



Viewpoint

Reflections about research and scholarship on learning and teaching issues in higher education

Holly Ormrod-Stebbing,

Holly Ormrod-Stebbing is currently a postgraduate student in Architecture in the Faculty of Development and Society, Sheffield Hallam University.

Correspondence should be addressed to Holly Ormrod-Stebbing, H.Ormrod-Stebbing@shu.ac.uk

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Abstract

Holly Ormrod-Stebbing is currently a postgraduate student in Architecture in the Faculty of Development and Society, Sheffield Hallam University. In this viewpoint, she shares her reflections of the 2012 Higher Education Research and Scholarship Group Conference.

On 22nd June Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) hosted the Higher Education Research and Scholarship Group (HERSG) conference, an event allowing SHU staff and partner colleges to share research and scholarship focused on the current learning and teaching issues in Higher Education. At a time when news stories and controversy regarding HE are making daily headlines, the conference offered a forum for debate and reflection on the future of universities and higher education, and how pedagogic research can help us face this uncertain future more effectively. Workshops were presented by staff throughout the day on a range of themes, including student identity and engagement, digital literacy and mobile learning, and providing students with skills for employment and life beyond university.

Keynote speaker Professor Ron Barnett began the day with his infectious positive take on the current and potential state of Higher Education, stating that he prefers to '*glimpse a Utopia*' rather than focus on the '*doom and gloom*' making the headlines. Ron is Professor of Higher Education at the Institute of Education in London; he is a leading figure in the field

of pedagogical research and philosophy, and has produced numerous publications on the subject. During my interview with him on the day he referred to his 2007 book, *A Will to Learn: Being a Student in an Age of Uncertainty*. In it, he talks of young men from the Pacific Islands who perform 'land diving' rituals:

These young boys leap off of these platforms and hurtle towards the ground with thongs around their ankles. Why did I put that there? Because it seemed to be a nice way of capturing how I see higher education at its best. It's to encourage students to throw themselves in to a space and be themselves, become themselves, go through a process of becoming.

Ron's belief is that the University's role is to provide a supportive place as well as a challenging one for its students, and to help young people realise their possibilities potential?

What better achievement can we have as tutors and lecturers, than to enable students to go forth from their universities having a sense of wanting to do things well in their lives?

Many of the themes touched on by Ron throughout his address and the interview resonate well with the University's objective of providing a high quality education to a diverse range of students. Ron was very encouraged to see work being done to further the quality of teaching and research through organisations such as HERSG:

A conference such as today is tremendous - this is a conference that is growing out of colleagues' own initiatives self-organised, self-propelled, self-motivated; it's absolutely wonderful.

Ron is also encouraged by the work being done by several universities to recognise and reward good teaching; this, of course, ties in perfectly with Sheffield Hallam's Inspirational Teaching Awards which this year received over a thousand individual nominations for staff. But Ron also believes that as well as having a responsibility to encourage and inspire students, Higher Education also needs to set high standards and create challenges:

Higher education can never be about giving students solely what they want. It is our responsibility to impart standards to students that they can never dream about.

Setting high standards in both teaching and research is something which is clearly a high priority for Sheffield Hallam in a political climate where major changes to the Higher Education system could result in uncertainty and disillusionment in students.

The day continued with Assistant Dean of ACES, Susan Orr, delivering an equally motivating and thought-provoking plenary talk; many issues were discussed which encompassed themes from the day's workshops and which mirrored Ron's views. The question was posed of how academics can continue to be enthusiastic and energetic in their teaching, in order for students to benefit the most from their education. The day concluded with a panel debate, where Ron reflected on this issue, 'We need to reclaim the fun in Higher Education', suggesting that this should be done by creating stimulating and challenging experiences for students, encouraging them to take risks while maintaining high standards. Finally he proposed that inspirational teaching should be ubiquitous and that the relationship

between the student, the academic and the discipline is a mysterious one, a process of 'putting new spirit into another human being.'

From my perspective as a post-graduate student at Sheffield Hallam, I found the conference very encouraging both in terms of the research and dialogue contributing to the quality and further aspirations of the University, and also the focus on the idea of the 'student experience.' In Ron Barnett's address, Susan Orr's plenary talk and during workshops throughout the day, student-focussed education was a central theme, suggesting that Sheffield Hallam's forward-thinking agendas will help the University to deliver a rewarding and stimulating education to its current students as well as being appealing to prospective ones.

The conference was organised by the Higher Education Research and Scholarship Group, consisting of Caroline Bath, Angela Lauener, Stella Jones-Devitt, Christine O'Leary, Jackie Cawkwell and Chris Corker.

A more in-depth article detailing the interview with Ron Barnett is featured in the autumn issue of Sheffield Hallam University's Review Magazine.

Further reading

The following is a list of Professor Ron Barnett's recent books:

- *Being a University* (2010). London, Routledge.
- *A Will to Learn: Being a Student in an Age of Uncertainty* (2007). Maidenhead, Open University Press.
- *Beyond All Reason: Living with Ideology in the University* (2003). Maidenhead, Open University Press.
- *Realising the University in an Age of Supercomplexity* (2000). Maidenhead, Open University Press.