

Disciplined environments: conceptualising university learning-teaching environments

Charles Anderson and Kate Day

Recent higher education research has given close attention to how students' experience and actions are mediated by the whole university learning- teaching environment in which they find themselves (e.g. Entwistle, McCune and Hounsell, 2003). This presentation pursues a focus on learning- teaching environments by: examining issues in the conceptualisation of university learning-teaching environments, foregrounding the need to take account of central disciplinary purposes, presenting a representation of disciplinary practices within university learning-teaching environments. The presentation acknowledges that conceptualising the nature and purposes of learning environments (whether at school or university-level), is a very challenging task. It entails the need to achieve a clear, coherent representation without oversimplifying or providing a reductionist account of complex social phenomena. In addition, models of learning environments customarily aim not only to provide a satisfactory analytical framework but also to inform practice. This means that they will be guided by, often very defensible, normative assumptions about the purposes and processes that should be pursued in schools or universities. Attention is drawn in the presentation to the central role that metaphors play within the conceptualisation of learning environments or contexts; and to the limitations that flow from viewing environments in terms of the metaphor of 'containers' for action that surround and shape activity. Drawing on writings from a socio-cultural perspective (principally Cole, 1996; Wenger, 1998 and Wertsch, 1995) we argue for a more dynamic and systemic conception of learning environments. As part of the critique of the notion of environments as containers for action, it is noted that a learning environment needs to be actively brought about in the sense of creating a 'shared space', a construal on the part of students of learning goals and activities and identification with these activities that is consonant with disciplinary practices. Guided by Cole's writings we suggest that it is helpful to view a university learning environment as a set of artefacts and processes, which involve dynamic interaction between cultural and technical tools (with their affordances and constraints), goals, social norms and practices, and prior experiences which shape participants' understandings of a current setting. At the same time as acknowledging the relational, interwoven nature of the different elements of a university learning environment including institutional 'structures', we argue that there is value in placing analytical focus on disciplinary practices. Taking this agenda ahead a representation of disciplinary practices within university learning-teaching environments is set out. The presentation concludes by giving a brief illustration of how this representation has been employed within a nationally-funded Enhancing Teaching-Learning Environments (ETL) project to frame the findings concerning undergraduates' engagement with the ways of thinking and acting of history as a discipline.

Presented at the European Conference on Educational Research, University of Crete, September 22-25