
ILTAC 2000: A Personal View

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The first annual conference of the Institute for Learning and Teaching was held at the College of Ripon & York St John from 27-29 June this year. It carried the subtitle: "Learning matters: improving practice in higher education". The themes of ILTAC 2000 were listed in the pre-conference leaflet as:

- Teaching and the Support of Learning: moving towards independence.
- Designing and Planning Learning Activities to Encourage Student Centredness.
- Making Assessment Integral to Learning.
- Developing Effective Learning Environments: student support to increase student autonomy.
- Using Reflection and Personal Development to Improve your Practice.

In practice, the conference included five keynote speeches and more than one hundred half-hour sessions in about ten parallel sessions.

I kicked-off early with a pre-conference activity labelled "The Yorkshire Experience", which involved in my case a tour of York with the challenge to look for ideas for case studies or other learning activities. I did find several links to my subject area (mathematics) but all rather embryonic, not substantial enough to build a workshop on. This, however, did not stop me from attending the follow-on activities and discussions which continued till after the conference proper.

The plenary sessions were generally interesting. We were shown some of the things modern technology can now achieve. We were told about theoretical models for assessment and given some idea of how theoretical models for the learning process can be realised in specific courses. "Reflection" also emerged as the key-word in one's personal development as a teacher. Overall, however, there was a rather pedagogical emphasis throughout the plenary sessions. Examples of links to practice seemed to come from "managers" and a plain talk by a subject practitioner sharing his "good practice" was clearly missing.

Of more immediate use to me were the shorter contributions. I could choose those of interest to me (but maybe I should have mixed topics more). I feel I did benefit greatly by the shared experiences and the new contacts made. However, the quality of these contributions was very variable.

The conference exhibition introduced us to material that we might not find easily on subject-related conferences, but the number of participants was rather limited for a conference which had such a wide spectrum of attendants.

The conference was attended by roughly three groups of professionals: those with an interest in pedagogy, those (like me) who actively teach a subject and those employed in a support role to teaching and learning activities. These three strands co-existed, often separated for the smaller contributions and did not necessarily interact as much as one would like. I believe future conferences should be more pro-active in bringing these strands together, not just for plenary sessions and meals but also in discussions.

The organisation of the conference could be improved. In particular, the accommodation was pretty basic. The local team did work very hard to manage the gruelling movement of people in between short contributions. With the next conference scheduled to take place at the University of York, I wonder whether the ILT team likes to continue to play on home turf in the future. My guess is that the conference will be more successful in attracting new people if it moves around the country, giving more people a sense of "ownership".

In conclusion, I should say I did enjoy the meeting overall. I did feel more "lectured to" by the pedagogical experts than I would like. If the conference's aim is to improve practice, more linking activities will need to be found and a stronger representation from practitioners will need to be encouraged to attend and share their experiences. Parallel sessions would make sense to distinguish subject area's, but not to separate theory and practice. Less, but better vetted contributions would benefit the meeting as well.