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Editorial

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There are few certainties in higher education teaching and learning. We simply take it for granted that our teaching will have some positive influence on student learning. Yet teaching is only one factor among many that affect how students learn. Ideas like teaching affecting student learning require critical examination because our presuppositions impact on how we interact with our students. Ideas prescribe what may or may not be done in a particular situation by shaping what goals are considered worthwhile and the appropriate means of achieving those goals (Parsons, 1968).

Still, just because something has worked for us in the past does not mean it will continue to work the same way in the future. Instead of searching for higher levels of certainty in higher education we need to learn to accept higher levels of ambiguity. As Karl Popper (1974) reminded us, even scientific knowledge is provisional. Our knowledge about higher education teaching and learning can only grow by identifying challenges we face and our attempts to resolve those challenges. This is because solutions to problems must come from beyond our existing knowledge and that requires an optimistic leap of imagination.

There is no shortage of challenges currently facing higher education teaching and learning in our region. University teaching has undergone a sustained period of change, the most obvious being in learning and teaching technologies brought about by increases in computer power and connectivity. But it is also in the many subtle changes occurring in staff and student demographics, student expectations, and in government policy. Each change puts pressure on universities to respond, with a desire for learning

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and teaching to change more quickly than it has in the past, even as universities develop into ever more distinctive and complex organisations.

Incremental adoption and adaption is no longer seen as the means of getting us to where we want to be. Australasian higher education has had a long history of finding out what can be improved and then suggesting ideas for improving it (Kandlbinder, 2012). The ideas that characterise higher education in our region are the result of a fusion adopted and adapted from across other anglophone higher education systems. When comparing ideas there are two distinct choices—those with precedents in North America and those from the United Kingdom (Kandlbinder 2015). Tight (2007) argued that the reason differences exist is largely historical and suggested that higher education systems will develop similar characteristics as they grow closer in size. However, instead of size, Australasian higher education is influential by being at the cross-roads of ideas from the UK and US where it is able to select from both to create a distinctive combination suited to our own unique set of challenges. As I have argued elsewhere this is only possible because of a common conceptual ground based on signature concepts that allows collaboration to occur across different fields (Kandlbinder, 2015). In this volume we have three articles that demonstrate the best of Australasian conceptual fusion.

Gerlese Åkerlind introduces the idea of variation theory as the means to better curriculum design. Variation theory is an expansion of the phenomenographic research tradition developed by the Gothenburg School in the 1970s. Phenomenography has been defined as the study of "description of appearances" (Hasselgren & Beach, 1997) and is primarily a method of analysis that structures how students describe their experiences of learning. Åkerlind shows how these statements map the different ways students can understand the same experiences. Variation theory provides the missing theory of learning that can be used to marry a phenomenographic understanding of the content of learning with an awareness of the different aspects of those disciplinary concepts. This is elegantly illustrated by Åkerlind's demonstration of how legal reasoning can be seen as a threshold concept in law which variation theory helps to structure into a more effective learning experience for students.

Peter Goodyear reviews the development of a concept that fuses two distinctive fields into a focus on design suited to higher education practice. He argues that a shift in the balance towards design is needed for higher education to cope with the pressures placed on staff and resources. Goodyear's concept of a design for learning frames this argument by expanding the core conceptions of what teaching work entails and then focuses on some characteristic qualities that can be observed when teaching is defined as a design activity. He intertwines issues that are of practical and theoretical significance to design work by drawing on ideas from philosophy. Goodyear explores the concept of a 'designerly ways of knowing' that requires a study of the products of the design process as much as the practices and processes of design. Goodyear concludes that building design capacity within universities can only occur by helping students to take greater control over the design of their own learning tasks and learning environments.

Sally Kift presents a distinctly Australasian solution to a global situation. It has been 10 years since she and Karen Nelson coined the term "transition pedagogy" (Kift & Nelson, 2005) at a HERDSA conference. Kift argues that it was a distinctly Australasian response due to the context facing our students in their first years of study. The practical responses to the challenge of transitioning into higher education made enormous gains once she was able to conceive of a different way of experiencing the first year in higher education. Over the past decade transition pedagogy has helped to shift our thinking from supporting individual students to making the first year a whole of university responsibility that emphasises what students have in common rather than focussing on their diversity and differences. By locating the challenge at the level of the university Kift is squarely laying the responsibility with university leadership that must respond to a dynamic environment in terms of resourcing, competition and diversity among the student population. It is a challenge that Kift argues transition pedagogy can help to solve.

What these reviews have in common is the view that it is not universities or faculties that innovate—it is higher education staff and students. Change in higher education is done through the work of other people. In a time of heightened experimentation and innovation there will be a need to build capacity among staff and students so that they can operate in an environment that involves new ways of working. When it comes to making changes, ideas matter. If knowledge is the result of identifying imaginative ideas forged through experience then ideas can also advance change. The more people are connected to conceptual, blue sky thinking the more ideas will flow. The key is not to look for ready answers but to go for the hard questions and make sure we develop thoughtful understandings of the situation without jumping to conclusions that limit any alternative futures for Australasian higher education.

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