

## Editorial

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# Editorial

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**active learning**  
**in higher education**

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EDITORIAL

The sharing and discussion of ideas, both face to face and via technology such as email, is a communicative task which forms an essential part of the learning process, whether in the context of higher education or in other areas of our lives more generally. Oral, face-to-face interaction and involvement with others concerns listening and speaking, and these are not aspects of communication which we need to be taught unless, of course, we are born with some kind of physical attribute which makes this necessary or desirable. We learn how to listen and speak via the informal context of the environment of our home and family. In contrast, the skills of reading and writing have to be taught and are, in our culture, normally practised and learned in the formal context of the classroom. Our skills of comprehension (listening and reading) and those of production (speaking and writing) are, however, not fixed, immutable; we can learn how to improve these. Helping our learners to improve their skills of communication in the context of the higher education classroom is not without its challenges, however. As the six articles which comprise this issue attest, both we, as educators, and those that we teach have some learning to do if we are to foster the kind of interactive learning community which we purport to wish to develop in higher education.

In the study reported by Esat Alpay in the first article, entitled ‘Group Dynamic Processes in Email Groups’, discussion and decision-making via email are explored against the backdrop of theories concerning social facilitation and loafing. The applicability of psychodynamic and interaction-based models is discussed and it is argued that these may be insightful when looking at interaction via email. How we, as facilitators, might effectively promote email groups and how, practically speaking, we might do so in the classroom (virtual or otherwise) is set out. Interactivity in the classroom or, rather, the conventional lecture hall, is the focus of the second article, entitled ‘Learning in Lectures: Do “Interactive Windows” Help?’ by Mark Huxham. The current trend or argument in higher education is that we need to make our conventional classroom/lecture room more interactive in some way but, as the author posits, there is little evidence to support either its acceptability to our learners or whether there is any justification

for so doing. The study described in this article involved over 500 respondents and results provide insights into the influence or otherwise of 'interactive windows' on recall and learning.

In the third article, entitled 'Tête à Tête: Reading Groups and Peer Learning' by Sara-Jane Finlay and Guy Faulkner, discussion and communication is looked at in the context of how we might encourage learners to help themselves in terms of engaging with the subject matter and developing skills of criticality. The study reported here, in which reading groups of three to five students were formed, suggests that learners not only had opportunities for sharing their understanding but that so doing improved their time management; they reported that their workload was reduced. Personal contact and interaction is a strand in the fourth article, by Nick Zepke and Linda Leach, entitled 'Integration and Adaptation: Approaches to the Student Retention and Achievement Puzzle'. The authors note that a recurring theme of how we might best engage with our learners and, in so doing, reduce the number who drop out or under-achieve is ensuring that they have regular and meaningful contact with us, their teachers. How we might (better) foster a sense of community in our own institutions is explored.

Interaction with our learners in order to find out their experiences of, and engagement with, our modules and/or us as educators, is the subject of the fifth article, by Mark N. K. Saunders and Christine S. Williams. In 'From Evaluation towards an Agenda for Quality Improvement: The Development and Application of the Template Process', the authors discuss how we might better understand the view of our learners and in so doing improve the quality of service we provide. As they rightly comment, seeing learners as 'customers' paying for a 'service' has provoked a great deal of discussion and, not surprisingly, many a heated argument in the climate of higher education today. Nevertheless, regardless of your view on this, it is certainly the case that we are these days required to be more accountable for what we provide and how we do so. In the sixth and final article, 'Did the Market Force Subject Review? A Case Study', Adrian Jowett brings us face to face with such accountability, and how good we are. Or, rather, how difficult it is to measure performance. Subject review is said to be a process which in some way assures the quality in HE in England and Wales. Quite what 'quality' we are 'assuring' is the subject of much debate in the UK, and the study described in this article makes a much-welcomed contribution to this.

As is customary, this issue concludes with several reviews of books. The review section of the Members' Resource Area (MRA) on the website provides further book reviews which, for reasons of space, could not be included in this or previous issues of the Journal.