

What have we been thinking of? A critical overview of 40 years of student learning research in higher education

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This paper is a response to the request from the organisers of the HECU4 conference to consider the following three questions in relation to the recent history of research into student learning in higher education: What do we know?, What do we need to know?, and What might we do about it? A survey of article titles reporting on research into student learning was carried out in three key higher education journals, and the results of this were then considered in the context of other, related research perspectives. The paper will first report on the results of this review, and then discuss these results in the context of theoretical moves in psychology and sociology over the same period of time. The trends identified in the higher education journals will then be compared to research into student learning in higher education which is published in two other disciplinary areas: Adult Education and Sociolinguistics. After raising some questions that arise from these comparisons, the final section of the paper will outline some suggestions about ways in which higher education researchers might begin to 'think differently' about learning and research in this field.

Keywords: learning, higher education, student learning research, epistemology

Universities today are homes of research into almost every subject save one – themselves. There are few fields of social science in which painstaking investigation is more necessary and less often pursued.

Lord James of Rusholme (1965) in Maton, 2004

In the context of higher education, 'student learning research' is frequently taken to refer to the Approaches to Learning research, originated by Marton & Saljo (1984/1997) in the 1970s, and developed around the idea of 'deep' and 'surface' approaches to learning. Although an increasingly varied range of models and theoretical approaches to understanding student learning are becoming more prevalent in the literature, discussion about research into student learning in higher education is still frequently either based on these ideas, or takes them for granted (e.g. Rollnick et al 2008; Gorsky et al 2006). Despite its influence and success, however, the bulk of this research, although taking a first step in this direction, has arguably avoided many of the really difficult questions about the nature of 'universities themselves'. Focussing largely upon the cognitive processes of individual students, one of the main concerns of this research has been to find out what is wrong with students who do not engage in the ways that their tutors wish them to (Haggis 2003). In response to the repeated finding that large numbers of students appear not to be taking a deep approach, the question implied by the research seems to be 'why do so many students take a surface approach to learning?' Despite nearly forty years of concentrated research activity, this question appears to remain still largely unanswered.

In order to try to find out something about the nature of the research base in this area, a review of article titles relating to student learning was carried out in three key higher education journals. The paper will first report on the results of this review, and then discuss these results in the context of theoretical moves in psychology and sociology over the same period of time. The trends identified in the higher education journals will then be compared to research into student learning in higher education which is published in two other disciplinary areas: Adult Education and Sociolinguistics. After raising some questions that arise from these comparisons, the final section of the paper will outline some tentative thoughts about my own attempts to work out ways of conceptualising and researching 'differently'.

What do we know?

In order to explore the question of 'what we know', a survey of article titles reporting on research into student learning was carried out in three key non-North American Higher Education journals, covering the period from the 1970s to the present day. The journals reviewed were *Higher Education*; *Studies in Higher Education* and *Teaching in Higher Education*. In terms of location and status, Tight (2007) has suggested that the journal *Higher Education* (HE) is generally regarded as 'the leading non-North American international' HE journal, and that *Studies in Higher Education* (SHE) is 'the leading UK-based' journal (2007:239). *Teaching in Higher Education* (THE), a more recent journal that has only been published since the late 1990s, was reviewed here in order to compare a newer, initially less prestigious journal with the two more established ones. Although UK-based, these journals publish articles from a range of international authors and are widely used in British, European, Australian, South African and Hong Kong higher education contexts (an extended version of this review in comparison with two key North American journals is reported in Haggis, 2008).

The focus of this analysis is 'how learning is conceptualised in UK-based journal article titles'. In other words, what models/research do these articles appear to draw on, in terms of the language used in their titles? The purpose of the paper is to examine ideas about learning in higher education from the perspective of discussions about learning which take place in other, non-higher education contexts. These contexts include schools, in Further Education, work-based learning, and professional learning. Conceptualisations of learning in many of these contexts have been influenced by 'big ideas' from Psychology and Sociology which often extend beyond the UK (for example, North America and the USSR). For this reason the discussion of theoretical moves in psychology and sociology is not restricted to the UK.

