

**Plenary Address by Dr Joanna Crossman (University of South Australia)**  
**Celebrating the interconnectedness of learning**  
**Re-cap by Sandra Caon-Parsons**

Dr Joanna Crossman shared her take on celebrating interconnectedness: How we might interpret this notion and how and why it is relevant to us as educators, to our students and to communities at large.

Some contexts of interconnectedness that she had in mind and referred to, included;

- Stakeholders in learning and education
- The now and the future
- The learning relationships with and amongst students
- How interconnectedness itself rests on connections between mindfulness, critical reflection, cultural assumptions and transformational learning
- The professional , the spiritual and the personal self

The multiple ways of conceiving interconnectedness that she put forward, frame how we think about the potential power of learning and what it can achieve.

**Learning depends on the interconnectedness of multiple stakeholders**

Interconnectedness assumes that the responsibility for student learning does not rest with a teacher alone, it capitalises upon and expands our resources to open up possibilities that would not be possible if we simply operated on our own.

Even the motivated, independent learner has probably been mentored and supported in different ways by an army of co-conspirators: friends, an extended family, various professionals, institutions and governments who provide direction and funding. Dr Crossman presented research which highlighted that the investment the community makes, is returned when the successful learner becomes the accomplished employee; an informed, ethical, fulfilled and compassionate citizen.

**Connecting now with the future**

As educators, we try to envision the future, the direction it may take and how learners will need to be prepared and ready. Doing so, can be a guessing game because it is far from clear how the past, present and future are interconnected. So she questioned where this leaves us.

We have to rely on that human capacity to adapt, perhaps more than upon the imagination of educators or even empirical futurists to provide insights into the kinds of learning now that can be relevant to that generation ahead. Perhaps, our most important work as teachers is to ensure that the minds of our students are stimulated, questioning, innovative, alert – tools to be kept in good working order for purposes we may never know. The arguable shift from a content orientated approach to curriculum design to one that focuses on the process of learning through the

development of problem solving, metacognitive techniques and critical perspectives, is perhaps related to an acknowledgement of what we don't know about what knowledge exactly will be relevant in the future but at the same time, a corresponding confidence in the kinds of mental tools we will need, whatever the future presents.

Dr Crossman calls this a confidence in, 'No shelf life learning'.

### **Internationalisation and interconnectedness**

Interconnectedness has particular relevance to international education and internationalisation in universities. The concept of interconnectedness is relevant to student social engagement that has a surprising influence upon academic engagement and is helpful in unpacking why it is that many international students, can feel so isolated from domestic ones.

As teachers we have to keep making spaces for sharing equally valued cultural contributions to deepen collective networks and enrich social, cultural capital. Dr Crossman explained that she uses the term, 'cultural capital' a little differently from the way it was originally conceived (as a source of power that privileges groups), she uses it as a resource that each of us can lay claim to that can be shared to expand the world view of others.

Connecting our students by capitalising upon and sharing their cultural capital in learning is increasingly necessary in a political and media driven environment that often works to divide our human connectedness. Some research suggests that domestic students are resistant to connecting and working with international students, perceiving them to pose a threat to their own academic success. These reports of the 'othering' of international students are of concern because if we cannot overcome a resistance to working together in our culturally diverse classrooms, what hope is there for an interconnected society in Australia or internationally.

The responsibility for fitting in to our universities, should not rest on the shoulders of international students alone or indeed on those of their teachers. All students, whether international or domestic, need to acquire an internationalised perspective and drawing on the cultural capital of international students is one way, local students can do this. She pointed out that there is something so limiting in only being able to communicate with those who largely see the world as we do.

Certainly a shared language facilitates communication as a basis of global interconnectedness. However, insisting upon our students using English at all times, or it becoming the lingua franca of global organisations, may loosen connections for students with other linguistic and cultural identities and value systems. It tends to send messages that devalue a student's cultural identity and damages confidence in personal identity.

Dr Crossman suggests that interconnectedness does not mean making language students connected to western culture as a one-way relationship, rather, that

interconnectedness broadens cultural and linguistic possibilities for interconnection. We must be sensitive to this, careful not to become unconscious contributors to a mythical neutral, global and universal culture, what some refer to as western imperialism with language as its tool.

### **Interconnectedness is complex, multidimensional and non-linear**

Dr Crossman gave an example of how the East can inform our ways of thinking in the West as part of a two-way, dynamic interpretation of interconnectedness. In her view, western academic thinking has tended to favour linear logic that is not easily applicable to problems where solutions need to address how contextual phenomena interact. She concluded that the value of interconnectedness may require more development in western universities than those in the East.

### **Interconnectedness from the East and the West**

In China, the broad and holistic value is intrinsic to “He” or harmony and embedded deeply in Chinese philosophy and values, capturing interconnection amongst humans and also with nature. Dr Crossman referred to research that the western focus on the individual, does not resonate well with the concept of interconnectedness where interconnectedness runs counter to Western individualism with its emphasis on separateness, independence, self-reliance and self-determination.

