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Adventures in meaning making: *Teaching in Higher Education* 2005–2013

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The paper presents an analysis of the forms of meaning making in *Teaching in Higher Education* between 2005 and 2013. Unlike other papers which have reviewed higher education journals the analysis was based on reading full papers. Previous analyses of journals have commented on the a-theoretical nature of much research into higher education. As we encourage critical work it was important to read in order to identify the practices of authors. Exemplars of different forms of meaning making were identified and these are discussed in greater depth. They included: description, reflection and reflexivity, explicit theorising and diverse forms of theoretically informed empirical analyses. The paper argues for a view of theorisation as an active, agentic, social practice. The paper suggests that there are rich knowledge making practices in the field. Rather than an a-theoretical activity analysing and theorising teaching in higher education in its all its necessary relations appears to be flourishing.

Keywords: theory; reflection and reflexivity; methodology; data analysis; knowledge

Introduction

As part of handing over to the new Executive Editorial Team I agreed to review the Journal from when I took on the role as Editor Designate in 2005 to 2013 – the last full year of published papers, consistent with writing this in 2014, before I stand down as Editor. The idea of reviewing journals to detect trends in the field is not new. Tamsin Haggis (2009) did an extended review of journals over a 40-year period based on looking at journal paper titles and comparing trends in student learning research with developments in psychology and sociology/social theory. Malcolm Tight (2008) has done co-citational analysis in order to establish patterns of influence in the field. Both Tight (2004) in an earlier paper and Haggis (2009) make a case about the limited and often a-theoretical nature of much research in higher education. Haggis in particular argues that much of the higher education literature appears to draw on a narrow range of theoretical resources when considered against the larger landscape of developments in the social sciences. The idea of looking at *Teaching in Higher Education* over a more recent period was in part motivated by a desire to see whether, if, and how papers in *Teaching in Higher Education* fitted with this pattern. This was especially pertinent as our Policy Statement has always stressed the importance of critique and conceptual analysis and, as Jon Nixon has outlined in his paper in this volume, *Teaching in Higher Education* was

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founded with a particular philosophy and approach in mind. It seemed clear to me that I was undertaking a relatively straightforward if somewhat laborious task. I was wrong.

The first decision I took was that it was important to read entire papers. This might sound obvious but many forms of review do not do this. Indeed Maggie McLure (2005) in her paper on systematic reviews argues that: 'the approach degrades the status of reading and writing as scholarly activities, tends to result in reviews with limited capacity to inform policy or practice, and constitutes a threat to quality and critique in scholarship and research' (McLure 2005, 393). Both Haggis (2009) and Tight (2008) were looking across a number of Journals and because of the nature and scale of the enterprise neither read full papers, but as McLure (2005) suggests reading is essential to scholarship and the formation of judgement. In analysing Journals discourse and the material social practice of writing are at the heart of the endeavour (Thesen and Cooper 2014). I had assumed that when I started reading coding would be a relatively simple matter of categorising the approach, methodology and method and deciding what the 'subject' of the paper was and that I would be able to discern trends. I had made the decision not to rely on quantitative methods as over the period under consideration the Journal went from four volumes a year to eight and there were Special Issues every alternate year. While percentages might look like a sensible measure I was aware as Editor of the happenstance of particular clusters of papers and also that as a theoretical category a calendar year carries no special epistemological significance. Some things were easy to code, for example noting the method, but were not very analytically interesting. In 2012 the largest categories were questionnaires (20), in 2013 interviews (19). Codes about the explicit content of papers, e.g., academic writing, assessment, e-learning, etc., also revealed no obvious trends. In some years there were clusters but no clear patterns emerged. More interesting in terms of the Haggis (2009) analysis were papers that I considered to be primarily theoretical. In 2013 the largest number categorised by approach were 24 papers coded as 'theoretical' – that is papers I judged to be making primarily theoretical arguments and where data, if they were used, were only used to illustrate the argument. Within this code, however, were quite different approaches to writing theory. Moreover, many of the data-driven papers were also engaged in theorising so that coding for method/methodology/approach, while seemingly simple, did not capture the forms of meaning making. My attempts at coding then corresponded most closely with what Graham Badley (2011) writing in *Teaching in Higher Education* describes, only very slightly tongue in cheek and with the frivolity of serious intent, as 'scrabbling':

> Scrabbling is a metaphor for three overlapping writerly activities: a critical inquiry process; a resource material collecting process; and a critical reading process. Each activity centres on human reflectiveness which stimulates thinking and creativity. These 'exploratory reflections' swell into waves of doubt' (Dennett 2007, 163). Provoking doubt and formulating new research questions are central parts of an academic's role as writer and knowledge-maker. (Badley 2011, 257)