Methodology

In each journal, for each decade, a content analysis was performed on the language used in article titles relating to student learning. In order to do this, a working definition of 'student learning' had to be developed. This was problematic, as the distinction between learning and teaching begins to break down when examined closely, and of course the focus on titles only restricted the information available on each article. For the 'curricular innovation' category (discussed below) a decision was made to restrict the analysis to titles which explicitly mentioned 'learning' in relation to new forms of curricula. Similarly, in the 'social context/student experience' category (also discussed below), titles referred to sociologically-based descriptions of students or student experience, rather than to organisational policies concerned with issues such as 'widening access'. The rationale for these decisions can be seen more clearly in relation to the questions connected to each category; what is being examined here is the way that *learning* is conceptualised (so, a widening access policy that aims to increase 'student support' may appear to be looking at learning as an institution-wide issue, but the conceptualisation of learning is still based on the idea of individual support)

The six categories generated in relation to these titles were ‘cognitive psychology’, ‘approaches to learning’, ‘curricular innovation’, ‘social context/student experience’, ‘critical perspectives’ and ‘discourse/writing’. The categories were not restricted to areas such as ‘theory’ or ‘methodology’, but used a wider range of concepts in an attempt to capture the different areas of focus represented by the titles. Some of these could be classified as relating to specific theoretical approaches (eg. ‘cognitive psychology’, ‘approaches to learning’, ‘discourse analysis’), but others, such as ‘curricular innovation’ and ‘social context/student experience’ were not, or only partially so. Three passes through the total data set were performed in order to cross-reference and confirm the categories.

The fact that it was not possible to group the articles into solely theoretical areas is interesting. Though many of the perspectives categorised as ‘social context’, for example, are clearly broadly sociological, ‘the student experience’ aspect of this category can also incorporate a range of political agendas, as well as methodological approaches linked to quite specific (eg. critical and emancipatory) strands of sociology. The category ‘curricular innovation’ represents a broad-based area of activity that might draw on any number of different theories, or possibly even have very little theoretical basis. For example, ideas such as ‘peer-learning’, ‘problem-based learning’ and ‘self-regulated learning’ could be seen to have developed as much in relation to cultural trends and value-positions as to research or theory. The discourse/ writing category often reflects theoretical discourse analysis approaches, but also includes discussion of essay writing and writing skills.

Each category could be said to be attempting to answer a particular question. For example, cognitive psychology and approaches to learning might be said to be asking: ‘*What can we discover about how individuals learn?*’ Key words in **cognitive psychology** include: personality, ability, motivation, learning style/strategy, personal meaning, orientation, achievement, preference, study orchestration, and learning outcome. **Approaches to learning (AL)** includes phrases such as: approaches to study/ learning, student perceptions/conceptions, deep learning, student ways of thinking, deep and surface. Although initially seeing itself as distinct from cognitive psychology, AL work arises within the cognitive tradition, and as time goes on titles indicated a blurring of the distinction between them. For example, in 1996, ‘metacognitive, cognitive and affective aspects of learning styles and strategies: a phenomenographic analysis’; or, in 2002, ‘validation of a free response test of deep learning about the normal swallowing process’.

Curricular innovation might be said to be asking the question: ‘*What are the implications of our knowledge about individual learning for classroom teaching and curriculum design?*’ (which AL researchers arguably extend to become ‘*How can we get students to take a deep approach to learning [the content of our curricula?]*’). Key phrases in this category include: peer learning, collaborative learning, problem-based learning, learning for self-direction, task-based learning, negotiated learning, and resource-based learning. Article titles that were focussed on teaching, instruction, or teacher action were not included in the analysis. Although this category appears to focus on ‘teaching methods’, titles here were only included if they focussed on creating new kinds of learning experience.

Social context/student experience perspectives initially ask: ‘*What is going on outside the classroom which might impact upon learning outcomes?*’, and ‘*What do students themselves have to say about learning?*’ Later this focus extends to ‘*How does what is done in the classroom impact upon work and life prospects?*’, and finally to issues such as ‘*How can classroom experience serve the agenda of lifelong learning?*’ Key phrases here are: mature students, disability, students and social class, cultural/social capital, gender/inequality, international students, the student experience, and recognising difference. Article titles which referred to participation statistics or organisational aspects of access policies were not included.

Critical perspectives ask questions such as: ‘*What are the limitations of our current positions and views about learning?*’ These perspectives were often indicated by a question mark, in combination with words such as critical/critique, challenge, hidden curriculum, transformation, power, tensions, transgression, and ethics. **Discourse and writing** perspectives are an extension of both social/student experience and critical perspectives. These perspectives might ask questions such as ‘*What is the effect of particular types of language use in relation to student learning outcomes?*’, or ‘*How does the way we speak, and what we ask students to write, create impediments to students’ learning?*’ Key words here included: writing skills training, writing experiences, academic literacies, writing styles and gender/ achievement, dialogic behaviour, and participating in academic discourse.

