Guest Editorial

By Suzanne Savage
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Bio: Suzanne Savage is a doctoral researcher at Birmingham City University, researching the use of video in observations of classroom practice. Suzanne also works closely with Prof Matt O'Leary to conceptualise, develop and implement a novel approach to peer observations at BCU. With an undergraduate degree in anthropology from the US, Suzanne spent the last 30 years in a wide variety of teaching positions in Nicaragua, the Netherlands and the UK. Most recently she was a teacher training manager and coach in UK further education colleges before joining the faculty at BCU.

Welcome to this Special Edition of the CSPACE Journal, drawn from the 3rd successive Reimagining Further Education Conference held on 27 June, 2018 at Birmingham City University. Known best by its Twitter hashtag #ReimagineFE, the conference has become the leading event on the further education calendar for practitioners, researchers, managers and leaders to come together and engage in action-oriented dialogue. The initial impetus for the first conference was to create a platform to counter the narrative of a precarious sector which was misunderstood by Whitehall and whose voice was largely ignored by policymakers. The act of reimagining was to create space for those with an interest in the broad further education sector to participate in dialogue about the current state of affairs and to imagine what FE could and should be.
The first conference was organised into thematic strands, such as Teacher Education, Leadership, and Professionalism, and a wide range of academics were invited to serve as chairs and discussants of these groups. Rather than passively listening to presentations, participants were invited to ‘put the “confer” back into “conference”’ and actively contribute to professional dialogue in their particular strands. The results of the first conference have been published in a January 2018 special edition of the Journal Research in Post-Compulsory Education.

The #ReimagineFE conference has continued to grow and develop its approach. Thematic inspiration for the third conference was provided by Professor Emeritus Frank Coffield’s seminal work Just suppose teaching and learning were the first priority, who also stimulated the conference with the first keynote address of the day. The cornerstone of #ReimagineFE has been the rich, professional discussions which have become vehicles for challenging and extending our thinking—not just to react to policy—but to collaboratively seek ways forward. In 2018, the organisation of these strands evolved into Working Groups, with a clearer structure and remit. Groups were convened on: Apprenticeships; Equality and Diversity; Leadership; Learning and CPD for Educators; Middle Managers; and Research and Scholarly Activity. These groups considered key questions facing their areas and explored creative solutions to connect their vision to the real world of policy. Convenors were not individually invited but instead chose to express interest in leading a particular working group on a theme of their choice, some experimenting with different forms of organisation to facilitate dynamic and engaging groups. In many cases successful convenor partnerships were forged between HE academics and FE practitioners.

The different working groups coalesced around key questions posed by their convenors. Examples include: Given the many pressures faced by FE leaders, how
do we ensure the central questions of teaching and learning become a primary driver in the meetings we lead and the decisions we make? Or How do we begin to unpick the often finely balanced game middle leaders play between student focused learning and teaching and performative agendas in an increasingly indicator/target driven culture? An important feature of the #ReimagineFE working groups is that participants remain with the same group throughout the conference day. While people may be interested in more than one topic, this all-day format allows each group to develop a solid partnership capable of identifying barriers and devising approaches to overcome them, both in their own practice as well as when engaging policy makers.

One of the key issues we faced as organisers was how to ensure the hard work of reimagining extended beyond the conference walls. While the special edition of Research in Post-Compulsory Education was an excellent contribution to academic knowledge on the conference, it remains behind a paywall and is perhaps more suited to an academic audience than one of FE practitioners. We are therefore thrilled that every working group in 2018 has contributed an article on their group’s work to this special edition of the open access CSPACE Journal. The convenors have taken their groups’ innovative ideas for putting teaching and learning back into the heart of FE provision and shared them here for you. In this way, conference participants and the wider FE community will have access to the dialogic work done at the conference and can utilise these to challenge policy and reimagine their own approach to further education.

As you will see in the following articles, many working groups identified the need for the FE sector to create vehicles through which it can formulate and articulate policy and practice. From the development of research practice to the creation of board
positions with expertise in teaching learning and assessment, the participants of *Reimagining Further Education* envision a dynamic and engaged sector which can establish collective priorities and advocate directly with the policymakers to achieve them.

We start this special conference edition with Ali Hadawi, CBE, who delivered a stimulating keynote speech to inspire us in the morning. In this article, Ali offers an account of the current predicaments faced by further education: a lack of sector-wide leadership and potential conflicting agendas between individual leaders and the needs of the ‘collective’. He challenges leaders, practitioners and researchers in further education to collaborate and develop a sector-wide voice that can robustly engage with policy makers around crucial themes such as: funding; measuring local targets (e.g. skills, education, training); developing new and more appropriate means of delivering teaching, learning and assessment; and exploring alternatives to existing regulatory methodologies.

In the afternoon, Jo Fletcher-Saxon and her colleague Brian Copper gave a popular keynote address which Jo summarises here in the *Journal*. She sets out an approach that senior leaders can take to ensure that teaching and learning remain central to their work. She warns that leaders must never get lost in data and forget that each statistic represents real students’ experiences. Jo discusses the different ‘lenses’ that leaders can utilise, such as a financial lens or a wellbeing lens, when making tough decisions, and she concludes with seven behaviours that leaders can adopt to ensure that the teaching and learning lens is the first and most prominent.

Sam Jones and David Powell introduce us to the FE sector’s growing appetite for developing a research-rich culture. Their working group on Research and Scholarly
Activity examined some sectoral barriers to research, and their article suggests 4 important principles and conditions necessary to promote a culture of enquiry. They invite FE leaders and managers to engage with them in open democratic dialogue to create an environment where ‘brave’ research is welcome and sustained.

Lynne Taylerson and Diana Tremayne argue for a focus on teacher professional learning rather than ‘tick box’ continuous professional development. The working group they convened have developed a model Practitioner Research Cycle and make several recommendations to planners of professional learning programmes which could empower teachers through a culture change that embraces collaboration and restores professional trust.

Vicky Butterby and Claire Collins convened a working group on Equality and Diversity that recentralised E&D as socially-just educational praxis. Their article explores the creation of ‘constellations of ‘practice’ to establish brave spaces where learners and staff are empowered to explore their lived experiences and to challenge structural inequalities.

Gary Husband and Catherine Lloyd describe the challenges of the squeezed middle leader with both management and operational responsibilities, often seen as implementing/enforcing policy with little say in its formulation. The working group they convened reimagined the role, creating space for middle leader critical education (as opposed to short-term skills-based training), in a culture where senior leaders value the expertise and operational insight they can bring to organisational decision-making.

Anne Haig Smith and Mara Simmons convened a group which explored new approaches to apprenticeships and developed seven ideas which would refocus
provision on the learning experience of the apprentices. In their article they also explain the Design Thinking Approach model which they utilised to organise the working group.

Ian Pryce and Jill Westerman convened a working group on Leadership. Here in the Journal, Ian lays out the 15 steps the group recommends FE leaders take in order to make teaching learning and assessment (TLA) central to their institutions. These steps require changes in attitudes, practices, structures and investment. The sector is also tasked with individually and collectively leading government thinking on TLA in FE.

Colin Forrest and Jill Westerman prepared to convene a working group of governors in the further education sector. Here they explore the reasons that the group did not attract any participants and consider the need for more expertise—and more focus—on teaching and learning across the wider FE sector at board level.

The work of #ReimagineFE continues, and the next conference will be held on 2 July, 2019 at Birmingham City University. The theme will be FE Speaks. Follow conference news at our website: reimaginefe.wordpress.com