

## **Improving the Student Experience. A practical guide for universities and colleges**

Michelle Morgan (Ed.) (2012) London: Routledge  
ISBN 978-0-415-59879-8 (pp. 232, £26.99, pb.)

**Review by: LIZ CLARK**

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In a changing educational landscape with students paying considerable fees to attend the institution of their choice, the student experience becomes of paramount importance to ensure client needs are met. In a competitive market, Universities and Colleges will have to ensure that quality is established and maintained in order to attract students. However, achieving these aims is set against diminishing resources both financially and in staff and thus becomes even more challenging.

Similarly, retention, particularly in the first year of a student experience, remains an issue of concern for providers across the country and research indicates that this includes not just the academic aspects but social and welfare concerns. Consequently, this must be a focus of attention within the total student experience.

This book offers a model for effective implementation of a quality student experience and will appeal to staff at whichever stage they are involved: from "Induction to Outduction". The Student Experience Practitioner Model detailed provides a structure that is flexible and cost-effective. There are six stages reflecting the lifecycle of the student:

- First contact and admissions
- Pre-arrival
- Arrival and orientation
- Induction to study
- Reorientation and re-induction (for returning students)
- Outduction (preparation for life after study)

The book begins by describing the current scenario, with increased numbers entering Higher and Further Education and the diversity of this student body requiring a number of agencies working together to ensure student success. It stresses the fact that students can no longer be viewed as a homogenous group and we cannot assume that "what students need if they are to thrive, is what they received in the past". It focuses on providing practical guidance and, as a "toolbox", this book will be of assistance to academics, managers and professional services teams within HE and FE institutions. It details a concise way of delivering interlinked academic, welfare and support activities at all levels throughout their student journey.

Drawing on student experiences around the world, each chapter covers particular stages, themes and core activities of the Practitioner Model. The editor claims that although there is a great deal of research which outlines the issues and problems facing higher education now, there are few practitioner handbooks which provide good quality, relevant and evidence-based initiatives across the student lifecycle today. This book aims to address this through the use of case studies. These are well described and of particular interest to me as the section in each which provides information on the cost of implementing the initiative as well as a timeline for implementation. This allows the co-ordinator or manager to assess its relative value and to decide whether a similar project would be practicable in their own institution.

Dipping into this book, which is the approach I would recommend, might provide you with ideas which may be worth trying in your institution. Some are more relevant to central services than the School/departmental level but, nevertheless, they could be adapted from macro to micro level. I was reassured that many of the ideas have already been implemented within our institution; e.g. within the University of Aberdeen, we operate an orientation week for first year students to familiarise themselves with life on campus. Extending this to an orientation for parents was one suggestion which sounded quite radical.

Primarily designed to allay fears and anxieties in relation to their child's student experience, I warmed to the idea when I read that this orientation would help parents understand the parameters that exist within an institution, and which would exclude them from continued close involvement and advocacy on behalf of their child. To conclude, this book is an easy read and will be of use to the range of staff involved in the delivery of a quality student experience.

## **Beyond Fragmentation: Didactics, Learning and Teaching in Europe.**

Brian Hudson and Meinert Meyer (Eds.) (2011) Opladen and Farmington Hills: Barbara Budrich Publishers.

ISBN: 978-3-86649-387-2 (pp. 432, £32.95, pb.)

**Review by LAURA COLUCCI-GRAY**

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This book is perhaps one of the most significant and tangible outcomes of academic debate aiming to tackle thorny issues of theory and practice in education and advancing understanding. Organised by the careful hands of the editors – Brian Hudson (University of Dundee, U.K.) and Meinert A. Meyer (University of Hamburg) – this book is a collection of twenty-six research papers produced over the last five years by the research community of Network 27 - Didactics, Learning and Teaching - of the European Educational Research Association (EERA). Altogether, the collection of papers presented in the book tackles the concepts of Didactics with the associated terms, Learning and Teaching across different European contexts. The title itself is an indication of the challenges involved in this discussion. The term Didactics is familiar to European scholars. It summarises the educational practice of observing learning and teaching as two interconnected processes, and indeed, in the French and Italian traditions, for example, the learning-teaching process (enseignement-apprentissage or insegnamento-apprendimento) is the subject of Didactics. Didactics research is concerned with the teacher's curricular and pedagogical choices, the learners' trajectories and the normative context of the class. It is a term that encompasses the full range of educational tools available to teachers and learners. Yet the need to include all three terms in the title of the book is indicative of the necessity to tackle a linguistic rift associated with different cultural-historical traditions of teaching in Europe and it is in this attempt that the book seeks to achieve its second and most important goal, that of increasing awareness of contemporary and shared understandings of the nature of teaching and learning in current times.