The categories are listed above in the order that they appear in higher education journals through time. For example, there are no titles deemed to belong to the discourse/writing category in the 1970s; and social context and critical perspective titles become more prevalent throughout the decades.

Articles on learning: 1970 - 2007

Figure 1 summarises the relative proportions of the different categories in each journal for each decade.

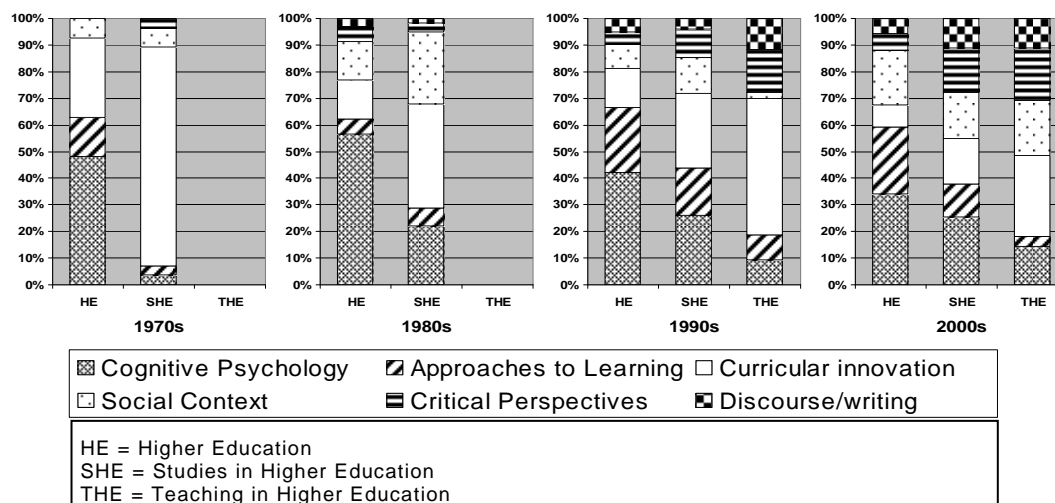


Figure 1: Content comparison through the decades

In the 1970s the main focus of *HE* in relation to learning appears to be the building of a knowledge base about individual student learning (cognitive psychology), and the development of a particular extension of this approach (AL). A smaller proportion of articles explore the application of this knowledge to practice (curricular innovation), and only a very small proportion of articles indicate an interest in understanding the effect of what goes on beyond the classroom (social context/student experience). *SHE*, by contrast, appears relatively unconcerned with building or discussing the knowledge base, but is very interested in considering the implications of research ideas about learning to practical teaching.

In the 1980s, the interest in learning research and theory has increased in *SHE*, whilst in *HE* it remains proportionally the same. Learning research in *HE*, however, has slightly less of a focus in this decade upon AL perspectives. Social and critical perspectives are increasing, particularly in *SHE*, with the combined effect of these increases resulting in a reduction in experimental approaches to teaching and the curriculum. Titles suggest that interest in learning is still overwhelmingly focussed at the level of the classroom.

In the 1990s, *HE*'s interest in building up a knowledge base about individual learning has increased very slightly, but is proportionally largely unchanged since the 1970s. *AL* research, however, now makes up a much larger proportion of this focus. In the 1990s *HE* is only marginally more interested in asking 'What's going on outside the classroom which might impact upon learning outcomes?' (social context/student experience) than it was in the 1970s, and is *less* interested in this question now than it was in the 1980s. It is also apparently slightly less interested in critiquing its perspectives than it was in the previous decade, though discourse/writing perspectives have increased. *SHE*, though more prepared to engage in critique, also appears to be less interested in asking what is going on for students beyond the classroom than it was in the 80s. Both journals show an increase in cognitive/*AL* approaches, and a corresponding reduction in curricular innovation and social perspectives. *THE*, a new journal in this decade, goes against these apparent trends, returning to the much earlier interest in curricular innovation, and also developing critical perspectives to a greater degree.

By 2007, the three journals appear to have settled into a pattern in terms of distribution of focus. *HE* continues to publish the largest amount of psychologically-based research and theory; *THE* publishes the least, and *SHE* a point between the two. Approaches to learning perspectives are reducing in both *SHE* and *THE*, but not in *HE*. All three journals are less interested in discussing classroom practice than in addressing social and critical perspectives.