In scrabbling certain decisions were easy to make, for example, in empirical research a description of the data collection method used. Judgements about whether a paper was theoretical or primarily theoretical in the sense of non-empirical or not data-driven were more troubling as there were multiple meanings and strategies for doing and writing 'theory'. So before I summarise what I think are some important features of writing in teaching in higher education I am going to consider what the nature of theory and

knowledge making might be in higher education research (Shay 2012), what the scope of thinking about teaching in higher education might be and what might be its necessary relations. Only then do I return to the subject of the paper: a survey of full Journal papers from 2005–2013.[1] Suffice to say, however, my scrabbling gave me the title 'adventures in meaning making' and also informed the decision to present my data not as a series of disembodied trends but as an engagement with different sorts of writing. I read all the papers from 2005–2013 (over 400), though not all in the same depth, but the idea of re-presenting my reading as different forms of meaning making seemed more true to the experience of '*scrabbling scribbling, scribing* and *scrubbing*' (Badley 2011, 255).

The structure of the paper that follows is, therefore, made up of related parts. The first part is about theorising practice and outlining an approach to knowledge-making practices that might be adequate to the task. This is followed by four main sections outlining the dominant modalities of meaning making as exemplified in the analysis of particular papers which might be considered as paradigmatic cases of the forms of meaning making identified (Flyvbjerg 2002). Where appropriate I have made suggestions of possible trends and what the epistemological and/or policy significance these might have. These are tenuous because of the sheer richness of the writing I encountered and an awareness that thinking in terms of trends is likely to flatten and reduce complexity in empiricist ways. The concluding section suggests that meaning making in *Teaching in Higher Education* is varied and flourishing. The judgement of an a-theoretical field, based on my reading of these papers, appears premature.

Knowledge practices, theory and meaning making

One of the dangers of writing about theory is that it tends towards reification of the concept and this has marked some of the debates about theory and higher education. It is also liable to judge the theoretical nature of a paper by its mode of citation – most notably by referencing key texts by authors who are recognised as Theorists with a capital T – Bourdieu, for example, has had this dubious honour in higher education research for some time. I prefer to think about the processes of theorisation (Clegg 2012) and what Shay describes as the 'knowledge-building process' (Shay 2012, 321) which goes from the particular to the general and then back again. Andrew Sayer (1992) in arguing against a reified view of knowledge making argues (and I will quote at length because he makes some obvious but often overlooked arguments with exceptional clarity) that:

> To combat this static view it is imperative to consider the *production* of knowledge as a social *activity*. To develop knowledge we need raw materials and tools on which we can work. These are linguistic, conceptual and cultural as well material. In trying to understand the world, we use existing knowledge and skills drawn from whatever cultural resources are available, to work upon other 'raw' materials – knowledge in the form of data, pre-existing argument, information or whatever. It is only by this activity, this process, that knowledge is reproduced or transformed: it is never created out of nothing. To paraphrase Bhaskar, knowledge as a product, a resource, a skill, in *all* its various forms, is 'both the ever-present condition and continually reproduced outcome of human agency'. (Sayer 1992, 16)

This emphasis on agentic work involving different resources seems particularly apposite for thinking about papers in *Teaching in Higher Education*. The context is a practice (teaching), which involves multiple normative concerns, and papers are authored by colleagues with a multiplicity of backgrounds in different national systems[2] and with the

rich resources of disciplinary meaning making at their disposal. This does not entail judgemental relativism since the knowledge interest is to the forefront in the form of meaning making being examined, i.e., that of scholarly and rigorous attempts to produce knowledge about teaching.[3] It does, however, entail a recognition of the context-dependent nature of our knowledge of the social and a recognition the narrative nature of knowing, unlike in the natural sciences where knowing is context-independent. In Bernsteinian language science is strongly classified and vertical. Vertical forms of knowledge have a strong grammar, that is, arguments go from the concrete to the abstract and have a capacity to generate empirical correlates which allows for disciplinary progression: physics is the paradigm case. Social science in contrast is characterised by horizontal knowledge structures with a weaker capacity to generate empirical correlates and a weak grammar so their development tends to be through the proliferation of different theories and frameworks. The sheer diversity of meaning making strategies in the area of teaching in higher education should, therefore, come as no surprise.