The editorial intervention in the first chapter of the book attempts to organise the discussion that follows. Some common themes that have emerged from the community have been identified and used to structure the edited collection of essays. So the book is divided into six sections, including both theoretical contributions and empirical studies, and organised respectively as: 1. From teaching to learning and back to teaching; 2. Teacher education; 3. Teacher research; 4. Didactical design and lesson planning; 5. Subject didactics and national didactics; 6. Educational theory and empirical research. At a first glance, the subheadings given to the sections do not appear to form a storyline or broadly-sketched narrative for the book. It is only after having read the first chapter that I started to foresee the outline of a conceptual discussion of some relevance and weight. The first chapter begins right away with a discussion of learning and teaching, and with what appears to be a preoccupation for the term Didactics of some of its negative connotations (particularly from the Anglo-Saxon context). This purpose is helpfully achieved through the contributions of the first four authors, from Sweden, France and Finland, that across their respective countries, helpfully remove the notion of Didactics from the idea of knowledge transmission from teacher to student to reframe the term as a process of decision-making and joint action in an educational space. As such, it is a term that revolves around the organisation of the

class and the teacher's philosophy, striving directly into the implicit epistemology served by classroom interaction in the school and the wider social context.

Framed in this way the term Didactics becomes a useful term to adopt for approaching a range of prickly discussions in education, for example, those concerning the role of subject knowledge. If we intend to move away from the model of knowledge transmission to adopt a model of knowledge construction that is respectful of the characteristics of the learners and the specificities of the different educational environments, then we need to have the tools for both planning and evaluating the learning and teaching process. Questions of substance – what is being learned – should then be asked alongside questions of method – how. The authors of the book, however, diverge on the feasibility of this proposal. For the authors contributing to part two and three – teacher education and teacher research – both structural and cultural issues appear to impede the development of didactics and its offshoot, personalisation and pedagogical innovation. An underlying position on knowledge – as something given and absolute – appears to dominate and it is reinforced by political and cultural structures.

Is there a way out? The dialogue across the lands and seas of Europe represented in the book serves the purpose of expanding one's own scenario for reflection. Of particular importance to Scottish readers is the contribution offered by two authors on the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence. Before a political context that appears to be favourable to change, the authors remind the readers that any curriculum is embedded within an existing set of beliefs and practices in which schools are immersed. So more fundamentally than simply broadening the scope of delivery – i.e. from specific content items to broader learning outcomes – what appears to be needed is a change in the system of relationships and an overhaul of knowledge hierarchies within the class. As indicated the opening lines of Muschamp's chapter: "*our knowledge is always incomplete and complicated by the realisation that knowledge is also contested*" (p. 265). So not only is the curriculum insufficient to account for the ever changing nature of knowledge but, more outrageously, the underlying subtext is that everybody can have something partial and legitimate to contribute to knowledge construction! As I was making my way through the two thirds of the book I was thus being introduced progressively to a model of Bildung (translated directly from German as 'formation or construction') that was not simply individual, to indicate self-development and formation of oneself, but potentially transformational and operating at a collective level. Yet such vision challenges traditional divisions between formal and informal learning environments and the locus of control of the learning process.

The closest the book gets to providing an operational response to this scenario is perhaps the chapter contributed by Colleen Mclaughlin on Participatory Action research, in which the author brings together a number of reflections offered by earlier contributors: the idea of participation and inclusion in the learning process, the use of *tools* to enhance guided and purposeful reflection on one's own learning and the collective involvement in *emergent evaluation* (as indicated by Hudson, in chapter 13).

