

Rowland (2009) A sense of audience in response to Tony Harland, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 14:5, 583 – 585 ISSN 1356-2517

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Tony Harland's piece raises some challenging issues for 'people who study higher education' and, in particular, for those who read and write for *Teaching in Higher Education*. He finds himself questioning the identity of this community of readers and writers: their disciplinary origins, their field of enquiry and of the journal itself, the purposes it serves, and its inclusive orientation are all reflected upon.

I welcome the opportunity for reflexive discussion which is opened up by Harland's piece. Contributors to *Teaching in Higher Education* have not tended to write about their identity, unlike those of a related journal, IJAD (*The International Journal of Academic Development*). A third of the articles in the first four years of IJAD focused upon the role and identity of its contributors. Within limits, such introspection and reflexivity can be valuable.

Central to his thinking is his observation that the community of people who study higher education is diverse and that the 'field' lacks 'epistemological precision'. His view seems to be that this is a major source of the problems he identifies.

But I'm not sure that he should be unduly anxious about being unable to resolve such epistemological uncertainties. Universities typically have many departments that cannot readily be described in terms of one dominant discipline and are variously referred to as being multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary. And new academic journals are becoming increasingly interdisciplinary in their orientation. Even within well established disciplines, the nature of the discipline, and thus its epistemological basis, is often widely contested. And even where the discipline itself may not be so widely contested, a complex interplay between pure and applied subjects often makes epistemological distinctions obscure. In my own strongly research led institution, the academic staff in the department of mathematics, for example, includes 13 professors whose research interests, in addition to pure mathematical aspects, include ecology, engineering, the environment and fluid mechanics as well as interdisciplinary research with psychologists, biologists and economists. I very much doubt that there is a shared and precise basis to the epistemology underpinning their researches.

If Harland is assuming that a well founded discipline or disciplinary community is certain of, and precise about, its epistemological basis, it does not appear to be the case for many university departments, and would be even more unlikely for a journal which seeks to involve the range of contributions that is characteristic of *Teaching in Higher Education*.

The more important distinction, however, is not between those who are sure of their epistemological basis and those who are not, as between those who

are *concerned* about the epistemology of their study and those who are not. At the risk of stereotyping, there is perhaps a tendency for those in the natural sciences to have other things to think about than the epistemological basis of their enquiries. The acceptance of (and certainty about) epistemological matters is characteristic of what Thomas Kuhn (1962) called 'normal science' (as opposed to science which is undergoing 'revolutionary' change). In the critical social sciences, however, the epistemological basis of claims to knowledge has been a major preoccupation of many.

While a lack of concern for epistemology may indicate a degree of certainty, it does not indicate a degree of precision, or at least not a degree of rigour. On the contrary, there is every reason for supposing that those who have little interest in the epistemological basis of their research have little grounds for claiming that it is rigorous in regard to epistemology. It is odd to claim that one is rigorous or precise about something of which one is indifferent. The logical conclusion of such a view would be that the only firm basis for certainty is ignorance. That doesn't seem to be a very good basis for any disciplined study.

But I share Harland's worry about 'whether or not an inclusive higher education community' of those who participate in *Teaching in Higher Education* 'undermines its own disciplinary status'. On several occasions I have recommended an article from the journal to a colleague, who later tells me either that they did not understand it, or that after struggling to understand it they thought its message could have been communicated much more simply without 'jargon'. Then when I question what exactly they took to be the message of the article, their account misses the subtlety of the message. The criticism of 'jargon' is often levelled against articles from a broadly sociological frame of reference. But lack of comprehension is even more apparent when statistics are presented. The only difference is that the incomprehensibility of statistics is widely accepted by those who lack familiarity with its procedures, whereas sociological accounts of a society and its relations are presumed to be comprehensible to anyone who participates in that society. Either way, inclusivity is a value which is not easily realised.

This seems to suggest a choice. Writers may concentrate on representing their ideas in ways which are readily accessible to others from any disciplinary base, and risk over simplification and lack of subtlety. Alternatively they may draw freely upon the insights of their discipline, and risk not being understood by those who lack familiarity with their discipline's ideas and ways of representing them. The former choice risks reducing ideas to banality; the latter risks specialism, fragmentation and sectarianism. This is a particular difficulty for a journal, whose policy states that it aims 'to develop a discourse of learning which transcends disciplinary boundaries and specialisms while drawing upon the rigour of a range of disciplines' (see *TiHE* policy statement).

Transcending disciplinary boundaries is no straightforward matter in principle or in practice. Gibbons *et al* (1994) claim that disciplinary knowledge is only of concern to academics, and is being increasingly superseded by 'Mode 2' problem oriented knowledge in which disciplinary boundaries are

transcended. The kind of issues that Harland's article raises, however, demonstrate that simply by focussing on a 'problem' (say, how best to support university students' learning) we do not 'transcend' the difficulties of negotiating and communicating between the various disciplinary approaches that may be deployed in addressing the problem.

The difficulty here is not just one for those who participate in this journal or who enquire into educational matters. Nor is it confined to communities of academics involved in research. It is also a problem faced by students and those who teach in programmes of study that increasingly cross disciplinary and professional boundaries. 'We' (participants of this journal and HE teachers in general) need to get better at speaking and writing across these boundaries.

When communities (of researchers, readers or students) and the boundaries between them are so fluid, the writer's (or the teacher's) sense of audience is particularly important. For Harland, the difficulties of identifying the audience are paramount. He appears to resolve this, however. He says 'when I write, I do this with my university colleagues in mind' acknowledging 'that this view is not shared by other higher education researchers... (who) write for other researchers who have a similar interest'.

I think I'm one of these 'others'. But I'm not sure, for it depends what is meant by *similar* interest. And that takes us back to the beginning of Harland's article. For 'field uncertainty' is primarily an uncertainty about the extent to which participants in the field have similar interests. This uncertainty is characteristic of anything I write for wider publication. For whom am I writing? Where do our interests overlap? How should I address them? Perhaps the desire for inclusiveness demands at least a moment's reflection upon such questions.

References

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