

Full Steam Ahead At BALEAP. A Review of the BALEAP Bristol 2017 Conference

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'Full Steam Ahead At BALEAP'. A Review of the BALEAP Bristol 2017 Conference

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Brunel's steamship SS Great Britain was an excellent start to my BALEAP conference experience¹. Relaxing over a glass (or two) of chilled white wine under a cloudless blue sky, it was good to catch up with old colleagues and be introduced to new. In a moment of quiet reflection, with the strains of a lone saxophonist floating in the background, I mused over the conference theme 'Addressing the State of the Union: Working Together = Learning Together' and contemplated if the conference would produce anything innovative to change history in the EAP world as this ship had in the world of ship building².

The 23rd biennial had provided a full programme with a cast of varied presenters, both international and home, delivering a wide range of papers. The subject matter spanned discussions from theory and knowledge building to technology and sharing teaching

¹ The BALEAP 2017 Conference (7-9 April) was hosted by University of Bristol. There were four invited keynote speakers - Clare Furneaux, Karl Maton, Libor Štěpánek and Glenn Fulcher and approximately 114 talks delivered in 10 parallel sessions across the 3 days under the themes 'Writing', 'English for Specific Academic Purposes', 'Assessment/Feedback', 'Technology Enhanced Learning' and 'The EAP Practitioner'.

² Deborah M. Withers, 'SS Great Britain and the containment of British collective memory', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 17:3 (2011), 245-260 (p.246)
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2011.557835> [accessed: 21.04.2017].

experiences and reflections. It was satisfying to see such diverse topics, even though this made choosing sessions difficult.

Clare Furneaux started the proceedings. In the opening plenary she set the theme with a thought provoking, at times humorous, account of EAP past, present and future. She addressed the key questions of: who we as EAP practitioners are, what our role and place in the academy is and what our future may be within British higher education.

On Saturday morning Karl Maton delivered a wave-making keynote address on Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) which certainly caught my interest. This sociological multi-dimensional toolkit connected theory with practice in a tangible way and addressed how forms of knowledge develop and in an effort to empower learners, he emphasised that learning needs to be cumulative and not segmental.³ Thus, the focus needs to be on cumulative knowledge building whereby learning interconnects in different areas and navigates away from segmental knowledge building which is strongly context bound, condensed and only meaningful within that context. In fact, it is very much in the vein of Bernstein with the emphasis on vertical knowledge building.⁴ It was cheering to hear that the framework is already being used to explore a variety of practices and contexts in education for example, music, mathematics, English and technology, successfully.

Steve Kirk, in his paper the next day, expanded on Maton's 'wave making' by sharing his experience of using semantics, one dimension of LCT, in his teaching. Kirk's case study

³ Robert Van Krieken et al, *Sociology : Themes and Perspectives*, 5th Ed, (Sydney: Pearson, 2014), p.175; Karl Maton, *Knowledge and Knowers: Towards a Realist Sociology of Education*, (London: Routledge, 2013), p.106.

⁴ Basil Bernstein, 'Vertical and Horizontal Discourse: An Essay', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 20:2 (1999), 175-173 (p.161)
<<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/01425699995380?needAccess=true>>
[accessed: 09.05.2017].

assisted in a deeper understanding of LCT in practice and his visible 'signature profiles' is definitely worthy of consideration in course design and practitioner development. Here the entire and/or sections of a lesson is captured and analysed for its strengths of 'semantic gravity' and 'semantic density'. For example, the stronger the semantic gravity (SG+), the more meaning is dependent on its context; conversely, the weaker the semantic gravity (SG-), the less dependent meaning is on its context. Semantic density follows the same pattern. The stronger the semantic density (SD+), the more meanings are condensed within practices; the weaker the semantic density (SD-), the less meanings are condensed. These concepts demonstrate how contextualised and basic understandings of knowledge transition towards more consolidated, diverse and deeper meanings.⁵ As I listened, I simultaneously realized that 'semantic waves' could be incorporated into my teaching not only to assist delivery of lessons but also as a tool for learners to develop their academic style (the formal academic language and the academic conventions that align it) and cumulative knowledge building.