So, does the book achieve its purpose of creating common ground and move discussion on teaching and curriculum forward? My view is that it does. On the one hand it corroborates some emerging areas of consensus across the educational community, such as the value of participatory assessment and teacher research; on the other hand, it continuously challenges our thinking and possibilities for creative interpretations of teaching and learning that draw on a fluid and contested understanding of knowledge. Many are the opportunities offered to the teacher to grapple with tools and contexts that enable the intersection of epistemologies, partial knowledge and experiences. So, as knowledge is never definite, neither is the book and you would find yourself wanting to go back and revisit earlier chapters in a recursive mode, so many are the dimensions and points of analysis that are being offered.

I commend the effort made by the authors to create a work of synthesis that does not draw on any single theory but puts theories and educational traditions into dialogue. As such, the book makes for an excellent text for research students as well as researchers and practitioners in education. Given the timeliness of the topics that are being dealt with in the

book and the very nature of education and learning today, the text will probably not have a very long shelf-life. It is a text that is meant to be read, shared and discussed widely to inform timely reflections and scholarly work, particularly at a time of profound political reconfigurations affecting teacher education and teacher practice across Europe. However, it is also a text that will need updating and the authors may want to start thinking about a second edition of the book in five years time. A broader spectrum of contributions to include a larger number of authors from the South of the world could also make an important addition to the existing range of chapter authors.

## **Disciplines of Education: Their Role in the Future of Education Research.**

John Furlong and Martin Lawn (Eds.) (2010) London: Routledge.

ISBN 978-0-415-58206-3 (pb), ISBN 978-0-415-58205-6 (hb). (pp. 206, £75.00 hb, £24.99 pb.)

### **Review by HELEN E. LEES**

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This book is a compendium of chapters which each look at the state of education as disciplinary. As an introduction to how education is configured within disciplines and by disciplines, it is exemplary and to be highly recommended. Each chapter offers a comprehensive overview of work achieved, in progress and to be approached, in the disciplines of history, philosophy, economics, geography, sociology, psychology and comparative and international education. There are also two further chapters which include considerations of broader themes of education as a voice for 'power' and the European context of educational research development. As a tour for the already substantially initiated of educational studies, it is also of much interest, both for what it says and what it does not say. What it says is enlightening and informative because it is in-depth and comprehensive and what it does not say shows how the self perception of educational disciplinarity limits itself.

Essentially, for a broad audience this book highlights conversations as they have emerged and developed in education as a research arena. It coherently and cogently presents some of the concerns of disciplines regarding their own inner workings. For instance, philosophy of education would now apparently appreciate development of more rigour in arguments that would perhaps bring it closer to an analytic spirit (p.53). The internal reflection of each chapter shows that the discourse of the disciplines (seen from the 'inside-out') can betray the limitations of the visions with which they work and the constraints that their own histories and historical constructions impose upon them as behemoths of their own power, with all the inflexibility that that imposes. But it also allows us to see what has been achieved within such constraints.

By allowing us to see the workings of disciplinary machinery as it develops prestige, standards, activity and networks through determined hard work in the face of a lack of research council funding, the reader is left with the impression that education is a discipline of disciplines peopled by very hard-working and dedicated key individuals. These players are clearly eager to show the value of their discipline's research and the intrinsic value of their disciplinary approach. As Rothblatt puts it in one of the later chapters, all the 'reports' are pretty up-beat (see p.146). But why? The book suggests that educationists, of whatever discipline, are really rather happy with the fundamental construction of the field, despite problems. Yet, one of the ironies, perhaps, of this book is that it also carries with it a strong warning about the impending demographic crisis in education in terms of numbers to replace those soon to retire. It also hints significantly at the potential demise of a disciplinary approach to education in light of inter and trans-disciplinary pressures which come with newer research funding demands. That the voices heard are happy could be Nero fiddling whilst Rome burns. That they might be inflexibly aligned (or constrained) with disciplinarity

might be an epistemological deafness to a need to move more freely, less coherently and 'successfully': with *less* disciplinarity.

