

A river runs through it

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Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of those rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs. I am haunted by waters.

–Norman MacLean, *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories*

Imagine a river. What comes to your mind? A silken river snaking and meandering in lush, uninhabited surroundings? Or does an urban river come to mind? Perhaps a muddy one like the Thames, cutting a purposeful swathe in the city, lined on each side by ornate historic buildings, standing incongruously alongside expressions of modernity – those unfussy office blocks reaching upwards towards the sky? Rivers can be places of tranquillity, beauty, sanctuary and leisure but also of uncertainty and danger. Perhaps the river you imagined was a foaming rapid, sweeping past rocks and boulders and moving inexorably towards a rumbustious waterfall?

Now, what if that river symbolised ‘pedagogical research’? This was a question I posed to a small group of new teachers on

LJMU’s postgraduate CertHE course the other week. I asked them to imagine a river in terms of their wider identity as academics (teachers *and* subject specialists). With a few prompts, I then asked them *to draw* what came into their minds. Each colleague took to the task with bemusement, at first, but then with much gusto!

I asked each person to think about the flow of their river; perhaps this could indicate a positive sense of direction? Conversely, I reminded them that rivers can also be stagnant and lack energy – is this what they also imagined? What about obstacles, such as rocks, or ‘enablers’, such as bridges? Maybe their river divided into two or into many other rivulets? We then set about interpreting, in very general terms, what their pictures might mean.

Of the drawings presented, three in particular caught my attention. In one, a colleague drew not just a river but a canal running in parallel with it. He rationalised that the ‘natural river’ represented his identity as a subject specialist, twisting and constantly searching; the canal his identity as a novice evaluator of teaching – manufactured, linear and devoid of bends or intrusions, bar one canal boat. Another drew a steadily flowing river but, in regular

kinks and bends, there were benches; she indicated these were necessary as time and space were needed, to sit by the bank, watch the flow of the river and reflect on her practice as a new teacher. The final picture was drawn with much frenzy! There were waterfalls, rocks and many, many waves in this drawing. The sketcher indicated that being a new teacher and learning so much about teaching practice, in a comparatively short period of time, was overwhelming; having the ability to control the flow and evaluate his teaching in a more focused way would come over time, and he foresaw the need to draw a dam.

The stimulus to apply this ‘river modelling’ came from a presentation I attended at the 21st Annual SEDA Conference in Brighton (‘Surviving and thriving: effective collaboration in the new higher education’, 3-4 November, 2016). As I sat observing how academics, from two contrasting institutions, applied the technique “to capture a learning journey” in their mission to co-construct a curriculum, my attention was briefly averted by a couple of tweets, with the hashtag #SEDAConf, from a delegate at another session: “If you want to wait until the end to reflect what you were when you started” (1/2); “you can only see yourself through the lenses of the person you are now” (2/2). The timing seemed propitious.

Our identity as academics is something that is constantly challenged and questioned. In the late 1980s, Ernst Boyer (2015) rationalised that our identity as subject specialists, engagement in the ‘scholarship of research’ had to be viewed on equal terms as the ‘scholarship of teaching’ [and learning] (SoTL). Boyer’s report was quite

revolutionary at the time. For me, there are different levels of SoTL but, in a nutshell, it can involve: looking at modifications and adjustments we make in our teaching; collecting evidence of its impact in a *systematic* way; comparing experiences; and, crucially, disseminating these findings.

As teaching in higher education is brought into sharper focus with the Teaching Excellence Framework and, at a local level, by discussions framing the new LJMU Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategy (2017-22), educational development will be under increasing scrutiny. These times of change in mood, culture and narrative demand from us a reimagining of ourselves as teachers; a clarion call to seek out and to offer collectable measurements to continuously challenge, refine and, ultimately, enjoy our practice. The clear course that follows will bring about a renewal of our values and identity as teachers.

Innovations in Practice is a means by which we can amplify our voices. It exists in a mosaic of other collegial practices (the LJMU Teaching and Learning Conference, Research in Practice seminars and Faculty pedagogic/education research groups) by which we can connect with and develop ideas inspired by others; a common narrative that shapes and arouses us with a common purpose – a vaulting collective ambition.

OK, so what form does that river take now? Can you see it taking a different shape? Either way, navigating these waters will be essential. With this in mind I can think of no better way to end this column other than to recite these familiar lyrics,

*Life goes on day after day
Hearts torn in every way
So ferry 'cross the Mersey
'Cause this land's the place I love
And here I'll stay...*

—Gerry and the Pacemakers, *Ferry 'Cross
the Mersey*

Reference

Boyer, E.L. (2015) *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*, (Expanded Edition), San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass