

Editorial

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Editorial

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In his enticingly named book *Academic Tribes and Territories*, Becher looks at the complex relationship between the way that we, as academics, organize ourselves and how this is interlinked with the tasks which we undertake in our role. His study, reported in the book, spans the disciplines/subject areas and reports on data gathered by way of interviews undertaken with practising academics and also from the body of knowledge that has been published in the field. Becher's questions fall into five categories, one of which concerns the characteristics of the discipline/subject area which he explores in Chapter 2. In this chapter, respondents report that although there are, naturally enough, differences between academics dependent in part on their individual institutions, there is nevertheless a shared view of the discipline that transcends the cultural and/or geographical boundaries. In other words, mathematicians, historians, biologists (or whoever) the world over recognize that there is 'a world' of (say) mathematicians to which they 'belong' and that, should they meet another mathematician, even if they are from another culture or country, they will always share a common set of values, beliefs and the like that underpin the 'language' of mathematicians, and mathematics itself.

Becher goes on to describe how we display our 'membership' of our particular tribe, which includes, for example, what we have on our desks/in our offices. It seems that the engineer may have an office whose shelves, or desk, may display some scale model or other, whilst the anthropologist may have walls decorated with colourful ethnic works of art of one type or another. As I read this, I looked at my own office and desk, and wondered what these said about me/my discipline! Becher's work was published some time ago, in 1989, so it would be intriguing to see how disciplines have changed (if at all) over the years, and how new/emerging groupings (are they 'disciplines'?) such as bioinformatics, for example, have forged their identities since their recent inception. Whatever the discipline, or academic tribe, as Becher calls it, those coming into it embark on a process to understand and fit into (and, later, shape) the tribe to which they seek to belong. How well and how quickly we do so is, one supposes, dependent to a great extent on the individual! That it is not an easy task is undisputed; being the 'new kid on the block' is not without its trials and tribulations. This is as

true for our *learners* as it is for us, as academics, of course. This issue takes as its theme how our learners understand, or come to understand, the academic ‘tribe’ to which they, too, belong.

Enculturation of new students into the discipline is the focus of the first article, entitled ‘Teaching autonomy: “reading groups” and the development of autonomous learning practices’. In this, Diane Railton and Paul Watson say that learners must not only understand the discipline itself but must also learn how to study effectively. This, they argue, is too often left for learners to do for themselves rather than being something that we, as educators, make explicit and actually teach. They describe their approach, which they call ‘structured autonomy’, and its benefits for use with a cohort of first-year learners. Whatever our learners do, or do not, learn during their degree course, upon leaving one ‘tribe’ and joining another, in the workplace, they need to be able to identify precisely what skills, whether transferable or otherwise, they possess (or do not) as they seek to join it. In the second article, entitled ‘Academic achievement: the role of praise in motivating students’, Effie Maclellan argues that, with the diverse student intake which characterizes the intake in today’s higher education climate, we must be aware that many students may not necessarily be well prepared for the demands, or that they may not necessarily learn in the way in which we expect or that is ‘traditional’. In this article we are provided with a cogent account of the multi-faceted nature of motivation, and I wholeheartedly agree that there is much to suggest that we need to re-visit our (often wrongly held) assumptions on what motivation is, and is not.

A similarly comprehensive overview of the literature on reflection, essential if we are to better help our learners to develop this vital aspect of learning, is provided in the third article, by Helen Bulpitt and Peter J. Martin, entitled ‘Learning about reflection from the student’. In this, they discuss the challenges faced in balancing reality with the abstract and the conditions considered necessary to support reflective thinking and practice. In the battle to understand self (which is, to a great extent, what learning is all about) and their place within the ‘tribe’, our learners, like us, need to make sense of the environment in which they find themselves and the people within it. As educators, we use written feedback as one of the channels by which we communicate with our learners. How, and how well, we do so is the subject of the fourth article, entitled “‘Testing, testing . . .’: how do students use written feedback?” by Stephanie E. Pitts. In the study reported, it seems that we still have much to do to help our learners to understand what it is we are looking for in their written work and, in a sense, what is important (or not) to the ‘tribe’.

Joining and/or understanding the ‘tribe’ is perhaps more difficult for those who study part-time, as the fifth article, entitled ‘How students cope

with part-time study: an analysis of coping mechanisms through an on-line forum', demonstrates. In this, David Kember et al. describe a study which sheds light on how self, work, family and social aspects impact on the coping mechanisms employed by part-time learners and the relationship of these to their sense of belonging. The sense of belonging to the 'tribe' is, Kember et al. argue, one of the factors which help to explain which learners persist with their studies and which ones do not.

Identifying and then providing support for students who may be 'at risk' is also the focus of the sixth article, 'Managing the transition into higher education: an on-line Spiral Induction Programme', by Christopher Laing et al. They describe their online Spiral Induction Programme (onSIP), a suite of online activities designed to effectively support learners as they deal with the challenges of managing the transition into higher education. Whilst higher education, like everything else, changes over time, there is a sense that the 'territory' of the 'tribe' has faced the equivalent of a fairly major earthquake in recent years. There are thus challenges for us all, as we grapple with issues such as balancing the demands of teaching with those of research, or, as is the subject of the seventh and final article in this issue, the 'Changing roles and competencies of academics'. In this article, Senga Briggs reports on a study into how academics perceive their competence in the online and traditional learning environments, arguing that conflict and/or lack of understanding of what our role(s) might be may affect not only our satisfaction but also our performance and, ultimately, impact on our decision as to whether to remain a member of the 'tribe' at all.

Reference

BECHER, T. (1989) *Academic Tribes and Territories*. Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press.