### **Interconnectedness relies on critical reflection to enable transformative learning**

Complex problems demand critical reflection that tends to create new perspectives and how they relate to personal experience. In education interconnectedness rests upon critically reflective practices that in turn enable transformative learning.

Transformative learning tends to translate better to adult rather than primary education because primary education is more concerned with the developmental whereas higher education can influence shifts from habitual, assimilated and uncritical perspectives to those that are better informed, responsible, discriminating and questioning.

Transformative learning enables the transformation of social, political and economic conditions to address inequality, poverty and injustice. Research suggests that transformative learning is a process of meaning making because the ‘old’ meanings learners construct, no longer seem to function well. For Dr Crossman, this is the BIG picture that gathers up the purpose and optimum outcome of interconnectedness.

### **Interconnectedness, mindfulness and meaning**

Mindfulness is a Buddhist practise and state which is integral to the concept of interconnectedness. However, there may still be much work to be done for the vision of transformative learning to be realised. Mindfulness is taken to be an element of transformative learning that involves being in the moment. The practical application of mindfulness involves effective listening and communication as well as compassionate speech and is a way to facilitate wellbeing and harmony amongst students and teachers alike.

### **Learning, Assessment and Feedback**

This is the lesson of interconnectedness; it is about the learning we take forward. Learning with 'no shelf life', learning that brings together our values, ethical perspectives, decision making skills and intellect. Good teachers make it personal.

Bringing who we are to work, raises the potential for transforming, not simply a learner's grade point average, but how they see the world and wish to contribute to it. So it's about taking a holistic approach and understanding that emotions and relationships between students and educators matter and how they have an influence upon how our students respond to learning, assessment and the feedback we provide.

The 'how' of our communication with students about their work, matters at least as much as the 'what'. By correcting every error, we may simply overwhelm students with our own conscientiousness or worse create dependency behaviours amongst students who believe the appropriate response to feedback is to 'tick off' our comments and criticisms, and in her words, becoming anxious about the trees and never appreciating the forest.

Indeed, mindfulness encourages intentional communication which might be interpreted as, 'less is more'. It is not how much feedback we give; it is the impact of really considering what is worth saying. Mindfulness, in this way has some practical implications for approaching professional practice. Teaching from a mindfulness perspective involves compassion and awareness without judgement. It is one we can apply to the teaching and learning context.

### **Interconnectedness has spiritual implications**

Interconnectedness is often associated with spirituality. Teaching, historically has been described as a 'vocation' and that concept comes with spiritual connotations. Contemplative and sometimes spiritual aspects of learning are crucial to success in higher education. However, this assumption has not been widely popular, at least throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Dr Crossman explained that what occurred, is now known as the Cartesian split – derived from the work of *Descartes* who separated essentially, rationality and the state from all that is subjective and spiritual; the relationship between who we are and how and who we teach. Thus, the enlightenment separated the personal, emotional, identities of teachers, from their professional selves and some might argue, their spiritual selves.

### **Connecting the personal and professional**

Dr Crossman points out that research shows that maintaining a work life balance is tied into the notion of both mindfulness and interconnectedness. For teachers to create the right environment for transformative learning, they need to nourish their own growth and capacity for creativity.

### **Healthy teachers are capable of transforming lives through learning**

High levels of stress are reportedly intensified by casualisation and the intensification of teacher work patterns. Dr Crossman uses the analogy by researchers in this area that the stress levels of a teacher have been likened to those of emergency room medics. Teachers need to maintain their health and well-being to sustain interconnectedness and transformational learning.

Mindfulness, by definition, encapsulates a state of mind that is capable of reducing stress and improving resilience, thereby improving workplace performance. Now more than ever we need to ensure that we maintain a balanced and healthy life and stand firm against all demands that place personal wellbeing in danger. Teachers have to be ready and healthy, physically and mentally, to be able to sustain compassion and passion for teaching.

In the end, the extraction of more and more work in the form of marking, planning, administration, resource development in less and less time, is counterproductive, because it does not create greater efficiencies at all, it can have the opposite effect.

Dr Crossman said she finds it encouraging that accrediting organisations are beginning to take the notion of wellbeing and what the Society for Human Resource Management refers to as a 'Human Workplace' and hopes others will follow. The interconnectedness between our wellbeing and the quality of our work and consequent satisfaction is critical to the student experience, if not to our own. Professional groups like the University English Centres Australia (UECA), are in positions to be on top of these issues and are planning ways to address them.

### **Concluding comments**

Dr Crossman's final comments were that there is much to celebrate in the possibilities that interconnectedness presents, as a paradigm for learning. But she reminded us that it is not a task for the fainthearted because it has as many applications as our human imaginations can envision and few interconnections are as simple to conceive or implement as we would like them to be.

In conclusion, Interconnectedness is relevant to teaching in the contexts of stakeholders in learning, linking now with the future, learning relationships amongst students, the professional and the personal, and how interconnectedness itself rests on connections between mindfulness, critical reflection, cultural assumptions and transformative learning.