

Conference Report

'open, multi-disciplinary discussion and criticism of each other's research'

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I don't like conferences, so the Postgraduate Research Student Conference came as a pleasant surprise. My experience of such events, mostly work related, is of rather tired presentations, made by rather tired looking men in grey suits. As a relative new/late-comer to this level of academia, I wasn't sure what to expect. I labour under an idealised vision of Platonic learning, where the free-flow and exchange of ideas stimulates debate that contributes to education in the widest sense. Sadly, my experience of the formal education system in the UK has generally failed to meet this hope and is probably much less likely to do so in the future, given the context of cuts and commodification in our state education system. But these concerns felt quite distant at London Met on 12 November, particularly after the red wine had passed round a few times.

I have 'given' five papers since I started my PhD (I still don't know why we use this odd expression), but I find that it's hard to pay proper attention to other peoples' presentations when you are pre-occupied with your own. My main anxiety centres on the technology and, inevitably, my memory stick let me down and there was the familiar fumbling until my PowerPoint appeared on the screen. I once heard that, around the world, there are three million PowerPoint presentations a day. I'd guess that most of them 'fail to load', but I also wonder what they contribute to the sum of human knowledge. I tried to avoid these thoughts as I embarked on my talk about 'Mixed Use Property Development and its place in urban regeneration strategies' – a nice snappy title. One of the challenges of the conference, but a good one, was to try to say something about

my particular, specialised field to an audience that didn't necessarily come from the same background. Trying to explain why Bracknell has an important part in twentieth century urban policy was not easy. I wonder if I inspired any of the curious to find out more – and if they'll forgive me.

When I was finished, I could relax and enjoy hearing about the work of other PhD students. As when I have been at other postgraduate gatherings, I was staggered by the range of subjects. I'm feeling my age a bit at the moment, having become a granddad in my mid-40s, so I was made almost misty-eyed by the knowledge on display and the passion with which it was imparted, particularly by the large number who did so not in their first language. To be honest, some of it went over my head, but even to be in the same room as someone talking about complex economic models or molecular biology was a privilege and at least one subject (the role of high net worth individuals) is something I'm planning to look at again in relation to my own field.

The notion of a 'learning community' has been devalued by over-use of the 'c' word, but I did get a sense of its possibilities at this postgraduate conference. It is interesting that, as students in some areas have protested against education cuts and higher fees by occupations, the idea of 'teach ins' has been revived, something that is usually associated with by-gone counter-cultures. The thing I liked most about the 12th of November was the feeling of open, multi-disciplinary discussion and criticism of each other's research and I look forward to similar experiences in the future.