The other source of diversity (and hence the problem of producing simple codes) is the 'aboutness' of writing on teaching in higher education. Teaching in higher education as a social activity involves certain necessary relations: some sort of higher education system historically usually universities, students, spaces of interaction whether virtual or real, knowledge and the possibility of learning. All these areas, and more, are entailed by the idea of *Teaching in Higher Education*. Thus the diversity of what authors choose to write about is given by the nature of the Journal itself and is, moreover, positively encouraged by the Policy Statement and in the philosophy of its founding Editors (Nixon 2015).

Another way of thinking about this diversity is to consider Karl Maton's (2005) plea to think about higher education relationally avoiding overly internalist and externalist accounts:

> Internalism objectifies higher education as a separate realm by focusing on constituent parts of the field (such as specific institutions, actors, discourses or practices) abstracted from their wider determinations. Externalism objectifies higher education as a reflection of these wider interests, focusing on external relations to the state, economy or social structure. In terms of policy studies, internalist approaches emphasize the contingency of policy implementation upon micro-contexts and treat macro-social issues as background scenery to the play of agents located in specific sites (universities, departments, classrooms) within higher education. In contrast, externalist approaches emphasize the centrality of the social, political and economic interests of the state for policy formation and treat higher education as a neutral relay for the resulting policies, as if they are unproblematically and uniformly implemented. This false dichotomy is often noted as such by commentators on higher education research. (Maton 2005, 688)

Unsurprisingly, whether explicitly Bourdieusian as in Maton's account or not, many authors writing in *Teaching in Higher Education* situate their analysis in terms of the relations between external interests and policies and the ways these are internally refracted in the university and mesh with the *sui generis* interests of the field. So the 'subject' or aboutness of a paper is often about these relations. For example, innovations in enquiry-based learning can be situated in the ways policy concerns with employability are mediated into practice, in ways that appear to honour the intentions of teachers and the perceived needs of students. The title might give you one answer to the question what is this paper about, but reading presents a more complex set of (fallible) judgements as to

what this paper is really about and is also likely to yield more than one answer – a series of and/ands.

With all this in mind, therefore, I want to turn to what I am describing as modalities of meaning making by focusing on particular papers that are illustrative of the sorts of knowledge practices that emerged from reading through the hundreds of papers published between 2005 and 2013. The dominant forms of meaning making I identified were: description, personal reflection and reflexivity, explicitly theoretical, and data-driven papers. My selection of papers was based solely on the explicating these categories and the selection was designed to illuminate the modalities of writing and knowledge making I encountered. In this sense the papers are paradigmatic in that they illuminate the key features of the different modes of meaning making identified. The modalities were developed iteratively in the process of reading and coding but the choice of papers to illustrate them is to a degree inevitably subjective. It was not based on any hierarchy of papers which would be impossible.[4] Rather it adheres to the sprit described by Flyvbjerg (2002):

> Like other good craftsmen (sic), all that researchers can do is use their experiences and intuition to assess whether they believe a case is interesting in a paradigmatic context, and whether they can provide collectively acceptable reasons for the choice of case. (Flyvbjerg 2002, 81)

which is what I hope to establish through the detailed analysis of the papers. In order to honour the intention of reading in presenting my analyses I have in some places used longer quotations than is conventional. As thinking about meaning making involves the analysis of textual practices this seemed warranted and is also an invitation to the reader to notice differences of tone and style (Thesen and Cooper 2014).

It is worth noting that in terms of simple counts the number of papers judged to be primarily descriptive has declined while the number of theoretical papers has increased over time, even discounting the impact of Special Issues. The dominant modality of meaning making throughout the whole period has remained data-driven, although there have been some developments in the type of analysis employed. The majority of papers selected have some common elements, notably in relation to a critical stance and an awareness and deconstruction of difference. My view is that this is partly epiphenomenal on what it means to choose paradigmatic cases since, particularly in the area of reflexivity, it is highly likely that papers written in this modality are personal and situated and that the voice of the author/s is likely to be to the fore. So while the selection of papers undoubtedly reflects some of my own research interests I would, nonetheless, suggest that for some of the modalities papers which attend to embodiment and difference are worthy of selection as an illustrative case by virtue of representing a particular kind of writing.

Modalities of meaning making

The power of description

One of the modalities of writing in *Teaching in Higher Education* is that it is based in course description. In these papers the author/teacher describes their approach and the teaching philosophy that animates it and then amass evidence and arguments that support the approach, thus implicitly offering an invitation to readers/teachers to consider the

ways such an approach might be applicable to their contexts. It is notable that this form of writing does not necessarily involve claims about general underlying mechanisms that might make it applicable outside the context described. They rather dwell on context-specific insight. The danger of such an approach is that it could be liable to produce just-so stories of success but what I want to draw attention to is how important description is to meaning making. This is well recognised in the phenomenological tradition of research where dwelling at the level of the descriptive is encouraged when reading data. In *Teaching in Higher Education* this offering up of descriptions seems to come from a motivation to develop and share pedagogical insights. An example of this approach is in the paper *Asking Pompeii questions: a co-operative approach to Writing in the Disciplines* by Elizabeth M Somerville and Phyllis Crème (2005). The paper describes 'foregrounding writing' in a first year course which was part of an interdisciplinary Humanities Degree in England. The context is significant because students moving across disciplines experience different forms of writing. The problem the teachers are addressing is, therefore, given by this context and they argue is likely to be shared by other interdisciplinary courses. The writing to be developed related specifically to the archaeology strand. The authors locate themselves in the 'writing in the disciplines' approach which was influential at the time, particularly in the USA. They describe how they wanted to free up each the student's voice and how they approached this through the addition of freewriting time in class and they give a detailed description of how they did this and their rationale for the approach. The claims that are made about the experiences of the students are not framed in terms of a conventional social science methodology, rather routine evaluation data are cited as supporting evidence and students' reflections on freewriting are extracted from the students' portfolios. The other source of data is the teachers' own reflections on the essays the students wrote, thus making a connection between the freewriting in class and the texts students subsequently produced. The examples of the writing we are offered as readers are richly contextual – dealing with particular archaeological sites and the ways students wove their narratives around their experiences of these sites. The claim of the authors, the writing tutor and course tutor who had worked together on the course, is that the experience enabled students to move between formal and informal modes of writing and between personal and public writing and the suitability of this approach in their cross-disciplinary context. They are, however, careful to argue that while the experience was powerful 'how it is carried out and what will work best is dependent on each particular context' (Somerville and Crème 2005, 28).

So how are we to judge the role of description in knowledge making? Narration and telling are important aspects of knowing in the context-dependent practices like teaching and what is clearly going on in the paper is a meaning-making process on the part of the authors. The paper draws on existing literature but not on abstract theory. Their description animates their practice and offers it up for reflection to other practitioners. This has always been an important strand in the philosophy behind the journal. In my analysis across time, based on the coding counts, however, it appears that there has been a relative decline in the proportion of papers which rely so heavily on narration and description. Authors are still using student texts/writing but the analysis is more likely to be explicitly framed as discourse analysis or as a corpus study (or some other named approach) and to be described as such in a formal Methods/Methodology section. Elements of description remain important in offering insight but this now more likely to form one element of paper rather than be the main focus. There, of course, exceptions: a recent example is *The race: Assimilation in America* (2013) by Andrea Balis and

Michael Aman a short but provoking paper describing a course which encouraged 'students to think critically about their own role in constructing concepts of race' (Balis and Aman 2013, 587), but overall description as the chief meaning making strategy has declined.

Personal reflection and reflexivity

Closely related to the descriptive writing analysed above is reflexive writing. This is not surprising given the influence of ideas of reflective practice in the broader educational field. In *Teaching in Higher Education*, however, reflective writing is framed in multiple ways not exclusively in the Schönian tradition. Moreover, when I was coding papers I consciously adopted a broad concept of reflexivity that included, among other approaches, autoethnography. The Executive Editorial Board has encouraged different forms of reflection in their Special Issue Calls. The first Special Issue Call under my Editorship *Diversity and commonality in higher education* explicitly invited reflexive accounts. One paper that took up this challenge in interesting ways and expanded the ways this form of meaning making can be understood is *Transforming diversity in Canadian higher education: a dialogue of Japanese women graduate students* by Mayuzumi et al. (2007). The paper is an account from four graduate students using an autoethnographical approach to meaning making and reflection in a dialogue format of *zadankai* described as follows:

> This paper illustrates the processes of 'self-making', as international students, in higher education. The dialogue in this paper is a product of our collective exchanges, which recapture our experiences and ascertain our solidarity as Japanese women students. Diversity in higher education, from a subjective point of view, is never a random blend of bodies with different skin colors, or, of bodies speaking in various accents. Nor is it a one-way process of assimilation to the established norms. Instead, diversity allows shifting modes of subjectivities. Values and knowledge are questioned and reassured when one disconnects and reconnects with people and communities. This paper demonstrates our transformative process and dynamic relationships to each other, to the academy, and to society, as we depart from the position of being silenced and begin to validate our senses and knowledge.

