The Location of Innovation: Modes and Effects of Change in Higher Education Institutions.

A Case Study of Inter-disciplinary Teaching in a Scottish University

Context

This study was part of a wider research project in the UK for the Centre for Sociology, Anthropology and Politics, now part of the Higher Education Academy that seeks to assist institutions to innovate in the sphere of teaching and learning. We were looking at changes in higher education in the context of quality assurance and quality enhancement, under the wider arch of new forms of governance. We examined the experience and far-reaching effects of the mechanisms of audit, and the expectations and ideology of 'improvement' within higher education. The site of the case study was a large, old university in Scotland, steeped in traditions and august alumni, and, more specifically, within an altered internal structure of schools of linked subject areas nested within colleges, rather than departments within faculties.

The case study entailed the tracking of two new courses from the final stages of their development, through their first year of delivery. Two major innovative elements were the manner in which Web-CT was been built into (and perhaps partly shaped) the course, and that the two courses were interdisciplinary. The two courses were a requirement for all politics, social policy, sociology and social anthropology students in their second year.

The questions that this paper will address arose from a complex and multi-layered context. A much earlier version of the paper, struggling for structure, reflected the disparate and dissonant modalities and effects of changes. With a long holiday from the material, I hope to have a more distilled focus, working outwards from the

courses, to learning, teaching and technology; to the reorganisation of the school, university restructuring and other quality and sectoral reforms; that is, structural change. Emerging from the whole project is a realisation that change is perhaps better called transformation and is a far from transparent process, and is suffused with the phenomenological peculiarities of any particular institution, the wider policy context and attitudes about the nature of and reasons for education.

Introduction

The questions I will broadly try to address here are: in what contexts did the two new courses appear; what have personality and phenomenology got to do with institutional change; and what effect does technology have on teaching in an institution where disciplinary identity is acquired by implicit means. There is, in this institution, a tension between explicit demands from above for transparency in knowledge acquisition, and a long tradition of enculturation into a discipline; between the instrumental necessity for education and the transformative process of learning in the rarified context of an old, confident university.

The research concerns one moment on quite a long historical trajectory in terms of the whole quality assurance story, that spans the last fifteen years or so, and also in terms of the substantial institutional changes that have taken place in the University over a similar period. As far as this research is concerned it soon became clear that there is no neat correlation between institutional change and intellectual and academic concerns, but that, at the same time innovation obviously happens with reference to other changes, in government and governance at every level, whether the connections are made explicit or not. These changes over so many years and in almost as many

contexts inform what's happening on the ground – that is, in the lecture theatres, in course booklets, in tutorials, and in casual conversations in university corridors. Structural change heralds transformations, and it is these that the most interesting, chiefly because they are unpredictable, and sometimes have only an indirect relationship to the change.

Two new courses and a bit of methodology

I will start with a description of the courses. In simple terms, with the reorganisation of the university into schools of related subjects rather than faculties and departments, it makes absolute sense to offer courses across disciplines where much theory is common. The two courses are 'Social and Political Theory' and 'Social Enquiry'. They are delivered to all second year students in the School of Social and Political Studies. It was decided that students would be given very specific topics with readings from key thinkers. The units in Social and Political Theory now are Society and the State, Individual rights and Collective Welfare, Freedom, and Materialism and Idealism. The Enquiry course outline starts with a quote from Geertz, advising students to look at what practitioners of a science do in order to understand what that science is. Both explicitly state that the courses are designed to encourage students to think critically. There are no long reading lists but set readings, available to download, and students are expected to focus only on those for each lecture.

Throughout the fieldwork I was physically located within the School that was implementing the two courses, having an office in the building that houses the four largest, in student terms, of the School's subject areas – Politics, Sociology, Social Anthropology and Social Policy. I attempted to be completely transparent with all concerned as to the nature of the research. A memo was given to all staff, and I was introduced to all the students at the first lecture of each of the courses. The early

stages of the research involved building up a picture of the development of the courses, and of the processes of forming the new School of Social and Political Studies, and its emerging identity.

As a researcher, I decided to join the students rather than my post graduate colleagues as tutors. It was felt by the team that 'the student voice' is often assumed in the literature, or not often made the subject of study in higher education, or that studies of students pathologise them: (but see Marton, Hounsell and Entwistle (1984).) That said, I was also in the unique and privileged position of having relative ease of access to all the constituencies involved in the processes of these changes inside and outside the university, I knew many of the staff, and the post-graduate tutors were my friends and colleagues. As a research fellow, a postgraduate student and a former undergraduate student, my position was unclear, which proved to be an advantage: on the whole, I was an insider, but to the staff, a junior one with no status and was therefore no threat.

I attended most of the lectures, and joined a tutorial group for each course. These groups in particular, became a valuable resource towards the end of fieldwork. Being sensitive to my potential impact on the tutorial groups, it was left open that if at any time they – the students and/or the tutors did not feel comfortable with my presence I would leave. My initial approaches to tutors were met with reluctance to have me there, and it was more of a problem for them than the students. In the Social Enquiry course, I did in fact become something of a resource for the group, especially with regards to ethical issues and the nature of qualitative research, and more particularly, participant observation. The uneasiness of tutors is understandable: the critics we fear

most are our peers. This was coupled with the more general insecurity felt by post graduate tutors within the institution and I will return to this presently.

'Social and Political Theory' and 'Social (and Political) Enquiry'

From the context of devolution; combining the funding councils for further and higher education; major institutional change from faculties to colleges and subject areas subsumed within schools; and partial semesterisation; the two new courses might or might not have emerged. In a self-assured institution such as the one studied, the question of whether innovation within the institution is a response to edicts from above, such as the Funding Council or the QAA or indeed is completely incidental to them, remains a moot one.

The appearance of the courses sometimes seemed incidental, and only as a result of discussions within the school, and of people in it who had seen such courses work elsewhere – chiefly in science. But it was also believed that such a course would give the school intellectual, interdisciplinary coherence. And, as I've said, many factors were at play: from policy changes at government level down to production of two interdisciplinary courses organised through web-based software.

All anthropology, sociology, politics, and social policy students are required to take the two new courses in Social and Political Theory and Social (and Political) Enquiry in the second half of their second year, and their introduction was heralded with much uncertainty and scepticism from the students. They were largely unaware of the wider implications of or rationale for the courses, in that they were part of moves to greater

coherence and semesterisation for example. I want to take a short side road and say something about the seemingly small matter of the naming of the courses.

Their naming creates an interesting ethnographic moment that flags up tensions around interdisciplinarity that were played down by staff involved in the courses, but that existed in the wider academic world that feared that interdisciplinary work was regarded as inferior, and unpublishable in the high profile, discipline-specific journals.

The absence of 'political' in front of 'enquiry' denotes an omission that extended into the production of the course booklets. There is tension evident through this naming anomaly that indicates some lack of fit between the subject areas. Some of the significance emerged during the course evaluation procedure through the comments of some of the politics students. They were unhappy about doing the Social Enquiry course, there being a closer methodological and academic relationship between Politics and History rather than Politics and the social sciences within the University. It also denotes an issue, perhaps, between what is 'political' and what is 'social'. Using both implies that they are distinct from one another, or that politics is not embedded in the social, and is something separate. Does naming matter in the context of such courses that are intended to fully dismantle the disciplinary boundaries? The question remains as to how effectively disciplinary boundaries will be broken down in the milieu of both staff and students, not to mention in the outside world Initially the name came from the assumption of the course convenor that politics is embedded in everything social, and vice versa, and it was not foreseen that students of Politics

would not necessarily assume the same. The convenor of the Theory course did not assume that politics is inherent to the social and named his course accordingly.

Resistance and grumbling about the Enquiry course on research methods came very clearly from Politics students. There were other subject staff not happy with what they saw as disciplinary dilution who carried on with teaching the same material they had always done even if this led to replication. A staff member teaching on the combined course said, when they realised the extent of the similarity of material in a subject specific course and the school-wide course that the disregarding of the content of the combined course was tantamount to 'sabotage' of the new courses.