Four decades of HE research in its wider theoretical and disciplinary context

The trends outlined in the higher education journals discussed above will now be compared with a brief summary of key theoretical moves in psychology and (to a lesser extent) sociology (see Fig 2).

70s →	80s →	90s →	00s
<p>PSYCHOLOGY (individual/ interactional): Behaviourism/objectives (Bloom); Cognitivism, including interactional perspectives (Dewey, Bruner, Bandura, Leont'ev) and developmental theories (Piaget, Kohlberg, Erikson.); Humanism (Rogers, Maslow); Psychoanalysis (Freud, Fromm, Lacan)</p> <p>SOCIOLOGY/SOCIAL THEORY (social): Neo-Marxism; Interactionism/ Interpretivism; Sociology of knowledge, Postmodern critique</p>	<p>PSYCHOLOGY (individual/ interactional/social): All previous perspectives plus Cognitive constructivism; Social constructivism; Multiple & Triarchic theories of intelligence; Socio-cultural approaches (eg Activity theory); Community psychology (radical social justice perspective eg Burman); discourse perspectives; Neural networks, connectionism</p> <p>SOCIOLOGY/SOCIAL THEORY (social): Agency, meaning, interaction, structure (Goffman, Giddens); Class, capital, power (Habermas Bourdieu); 'Minority standpoint epistemologies': gender, race, sexuality & disability; Postmodern/post-structuralist critique (Foucault, Lyotard)</p>	<p>PSYCHOLOGY (individual/ interactional/social/ distributed/evolutionary): All previous plus development of Collaborative, cooperative and discursive approaches; perspectives from Neuroscience (cognitive neuropsychology); Ecological and Dynamic systems theories (Maturana & Varela; Fogel; Bosma & Kunnan); Sociogenetics (Valsiner); Evolutionary perspectives</p> <p>SOCIOLOGY/SOCIAL THEORY interactional/ social/distributed/ evolutionary/individual: All previous perspectives continue and are joined by, Complexity theory and Actor network theory (Latour, Byrne, Law & Urry); Morphogenetic theory (Archer)</p>	<p>Continuing development of social/interactional, distributed, networked, and emergentist perspectives in both psychology and social theory.</p> <p>Increasing amounts of interdisciplinary work, and perspectives which try to overcome the perceived boundaries between social/biological/technological</p>
HIGHER EDUCATION			
<p>Individual: personality, attainment, motivation, information-retrieval, student type, approaches to study, perceptions, student learning processes</p> <p>Social: access, mature students</p>	<p>Individual: affect, anxiety, self-directed learning readiness scale, locus of control, skills, conceptions, approaches, perceptions, individualised learning, problem-based learning, independent study</p> <p>Social: access, comparative achievements of conventional/ non-traditional students, student experience, gender, mature students, social class, social disadvantage, groupwork</p>	<p>Individual: study orchestrations, learning outcomes, study deficiencies, gender & learning style, learning behaviour, learning strategies, approaches & mature students/gender, perceptions, conceptions, self-directed learning, problem-based learning, reflection</p> <p>Social: mature students, class, gender, social inequality, adult learning, student experience, international students, disability</p>	<p>Individual: individual differences/styles, motivation, text & learner variables, learning outcomes, student type, threshold concepts, attrition, metacognition, dissonance, achievement, approaches, perceptions, conceptions, orientations, alienation/belonging, active learning, self-directed learning, experiential learning, learning journals.</p> <p>Social: mature students, academic & social integration, diversity, student debt, disabled students, adults, networked learning, web-mediated discussion (socio-culturally appropriate methodologies, university culture, work-related learning, power distance, complexity, uncertainty)</p>

Fig 2. Comparison of broad theoretical shifts in psychology, sociology, and higher education research through four decades

1970s

In the 1970s, the higher education journals being reviewed here arguably take an individualistic approach to the study of student learning which is rooted in both behaviourist and cognitive psychology. Within this overall orientation, there is some quite radical thinking, demonstrated by titles such as ‘a course without a structure’, and ‘freedom in the selection of course content’. The focus, however, is still predominately upon answering the questions ‘What can we discover about how individuals learn?’ and ‘What are the implications of our knowledge about individual learning for classroom teaching and curriculum design?’