> We named our first gathering a *zadankai*, which is a Japanese term that can be translated as a 'sit-and-talk gathering' in English. Our original intention for the *zadanakai* was for 'healing', which can emerge by acknowledging our whole beings, the importance of reflections on our past and present, the value in the process of reflection, and our relations with each other (Mayuzumi, 2006). We started with sharing a meal, spoke Japanese, and made a circle for our discussions sitting on the floor. While the *zadankai* emerged from our indigenous knowledge, we also borrowed an idea from aboriginal people, and passed a Japanese charm around in our *zadankai* circle to designate a speaker. (Mayuzumi et al. 2007, 583)

These meaning making strategies give access to forms of knowing that have traditionally been sidelined in the discourse of the international student. They explicitly contested the positioning of the 'other' as racist, patriarchal and heterosexist, a silencing of the voices of the authors of their own knowledge. In their paper, by contrast, the division between the researcher and researched is challenged. Moreover, the use of the *zadankai* not only allowed for the connection of the personal and the social as in traditional forms of autoethnography but also for a collective engagement in the reflexive process. The presentation of the data is also highly original: first in the form of a script which was performed, and then as a scripted text in *Teaching in Higher Education*. The result is

a highly theorised set of insights into the operation of concepts such as diversity itself. The paper, therefore, not only contributed to the Special Issue but destabilised the categories in which the Call itself was framed:

> By breaking the silence, we attempted to dispute the subjugated knowledge of the Western academy, where the disadvantages of minority group are perpetuated under the name of diversity. For the genuine 'diversity' in higher education, there has to be critical interrogation of the conceptualization of 'diversity' that is prevalent in higher education. First, the discussion of diversity should not merely be about 'the physical ability to speak' from our diverse locations but also '*to be heard*' (Asad 2003, 184). It is important to ask 'Through what lenses and voices should "diversity" be responded to?' Is it through the lens of commodification of cultures such as 'sushi-talk' and Orientalist constructions of 'foreign' bodies? Are we *listened to* only when we speak about our ethnic background or 'international' perspectives? (Mayuzumi et al. 2007, 591)

The meaning making involved in this sort of reflexive writing also challenges the notion of rationality as outside the bodily and emotion. This has been an emerging theme with an interest in emotion, identity and difference analysed from a personal and critical perspective forming the basis of a small but significant number of papers. It is not possible to judge whether this is a general trend as while the number of papers coded under emotion/affect is increasing the overall number remains small. Nonetheless, it is an interesting example of where research into higher education is reflecting broader trends in social theory.

Explicitly theoretical manoeuvres

Across the period reviewed there has been an (uneven) trend towards papers I coded as explicitly theoretical. I have described the tendency as uneven because, for reasons that are not at all clear to me, Volume 17 (2012) contained a larger number of empirical papers and fewer theoretical papers than in previous and following years. The range of papers that are primarily theoretical varies widely and of course on another coding I could have described the paper discussed above as primarily theoretical. I will illustrate the idea of the explicitly theoretical by looking at two papers: one where the authors are located as disciplinary academics, and a second where authors present themselves primarily as researchers of higher education.[5] The intention of the first paper is to reframe the acceptance of a particular approach to pedagogy, whereas the second paper is more about reframing our approach to the researching the subject 'higher education'.

The first paper *Reflection in work-based learning: self-regulation or self-liberation?* is by Sabina Siebert and Anita Walsh (2013), from, respectively, a Business School and a Department of Management, and makes an argument about the use of reflection for learning at work which now represents a widely adopted approach to pedagogy. The paper explicitly problematises the role of reflective practice in the workplace by drawing on Foucault's concepts of power and governmentality. They offer a comprehensive discussion of the problems of reflection seen through this lens. A quick skim of the paper might suggest that the authors were concerned to reject reflection; however, they recoup the notion through a theoretical argument using other sources from the higher education and broader education literature:

> Having considered the argument that reflection supports self-regulation in a way that disadvantages individuals while benefiting organisations, this article puts forward a claim

that reflection in work-based learning can empower individuals. The authors argue that reflection allows for recognition of a broader range of knowledge, awarding validity to types of knowledge which have hitherto been undervalued. In addition, it supports the explicit recognition of aspects of organisational culture that operate 'below the surface', and can help expose the contrast between organisational espoused theories and theories-in-use. Moreover, active engagement with different discourses of power (those of the workplace and of higher education) alerts learner/workers to the existence of difference and the opportunities that it provides. This is consistent with Foucault's view that the dynamics of power offer possibilities as well as constraints. Through the exploitation of such possibilities, even within the constraints posed by the labour market, more disadvantaged individuals are alerted to the possibility of change. Biesta (2008, 201) points out that Foucault's critique is aimed at 'those who are struggling to make possible different ways of being and doing'. Through reflection learner/workers are supported in analysing and evaluating their workplace and helped in identifying where change may be an option for them. (Siebert and Walsh 2013, 175–176)

This makes the paper very much about using explicit theory in the context of *Teaching in Higher Education* – rather than in say a general social science journal. The argument is brought back to the authors' central concerns with teaching and approaches which have the potential to advantage their students.

