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This is not America

March 5, 2018 By [2 Comments](#)

Dr John Butcher, FACE executive, The Open University

This is not America (Bowie et al, 2002)

I was fortunate enough, recently, to attend the 2018 National Association for Developmental Education (NADE) conference in National Harbor, Maryland (just outside Washington DC), as a representative of FACE. As a sister organisation, NADE is probably the nearest thing in America to FACE, with a remit to provide equity and access to the best possible education for all students, no matter their abilities or educational goals. NADE publish a journal, *The Journal of Developmental Education*, and run chapters in most States. The conference's slogan was 'Believe', and many colleagues proudly sported t-shirts with the plea 'Ask educators, not legislators'. This was a more powerful stance than it might appear, since the conference was taking place at exactly the same time as the COPAC convention in the next hall, at which the alt-right supporters of Trump were demonstrating their unshakeable support for the NRA and the second amendment a week after the Florida school massacre. Having attended many education conferences, this was the first time I experienced an FBI lock-down (when Trump spoke), the first time I was in the same building as Nigel Farage, Mike Pence and Katie Hopkins, the only time I have seen a Le Pen (the young niece walked past me in the hotel lobby) and I sincerely hope the only time I will observe a 'fan' beg a selfie with the Press Officer of the NRA. I have gradually recovered my faith in education and humanity after it was severely tested in such an alternative universe, and the commitment of American educators in such challenging circumstances helped enormously.

Visiting UDC Community College (instigated in 2008 by the only public HEI in DC, with an open enrolment remit as first stop for kids coming out of the public schooling system) gave a fascinating insight into the differences (and similarities) between America and the UK. Discourses were dominated by an infatuation with pre-requisites and co-requisites and cut-off scores, yet a clear commitment was to providing lower cost pathways for progression, and supporting learners via a Tutoring Centre ('Centre for Academic Success'). Most students in the Community College start with non-credit-bearing Development Ed courses in English (e.g. Reading Improvement, Composition, Fundamentals of Writing and Grammar), and Math (Basic boot camp-style), before moving on to credit-bearing programmes in areas like Nursing and Allied Health, Liberal Studies and STEM/IT, which might include Supplemental Instruction, increasingly supported with OERs. But 55% of students are not retained.

I observed a class with 13 mixed gender, black, late teens, who were being sensitively encouraged to re-format an article from *The Atlantic* – about the impact of restrictive security on schools with black learners and arguing it had the unintended consequence of pushing a disproportionate number of black kids out of education and into crime. This felt entirely appropriate in the circumstances. The teacher was referred to as Professor, and he encouraged learners to use their mobile phones to access Blackboard (a VLE), and to search for missing information. The students were exactly what you would expect on a pre-Access FE course in the UK. There were also references to the Adult Charter Schools (Academy of Hope) offering late starts for students who cannot start with any other institution – offering free workforce development and lifelong learning, starting with Maths, English and Sociology.

Many of the presentations I attended were influenced by Carol Dweck's work on growth mindsets and positive psychology, particularly the challenge to engrained beliefs that IQ cannot be changed. Thus there was lots of interest in connections between, persistence, emotional awareness, 'grit' and resilience, adaptability and self-awareness. Memorable references were made, including the botanical (lifelong learning as botanical growth, as against disengaging from learning as ripening followed by rotting – you had to be there), and the importance of listening to inspiring learner voices asserting 'You can always change'. There was a lot of doctoral research going on around academic resilience, and 'academic buoyancy', drawing on Bandura's work on self-efficacy and I enjoyed the analogy of spending more time on where your learning is going (looking through the windscreen) as opposed to looking back at past success (occasionally checking the rear-view mirror).

There was a compelling keynote from Stephen Chow, who argued for the need to mesh pedagogy with what a learner's mind does well, linking knowledge of discipline with pedagogical content knowledge and knowledge of how people learn. The relevance of this crossed the pond, as he suggested students bring study skills to university, but they can be inappropriate (misconceptions about independent learning and a belief that effort = grade). His thing was for lecturers to pro-actively correct misconceptions (his videos can be found at Samford.edu) especially that learning is fast and can be started 'late', that learning is shallow (first time understanding) and talent trumps hard-work. He made much of inattentional blindness and attentional blink, asserting there was no evidence that multi-tasking is a good learning strategy. He invoked the metacognition of strategic pessimism versus not understanding how incompetent you are. He was also highly critical of 'learning styles', asserting there was no empirical evidence to justify the belief, advocating learning in as many ways as you can. He argued lecturers have the most impact on learning, but need to reinforce 'elaboration' (connections), and 'distinctiveness' (different from). He concluded with cognitive load theory, suggesting learners have a limited capacity available, so lecturers need to be clear about germane load from extraneous load.

I attended a session on enacting social justice, which felt both familiar and very different from UK discussions on widening participation/widening access and success. There was a strong call from the participants for a more participative and democratic challenge to inequitable power relations and the marginalisation of identity issues. It might be worth UK colleagues following up references to Malcolm X's prison writing, to research on non-violent communication, and to the human library (voices not books), as the push was focussed on students themselves investigating power and privilege – which might galvanise sterile debates about student engagement.

I also learned that one of the reasons OERs were taking off in the US system was the extortionately high cost of text books (which still play a more prominent role than in UK). And for the first time ever, I won a prize by entering my business card at a publisher's exhibition – now the proud owner of a signed copy of Boylan (2002) if anyone wants to borrow it J

It was also a pleasure to see our own John Storan charm a very full hall with a prezi linking his own non-linear learning journey to HE policy developments around widening participation.

So we are not America, with our very different systems, but non-traditional students from under-represented groups are students whichever side of the Atlantic we sit.

References

Bowie, D, Metheny, P. (2002) 'This is Not America', soundtrack to the film *The Falcon and The Snowman*

Boylan, H. (2002) *What Works: Research-Based Best Practices in Developmental Education*, National Center for Developmental Education: Appalachian State University, Boone, NC