Both course conveners invested huge amounts of time and energy into the courses, and were, in turn, proud, protective, and worried about them. At the halfway point, the attitude of students had shifted from an initial one of suspicion that it was a money-saving exercise, an anger at the lack of information and consultation during development (over practical issues such as lecture times not suiting those with children), and a belief that as guinea pigs, they would suffer from inevitable teething problems, to a qualified acceptance that the courses were working and a recognition of the courses' aims. Students particularly enjoyed the Theory course, and by the end, most had realised what the Enquiry course was about, and appreciated the breadth and complexity of social science research. However, a significant number of politics students did not see why they had to engage with social science methodologies encountered in the Enquiry course that they will not use. There was also some resistance to becoming a generic social scientist at this stage, when they were beginning to identify with their chosen disciplines, and learning the cultures and idiosyncrasies of those disciplines. And students worry endlessly over assessment:

they did not like the thousand word essays, feeling that they could not express themselves or their arguments so concisely. Again, they were cynical that short essays were about giving tutors less work rather than forcing them to focus directly on the cogent issues, and to argue succinctly. By the end however, they appreciated the intellectual reasons for the form of assessment, and it was viewed positively by the external examiner, as indeed the courses were generally.

The liminality of post graduate tutors

Tutorials were timetabled as one per week per subject as was the norm, but right from the start, the involvement of tutors was quite novel.

Post graduates have only started tutoring since the rapid rise in student numbers brought about by widening access and participation policies. They have no clearly defined or fully contracted role, and get little recognition in financial or other terms for their part in the teaching and smooth running of courses, not to mention a considerable pastoral role that exists by dint of their being the academic representative of the university that the students have most contact with. However, an interesting aspect of the two new courses was how their structure as being interdisciplinary/school-wide affected their position and roles.

There had been little cross-disciplinary interaction between postgraduates previously, and only a dim awareness that conditions for tutoring and postgraduate access to computers, photocopying and printing varied quite widely. There emerged a growing sense of a formation of a cohesive group. In short, they were in search of a legitimised identity within the School. Gradually, conditions became standardised for

all across the School by the School Administrator, and postgraduates have been brought together through their involvement with the new courses. The convenor of the Theory course called regular meetings so that lecturers could brief tutors on each section of the course, and these also served as meetings to discuss how tutorials were going. As far as I am aware, this involvement of tutors is unprecedented. However, tutors said that they would appreciate more, and to at least have the formal opportunity to discuss the courses once they were finished. Although there are pay implications, tutors said that they would attend such meetings whether they were paid or not, especially if they felt that it would help them in their teaching. The convenor took the decision to tutor several groups himself, and hoped that other lecturers would do the same, but none did. Some of the tutors attended lectures, which has never been the norm with any of the subjects. Tutors' involvement with the new courses extends only to how they run their tutorials, and they were not involved in the substantive development. All tutors are expected to attend a two day course run by the centre for teaching, learning and assessment, for which they are paid, but beyond that, they are trusted to get on with the job. They started meeting regularly over lunch in the new postgraduate common room within the school. They articulated deep concerns over their status within the School, such as: are they staff or employees; what are they actually paid for – there is a largely unrecognised pastoral aspect to the role; do they receive holiday and sickness pay; will there be continuity of contracts? It was tacitly recognised by all concerned, and explicity expressed by the tutors themselves, that the position of tutors is liminal, that they are just passing through, and that they are away on fieldwork for long periods sometimes. But, there is a real sense that elements of restructuring were, in a somewhat back-handed way, creating an official place for

them, and that they were now in a position to respond to that official, rationalising agenda.

What has restructuring got to do with learning and teaching?

One might think that the restructuring of the academic year would have little to do with intellectual concerns, but this was not the case, and the committee concerned chose the Bologna Process requirements of European coherence in HE to restate a tenet of the university: namely that a 'modified semester' model still allows for the 'deep and independent learning' (Report of the Working Group of Academic Policy Committee, 2002) that is only possible with year-long courses. I choose this quote to suggest the strongly held belief at the heart of the university that learning should be largely self-directed. The two new courses within the school fit into this new year structure but students get all the course materials and information on the plate of Web-CT. Where does the deep and self-diercted learning come in? The courses also emerged in a growing climate of demand for explicitly outlined outcome-based course planning. Here, again, we see the tension between the notion of self-directed learning, where the student synthesises knowledge and information for themselves via the sum and variety of input from reading, lectures and tutorials. These courses, unlike many in the discrete subject areas, did emerge from the outcomes: students would know and be tested on the fact and detail of these 'key thinkers', rather than be asked to create new debates and questions. It is interesting to consider the degree to which the structure of Web CT itself came to influence, circumscribe and shape the course itself.

