

Review of

11th International Conference on Learning, 2004, Havana, Cuba

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Attending the Learning Conference 2004 in Havana, Cuba was a unique experience. It allowed delegates to explore the challenging learning themes of communication and technology, all within an environment that was itself pedagogical. My one regret about this otherwise splendid event was the necessity of concurrent sessions that made hearing all the papers impossible.

Amongst the wonderful variety of papers presented, I would like to mention two in particular. First, *Navigating Unchartered Waters: Peace within Hearts, Hands and Minds* presented by Sheila Devkaran Narsee, a senior lecturer in the Department of English and Communication at the Durban Institute of Technology in South Africa, captured everyone's attention. Narsee addressed the "need to foster worldwide institutional collaboration and to reconsider conceptualizations of teaching, learning and researching education, encompassing a concern for human rights and a culture of peace." Education is a fundamental element in all processes that aim to build a culture of peace and human rights. The notion of diversity as is currently applied in South Africa is clearly one that includes race, culture, language, gender, class, and ability, however, these issues must be given far more attention and importance than they are currently. Narsee's paper is influenced by the underlying principle of Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence. She argues that given the circumstances of today's society, education must be rethought in order to achieve a balance between academic

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excellence, human values and moral perceptions: "The making of moral citizens must mean persons with 'human excellence'." She contends that the single-minded focus on economic growth and globalization over much of the 20th and 21st centuries has led to an erosion of human values: "Anger, resentment, lust for revenge, even success through aggressive competition, subvert, undermine and are corrosive of this good. For peace education to accomplish societal change, attitude and value formation need to be considered."

This is a first for the Durban Institute of Technology, where a module entitled "Value-Based & Peace Education" will be introduced to students across faculties. Narsee talked about her attempts to achieve, through such a module, a dialogue with students that would enable them to overcome aggressive attitudes and to consider issues of ethnicity and identity. This is an attempt to create learning outcomes oriented to knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes through an integrated approach. It seeks to encourage the culture of peace, interfaith dialogue, and education for value choices. Principles which are essential cornerstones on which an education for a humanistic and international society must be built, are also incorporated.

Narsee's presentation and efforts made within the Durban Institute of Technology can lead educators to look more deeply into aspects of Intercultural Education and the ways in which it can be integrated into curricula. In a time of war, these preoccupations should be of concern to all educators.

Another paper presented that was of great interest was about the historical development of literacy and rhetoric in cross-cultural contexts. John M. Duffy from the University of Notre Dame has published articles on the concept of "preliteracy", the uses of writing in a guerrilla army and literacy development in American immigrant communities. In his presentation entitled *Primitives and Pencils: The Social Construct of Preliteracy*, Duffy argues that preliteracy is less an empirical category than it is a social construct applied to non-Western and non-industrial cultures whose educational opportunities have been historically suppressed. He argues that the notion of preliteracy devalues the peoples to whom it is applied by situating them within a nineteenth century narrative of "primitiveness" and offers a deficit model of literacy education that restricts the range of social and economic possibilities available to learners beyond the classroom. To illustrate this, Duffy details the literacy history of Hmong refugees living in the United States who are commonly described as preliterate. Using Hmong oral testimonies, he demonstrated how Hmong preliteracy could be understood as a consequence of asymmetrical relationships with others, including Chinese, French, and Laotian governments, as well as the US CIA during the Vietnam War.

Duffy's ideas are an important contribution to the field of literacy. Understanding the effects of repressive regimes on people's literacy development should be encouraged. There is much more research necessary in this area.

Apart from listening to the vast range of papers presented during this conference, participants were also able to visit local schools within the city of Havana. This was a truly fascinating experience, and I would like to briefly outline a project set up by UNICEF in a poor locality in Havana. The Community Project called "Boys and Girls Home" is dedicated to childhood and is the first of its kind in the world. Founded in May 1998 by the Fundamental Transformation Workshop in Cayo Hueso, the project is part of a community planning initiative to identify the needs of neighbourhoods. Sponsored by the Municipal Administration Council, the People's Council, Transformation Workshop and UNICEF, the project was created taking into account article 31 of the Assembly on Rights of Children which examines the resources needed to satisfy the needs of children and which offers educational, recreational, scientific and cultural information that leads to the development of children as autonomous and responsible subjects. There is a library, daycare centre, screening room and workshops are provided on theatre, computers, painting, literature, journalism, and audiovisual technology. All workshops focus on children's rights and innovative education and are conducted by neighbourhood artists. The project hopes to strengthen the role of culture in communities to enrich the lives of youth and their families. This is a means of providing healthy, educational activities that develop children's personalities and mental and physical capabilities. The children are the true protagonists of this project, since it is their opinions and judgments that guide it. In this fashion, the objectives outlined at the World Summit on Childhood have been achieved.

The visits to the schools as well as listening to various Cuban presentations offered insight into the efforts being made in Cuba to achieve higher levels of social justice and educational equality. Cuban presenters touched on a variety of issues related to the current transformation of the educational system including the use of new technologies as well as the role that educational research must play in the work of the system as a whole.

The Twelfth International Conference on Learning is to be held at the Faculty of Education at the University of Granada from July 11–14, 2005. The conference will address a range of critically important issues relating to education today.