

Conference – Centre for the Study of Learning and Performance

I am honoured that I was asked to say a few words of welcome at the opening of this mini-conference of CSLP, and I will indeed do so in a few minutes. Before I get to that point, though, it was important for me to uncover what it was I was welcoming, so that I could do so properly. Using the technological tools that your first panel is investigating, aka the internet, I undertook some research on the CSLP website.

I was extremely impressed by the scale of the research which the Centre coordinates and promotes; the number of research groups and affiliated partners and funding agencies with which it works. Most important, however, I was struck by the centrality of its concerns to so many of the social and educational issues of today. The primary question CSLP poses – how to promote complex cognitive skills in learners – lies at the heart of any society's capacity to furnish a rich life for its members; and by rich I certainly do not mean monetary wealth alone. A full life – one in which the ability to profit from social, cultural and economic opportunities, and to be able to create similar opportunities for others – is only possible when we can maximise the capacity of each person to learn new information, new skills and new concepts, and to experiment in the multitudinous ways in which this learning can be applied. As an historian, I can say that a society which gets its education right is always, in each era, one in which the boundaries of the human spirit is extended.

It is often a cliché to characterise the present – whenever that present is - as a period “in crisis”, and I do not want to ring alarm bells over a Quebec or Canadian system of education which continues to do very well in most respects, and outperforms most of its confreres in measures like PISA. Yet it does seem incontrovertible to me that we are, in fact, in a period of a generation or so when huge and extremely rapid changes are occurring in educational approaches and in cognitive contexts, and it has often seemed to me that much of what we are researching is, by the time it arrives in print, already out of date. I have been teaching at university since the late 1980s, before the widespread use of computers or internet, and the changes I have seen in different cohorts has been massive. Moreover, just as educators were assimilating the internet generation and addressing their learning styles, a new generation of social networking and texting communication came along. What finally will be the outcome of these changes is – as your website indicates – woefully under-researched and poorly understood. Is there, finally, a hard-wired way in which humans understand and learn, to which technology is only peripheral and instrumental, or is, so to speak, the medium the message, radically altering the way forms of knowledge and different skills are learned?

Secondly, specifically within the Quebec context, the work of your Centre is crucial, given the educational reform of the very recent past. I have a personal as well as professional interest here, as my elder child was in the cohort which surfed one wave ahead of the reform, while my younger child will be a member of the first reform cohort to graduate next year. I do not know what difference the reform will make; whether, finally, it is a “good” thing or a “bad” thing, or like most things, a mix of the two. What I am convinced of, however, is that if the school system was relatively unprepared for the reform, the CEGEP and university system is largely unaware and unprepared for whatever will hit them. For these reasons, the work of the CSLP is vitally important. It is an excellent idea as well that experts working in these various fields of educational research spend two days listening to what others are doing, so as to question, criticise and encourage one another in what is actually a grand common enterprise.

For these reasons, then, I will finally get around to bidding you welcome to Bishop’s University, to wish you well in your discussions, debates and endeavours, and to hope that you will go away from this conference with renewed faith in our ability as educators and researchers to enhance the most precious quality of humanity – the ability to understand our world and to make reasoned and informed choices about our lives. Thank you, and I wish you an enjoyable and productive conference.