Communication – not (necessarily) a 'let down'

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Communication let me down,
And I'm left here
Communication let me down,
And I'm left here, I'm left here again!

- Spandau Ballet, *Communication*

When eighties new romantics Spandau Ballet lamented on being "let down" by communication, they were clearly referencing the pitfalls inherent in the 'sender-message-receiver' model. 'To cut a long story short' (!) the model starts with a sender 'encoding' an idea as a 'message'. When transmitted it is expected that the message remains intact when it can, of course, be distorted or adulterated in some way. The message then proceeds to the 'receiver' who then 'decodes' at the other end (Ellis and Beattie, 1986). To Finnegan (2002), the model is narrow, mechanistic and unrealistic of what is involved in communication. This may, she argues, be down to our focus on transmission rather than the context of communication. Finnegan elaborates by positing that the 'message' dissolves into a fluid, situational and multiplex process, "where mutual

understanding and influence may eventuate *during* the interaction, not just in a concrete message enunciated beforehand, and continue even after the apparent 'conclusion' of the message-transfer at its 'destination.'" Many communicative situations involve multiple participants and, to apply Bauman's (1992) observations, university life can thus be viewed as one that "is communicatively constituted, produced and reproduced by communicative acts (p. xiv). These collegial instincts drive us towards a creative mutual interacting of teachers and learners in specific contexts rather than in abstract systems of codes or transmission bounded 'messages'. When browsing through this issue of *Innovations*, you'll notice that communication, networks and interconnectedness loom large as common threads.

Viewpoint papers presented in *Innovations* represent an opportunity for colleagues, with an authoritative perspective, to raise awareness of particular ideas or issues that merit further consideration. The first Viewpoint paper, by Carey, casts a critical eye on student representation, and the

mechanisms for involving students which, as recommended by the QAA (2016), "[ought to be] not 'one-off' initiatives but are undertaken as part of a sustained strategy of student involvement." In light of this, the paper focuses on 'reward and recognition' initiatives at LJMU that are aimed at improving student engagement. The idea of 'belonging' and 'identity' is then followed by Morrissey's paper on employability and enterprise skills on a Forensic Science programme. What's especially striking in this paper is the sense of dialogue between the students and programme team that chimes with some of the findings from an HEA-commissioned study, which found that the 'employability' literature was gradually moving from the discussion of a list of skills and attributes towards a more subtle discussion of identity (Artess et al., 2017): in Morrissey's case, discussion with students on their future status as graduate worker. Feedback on learning has regularly been reported by students as a thorny issue. The theme is scrutinised by Adams and Wilson, who undertook an LJMU Curriculum Enhancement funded project on academic self-efficacy. They propose is that a dialogic, sustainable feedback cycle is a valuable mechanism through which to develop independent, self-regulated learners: students may develop agency in their studies and improve their mental toughness and academic self-efficacy, enabling them to both set, and evaluate progress towards self-determined learning goals, thus ensuring a beneficial learning partnership. The final Viewpoint paper, by Nixon, Brooman and Murphy, reflects on the establishment of a writing group dedicated to pedagogical and higher education research. I'm sure many of

you may have had the intention of writing but never quite managed to put pen onto paper. What stands out in this paper is that writing needn't be a lonely process; collaboration and engendering a shared sense of development and understanding can be richly rewarding.

The idea of dialogue is continued in the Research in Practice section (it is worth noting that all papers have featured in presentations to the annual LJMU Teaching and Learning Conference). The section opens with Smith's dissemination of findings from a small-scale study with first year (Level 4) students, studying at LJMU's School of Art and Design, on their expectations and early experiences of higher education. Sharp-eyed readers will notice the interesting parallels with Money et al.'s (2016) paper, which featured in the previous issue of *Innovations*. The assessment of student expectations and values at this formative stage of their academic lives is being scrutinised in great detail. For instance, and at the time of publication, Unite Students and HEPI (2017) published a report on attitudes and perceptions of university applicants. Does institutional and sector practice today possess the conceptual and practical tools to understand the demands and vistas of transition?

The following paper, by Gallard and Taylor, on the role of companion animals in the classroom may appear slightly left-field. However, there has been a growing trend in recent years to 'use animals' as a means of combating student stress by a number of UK institutions. Gallard and Taylor not only reflect on the role companion animals can play in acting as a 'social lubricant', but argue passionately about operating within an

appropriate ethical framework; moving beyond mere 'use of animals'.

In the final Research in Practice paper, Randles unearths the developing dialogue between the UK and US, in relation to the concept of learning gain. There has been some traction of learning gain in the light of substantial investment made by HEFCE to supporting various programmes and initiatives since 2015 (there's even been mention of it as a possible metric in the Teaching Excellence Framework). Moreover, the conversations HEFCE has engaged in, are worth noting. They include engagement with the US Council for Aid for Education, who have established the CLA+ standardised test; HEFCE's current National Mixed Methodology Learning Gain Project draws broadly on a study by the Center for Inquiry at Wabash College in the States.

Finally, thank you for your continued support. It has been a year since *Innovations in Practice* migrated to the Open Journals System platform and we are really pleased with the positive feedback and engagement. Our statistics show, there have been over 2,000 downloads in the first six months of 2017. With this in mind, we therefore hope the journal inspires you to reflect on your teaching environment, collect data and to write up your analyses!

#LJMUIiP

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