In this decade, the discipline of psychology is developing a much wider range of cognitive perspectives. Potentially relevant, among many others, are the social and interactional perspectives of Bandura and Leont’ev and the philosophical perspective of John Dewey. In addition, humanistic psychologists such as Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, and psychoanalytic theorists such as Erikson and Freud are developing ideas which are being rapidly taken up by those who teach adults in contexts other than universities (see section on Adult Education below).

1980s

In the 1980s the higher education journals continue to take a predominately individualistic approach to the study of student learning, demonstrated most clearly by the overall increase in cognitive and AL perspectives. The potentially radical questioning of the 70s in relation to curricular innovation appears to become reined in in this decade, particularly in *HE*, with discussions of self-managed and structure-free learning giving way to discussion of more manageable technologies such as peer teaching and problem-based learning. In this decade social context perspectives also begin to increase, but these are arguably limited to attempts to answer the question ‘What’s going on outside the classroom which might impact upon learning outcomes?’ The focus of titles in this category is largely limited to a concern for the effects of Access movements and the resulting influx into higher education of ‘non-standard’ entrants, though a small number of articles reflect an interest in the ‘minority standpoint epistemologies’ of gender, race, sexuality and disability which are developing at this time in sociology (Ball 2004).

In the 1980s in psychology itself, cognitive and constructivist approaches are developing into a range of social and interactional perspectives which explore the relationship between individual and ‘context’ in a variety of much more complicated and nuanced ways. Social constructivist approaches in general, and particular socio-cultural approaches such as Activity Theory, begin to consider the implications of not thinking of the individual as at the centre of all that might be designated ‘learning’. This is a radical conceptual departure which is still almost completely absent in the non-North American HE journals by 2007. In addition, the 1980s sees the development of more politically radical branches of psychology, such as community psychology, which critique and challenge mainstream psychology from a sociological perspective. In sociology, major theoretical work in relation to the relationship between the individual and society is being carried out by theorists such as Giddens, Habermas and Bourdieu, and a range of critical perspectives are being developed from feminist and postmodern positions.

1990s

The relative absence of this more nuanced and critical approach to the theorisation of individual and society continues, although to differing degrees, in the higher education journals throughout the 1990s. Apparently largely uninterested in developments in psychology and sociology, *HE* in particular maintains its focus on the more individualistic and static aspects of cognitive psychology, and in this decade significantly increases its coverage of AL research. Although the other two journals are slightly more interested in critical and/or social perspectives, these are largely confined to critiquing

new teaching methodologies and/or discussing generalised (and often psychologised) notions of gender, class, and the student experience (exceptions are one article in *HE* which mentions cultural and social capital, two articles in *SHE* which mention Bourdieu and Freire respectively, and one article in *THE* which mentions postmodernism).

Whilst higher education is focussing in this decade largely upon developing the concerns it identified in the 1980s (with very little critique of such concerns), the fields of psychology and sociology are witnessing the emergence of more new theoretical developments. Resulting partly from increasingly cross-disciplinary flows of critique and ideas, these developments arguably have the potential to reframe the very foundations of the social sciences, and to liberate research thinking in hitherto unimaginable directions. In developmental psychology, for example, ideas from ecological and dynamic systems theories begin to create a range of fluid, dynamic and de-centred notions of self and society. In sociology, actor network theory creates new possibilities for a simultaneous framing of the social, biological and technological in networked relations through time, while complexity theory offers a radically contingent and dynamic perspective from which to consider the emergence of adaptive specificity and difference across a range of disciplines.

2000s

As these new perspectives are continuing to develop throughout the 2000s, the higher education journals apparently show little awareness of their existence. There is not yet even much discussion of theorists such as Habermas and Bourdieu (recent books by researchers such as Mclean (2006) and Archer et al (2003) do explore these perspectives, but they are rarely represented in the three journals being examined here), and, in *HE* and *SHE*, there is a very limited amount of self-referential critique. *THE* is the journal most influenced by critical perspectives in sociology, but it too shows little sign of any interest in the ecological, dynamic systems and network theorisations occurring in other fields. In all of the journals there is some discussion of networks in relation to web-based and online learning, but this review of titles, at least, gives no indication of any of the radical questioning of conventional epistemologies and ontologies which is being explored in other disciplines.