So to the broader impact of technology. It is a small but interesting fact that the Learning and Teaching Support Network, now the Higher Education Academy was

born out of the Computers and Teaching Initiative. Positively, the LTSN established a focussed network with a clear remit that looked to improving practice, and raising consciousness in university teaching. However, it also emerged from a body that, by virtue of its name, conflated improvement with an increased use of technology. There exists in the university, a media and learning technology service. The centre is located within Education, away from the heart of the university. (a question that arose in later research on the state of social sciences in the UK was how distinct the teaching of teaching was from the academic study of pedagogy. The wall between the two is very high. But that is the subject of another paper!). Suffice to say that wall says something of how knowledge is ideally acquired at HE level, as distinct from lower levels, or begs the question of whether good teaching can be taught…

The staff of the technology service are enthusiastic, and they sell the idea of e-learning to academics. Talking to them it is clear that their mission is to support academics in developing e-learning, to enhance their practice. I was told that the skills and materials should be regarded as providing more tools at the academics' disposal, the approach to improvement being chiefly instrumental. One staff member, though, reflected that when she asks academics to explain explicitly why they want to use Web-based tools, they are forced to think and articulate their whole approach to teaching and what they are attempting to do in the broadest educational sense. This sounds very positive, but seeks to deny, or undermine or ultimately do away with very successful, if incommunicable elements of the teacher-learner relationship merely because they cannot be articulated. It should be added that this person had studied maths and statistics, and had experienced lectures where there was no relationship because the lecturer stood at the blackboard saying nothing: "there was nothing worse

than being taught in vast lecture theatres. When I was a student, the lecturer came in, said nothing, turned to the board and filled it with equations. When it was full, he would rub them out and start again. At the end of the hour, he would leave."

Her experience of face-to-face teaching was a negative one, and to an extent set her agenda with regards to the promotion of technology in teaching and learning. She felt that if academics are forced to think about using technology, then at the same time they have to evaluate their overall teaching strategies, which can only be a good thing.

> "Technology is all about communication, and although science and engineering subjects make more use of it, language-based subjects are more suitable, simply because they are all about communication. Staff have to realise this, it is not an argument to say that students won't talk on-line, as they might not talk in class either – what's the difference? They are likely to be less-inhibited on-line."

From her negative experience, she denies the value of, or even the existence of the teacher-learner relationship, and implies that proximity, personality and individuality are irrelevant, or even disruptive to learning. The uniformity and levelling aspects of e-learning (that I believe are also implicit in restructuring and in more esoteric norms coming down via the transformations of QA for example). They threaten the underlying ethos of the university, attempting to flatten out difference in the name of equality, or widening participation, or efficiency.

Teachers and students

A central question emerged through the fieldwork about the unique relationship between the teacher and learner, partly prompted by wondering about the effects of remote and e-learning, such as Web-CT, on that teacher-learner relationship.

Individual personalities are the key, and the relationship between the teacher and learner is the central relationship from which the rest emanate. When the personal relationship is removed, as in the case of e-learning, the learner ceases to become an apprentice. There is no relationship at all at the extreme end, with knowledge being delivered in discrete 'packages' for consumption.

The university, historically has relied on a somewhat amorphous relationship between teaching and learning, and the primacy of personality, and idiosyncrasy even, in the transmission of knowledge. The academic 'habitus', remains understandably defensive and suspicious of any innovation coming from agencies such as the funding councils. Along with such innovation is the assumption that it will entail audit and accountability, measuring and evaluation. So, the question of whether innovation within the institution is a response to edicts from 'above', or indeed, is completely incidental to them, remains a moot one, and one that is at the core of this particular case study. All the people I met in the course of my fieldwork believe passionately and sincerely in improving the experience of learners and learning in the university, but the means, structure and culture for that improvement vary widely.

