A Growing International Technology Education Research Conference – Flavours to Savour

A recent conversation with a friend came round to the topic of blue cheese. My friend is no fan of this (what I find to be) mouth-watering phenomenon and feels the best place for those of us who insist on indulging would be 'somewhere over there'. It occurs to me that we could look at conferences as cheeseboards. It also occurs that 'over there' always has something interesting to offer.

Viewed from any other point on the planet, the great island continent of Australia often gains the tag of being 'over there'. But as any true-blue Aussie will tell you, others have simply got things the wrong way round.

In 2000, the Technology Education team at Griffith University in Queensland, inaugurated the 'First Biennial International Technology Education Research Conference'. Their judgement and confidence were well placed in that title and from a modest but sound beginning this much-needed event laid its foundations. I say much-needed because not only did Australia have a need and indeed the Asia-Pacific region have a need but I believe the International Technology Education community also has a need for a conference located – in time and place – as this one is.

"Queensland: beautiful one day, perfect the next" – that's what the locals like to say. So as some visitors left their cold climes of the Northern Hemisphere in December for summer in the enticingly-named Surfers Paradise on the descriptively-named Gold Coast along the deceptively-named Pacific Ocean, their optimism would seem justified. And so it was in part. It was warm in comparison to home and once those diverted from the local airport because of the 150mm of rain that came down in an hour had got into the hotel, things began to improve. For many the sun appeared on the day of departure – but in the meantime there was a conference to engage with.

There are those who knock conferences as talk-fests but this is an easy shot to take. If we don't engage in professional talk – no matter the medium – we starve ourselves of stimulus, we defy debate, and we become isolated in our outlook. In fact, never has the need been greater for professional interaction with colleagues and especially with colleagues from jurisdictions and systems different from our own. Here, any conference with an international dimension has much to offer and this third 'TERC' (as it has become known) conference is an event worth looking at.

Inevitably the host country is likely to offer the greatest representation of attendees and papers and, just as it is possible to attend DATA's International Research Conference and hear lots about a 'subject' called 'Design and Technology', so it equally happens that in Australia one hears lots about '(Key) Learning Areas' variously entitled but all incorporating 'Technology Education'. This isn't just a name game because as soon as it is understood that Learning Areas offer curriculum frameworks for local professional interpretation largely free

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from inspectorial policing, then it becomes clear that things can be organised and done differently by practising teachers in different systems. There are ironies to observe – the strength of professional associations in some situations and the simple absence of them in others; the degrees of central government control versus the respect for the professional judgement of teachers; and, the inconsistencies in the quality and use of research in (Design and) Technology Education. There are also different histories to observe. True, Design and Technology has a near four-decade history in the UK and is nascent elsewhere. What is interesting is to observe are the adoptions and adaptations of such curriculum innovation in inappropriate ways – without having critical regard for what might constitute undesirable aspects of one system's curriculum for another setting.

The differences and ironies I mention here are the very stuff at the background of our working lives – wherever we practice Technology Education. That said, there is much that we have in common as an international education community. We have common interests in what we teach, why we teach it, how we teach it and so on.

So it is that there is real value to be found at International Technology Education Conferences such as this third biennial on the Gold Coast. With approximately 80 papers available and organised through five strands it was possible to get to 16 papers in the three days. Add to this four keynote addresses:

- Prof John Stevenson (Griffith University): 'Innovative Thinking as Meaning-making'
- Dr Allison Druin (University of Maryland); 'Research, Robots and Real Children'
- Dr David Barlex (Brunel University): 'Creativity in School technology Education: A chorus of voices';
- Prof Richard Kimbell (Goldsmiths College) 'Assessment in D&T Education';

and, a Panel on Gender Issues along with the launch of a major Sustainability Project by Griffith University and there was stimulus a-plenty.

One can engage with a conference in different ways and what one takes away is a result of both decision-making and chance. With a conference theme of 'Learning for Innovation in Technology Education' the net was cast wide and this was reflected in the program's choices. It's interesting to see the kinds of spectra and topics addressed – all common currency in D&T across the globe: early childhood to senior secondary; from novice researcher to the most accomplished; theoretical and empirical research; technological literacy; curriculum (in many guises); assessment; pedagogy; values and ethics; creativity; innovation; ICTs (software, E-learning, internet use); Maori education; epistemology; cognition (thinking genres, mental modelling, reflection, critiquing); and, design (in many guises too).

This was no cheese-board of a few bland standard brands – there was rich with varieties and enough to go round. Importantly, regardless of tastes it was, as usual, the associated debate and discussion away from the program – the 'over there' - that engendered the real professional development, the seeds of new working relationships and, simply, new friendships.

In the bigger curriculum picture, ours is a struggling and emerging field – albeit a highly defensible one – so it's not surprising that amongst us there are differing perspectives and understandings both within and across our different jurisdictions. Such is our journey at present. So it is that this critic might have concerns about just how far a conference casts its net; or about the constant need to maintain quality in our research and our thinking; or to define the field and defend its misrepresentation as just a branch of other entities (science and computing are two obvious ones).

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Globally such matters are slowly being resolved although there's still much work to be done – and a TERC conference lends key support.

There is much to learn from our different methodologies and perspectives and it is possible to see at any international conference the struggles of others as they engage with challenges – especially those already tackled elsewhere. The TERC conference was no exception in articulating such issues. While curriculum challenges are political and all advice and reporting is valid and valuable, our understandings of, and relationships with, such fields as cognitive psychology, sociology, philosophy and politics continue to (necessarily) grow. These connections, too, were explicit at the conference.

Yet there must also be concerns about how we can be inefficient when we reinvent D&T research wheels around the world. One example arose at this conference and is illustrative of our still unfulfilled need for substantial and organised deposits of research (online or in text forms). To witness the design theorising struggles of colleagues can be difficult. In some countries the debate is adjudged as over and, temporarily at least, unnecessary. Meanwhile some researchers miss the very bodies of knowledge and theorising that already exist about design and its practice in education. The need to continuously deepen our individual and collective knowledge in our field matters as much as the need for goodwill and altruism amongst colleagues in our international community.

Such comments are no criticism of the conference itself. The example merely illustrates how a rich conference such as this allows a phenomenon to be observed – and whether one is the under-read researcher or the professor of the field, there is always room for improvement and action and the clues are readily available in the proceedings of such conferences.

Given current political and economic climates the Griffith team have done an excellent job. I know the modesty of the members and I'll not name them. They are a team of academics who are quietly achieving much on behalf of Technology Education and this conference is just one aspect of their work. The conference is now established in our planners and diaries – approximately the first or second week of December in the even year – so the next is 2006. The pedigree is building and the team take the critical feedback seriously. Perhaps this event will become a landmark in International (Design and) Technology Education. It deserves to!

Cheese-boards are wonderful things. They bring people together. Many will sample and savour. Others will pick and choose and may not like everything they'll have tried – but at least they'll have tried. Others will know what they don't like – whether it's the smell, or taste of what they sample or the fact that it might have a few holes in it – but will still enjoy sharing their perspective with others. How else can we have a professional perspective if we don't go 'over there' now and again?

REVIEWS