Editor's introduction

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This is SCUTREA’s twenty-sixth annual conference, and these proceedings (or, perhaps more accurately, precedings) bring together fifty-three formal papers and participative workshops from nearly seventy individuals in thirty institutions spread across five countries. The contributions are diverse both in terms of approach (something which we have encouraged in SCUTREA) and content, reflecting a field which can sometimes appear to have few common concerns. As we noted in our original call for papers, we try to use the conference theme to encourage participants to focus on similar issues, regardless of their particular theoretical or disciplinary perspectives and approaches. This year, the success of our appeal for papers and other contributions concerned with futures in the education of adults was almost overwhelming; however, it was tempered with some frustration when a few writers offering promising abstracts refrained from committing themselves in their papers to predictions or speculations about the future. Perhaps this reflects our uncertainty about our collective future - indeed, we may not have one! The planning group who chose the theme of the conference avoided the use of the word ‘disintegration’ in the conference title, despite its alliterative appeal (we were originally working with the title Disintegration, diversity and ...)

1 Our call for papers included the following statement from the conference planning group:
‘There is a debate about whether or not it is important to have a conference theme, particularly in a field which is changing so rapidly and which brings together so many different perspectives and interests. This year, when issuing its call for papers, the planning group focused on this very diversity, multiplicity and even disagreement within the field of the education of adults. We invited participants to submit proposals for papers which focus on new futures in the education of adults. We suggested that these proposals might consider the future from very different perspectives. They might focus on issues of diversity and equality within the field and the impact these have on future directions; they might take a postmodern stance and focus on the fragmentation of ideas, communities, the field of the education of adults or some other perspective. Perhaps some would consider development within a global setting or at more local levels. We wanted to encourage those working from a historical perspective, those engaged in research projects and those developing their teaching to consider how they might relate their work to the conference theme. We also wanted to encourage policy-oriented papers that looked at the implications of fragmentation, diversity or development for future policy. Finally, we hoped to encourage presenters to relate the issues within the papers to broader theoretical and disciplinary perspectives.’
development) but we were aware that many authors might wish to consider the fragmentation of ideas, communities or, indeed, the field of the education of adults.

In recent years, we have tried to provide a coherent introduction to the themes emerging from the papers. This year, the contributions defy summary! Some authors such as Julia Preece, the Multicultural Inquiry Exchange, Valerie Williams, Sonia Crandall, Roseanne Benn and Amy Rose address the issue of diversity and equality explicitly. Several authors address the issue of ‘community’ both in terms of training community educators (Christine Jarvis, Martin Notley and Helen Jones) and considering the place of ‘community’ within the education of adults (Rebecca O’Rourke). Others concentrate on the ‘futures’ of the title including Richard Taylor and Janice Malcolm, who write about policy issues, and Judith Calder, Ann McCollum, David McConnell and Mike Davis writing about delivery issues. Still others approach the future through the past - either through a life history perspective (Paul Armstrong and Alistair Thomson) or through a considered evaluation of our recent history (Roger Fieldhouse and Xiao Fang).

The ‘reflective practitioner’ debate continues to dominate with Barry Bright, Pat Fairbrother, Christine Hibbert, Rita Newton and Chit Chai Stuart among the authors joining the discussion. Nod Miller and Richard Edwards turn the tables by considering last year’s SCUTREA participants’ views of themselves, while Jan Sellers, Pam Coare, Julia Dinsdale and Rena Feld invite this year’s participants to join in the reflection. Roseanne Benn and Elisabeth Gerver’s session will involve those attending in developing guidelines to promote gender awareness.

The whole process of educating adults is questioned by those focusing on quality issues (Jean Gardiner, Peter Emsley and Russell Smith) and questions of values (Kirit Patel and Sue Kilminster). A further group ask questions about what we teach (Malcolm Chase, Freda Chapple, Chris Wiltsher and Linden West).

So themes do emerge from this disparate collection and we hope that participants will have a chance to engage with ideas and arguments that both confirm and challenge. The proceedings provide an opportunity to read those papers you have not been able to attend (always a problem at such a conference) and we hope you will feel able to take up issues with colleagues well after the conference.