Compared to other disciplines over this period, then, when it comes to discussions about learning (and with some notable exceptions; see for example Webb 1997; Terenzini, 1999; Mann 2001) it can be seen that the higher education journals, and *HE* in particular, focus on a very narrow range of possible perspectives and methodologies. These are not only narrow in the sense that they are restricted to a predominately psychological approach to learning (Malcolm & Zukas 2001), but also narrow in terms of the field of psychology itself. Even in the 2000s, a great deal of discussion about learning in higher education is still focussed upon the same basic questions that arose in the 1970s; ‘What can we discover about how individuals learn?’, ‘What are the implications of our knowledge about individual learning for classroom teaching and curriculum design?’, ‘How can we get students to take a deep approach to learning the content of our curricula?’, and ‘What is going on outside the classroom which might impact upon learning outcomes?’. *THE* is the only journal which explores questions such as ‘What is the effect of particular types of language use in relation to student learning outcomes?’, or ‘How does the way we speak, and what we ask students to write, create impediments to students’ learning?’ in any detail. Thus, *HE*, and to a lesser extent also *SHE* (the two most prestigious journals), are usually at least one, and sometimes two, decades behind research in the two fields which have traditionally most directly informed the development of educational theory.

This lack, or, in the case of *SHE* and *THE*, relatively late, engagement with critical and social perspectives in the mainstream higher education journals does not, however, mean that no critical or social research has been carried out in the context of higher education. Relevant and challenging work has been carried out in two other disciplinary areas, that of Adult Education and Sociolinguistics. Researchers in these fields do occasionally publish in higher education journals (see, for example, Boud & Lee 2005; Lillis & Turner 2001), but in the main this work has been published in the specialist journals of each field.

Adult Education

A comparison of the review of higher education journals carried out above with the leading UK-based journal in the field of Adult Education, *Studies in the Education of Adults (SEA)*, for the 2000s, shows that *SEA* is dominated by the perspectives that are very limited in the two high status higher education journals (see Fig 3). Though UK-based, *SEA* represents perspectives of North American, European, South African and Australasian researchers, as well as writers from the UK.

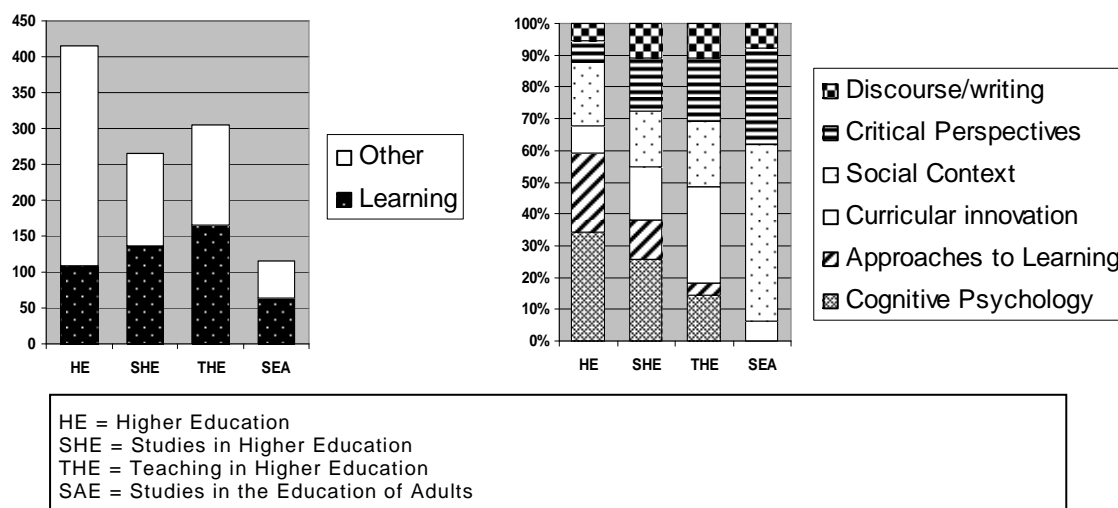


Figure 3: Comparative balance of article focus in three leading HE journals and the leading AE journal (2000s)

Adult Education has been much more influenced throughout the decades by the changes and shifts in the wider intellectual worlds of the social sciences and the humanities. For example, in the 1970s and 80s, when humanistic psychology is developing in psychology, adult learning theory begins to experiment with a wide range of ideas from humanism (eg. self-actualisation, facilitation, self-direction, experience, reflection). The reflexive critique which can be seen in the 70s in fields such as sociology begins to affect adult education by the 80s, as researchers such as Brookfield (1993) and Boud (1990) bring critical reflexivity to bear not only on new teaching ideas and methodologies but also on the field of adult education itself. By the 90s, when the two main higher education journals are only just beginning to develop critical perspectives, adult education is critiquing every one of its central concepts, including the ‘adult’ in adult education, and the policy contexts (such as ‘lifelong learning’) within which its activities are embedded. At this time, adult education is also engaging with a range of issues related to learning for and in work, and drawing upon a range of socio-cultural and post-modern/post-structural theories.