Academia perhaps rests on the assumption that an academic, as a good learner, will make a good teacher. It is also unclear whether its product is 'knowledge' or the 'student'? Both, in a sense are invisible in product terms: teaching is an invisible craft. In this university, there is a strong sense that the process of becoming an academic is an apprenticeship of sorts, and the real grooming starts after the transition to the Honours years, when students become known to particular members of staff in the subject, particularly through the supervision of final year dissertations. These

relationships remain beyond graduation, if the student stays with the subject, and there is a sense that one is a product of a very specific enculturation and means of induction into a subject.

A thorough investigation into what constitutes knowledge in higher education, the triangulation of technology, learners and teachers, and what exactly is being produced and reproduced in a higher education institution is beyond the scope of this. Aspects of at least the last though were examined as part of the wider research project. What I want to suggest through this is that for those who come to the university as students, the personal relationships fostered and the personal interactions with staff at a number of levels is of primary importance in their expectations of, and their experience of higher education.

Bonner, in 'Motivation and the Desire to Learn', argues that current teaching methods rest on the consumer model of learning, that increasingly there is pressure for teachers to 'keep students happy'. This trend has come about partly because of the marketisation of the sector, but also because of the belief that people learn best when they don't realise that they are learning; that is, as children, when they learn through play. The teacher becomes merely a facilitator. This process collapses the difference between education and socialisation, and, if we extend this to higher education, and university education as a key period of becoming adult, then the distinction between the university and the outside world is also diminished. This is the space in which widening participation policies can work. But, as he goes on to argue, true learning comes through the experience of having one's assumptions challenged. He draws a clear parallel with the process of growing up, when disillusionment and pain move us out of childhood into adulthood. Education is a mutual project between student and

teacher of 'nurturing the desire to learn' in both. 'They (teachers and students) are deeply the same but they differ in degree. Both share the desire to learn, but the teacher can be identified as the one whose desire to learn is greater….we are no longer dealing with two different entities, student and teacher, but rather two parts of a whole'(1990:24). The educational experience becomes relational rather than interactional: 'By treating teacher and student as separate entities who are only united in interaction, then the order or unity of their togetherness can merely be thought of as incidental (1990:25). Both are fully implicated in the process of learning, and it becomes much more than achieving competencies: it becomes an educational experience that is transformative. I would argue that this is the underlying ethos of the university where the study was done, especially evident through the two courses and how they were conceived and constructed.

The experience and expectations of students are also bound up in something more amorphous for both them and staff: reputation. A questionnaire returned by two hundred second year students in the university showed that it was the reputation that brought them to the university. From focus groups it became clear that students do not measure reputation by league tables, but that it is something indefinable, and that the experience of being in the city itself was bound up with the whole experience. One senior member of staff responsible for recruiting students from north America takes a scrap book with him full of images of the city and Scotland. He says that it is his most successful tool for drawing students to the university. For teaching staff, despite a fierce protection of their own research time, I would argue that the personal is no less important, even though its focus might be different. This same staff member though cited both the kudos and the city as the reasons why he had stayed so long.

The Personal suffuses the institution and can be used as a phenomenological base for thinking about how the university works.

There is a particular 'way of being' in the university for both staff and students that ensures a sense of belonging and of success, whether you have any executive powers to implement decisions or not. The appropriate way of being and doing is hard to define, and even resists definition. It is, in part, about an acceptance of how things are, or get, done. For some; those that don't 'fit, or are not willing to 'be' in the right way, it would be regarded as insidious. I do not want to go too far in trying to pin down such an intangible, nor do I want to suggest that there is a particular culture or particular cultures at odds, or in allegiance with one another. In this instance. It is best to think of it as more of a loose network of shifting relationships, not necessarily hierarchical, but preserving something of the teacher-learner or mentor-apprentice about them, than of it as a culture, or set of cultures.

Organisations are often conceived of in this way (see Wright, 1995), but it does not convey what I regard as a more amorphous web of associations and relationships that extend beyond this university itself, and the notion of a culture, or cultures, sets up boundaries that I want to avoid. Undoubtedly walls and barriers are experienced by some, and when it applies to students, and they express their frustration, staff might say of them that 'they just don't get it'. If students complain that they are not satisfied, they can be dismissed as 'wanting it all on a plate.' Either the student does not know how to 'be' in the university, or they do not understand how they are being educated there. Education is not delivered to students in this institution.

