

Conference Review

Innovation: The Key to the Future

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While the term ‘innovation’ has been very much associated with the role played by technology in recent years, the conference took the position that technology is not the only driver of innovation in teaching, materials development and teacher development. As a consequence, there was a focus on creative ways in which to prepare students for academic study, and to develop EAP practices.

The conference was opened by the organiser, Kerry Tavakoli, followed by an excellent welcome from the Proctor, Professor Lorna Milne, who argued that EAP is not only at the cutting edge of pedagogy in the university, but also leading the way in ‘engaging with content lecturers and determining the extent to which a mutual exchange and enrichment is possible’.

In the opening plenary on ‘EAP Methodology: What’s New?’ Edward de Chazal provided a comprehensive review of the key influences on methodology and consequent practical approaches to EAP. Edward’s argument was that it is only through an appreciation of these that teachers can formulate their own distinct new methodologies and practices.

This was followed by Sophia Butt’s ‘Balancing an Innovative EAP Assessment Cocktail with Student Autonomy’. Sophia is Director of the Business Management English (BME) Preessional at Birmingham University and her presentation was based on the results of a project designed to counteract the apparent over-assessment of the preessional. The solution was a Dragon’s Den ‘Booster’ week or weekend where students produced a video promoting a particular product. Sophia concluded that such an approach deals with many of the challenges and constraints facing teachers on preessionals, specifically the issue of assessment.

Carole Macdiarmid’s fascinating presentation on ‘Encouraging Exploration and Innovation through our CPD Programme’ discussed how the University of Glasgow’s EFL Unit responded to an engagement with professional development (identified as a core competency within the BALEAP competency framework for EAP and generally recognised within the field as being of vital importance, e.g., Borg, 2010 and Mann, 2005). Carole outlined a wide range of sample tasks, including developing professional practice and peer observations, materials development, feedback on BALEAP conferences and an EAP reading group.

Steve Kirk, in his visually arresting plenary ‘Lost and Found in Translation: Innovating and the EAP Practitioner’, presented his thoughts on innovation in EAP commenting that creativity and innovation in language teaching is more common than we think as a result of the changing contexts in which EAP tutors find themselves.

One such context was that presented by Susie Cowley-Haselden in ‘Content “Unplugged” – A Bespoke Approach to EAP’. As part of her engagement with content-based language learning, Susie presented an approach to EAP based on Academic Reading Circles (Seburn, 2011), dialogic teaching and engaging students with threshold concepts. Through interviews with participating students, Susie demonstrated the ease with which such an approach – involving the apportioning of roles to students – could be applied in the classroom and commented, perhaps controversially, that the greater the EAP tutor’s engagement with content, the greater EAP’s relevance (Donohue, 2012) .

Another presentation concerned with an engagement with content was Gary Riley-Jones’ ‘An Innovative Understanding of Criticality: Consequences for the Student Experience’. Gary presented a critique of the three key understandings of ‘criticality’: critical thinking, critical pedagogy and post-structuralist critique, arguing that critical thinking (the most common understanding of criticality) has become so naturalised within the university that it is often regarded as the *only* way of thinking and that its assumed ideological neutrality does not take into account its historic origins within the Enlightenment (a ‘fault’ which can also be levelled at critical pedagogy with its origins in Marxism). Instead, he argued with reference to student artwork, that any understanding of criticality must incorporate Barnett’s (2000: 154) observation that criticality should ‘create epistemological and ontological disturbance in the minds and in the *being* of students’ which Barnett argues is a prerequisite for critical being.

The online provision of TEAP was another theme. For instance, Chris Lima in ‘Delivering Training for EAP – an Online Model’ showcased the Leicester PG Cert TEAP and eloquently explained how the course has been set up. The BALEAP TEAP competencies writers in the audience seemed particularly impressed by the use of Padlet as a portfolio of evidence.

In a similar vein, Tony Prince of INTO UEA presented on ‘The making of a Moodle EAP Module’, which was in fact a TEAP module. One interesting aspect of this presentation was that it seemed as if Tony had four different presentations planned and asked us what we would like to focus on. Essentially, Tony was saying that he used pre-recorded screencasts to provide feedback on questionnaires students would complete on Moodle. This meant students had instantaneous feedback, although it might not exactly be tailored to their needs; something that would come later.

PDFs of the programme may be found at

<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/elt/newsandevents/title,227970,en.php>