By the 2000s, adult educators have been critiquing their own field from Marxist/neo-Marxist, postmodern/ poststructural and feminist perspectives for a number of decades.

In contrast to higher education's ongoing attempt to establish a robust, 'evidence-based' theory of individual learning, in adult education the influence of postmodernism/poststructuralism and critical theory is by now raising questions about the nature of knowledge, and considering the implications of seeing knowledge itself as de-centred, contingent, distributed, and social. A comparison of article titles focused on learning in the most recent volumes of *SHE* and *SEA* available online at the time of writing gives an indication of the differing content of these two journals today (see Fig 4).

<i>Studies in Higher Education Vol 32 2007</i>	<i>Studies in the Education of Adults Vol 38 2006</i>
<p>1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using concept maps to measure deep, surface and non-learning outcomes • The interplay of perceptions of the learning environment, personality and learning strategies: a study amongst International Business Studies students • Not belonging? What makes a functional learner identity in undergraduate mathematics? • Identity and placement learning: student accounts of the transition back to university following a placement year <p>2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student approaches to achieving understanding - approaches to learning revisited <p>3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student conceptions of oral presentations • Approaches to learning, course experience and examination grade among undergraduate psychology students: testing of mediator effects and construct validity • Scaffolding through the network: analysing the promotion of improved online scaffolds among university students <p>4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving the quality of students' academic writing: an intervention study • Reading and writing tasks on different university degree courses: what do the students say they do? 	<p>1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beyond the moorland? Contextualising lifelong learning • Learning habitus and the dynamics of lifelong learning • From critical vision to critical practice: Exploring the process of critical transformational learning among archaeologists • Consuming metaphors: Stimulating questions for everyday learning <p>2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Just do it: Literacies, everyday learning and the irrelevance of pedagogy • Adults' use of computers and the Internet for self-education • Learning in a border country: Using psychodynamic ideas in teaching and research • 'Invisible other': Understanding safe spaces for queer learners and teachers in adult education

Fig 4: Comparative titles of articles on learning in recent volumes of *SHE* and *SEA* (the two most current volumes available online in August 2007)

Sociolinguistics

The discourse/genre work arising out of the second area, Sociolinguistics, is grounded in the tradition of New Literacy Studies (Thesen & van Pletzen 2006), exemplified by the work of Barton, Gee, Ivanic, and Street (see Barton et al 2000). Arguing for a view of literacy practices as social, context-specific, patterned by power relations, historically situated, and dynamic (Barton et al 2000: 8), this work brings together the socio-cultural concerns of contemporary approaches in the social sciences and poststructural/discourse

approaches in the humanities. The research from this perspective which focuses specifically on higher education has become known as ‘academic literacies’ (AcLit).

AcLit research first starts to make an appearance in the higher education context in the late 90s, with the publication of an article by Lea & Street in *SHE* (1998), and the books ‘Student writing in Higher Education’ (Lea & Stierer) in 2000, and ‘Student Writing’ (Lillis) in 2001. As far as can be seen from the above review of titles, *HE* publishes no research related to this tradition, with the exception of a very interesting article by Francis & Hallam in 2000, and Mann’s equally interesting paper on the student experience of reading (also 2000). *SHE* publishes a very small number of articles in the following years; notably Francis et al in 2001, and Robson et al, and Lea in 2004. *THE*, on the other hand, publishes a range of articles taking an academic literacies approach, focussing on issues such as critical approaches to text, and the analysis of communication and discourse.

Despite its extraordinary relevance for developing a wider range of understandings of teaching and learning, and even more importantly, as a source of potentially generative/transformational critique of higher education cultures and practices, most academic literacies research is not published in the higher education journals being examined here. Whilst some academic literacies researchers are on the editorial boards or review for *SHE* and *THE*, most of their work is not published in these journals, with the result that staff in higher education who might benefit from this work are very likely not to be aware that it exists. They will probably never see, for example, the special issue of the *Journal of Applied Linguistics* which came out in 2007, or the recent work in South Africa collected together in Thesen & van Pletzen (2006).