Government policy, widening participation and instrumental education

A tension became apparent regarding the project that the university pursues, which undeniably retains an element of elitism, and as I've implied above, even tribalism, and the Scottish Government's instrumental requirements for a skilled and educated workforce. At the time of the study, Higher Education and Further Education are not under the remit of the Education Department, which covers schools and issues relating to children, but belongs to the Department of Life-long Learning, Enterprise and Transport. Post compulsory education is seen as part of the continuum of Life-long Learning that incorporates *all* training and education provision, be it at college, in the work-place, or through the Trade Unions, for example. An explicit link is made between commercial enterprise and education, between what is termed the 'Learning Market and the Labour Market' (Scottish Executive, *Life-Long Learning*, 2003:9).

The relationship between further and higher education institutions and the funding councils, is moving along a different path from that taken in England and Wales. The higher and further education funding councils have been amalgamated, to improve the interface between the two sectors which will also add greater coherence to the singular notion of post-school learning as being a unified resource that offers everyone equal access to all education and training provision, and seeks to remove any vestiges of élitism. 'Widening Participation', and the more general 'Social Inclusion' are phrases of the moment. Life-long Learning seeks to place all resources for 'gaining knowledge' before all citizens, making all equally accessible and valid.

However, what this reasoning might also do, perhaps by default, is to dilute the various institutions' distinctive cultures, and flatten out the peculiarities and

particularities of various learning environments. This strategy also ignores the differences between the sorts of knowledge they are dispensing or inculcating. It assumes a commensurability between modes of learning, types of knowledge, but also the meanings to, and motivations of those seeking to learn – that they are chiefly instrumental and vocational in nature.

We can ask how the overall stance of collectivising sources of provision and of flattening out the differences between types of knowledge have affected quality assurance discourse and practice. Perhaps paradoxically, the Scottish Funding Council's decision to shift from a 'quality assurance' to 'quality enhancement' model has been brave one in view of what's been argued above about the university adhering to its intellect-led, rather than an instrumental academic base. There was no definite strategy for how quality enhancement will be implemented by the institutions, but a committee for each has recently been established to take the work forward. This new approach has been formulated in a spirit of trust; from the common-sense belief that institutions, as demonstrated by the last TQA, are performing very well; and from the view that the huge resources required to 'assess' and 'assure' quality would be better allocated to support and enhance good and innovative practice, and to foster a sense and space for innovation and enterprise in teaching and learning. I say there is a paradox because it hands back a high degree of autonomy to the institutions, and allows institutions to become more inward-looking so that the intended integration between industry, enterprise, life-long learning, and further and higher education potentially becomes threatened. Certain institutions then do not really have to take account of the *supposed* level playing field of learning resources that gives all citizens access to any and all learning environments. The success of quality enhancement is all

about trust, apparently. A key figure in the SFC talked of Scotland and its politics, particularly noticeable post devolution, saying that 'it's a feature of the size of Scotland that you can get around a table, so there is a certain amount of trust around'. He was talking somewhere between metaphor and reality, and he was stressing that good relations between the HE sector and personalities in the QAA and Funding Councils had existed for a long time, and there wasn't the distance between the bodies that was more evident down south. Throughout the interview, in different ways, he drew this distinction and gave an overall impression of a 'cultural intimacy' (see Herzfeld) that pervades not only the HE sector, but Scotland as a whole. Interestingly, he foregrounded his 'tribal'connections early in the interview, and it began as a conversation about his being a physicist away from his 'territory' (see Becher, 1989). He was making a connection with me, and with academia and with his having moved through the science studies unit at the university in question. He described how he had seamlessly moved into his current role; but he still strongly identified himself as a physicist, a member of this university.

