the papers presented here, contribute to our understanding of teaching and learning in higher education, at conceptual and operational levels. The Higher Education Academy has performed a service by supporting these reviews.

Paul Temple
Executive Editor

Reference

Higher Education Academy. Forthcoming. *A comparative study of methodological approaches to reviewing literature*. York: Higher Education Academy.