The second example of an explicitly theoretical paper I have chosen illustrates just how broad the category of the explicitly theoretical is. *Gender/ed discourses and emotional sub-texts: theorising emotion in UK higher education* is by Carole Leathwood and Valerie Hey (2009). The authors' affiliations mark them out as researchers into higher education at the Institute for Policy Studies in Higher Education, and at the Centre for Higher Education and Access Research, respectively. Their paper reprises the increased attention paid to emotion in higher education in recent years. It sets out to theorise emotion drawing on feminist debates and making an argument for the importance of 'attending' to the affective in higher education. The paper deconstructs the familiar dualities which pit emotion against reason and associated binaries male/hard; female/soft. They draw on policy examples, particularly employability and its associated pedagogies. They also consider the rise of the practices associated with research selectivity and the impact this has on academic identity and the ways 'Experiences of shame are intimately connected to gendered, classed and racialized identities and oppressions' (Leathwood and Hey 2009, 437). This paper, unlike the one above, does not bring us back to the pedagogical; rather its terrain is that of *Transforming diversity in Canadian higher education: a dialogue of Japanese women graduate students*. The subject is the classed, raced and gendered operation of higher education and how we cannot understand these dynamics without properly attending to emotion.

There are of course numerous other examples of theorising in papers in *Teaching in Higher Education* the two I have chosen announce themselves with their references to Foucualt, feminist theory and in the textual form of their titles. The coding as 'theory' is an obvious one and empirical corroboration where they are discussed – the employability agenda or the teaching context – are muted and illustrative. It is noticeable that a higher proportion of papers which are primarily conceptual have been published in Special Issues and this reflects the theoretical concerns of the Executive Editors in putting together Calls. What might be considered more surprising, given the admonitions of Tight (2004) and Haggis (2009), is the number of papers which can be legitimately described as theoretical. This description, moreover, considerably underestimates the amount of theoretical work represented in the Journal as many obviously empirical papers are also

advancing theoretical arguments. It is to these empirical papers that I will now turn my attention.

'Findings' and data analysis as theorising

Mirroring other surveys of the higher education literature I found that the most common methods employed in data collection were interviews and questionnaire although there was a discernable trend towards using multiple sources of data and the reanalysis of texts created for other purposes – for example, students' reflective writing. Another trend was towards more use of inferential statistics in a small but increasing number of papers. One of the problems of commenting on papers presenting empirical work is with the conventions of journal writing (Clegg and Stevenson 2013) and the presentation of data as 'findings'. I want to disrupt this assumption to a degree, however, by looking at some papers which lay open the logic of the ways they have worked with data.

The first paper I have chosen is by Clare Mariskind (2013) *Always allowing the voice: expectations of student participation and the disciplining of teachers' practice*. The paper is described as being taken from her Doctoral research. This itself is noteworthy, as there is an increase in Doctoral work being undertaken in higher education, and we can expect this to contribute to shaping the field into the future. The study is 'about' teachers' perceptions of what participation means given the ubiquity of the value attached to student participation. However, this aboutness is treated with considerable subtlety as the description of the approach to the analysis indicates:

> I conducted semi-structured interviews with 22 lecturers and tutors from faculties of business, education, humanities and social sciences whose work included face-to-face teaching in small-group contexts (defined as less than 30 students). … Although I did not ask them directly, all the study participants spoke about student participation in face-to-face contexts such as tutorials, workshops, seminars or labs. Some teachers mentioned student participation only briefly, and others recounted detailed narratives about it. This suggested that student participation was a topic of importance and prompted further analysis.

> In this study, I consider teachers' transcripts as texts that require interpretation (Usher, Bryant, and Johnston, 1997). I employ a dual approach to analysis that investigates what these texts tell and what they reveal (Josselson 2004). I begin by analyzing the content of the transcripts to identify what teachers said about student participation, attempting to present their perspectives as accurately as possible. Josselson, drawing on Ricoeur (Ricoeur 1981) refers to this attempt to represent meaning as a hermeneutics of faith. Following this, I cast a more critical eye over teachers' narratives of experience, deconstructing these in order to identify the norms and assumptions they conceal. This hermeneutics of suspicion (Josselson 2004) looks for what is taken for granted and not normally visible but which nevertheless shapes teachers' practice. Foucault's (Foucault 1975/1995) notion of disciplinary power is drawn on to question 'common sense' meanings and consider how they exercise power (Weedon 1997) in and on educational practices. (Mariskind 2013, 598)

