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British Council signature event: frameworks for diversity and equal opportunity in ELT

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How to cite:

Solly, Michael and Brown, Liam (2009). British Council signature event: frameworks for diversity and equal opportunity in ELT. In: IATEFL 2008, 7-11 Apr 2008, Exeter, UK.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://iatefl.britishcouncil.org/exeter-2008.htm>

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Frameworks for Diversity and Equal Opportunity in ELT

This *British Council Signature Event* marked a first at IATEFL. The themes of Diversity and Equal Opportunities have not had such a high profile at the event before, and an added 'first' was through the *Exeter On-line* initiative where we engaged in real time with people globally. The lead-in discussion and subsequent panel formula led to powerful interactions as questions were raised from the floor and via the internet. The event aimed to demonstrate a commitment to promote equality of opportunity and diversity in ELT.

There was a brief period of silence as we were invited to watch a series of powerful images, flashed on screen. These were intended to mark the territory of the discussion and forced us to picture the issues we were debating. Fiona Bartels Ellis, Head of Equal Opportunity and Diversity at the British Council took the lead in presenting the ground, bringing in some wider perspectives which were challenging in themselves as they were not always high-agenda items in the ELT context.

Fiona Bartels-Ellis first defined the terms and suggested:

- Equal opportunity = legislating against unjustified discrimination. In other words: *It means treating people fairly, removing barriers to equal opportunity and redressing imbalances.*
- Diversity = harnessing and maximising potential to the benefit of the organisation. In other words *the recognition that people are different in many ways, and valuing this difference.*

She explained, just as with a salad, the ingredients, with their distinct flavours and colours add the richness we require, and are individually selected for their unique contribution to the end product. While we do look for variety of shape, colour, texture and flavour, we want them to work well together but not be all the same.

This isn't a passive engagement. Managing diversity means seeking, valuing and capitalizing on difference. And it is not just about the obvious big ticket issues of gender, age and race but also the less obvious, such as life experiences, behaviours and work-styles. *We are all different. We all have something to offer.*

Fiona Bartels-Ellis stressed that this approach is new and not yet widely practised. Workplaces now consist of individuals bringing different perspectives, with distinctive needs, expectations and life-styles, and there have been quite significant changes from the past.

The most evident changes - more women in a variety of jobs, the inclusion of people with disabilities, widening age groups and multiple 'racial' and ethnic identities - sit alongside the less obvious ones. The thing to recognise is we are *all* members of a diverse workplace and "We have diverse customers too!"

Turning to the issue of diversity, “harnessing and maximising potential to the benefit of the organisation”, we were asked to consider what exactly is driving diversity?

Among the contenders, Fiona Bartels-Ellis offered: globalization, demographic changes, climate change, politics of recognition, persistent inequality, unfair treatment of workforce, urbanization, polarized and segregated communities.

Each of these impacts differently on our working lives according to where we find ourselves as individuals and how our organisations respond. Fiona Bartels-Ellis concluded with describing three important strands to responding to diversity in ELT: business, moral and legal.

The first strand - business, is about the rationales’ underpinning an organisation’s case for investing resources in equality and diversity. It may, for example, wish to be an *‘employer of choice’* able to select from widest possible talent pool. From the customer perspective we might add that creativity is released, and staff are supported to innovate, innovative products can become more relevant to customers’ needs and customers in turn recognise their needs are reflected, which promotes loyalty.

The next strand – the **moral** case, centred on *social justice* reasons, specifically that it is a basic human right to be treated with dignity and fairness and that we see greater attention to ethics, especially in research.

The last strand – the **legal** case, focuses on the *statutory requirements/obligations*, specifically the growing number of equality laws which require employers and service providers to take account of different needs and the shift in emphasis from anti-discrimination to active promotion of equality.

The ground was now set for the next discussion stage. Mike Solly the Global Issues SIG Co-ordinator, suggested we might ask ourselves how these agendas impact upon our definitions of good and best practice in ELT. The four other panellists, all experts working directly in the field of ELT in a variety of contexts, briefly raised issues of concern to them in relation to EO&D.

Catherine Walter from the Institute of Education at the University of London, directly related EO&D to IATEFL Exeter by pointing out that the titles and abstracts of sessions in the conference programme greatly under-represented some EO&D areas such as gender and disability. Dr Walter invited the audience to reflect on the representation of people with disability in ELT materials and on the provision made for teachers and learners with disabilities, asking how much they are seen and heard and to what extent the profession was successfully promoting them and meeting their needs. Harry Kucher, national pedagogic inspector at Cameroon’s ministry of basic education, highlighted the reality of the context for most teachers of English around the world, and the fact that coursebooks rarely reflect this reality. He stressed that in many cultures where English learning takes place, gender equality is not respected. Also that untrained teachers, who meet an essential need, should be valued and respected. The third panelist, Tricia Thorlby, a teacher trainer with the British Council in Malaysia, added that the profession also needed to think about equality of opportunity for access to training. Tricia Thorlby also stressed that as classrooms become increasingly diverse, issues are raised for us as

teachers/educators and we need to be aware of our ethical and legal responsibilities in this context. The final panelist, Rod Bolitho, currently Academic Director for NILE (Norwich Institute for Language Education), began on an optimistic note by saying that a decade ago, when working as a consultant to textbook writers, issues were voted off the agenda as being too sensitive in their contexts (for example, the treatment of ROMA, and bullying). Some of these same writers recently produced a human rights book in which all these issues were included. But Rod Bolitho also reminded the audience that the height of the glass ceiling for women differed from context to context and ended by raising the issue of the ethical choice we have to make in working in countries with regimes that we may find repellent.

Questions and comments were then invited from the present and virtual audience. These covered, for example:

- A suggestion that if literacy in the first language was not developed, it would inhibit the learning of a second language.
- Concerns about managing diversity and the potentially contradictory concepts of diversity and equal opportunities.
- Global coursebooks as non-homogenizing influences: they can enhance awareness of diversity by shedding light on people and issues around the globe.
- The issue of age discrimination at both ends of the age spectrum.

At the end of the event the facilitator echoed Catherine Walter's point about certain EO&D issues being neglected in programmed talks, but hoped that next year we would see a marked difference. The discussion continued for another two months on Exeter OnLine.

Mike Solly and Liam Brown