Regarding impending mass retirements, that there simply will not be the woman/man power to continue the disciplinary development reported so unequivocally in this book, unless something radical changes, is a fault line of the story presented. It is not one that spoils this book, however. What the presentation offers, it offers in a way that stands as a classic overview of education (in the UK mainly) at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The strengths and dynamics of disciplinary vision and activity in education are fascinating to behold. The accounts raise many questions about education 'itself' moreover, enabling in their interplay, chapter upon chapter, readers to construct their own understanding of the richness that informs this tricky science of education.

For me one of the most intriguing aspects was to witness how various epistemologies of educational disciplines are constructed in response to external factors. For example, economics of education – as a rising star in the disciplinary firmament – seems to be understanding itself as a *necessary* educational epistemology and is being treated thus by funding mechanisms. Of course this has strong implications for what kind of educational practices and experiences might emerge and the theoretical underpinnings which will inform them. Whoever wins the disciplinary pop-charts will end up changing the world to some degree perhaps, if we believe education is important and influential. So, the book is at the heart of how education functions at the moment and has much to say which can help students, lecturers, professors, teachers and policy-makers address and reflect upon the educational game. Highly recommended for all those serious about understanding the field/ arena/ discipline/ science/ study/ domain/ practice of the moving target that education is, has been and will, it seems, continue to be.

## **The Transformation of Children's Services: Examining and debating the complexities of inter/professional working.**

Joan Forbes and Cate Watson (Eds.) 2012. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge  
ISBN 978-0-415-61849-6 (pp. 194, £28.99, pb.)

**Review by ROY McCONKEY**

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*"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean -- neither more nor less."*

*"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."*  
(Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking Glass).

Children's services – be it education, social work or health – have their fair share of pontificating Humpty Dumpties! It is not always easy to unpack the meanings they give to commonly used phrases. Prime examples are terms such as "interagency collaboration" and "inter/professional working". This very welcome book examines the question posed by Lewis Carroll's Alice and in 14 stimulating chapters amply unpacks not only the different meanings that have resulted in befuddled thinking around these terms but it proposes how we might need to think differently if truly shared meanings of these concepts are to emerge.

Based on an ESRC seminar series involving three Scottish Universities, the book's contributors are drawn mainly from education but with chapters also written by social workers and a psychiatrist. Although most are based in Scotland, authors from England and the USA bring an international perspective. Their common purpose was to challenge a widely shared and almost unquestioned belief that interagency collaboration is a very good

thing and that more of it is needed. The editors' aim for the book is simply stated: "*to encourage debate around the complexities of inter/professional working*" (p.3).

The chapters are arranged into three main sections. The first two examine the intricacies of inter/professional working and the preparations required by professionals in order to practice it, while the third section questions current orthodoxies surrounding notions of collaborative working. The editors provide a helpful introduction and conclusion to the book. The variation in the authors' style of writing contributes to the sense of debate that the editors wanted to engender and the inevitable repetition often found in edited texts reinforces arguments rather than distracts from them. Various pithy comments pepper the text. My favourite was penned by Mark Smith: "*we have reached the stage where social work is neither 'social' nor is it working*".

The book is stronger on diagnosis than on treatment in that there is greater consensus around why inter/professional working is proving difficult to implement but less agreement on possible solutions. A recurring theme is the lack of shared conceptual understanding of children, childhood or families that exists across professional disciplines. Unifying approaches are proposed and expounded by different authors with an emphasis on the social and cultural influences on children's development, as embodied in the European discipline of social pedagogy. Several authors re-iterate that common conceptual frameworks need to be routinely taught during initial professional training across all disciplines and service settings.

Other authors examine the impact of organisational structures but this seems to be done more in hope than expectation. As Andrew Cooper states: "*Our less bounded, more fluid, more flattened, networked public sector organizational forms do make new things possible*" but equally he and others acknowledge that often the best forms of inter/professional working are based on ad hoc or informal organizational arrangements. However, leadership is identified as an essential ingredient and particularly that of head teachers within new styles of children's services. Two chapters focus on preparatory programmes for these key personnel but also underlined is the limited support and encouragement given to them to create new 'communities of practice'.