Although at first glance this looks like a conventional study based on interviews, the author clearly signals a highly sophisticated approach to meaning making and theorising in the analysis of her data. The study reveals how normalising practices around participation depend on the ways Western academic discourses differentially (de)value the practices of students from different backgrounds. Thus what might have appeared as a quite conventional study of perceptions of student participation speaks powerfully to assumptions about participation and the way 'In particular, verbal participation may be

resisted by students through silence. Silence can have many meanings, and it is dangerous to assume that verbal participation in the classroom equates with student learning or creates an inclusive classroom.' (Mariskind 2013, 604). This paper is also an example of an increasing number of papers that take diverse intercultural classrooms as their subject matter a trend undoubtedly influenced by increased geographical mobility.

The second paper involves a different approach to theorising empirical work this time through the lens of curriculum drawing on Bernstein. This is interesting as an exemplar as my coding showed an increase in the number of papers with an interest in curriculum and Bernsteinian analysis. Again it might be premature to identify this as a firm trend but from my reading it appears that significant analytical development is taking place in this area. The paper: *Integrating multidisciplinary engineering knowledge* by Karin Wolff and Kathy Luckett (2013) is a detailed case study of a particular Mechatronics curriculum:

> Epistemologically, a Mechatronics curriculum comprises a range of subjects that are fundamentally different in nature and which require very different learning and application practices. This has manifested in widespread cases of the difficulties in integrating knowledge in this region. (Wolff and Luckett 2013, 80)

This range is a particularly problematic area for students. Drawing on student mind maps and interviews the authors analyse the semantic wave patterns in student knowledge integration practices using in Karl Maton's (2009) extension of Bernsteinian categories. The category of semantic gravity indicates the degree to which knowledge is tied to its context – where 'abstraction' involves weak semantic gravity and 'reproductive description' strong. In their analysis they map the movement of problem-solving moments – the 'semantic wave' – across the curriculum:

> What the interviews appear to indicate is that integrating and applying knowledge in Mechatronics engineering is essentially the ability to draw on knowledge from different disciplinary/regional areas, and build the knowledge cumulatively by moving (in wave form) up and down a context-dependency scale of semantic gravity. The separable contextually visible disciplinary regions are mechanical, electrical and programming, and they generally flow in this order. Over time, however, they merge into a 'system'. (Wolff and Luckett 2013, 88)

The paper, a collaboration between an academic with a background in the discipline and an author located in a central Centre for Higher Education Development, represents not only a rich case study of a particular curriculum but is also making an argument for the need to take account both of curriculum design and pedagogy. Drawing on the idea of semantic gravity it also describes concepts that could be useful to other higher educators in analysing their own curriculum. In terms of my analysis it provides an example of sophisticated empirical work and engaged theorising and and/and rather than either/or and, moreover, one which does not announce its theoretical sophistication in its title.

The final example of empirical work I wish to consider is work which as part of its argumentation draws on inferential statistics. Again, as above, the number of papers which fall into this category is increasing. The paper is *Exploring teaching concerns and characteristics of graduate teaching assistants* by Cho et al. (2011). Unlike the papers above the literature these authors draw on is primarily from within psychology and works with the idea of teachers' concerns:

> According to expectancy-value theory of motivation, which is often used to explain one's cognitive engagement and associated behaviour (Wigfield and Eccles, 2000), the nature of teacher concerns may differ depending on the degree of importance (value) that they place on the specific concern, and the level of confidence (expectancy) they have for resolving a concern. We used these two constructs, a parallel to the expectancy-value theory of motivation, as we further explored underlying meanings of teacher concerns. (Cho et al. 2011, 270)

The style of writing in this paper marks it out as being within the hypothetico-deductive tradition and so, unlike some of the papers already considered, the form of knowledge making does not announce itself in the same way in the writing protocols adopted. The data for the study were collected from 228 Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs), a larger sample than is typical of much work reported in *Teaching in Higher Education*, and is based on a modified 'Teacher Concerns Checklist' and an existing 'teacher efficacy measure'. The use of modified or well-established instruments is more common in psychologically informed research. The analysis involved an exploratory factor analysis. Multiple regressions were used to examine 'the relative contributions of four GTA characteristics – teaching experience, teacher efficacy, participation in professional development and values on teaching – on five categories of GTA concerns' (274). The paper uses the analysis to build an extended conceptual framework for understanding GTA concerns but, as is warranted in this form of analysis, the authors are careful not to attribute causation to the correlations they found in their data. They do, however, draw some practice conclusions:

> Given that the ultimate goal of GTA development programmes with regard to GTA concerns is to help them shift away from deficiency concerns and move towards growth concerns, the findings of this study shed light on the importance of resolving concerns with class control, external evaluation, task and role/time/communication issues deficiency. From the perspective of value and confidence components, professional developers need to develop instructional support strategies that enhance GTAs' confidence. (Cho et al. 2011, 277)

As such it clearly positions itself within the discourse of *Teaching in Higher Education* and is a contribution to the debates about GTAs where most previous work has been qualitative.