Although SCUTREA exists during the rest of the year and is involved in several initiatives at which such discussion might happen, the annual conference is its raison d’être. Without wishing to imply that the early annual conferences were badly organised, I believe that SCUTREA has taken its role as a learning organisation much more seriously in more recent years. The whole process of organising the conference is imbued with an implicit culture of learning and, inevitably, unwritten procedures have been developed to maximise learning - these are not always as transparent as we might hope. Taking advantage of my position as this year’s conference organiser, editor of these papers and outgoing Chair of SCUTREA, I want to use the rest of the introduction to clarify some of what I believe to be the implicit values that have emerged over the past few years, and to make explicit some of the more difficult issues facing a SCUTREA conference planning group. While many individuals who have participated in the process may disagree with elements of my analysis (including some of this year’s planning group), I hope this personal introduction opens up a discussion within SCUTREA about the values and purposes of our annual conference.
The Secretary brings together a group of individuals (sometimes by inviting volunteers and sometimes by nomination) including the SCUTREA officers, to become the conference planning group. The planning role has evolved over the last few years, but the group’s main responsibilities are to determine a conference theme, to agree a procedure for selecting presentations, to become anonymous referees for abstracts, to agree the programme and to provide support for the Conference Secretary. The ethos and role of each planning group is, to some extent, determined by the Conference Secretary, but some element of continuity is provided by the officers and long-serving volunteers, together with Council’s overview.

One of the features of the SCUTREA conference since the mid-1980s has been our aim to increase conference participation in a whole range of different ways to ensure that individuals have the chance both to present their ideas and to interact with others. The impetus for increased participation has come about for several reasons, not least because we have recognised the significance of being an organisation that is concerned with the education of adults. Organisations like ours have been accused so often in the past of not putting what we supposedly do in the classroom into practice in the conference centre; we know that individuals are much more likely to gain from a learning experience if they have made some intellectual and emotional commitment to such an event - and one way to do this is to present, or to take an active part in discussions. While this participation might be planned in some overall way (Miller 1989), we have veered between maximising participation using whole group events and increasing individual participation within much smaller seminar or presentation groups.

Another rather more instrumental reason for wishing to increase participation (and overtly demonstrating that the conference is anonymously refereed) has been the shadowy presence over the past ten years of the research assessment exercises in Britain which present particular problems for those working in continuing education (more broadly defined). One of SCUTREA’s - and indeed the proceedings’ - functions has been to provide a forum for those working in a very small field, with few journals, to publish their ideas in a recognised (if somewhat less prestigious) form. We have seen it as our responsibility to ensure that work within the education of adults is thought to be at least as academically respectable as work in other areas of education.

But this lofty ambition to produce highly respectable proceedings does conflict in some ways with SCUTREA’s other purpose: that of encouraging would-be researchers and those studying the education of adults to publish for the first time. This is not to say that this group of ‘learners’ cannot present first-rate sessions and write the best quality articles: more that those entering the process for the first time may have a great deal to gain in terms of what is achievable within the limits of space and time that a conference imposes. And while some members of this group may involve more risk for the editor trying to ensure quality, his or her more experienced colleagues may be equally risky bets when their papers finally emerge from the word processor - a point I discuss later.

Of course, one way to deal with this heterogeneity would be to publish the best contributions to the conference in a set of proceedings afterwards - a method adopted by other disciplines. This would enable comments and ideas raised at the conference to be included in
papers and perhaps allow for a more reflective approach. However, this might create both ideological and practical problems. SCUTREA has tried as far as possible to work within both an inclusive and egalitarian framework - and any selection process would, necessarily, be exclusive. Furthermore, the current procedure ensures that colleagues have to produce something by a deadline if they are to be included in the programme, but the problems of post-conference productions are legendary.

Another set of difficulties raised by our current practices has to do with the lack of dialogue from year to year. Individuals who have not attended in previous years may be unaware of the continuing discussions and debates about particularly topical issues; there have been instances where proposed sessions apparently repeat previous discussions without reference to them and there appears to be little sense of evolving ideas - merely the rehearsal of the same arguments. This was highlighted last year by Paul Armstrong and Paul Garland in their joint session, when they promised to give the definitive critique of national vocational qualifications to deter anyone else repeating the same points yet again at SCUTREA (see Armstrong 1995 and Garland 1995). This year, contributors refer to some two dozen SCUTREA papers from the past few years and it might well be thought that this does not imply much of a continuing dialogue. Of course, individuals may be unable to engage with SCUTREA because they do not have access to previous papers; if this is the case, we hope that our new CD ROM containing the first twenty-six years’ proceedings, to be released later this year, will help develop the conversations between annual conferences.

