

Enhancing learning, teaching, assessment and curriculum in higher education, edited by Veronica Bamber, Paul Trowler, Murray Saunders and Peter Knight, Maidenhead, Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press, 210 pp., £26.99 (pbk), ISBN-13: 978-033523375-5, ISBN-10: 033523375-9

The first impression given by this edited collection is one of scope. With its catch-all title and 27 chapters, the reach is ambitious, with the aim of finding a 'new space' in which to talk about the processes of change in higher education. The editors begin by emphasising the notion of *enhancement* as opposed to quality assurance and sociocultural theory is advanced as the guiding framework, with a persuasive case made for a 'social practices' perspective, incorporating into analysis multiple actors, discourses and subjectivities. In this way the frame is set for a discussion of enhancement at various levels of the sector and institutions. The case studies are organised usefully into four themes, explored at four levels, ranging from the more macro level to a focus on individual practice.

The first theme is 'influencing the disciplines', and includes a historical overview of the formation of the subject centres, a detailed review of the Subject Network for Sociology, Anthropology and Politics (C-SAP), a discussion from the perspective of the PALATINE (dance, drama, and music) subject centre, and an account of an attempt to introduce e-assessment in physical sciences at one institution. This opening section represents a stimulating examination of the tensions surrounding the 'generic' and the 'disciplinary' in academic development, and the challenges of working within disciplinary frameworks. The second theme then proposes 'The Scottish Way' as an exemplar of enhancement at a national level, giving an overview of the thematic approach from a national perspective and an account of how this was implemented at one institution. It then focuses on one particular project relating to an enhancement theme, then finally looks at a review of courses in art and related fields. It seems clear from this section that Scottish approach is less dominated by an assurance/compliance ethos, although some might argue that the Enhancement Lead Institutional Review (ELIR) retains the air and apparatus of an inspection on the ground (with all the dissembling that can provoke). However, this section provides a very thought-provoking overview of an alternative, hybridised, more student-focused approach.

The third theme of the book focuses on 'frameworks for action', looking at 'the interplay of the different elements in university activity systems'. The introduction makes the welcome point that people, culture and practices are inseparable, and offers a bracing critique of the 'apparently rational lens of organisational structure', with an emphasis instead placed on dialogic uses of data at institutional level. The illustrative chapters start with an account of the introduction of teaching and learning courses for new Norwegian lecturers, then move on to a discussion of an MBA in higher education management. The third chapter focuses on restructuring within a university, with the final one reporting on the experience of an e-learning manager attempting to implement change in an Asian university. The fourth and final theme is entitled 'challenging practices in learning, teaching, assessment and curriculum'. This opens with an insightful discussion of the nature of change in pressured, time-poor educational contexts, and presents examples of 'challenging' enhancements. The first is a fascinating discussion of competing discourses at work in the South Africa HE moving towards 'mode II' knowledge. The next chapter covers the 'generic attributes' project at the University of Sydney, making valuable points about the importance of mid-level management support in a long-term institutional change. The following chapter uses Goffman's concept of on-stage performance to provide a critique a Virtual Learning Environment. The final chapter centres on an individual experience of embedding PDP in a course. The final commentary chapter provides an extremely perceptive discussion of implicit change theories and 'enhancement identities', the latter related back in a

very helpful way to the cases. They conclude by offering a very useful set of reflexive questions for those engaged in enhancement activities.

This is rich and diverse collection, and will deservedly find a place on the shelves of developers, practitioners and managers working towards meaningful educational change in a broad range of contexts. With any ambitious project, some minor criticisms might be made – perhaps arising inevitably from the comprehensive scope of the book. An acknowledgement of the critiques surrounding activity theory and the communities of practice model would perhaps have given it more depth, and some chapters might have benefited from a greater degree of critical oversight, with the occasional impression of ‘show and tell’ and some rather short, descriptive pieces with not all contributing authors subjecting their enhancement project to an explicit sociocultural reading. Some chapters provided complex, theorised accounts of change at various levels of the sector, although occasionally the relationship between the central thesis of the book and its illustrative chapters felt a little tenuous. However, the commentary chapters alleviated this by pulling together the themes and extending the analytical framework. It is perhaps worth noting that, despite the sociocultural framing, the ‘enhancement’ agenda itself was left untroubled. The editors explicitly distance themselves from postmodern standpoints (the purveyors of which are portrayed as looking ‘with amusement on an unpredictable and uncontrollable world’ (1) – a discursive move which allows the editors to claim a more ‘committed’ stance). They do have a point; finding the right balance of critique and pragmatism is probably the central challenge of working in this field. But... by adopting this perspective whilst stopping short of any examination of ‘enhancement’ *itself* as a sociocultural phenomenon, the discussion is left somewhat lacking in recognition of *agency and power*. The complexity of catalysts for ‘innovation’ and compliance are elided, along with their relationships to managerialist values and agendas. They make very cogent points about discursive framing, although the ‘translation’ metaphor felt rather incomplete; the editors seeming to claim that disciplines are essentially the same in pedagogical terms, but that enhancement ought to be localised primarily in order to ‘speak the language’. This arguably retains the notion of the ‘generic’ with language relegated to a surface means of transmission (persuasion?). An alternative analysis would see discourses and epistemologies as constitutive of one another and disciplinary discursive practices as different ways of constructing knowledge and enacting subjectivities – therefore demanding strongly situated disciplinary enhancement – not a generic agenda repackaged in ‘the local lingo’. However, pragmatism and realism are strengths here, with insightful discussion throughout of the nuanced, multi-layered nature of change, and detailed, reflective accounts of these processes in all their complexity, from a range of contexts and perspectives. Positive change is seen as desirable and doable, but crucially the dominant ‘what works’ brand of instrumentalism is roundly rejected. Refreshingly, the assumptions of modernist ‘change management’ are thoroughly critiqued, with the non-linear nature of change in universities presented as the norm. This book will hopefully allow these insights to permeate the main-streams of those concerned with both ‘quality’ and ‘development’, raising questions in particular about large-scale, monolithic, top-down agendas and how they are played out – and inviting a more realistic, local approach. Perhaps the key strength of this book is this recognition of the chaotic nature of change, and of universities as ‘loosely-coupled’ organisations. They make the vital point that any and all change is subject to/enacted through multiple discursive strategies and agencies, and in this regard it represents a very valuable and much-overdue mainstream challenge to the dominant assumptions of academic development and change in higher education.

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