This does not exhaust the types of empirical work I could have chosen. There is a whole body of work that uses critical discourse analysis to analyses a range of texts including student writing. However, I hope the examples I have chosen suffice to indicate that while questionnaires and interviews remain the dominant mode of data collection this does not tell us much about the quality or theoretical sophistication of some of the work that is being published.

Some concluding reflections

In this paper I have pulled on one thread to make an argument about meaning making and knowledge practices in *Teaching in Higher Education*, but the sheer diversity of papers means that other threads could have been explored. This paper has illustrated the multifaceted nature of theorising in higher education research and illustrated the ways in which (after Sayer 1992) the production of knowledge is a social activity where authors draw on previous writing and ideas and rework them into new knowledge claims. I am aware that I could have structured the paper as a more critical reading and analysed the

deficiencies of the field by focusing on papers which exhibited particular absences, for example, or taken a view about what important theoretical developments have taken place outside the field and judged the contributions to *Teaching in Higher Education* accordingly. I chose not to in part because I wanted to offer a counter narrative to those provided by Tight (2004) and Haggis (2009), not because I think their work is misleading (it remains important) but rather because as with all accounts it is partial. Methodology, as always, constrains and shapes what can be claimed and there is scope for different approaches to analysing journal writing and meaning making practices. My approach of reading papers in full has provided a rather different picture of research into higher education, albeit one of limited scope in that it is restricted to one journal. In particular, the forms of meaning making I distinguish illustrate the complexity of making judgements about what constitutes a theoretical argument and what the subject of a paper is. Meaning in any one paper involves multiple claims and levels of analysis which cannot be reduced to method or topic. I found clear evidence with engagement with broader moves in the social sciences – the 'affective turn' being but one example of this (Clegg 2013), and also an engagement with broader theoretical concerns from education studies notably work drawing on Bernsteinian perspectives (Maton 2009). Unlike previous reviews phenomenographic research did not emerge as a significant category, very little work in *Teaching in Higher Education* uses this approach. Because our field is one that elaborates its understandings in terms of horizontal rather than vertical development I did not approach my reading in the expectation of finding a progress narrative; to think in terms of cumulative progress would be misleading. What I did find, however, was an extraordinary richness, deep seriousness and accomplished scholarship.

My final point is to reflect on what makes for creativity and quality in journal publishing and, with all its flaws, I think a major contribution is refereeing.[6] As an Editor I read and make first decisions on papers as they come in, I also review the referees' comments and come to decisions. The published outcomes are a reflection of the very real work by authors and referees and the published papers reflect the outcome of that journey. The published papers I read, taken as a whole, enriched my understanding of teaching in higher education in all its necessary relations. The bigger picture that emerged was of a flourishing field which is responsive to the changes in policy and international context and alert to the intellectual challenges involved in providing accounts of teaching in higher education.

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Notes

1. I did not include Points of Debate/Departure because these are intended as shorter interventions and refereed via a different process, but I did include Essays as they are full papers.
2. There are some notable absences: few African writers, other than from South Africa and a lack of work from India, China and South America. Language undoubtedly plays a role here and *Teaching in Higher Education* remains anglophone. So while *Teaching in Higher Education* is international in its scope it is important to recognise the geographical limitations of meaning making represented here.
3. I have chosen not to digress too far into the philosophy and sociology of science, but my influences are from within critical realism, notably in this instance Roy Bhaskar, and also with

the turn to considering knowledge questions by authors such as Michael Young and Lisa Wheelahan.

4. I chose papers which seemed good examples of the types of meaning making I was highlighting. I did not try to make them representative of particular years or of the nationality of the authors as this would have been more appropriate for a different sort of review article.

5. The authors might not agree with this characterisation which is based on my reading and the description is in relation to the papers not the academic identities of the authors. It is also possible that the 'disciplinary' authors might see themselves primarily as academic developers in a disciplinary context as this is not an uncommon positioning.

6. All the refereeing in *Teaching in Higher Education* is done by members of the Board and my gratitude to them is enormous.

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