Editorial

Welcome to the third issue of *Learning and Teaching: The International Journal of Higher Education in the Social Sciences*. This issue completes the 2008 volume. Our thanks go to the authors of articles and reviews, the anonymous referees who read the articles, the publishers who provided review copies of the books, our own publisher, Berghahn, and the editorial board.

Learning and Teaching invites students and staff to explore their educational practices in the light of changes in their institutions, national higher education policies, the strategies of international agencies and developments associated with the so-called international knowledge economy. The first two issues of this volume concentrated on national and international policy developments, whereas the focus of the articles in this issue is on innovation at the level of an individual programme or course/module.

In the first article, Claire Gregor demonstrates how information technology can be embedded in the undergraduate Social Work curriculum. She describes how students can become familiar with the principles of information technology and the functions of personal computers and gain competence in word processing, spreadsheets, databases, presentation tools and use of the internet at the same time as they are developing their understanding of the theory and practice of Social Work. This 'blended learning' strategy was chosen in preference to a separate taught module or web-based European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) course in order to increase student engagement with the required tasks. Within this strategy, the e-learning activities were designed to meet the needs of students with varying levels of pre-existing computer skills and to match the range of learning approaches that might be found within the student group. Her project was prompted by the requirements of the General Social Care Council that all Social Work graduates in England should have

computer literacy skills equivalent to the ECDL, but the approach that she developed is relevant for other contexts too.

Jo Lindsay shows in the second article how students can learn social science research skills by organising and participating in focus groups with their peers. This qualitative research method can be learned quickly and can be carried out in class time. By undertaking it, students develop a wide range of research skills – group management, listening, note taking, analysis, evaluation of results and the writing of a research report. In this second-year undergraduate course entitled ‘Sociological Research’, tutors gave formative feedback on the plans for the focus groups ahead of the exercise and the summative assessment at the end of the module included students’ reflections on their experience of the process as researchers and participants. An added advantage of the reflective piece of assessed work was that it deepened the tutors’ understanding of the students’ learning processes and provided rich material for the tutors’ own reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of how the course was organised and assessed.

In the third article, Alexandra Howson discusses how visual material and methods can be used more extensively in learning and teaching Sociology. Final-year Honours students taking ‘The Body in Social and Political Context’ designed and made posters that demonstrated their critical understanding of the role of the visual in the social processes and cultural practices that shape and organise the human body. The students presented their posters to other Sociology students and staff and explained how they constructed them and the ideas that influenced them. While the majority of students found the assignment daunting at the beginning and some did not enjoy the public presentation of their work, by the end of the module many reported that the poster assignment had given them welcome opportunities to be creative, imaginative and to express their own ideas.

Developing active citizenship is the theme of the fourth article by Judith Burnett and Erika Cudworth. In an innovative second-year undergraduate Sociology module, students explored different concepts of citizenship and visited a further education college, a state secondary school and a fee-paying independent school. In the first two settings,

the university students facilitated citizenship activities with college and school students and in the third they observed pupil self-governance practices at Summerhill School. Through their experiences with these different groups of young people, the university students found their existing ideas about identity, community and the possibilities of active citizenship challenged in ways that deepened their sociological understanding and their self-knowledge.

The innovations in learning, teaching and assessment reported in these four articles share some important characteristics. All have been initiated by course teams in response to developments in their subjects and all have been informed by published literature on learning and teaching in higher education. They all involve moves towards greater congruence between the course content and the methods of learning, teaching or assessment used. They all feature active and self-directed learning by the students, underpinned by appropriate support and guidance by tutors. Students' accounts of their experiences have been used in the subsequent evaluation of practice. The authors do not disguise the amount of time and energy that goes into planning, implementing and evaluating these sorts of innovations, but convey a strong message that carefully considered innovation at the level of the programme or the course/module has the potential to deepen students' learning and to be professionally satisfying for staff.

Penny Welch and Susan Wright