So, within my role as editor, I see the issue of quality emerging in many different ways: partly through disparity between abstracts and finally presented articles, and partly through the missing links between earlier and current presentations. But I also see a problem with the nature of the editor’s role, as it currently stands.

What role is the editor supposed to fulfill? Is it purely a matter of bringing together the disparate contributions and producing them in some reasonably consistent document? At one time, this might have been the case. The whole business of production was much more difficult - papers had to be retyped, proofed and re-proofed. The editor had to ensure that the organisation could be proud of the standard of our proceedings in a technical sense. But, as new technology enables us to receive our documents from authors in electronic form so that we do not retype, and our instructions to authors (although still disobeyed!) become ever more demanding, requiring consistency of presentation and levels of proof-reading and checking far outstripping our earlier productions, the role of editor has room to change. There is time (just) to absorb the content of papers between the endless attention to missing references and page numbers; there is time to recognise that a writer refuses to address the theme of the, conference, or, dare I say it, to realise that in a very few cases a writer has not met the basic minimum standards that we might expect from an academic conference. What should the editor do? At present, we have no space to reject papers once we have accepted abstracts. Should we be building in a second mechanism of refereeing? Should we have better decisions?

One of the reasons for raising all these issues is that I think many of us within SCUTREA feel uncomfortable about moving away from an inclusive and welcoming ethos.
towards one of judgment and restrictiveness. We are used to encouraging others and we do not want to lose this atmosphere from our conference. And yet surely there is a balance between non-judgmental pluralism and harsh dualism (you’re okay/you’re not okay). I believe we need to continue our search for some agreed evaluative process that encourages colleagues to present their latest research and ideas, but that also enables us to take difficult decisions about standards and quality. One of the most awkward problems for me this year has been how to exclude a particularly poor piece (a problem resolved by the author, fortunately), and I would have welcomed some safeguards within our selection process.

**Learning through the process**

This year, with the agreement of the planning group, I have attempted to enhance the learning that we hope takes place throughout the process of getting the conference together. For example, where the planning group has felt that an abstract could be accepted, provided it bore some relationship to the conference theme, we have invited resubmissions. In other cases, we have offered advice to authors about the direction their papers might take. We have tried to encourage those presenting papers in the same session to contact each other before the conference to discuss possible synergetic arrangements and themes. At a rather more basic level, we have recognised that many individuals are not trained word-processors and we are returning proofed papers to authors so that they can learn from their errors - this also gives me the chance to give written feedback to those individuals who cannot follow instructions - surely an extension from my teaching role!

Much of the learning will take place outside the formal arrangements for the conference - and we have tried to enhance the opportunities for informal discussions and exchanges through the judicious use of longer breaks than might otherwise appear sensible. Our exclusion of formal plenary sessions might seem strange to many first-time SCUTREA conference goers, but our experience has demonstrated that there are few plenary sessions which are as engaging and fruitful as smaller seminars and workshops. Plenary sessions may serve the ritualistic purpose of bringing a disparate group together in one room, but they rarely enable individuals to benefit from anyone except those speaking from the platform. And, given the diversity of interests represented in the average SCUTREA conference, the difficulties of choosing a speaker who will interest everyone have been too much for planning groups more determined than ours.

A final learning point emerges from some of our experiences in participating in conferences abroad. I am aware that we are an international conference -many of our participants come with concerns very different to those we face in Britain. I have tried to ensure that everyone takes account of the fact that they are talking to an international audience but this has not always been easy - particularly for British participants. I have tried to replace acronyms with words, but this has not always been possible and, because there are many instances where I have been defeated, I attach a glossary with the most frequently used British acronyms. I hope this helps!

Finally, I hope you enjoy reading this year’s conference proceedings which are, as
ever, a testament to the energy and originality of colleagues. I will be thanking all those who helped organise the conference at a more appropriate moment, but these proceedings would never have happened without the help of Jaswant Bhavra in the Department of Adult Continuing Education at the University of Leeds. Thank you.

References


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This document was added to the Education-line collection on 18 December 2009