In concluding this review, then, it can be said that what we know about student learning depends on where we look, and is always a reflection of specific purposes and interests, which are tied to particularities of temporal and spatial contexts. One characteristic of the theoretical shifts which I argue have been largely ignored is an increasing demand for critical reflexivity; a call to pay attention not only to issues such as gender and power, but to turn this attention back on all of the practices and assumptions of teachers and researchers themselves. Higher Education has arguably focussed most of its efforts until very recently upon attempting to shore up certainties in relation to knowledge of students as ‘other’, and has not been particularly good at examining its own cultures and ways of being. In the wider world of Education, ‘what we know’ is contradictory and contested, and is understood to be rooted inextricably in value positions. It is only recently in Higher Education, however, that a range of different perspectives have begun to emerge, and finding ways to really engage with value positions is still arguably problematic.

What do we need to know?

The issues discussed in this review lead to a number of questions which could be explored further. The first issue is what the focus of the two high status journals through the years reveals about the cultures and practices of (non-North American) Higher education to date. As well as considering what is valuable about these cultural biases, there is arguably also a need to consider how we are ourselves contributing (both as researchers and as practitioners) to aspects of these biases which may not always be productive, in ways that we find hard to see. We need to continue to look for ways to better understand the value-laden nature, and effects, of our own positions. The Adult Education and Sociolinguistics literatures can be very helpful here, as there is already a considerable body of research in each of these disciplines which is directly relevant to the issues and questions raised in this discussion. In Adult Education, for example, there is a long history of debate about many of the teaching methodologies and ideas which are either still relatively new to higher education, or which often exist in higher education

contexts in rather simplistic and reduced forms. These include self-directed learning, experiential learning, learning contracts, profiling, and ideas such as 'learner responsibility' and 'autonomy' which underpin such methodologies. The literatures of Adult and Professional Education also contain decades of discussion and debate about the nature of work-place learning and learning for work, again, directly relevant to the increasingly work-focussed agenda being imposed on higher education.

If we can begin to stand even further outside the results of our own enculturation and start to see things differently, a further question is how it might be possible to find productive and generative ways of challenging aspects of what we see that we wish to change. This challenge, already being taken up by many of the participants at the HECU4 conference, is extremely difficult in the current context of massification, increased pressure to produce economically-relevant student outcomes, underfunding, and other factors which are often interpreted as being a threat to academic identity. A particular challenge in relation to the theory and research of learning is the consideration of what it would mean to shift from an individual to a social approach to understanding learning in higher education.

What we might do about it

In response to this review of titles relating to student learning in a selection of UK-based higher education journals, I have argued that we need to do everything we can to get out of our own comfortable, cultural milieu. We need to find ways of standing outside of our histories, circumstances and fields, and of examining our epistemological and ontological assumptions. I have argued that we need to know not only more but *differently*, and to keep on extending the range of our different ways of knowing. It has been suggested that existing research in the fields of Adult Education and Sociolinguistics offer relevant and well-theorised work specific to higher education which could act as a productive starting point for doing this. Beyond this, recent developments in psychology and social science (eg. community psychology, dynamic systems theory, actor network theory, and complexity theory, to name but a few) offer the potential for developing radically new perspectives, if we can be brave enough to try to engage with them.

In more general terms, there are many aspects of learning that are still not well understood, which currently dominant ontologies and epistemologies struggle to investigate and represent. For example, research into learning is still not able to deal well with 'the fleeting', 'the distributed', 'the multiple' and 'the complex' (Law & Urry 2003:10). To my knowledge, there is as yet little research that attempts to document different types of dynamic interaction and process through time in relation to 'learning' situations in higher education. For example, there are few ethnographies (see Nespor 1994 for an important exception), although Academic Literacies research has begun one strand of work from this perspective. The attempt to work with and across a variety of disciplines is fraught with difficulties and challenges, involving identity risks and the creation of endless and unforeseen vulnerabilities. But if we are serious about trying to do justice to our students in terms of understanding what we currently deem to be 'their' learning, we too need to step into the unknown.

The journal review discussed in this paper has also been published as Haggis, T. 2008. 'Student Learning Research : A broader view' in Tight, M, 2008, International Handbook of Higher Education London, Routledge (forthcoming)

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