Another dominant theme of the book is the threat to professional identity posed by interdisciplinary practice. The reasons for this are examined in a balanced analysis by different authors that gives due weight to the dangers inherent in devaluing professional expertise and reducing the challenge that comes from diverse insights. Yet this debate only serves to underline the editors' contention that transforming children's services is "*inherently and inescapably characterized by complexity*" for which, they suggest, there will be no easy solution but rather an acceptance that we need to live with uncertainty and chaos.

But need that be so? The final chapter by Walter Hume casts professionalism in a new context when he asks whose social capital is being enhanced through inter/professional practice? He warns that it is another ruse by service personnel to hold on to the institutional power they have built over many decades and concludes that: "*we need to focus our attention much more effectively on the supposed beneficiaries of all this collaboration ... we need to do better at trying to understand their experience*" (p.178). So might we be looking through the wrong end of the telescope in reframing children's services? What form of transformation would occur if it was the outcomes for the beneficiaries that were the pre-eminent concern rather than the outcomes for practitioners and their organisational arrangements?

This book deserves to be widely read but I suspect that it will appeal more to academics and researchers than practitioners and politicians. The editors are however well placed to pen further texts directed more to the latter groups and hopefully they will do so. Providing effective and efficient services to children and families is too serious an endeavour to be left to Humpty Dumpty.

## **Narratives from the Nursery. Negotiating professional identities in early childhood**

Jayne Osgood, (2011) London: Routledge.  
ISBN 978-0-415-55622-4 (pp. 184, £24.99, pb.)

**Review by: SHEILA NUTKINS**

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This is a very interesting book, thoroughly exploring the debate surrounding professionalism in the early childhood education and care (ECEC) workforce. It is essentially an extended and extensive research paper but it is, as it says in the frontispiece, mostly 'accessible'. Osgood makes a very solid contribution, building on her papers, Osgood (2009 & 2010) by pulling together the complex socio-cultural factors that impact upon early childhood education and care and those who make up the workforce. As Osgood reiterates throughout, the early years workforce is female and working class. She rightly contextualises the debate about professionalism within this framework.

The book is divided into eight chapters, but essentially falls into four sections, with the introduction followed by three chapters that contextualise and provide a framework for the next three, which provide and discuss the primary research data. The primary data comes from a research study conducted in three London nurseries over five years. Osgood is clear that, 'the lens applied when gathering and analysing the data was politically motivated and therefore inevitably partial'. She is also clear that her 'subjective reading relates to a specific socio-political and historical moment'. Neither aspect diminishes or invalidates the study or the conclusions she draws. The conclusion draws together the preceding themes providing suggestions. Each section or individual chapters make worthwhile reading on their own, depending on the reader's interest and focus. I found chapter 2 and chapter 4 particularly interesting where Osgood writes eloquently in relation to feminism under such headings as 'The Needs of the working mother'. It is good to see this debate revived – particularly at this historical moment and in this context. Current economic pressures will inevitably impact, more quickly and harder, on the more vulnerable, which includes working class women and very young children. Under another heading in chapter four, 'ECEC as saviour ... of the economy, of children and of working mothers' Osgood writes, 'Within government policy it is possible to trace the ways in which the ECEC workforce has been constructed in contradictory ways: as the salvation of society and as shambolic/disordered.' This is just one example of how I feel she has really 'grasped the nettle' in this detailed study.

In the introduction it is clear that Osgood has set out to explore, problematise, develop a debate or discourse to attempt to deconstruct and 'unsettle'. The purpose is to allow 'new ways of knowing to become possible'. This is no small task! The book does cover a lot of ground from the opening sentence in the introduction, 'Professionalism is a widely contested and variously constructed term'. Osgood goes on to show just how contested it is in this context. She highlights that professionalism in any context is gendered, classed and 'raced'; how it is a personal issue; how 'notions' of professionalism are driven by policy that are in turn driven by economic and political power struggles; how 'necessarily emotional' and inextricably wrapped up in the feminist debate it is in this context; how motherhood is a central and recurring theme in any debate about ECEC and how the focus on standards and 'a demonstrable lack of importance attached to activities designed to promote critical reflexivity' leaves the professional defined as 'competent technician'.