A couple of sessions I attended did not deliver anything new. Nevertheless, as a practitioner, it was good to be reminded of certain elements that had been backgrounded. It appears that the current climate is ripe for these to be foregrounded such as embedding intercultural competences into programmes and the multiple levels of collaboration that can take place between the various actors. Furthermore, it was heartening to learn that the above and certain practices already incorporated in my teaching could lead to further possibilities of working and learning together in a variety of areas such as formative feedback.

⁵ Karl Maton, 'Making semantic waves: A key to cumulative knowledge-building', *Linguistics and Education*, 24 (2013), 8-22 (pp.11 & 20) <
http://www.legitimationcodetheory.com/pdf/2013Semantic_waves.pdf> [accessed: 21.04.2017].

A number of my colleagues from the University of Leeds shared their interests at the conference with Dr Alex Ding presenting twice - once in collaboration with Dr Ian Bruce with 'State of the Union: Evaluating the Current and Envisioning the Future Knowledge Base of EAP' and he also presented a paper which played on an utterance purported to be by Socrates entitled 'The EAP Practitioner: Examining An Unexamined Life'. Dr Simon Webster presented his findings for case study research in 'Evaluating Partnership Programmes in Embedded In-Sessional Settings' and Bee Bond and Professor Melinda Whong collaborated on a paper entitled 'A Combined Offer: Collaborative Development Through a Content-Based Pre-Sessional Programme'.

The most dare I say 'revolutionary' session I attended was Chris Macallister's. He argued for a more critical approach to the practice of EAP particularly as ideas matter in education and they are reproduced again and again. Education is a political arena and the EAP classroom is not a neutral site but a political space where opportunities exist for political and social change - critical can be realised in the classroom.⁶ Macallister's paper indicated that it is possible to engage students with political concepts which result in their agency as political actors. He concluded that students needed to be viewed holistically - not just as producers of good essays but as actors with political agency too. Even though EAP is very much a high stakes results orientated form of ELT, it is possible for criticality to coexist with EAP. In the current post-truth and fake news landscape and the ever expanding social media, it is essential for learners to engage critically with all sites of information. I too advocate that EAP should not just be EAP but Critical EAP (CEAP).

⁶ Paulo Freire, (Myra Bergman Ramos, Translator) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (London: Penguin Books, 1996), p.72; Sarah Benesch, *Critical English for Academic Purposes: Theory, Politics and Practice*, (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc., 2001), p.46.

Even though the bright sun and cerulean skies beckoned, I am pleased I caught Averil Bolster's and Peter Lavrai's talk on Sunday morning which situated sustainability at the heart of their EAP course book. It was interesting and informative to hear how they developed their course based on the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals 2030. I must confess, it prompted ideas that could be adapted. For example, the extensive use of QR codes in their textbook was inspiring. Engagement with QR codes does not appear to be widely employed in EAP to enhance students' learning; albeit, they have occasionally made an appearance on posters. It is an excellent approach to enable students to access external resources in an efficient and speedy way and be integrated on the VLE.

Returning to the question posed earlier, did the conference produce anything that will impact the world of EAP in the manner SS Great Britain impacted the shipping industry? Maybe... it is possible that the LCT and CEAP ripples could be considered the vanguard of a new era in EAP. No doubt, it could be claimed that that CEAP is very 1990s and not the leading force. However, I would argue, even though CEAP has lain dormant, in an era of post truth politics and fake news it is more relevant and necessary - it needs to be stirred and awakened.

Overall, it was good to hear that the 'State of Union' is alive and kicking and that 'Working Together = Learning Together' is very much in evidence and ample opportunities enabled new partnerships and alliances to blossom to ensure the 'union' continues to move forward.

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