The elements of restructuring lead to standardisation and assume a uniformity: that there is a typical student with universalisable needs and motivations – that university is one amongst other vocational options, offering knowledge and skills that are within a package called a degree. Increasingly they are told that it does not matter to employers what subject their degree is in. The move towards standardisation and uniformity also denies the value of the various 'cultures' within the university, or, as one vice-principal put it derisively, 'the collection of cottage industries'. This was said at an E-learning Day, led by the new principal, which was attended by over two

hundred academics. All but two of the speakers were very enthusiastic about e-learning, but there was no reflected eagerness coming from the large audience. The chief librarian pleaded that there should still be a place for the library within the university, in the midst of all the satellite libraries closing and the centralising of resources. The student union representative, who was the most conservative speaker, said that e-learning should be an extra, that a major aspect of university life was social, and that a quarter of students did not even own a computer. Among the academics, there was reticence and caution, and a grudging acceptance that technology equals progress. One final question on the day asked what research had been done to evaluate the benefits of technology in teaching and learning. Apparently there is an empty Chair waiting to be filled which is to have such a focus, but in the meantime, an E-learning strategy group is being instituted to make the university the most technologically advanced in the country.

From the students' point of view, I perceive a genuine fear and insecurity at an increase in the distance they feel from different parts of the institution, particularly their teachers. Whilst the School of Social and Political Studies has a growing identity, they identify with their subject areas. The main conduit in first and second year are the tutors, who are the only representatives of the staff, and their subject, that they get to know, and who would know them. This relationship has been undermined by the introduction of half courses: they have a different tutor for each half course, and in the case of the new courses, it is unlikely to be one from their own discipline. There is no longer the time to build up a relationship with the tutor, nor the tutorial group.

The communal office, a physical space at the very centre of the building where most of the subject areas within the School have been brought together, is the main focus for all undergraduate students. The administrative staff there described being besieged by students wanting attention. Their frustration was profound at students' insistence on personal contact. Students literally pound at the doors during staff breaks, when the information they required was posted outside the office on the noticeboards. One of the older admin staff said that it was understandable, that the students needed and wanted some sort of personal contact with those responsible for teaching them. The administrative staff were as close as they could get. Distancing between the student and the university has also been institutionalised through the use of e-learning materials, because Web-CT can supply such a rich and accessible set of resources for the student. However, as I said, attendance levels at lectures was high, and it was fascinating to experience the range of teaching styles adopted by the lecturers, who taught in two-week blocks on a key theme. With a class of three hundred, all managed to engage with students through different techniques; some acted, some were comedians, some used participation, and others ignored the stage and taught in the auditorium itself, while others chose to allow the physical format to adopt them and they stood behind the lectern and delivered the lecture in the traditional way.

Concluding thoughts

The new courses are an aspect of restructuring in miniature: interdisciplinarity can be seen as another facet of centralisation and rationalisation. Or, and the two are perhaps not mutually exclusive, it really is a recognition of the permeability of intellectual or academic boundaries that are out-dated and now irrelevant. Ironically perhaps in this

instance, with rationalisation and interdisciplinarity working in tandem, the courses created are not more general; they are more focussed and specific. It is interesting that the two to three year enterprise in devising the courses has always been about their intellectual content, not about their accessibility for students. The aim was to take students back to key theorists and to set up a dialectic between one view of one theorist and another's. This brings us back to Bonner's argument, when he talks about the value of experiencing education. He uses Gadamer (1975: 310 – 325) who, Bonner says, argues that 'when science seeks to make the concept of experience objective and verifiable, the historical – and in this sense, real – aspect of experience gets lost. Experience which is part of the historical nature of man is essentially dialectical. "This is the reversal of direction that consciousness undergoes when it recognizes itself in what is alien and different"(p.318)'(1990:22). Whilst every effort has been put into inculcating in the students the 'desire to learn', and in giving them certain tools, in the form of Web CT for example, there is no sense of making the courses 'fun', or intellectually 'easy'. One obvious fact is that the courses are compulsory, so the only concern of the convenors and teaching staff are around the intellectual content, and, more pragmatically, in the assessment procedures. They do not have to be concerned with 'marketing' their courses, they have a captive audience already.

It feels true to say that the courses would not have happened had it not been for the energy and impetus of key personalities within the new School, one having been its first Head, and the courses, and how each is run, bears marks of them both, in spite of the outward uniformity of presentation of the courses. But is it possible to look at their innovation in intellectual isolation? Would multi-disciplinary teaching have

been possible without all the aspects of restructuring coming into play? Within the university, there is a strong tendency by academics to distance themselves from the managerial and administrative concerns that are imposed from above. Such stuff, and that includes the administration they are required to do, as well as anything to do with 'quality assurance', clutters their intellectual and research space.