Sadly, I fear that the recent and ongoing push in Scotland and the rest of the UK, for higher qualifications for ECEC workers, ostensibly to raise quality of provision and 'sold' to them as a route to professional status, will achieve neither. As Katz wrote in Katz & Cesarone (1994) with respect to the United States, 'I am fairly convinced that little will happen to improve the typical quality of early childhood provisions especially in child care programs until parents demand it and demand support for staff salaries in particular.' As she also highlights, this group (parents of very young children) are not members of the group for

very long. Osgood also highlights what a disparate group they are, from young single working-class mums to middle-class stay-at-home mums or career women, all of whom are wracked with guilt or too busy trying to make ends meet to engage in a debate about anything. Again, as Osgood rightly points out in this text, both childhood and professionalism are social constructions. Again, sadly I fear ECEC workers will continue to be 'constructed in deficit terms through the discourses of particular groups, at particular times, for particular reasons'.

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## **Personal Epistemology and Teacher Education**

Jo Brownlee, Gregory Schraw & Donna Berthelsen (Eds.) (2011) London; Routledge ISBN 978-0-415-88356-6. (pp. 295, £85.00, hb.)

**Reviewed by: EDWARD M. SOSU**

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*Personal Epistemology and Teacher Education* is an edited book that draws together research and emerging evidence linking teachers' personal epistemology to various domains of teacher competence, with the sole purpose of informing initial teacher education and inservice teacher development. The book is made up of 17 monograph styled papers, organised into four main sections: an introduction, eight chapters devoted to preservice teachers and teaching, seven chapters on inservice teachers and teaching and a concluding chapter. Contributions are from researchers within the field of personal epistemology and teaching.

The book provides a comprehensive overview of existing research on personal epistemologies and its influence on teachers and teaching. It addresses some of the key issues surrounding the conceptualisation of personal epistemologies: measurement; strategies for belief change; and the implications of teachers' epistemology on their teaching and learning. The chapters draw on the most recent research in the field, thereby providing a rich source of reference material. While this sometimes makes the book read like a collection of journal articles, its accessibility offers those who are new in this area an initial starting point and those already established a one-stop reference resource.

In considering the key highlights, the introductory chapter provides a better overview of the potential of the book than the table of content. It offers an alternative organisation of the chapters according to themes rather than the broad areas of preservice and inservice teaching in the table of content. For those new to the concept, the chapter by Aman Yadav and colleagues provides a good introduction of personal epistemology and its implications for teaching and teacher education. Several chapters provide exemplars of unresolved discourses that confront epistemological research. For instance, a chapter by Lisa Bendixen and Alice Corkill suggests that teachers generally hold a complex array of beliefs, some of which can be conflicting. This finding feeds into the debate surrounding how personal epistemology is conceptualised and measured. Additionally, Florian Feucht's case study, which examined the relationship between teachers' personal epistemology and actual classroom practice, is among the very few studies that have gone beyond linking personal epistemology to teachers' self reported behaviour. This is one area that needs further work if research on personal epistemology is to become a mainstream issue in teacher education. Recent evidence shows that the impact of personal epistemology on actual teaching competency is mixed (Sosu & Gray, 2012). Finally, numerous chapters have been devoted

to strategies for nurturing belief change (e.g., Marra & Palmer; Brownlee and colleagues; Schraw and colleagues). Other interesting features of the book are the extent to which the complexities of studying personal epistemology are comprehensively discussed. Where the book falls short is the organisation of the table of content. It would have been better to organise the content according to key themes that provide a logical structure for readers. A look at the table of content does not give you meaningful perspective.

On the whole, the book is an interesting read. It will be a valuable resource for teacher educators and researchers interested in fostering belief change. There are lots of practical examples that can be used by teacher educators to help students, teachers and colleagues reflect on their own beliefs.

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