Dialogues of Space, Time and Practice: Supporting Research in Higher Education

Julian Stern, Faculty of Education & Theology,
York St John University, UK

Abstract *Dialogue can be seen as entirely functional, as a way of disseminating research or increasing the effectiveness of teaching and learning. Here, it is seen as of value in its own right; as having a central role in the nature of learning and of research. This second model of dialogue in higher education is associated with work on the nature of learning communities or communities of practice. In consequence, the model can contribute to discussion of the purpose of higher education and its role in society. Recent work theorising dialogue using the approach of Buber, has looked more specifically at the dialogue that takes place in particular settings and circumstances in higher education. The article presented here concerns dialogue related to support for staff research, complementing previous work on dialogue in assessment contexts, and dialogue in times of crisis. Despite the challenges of supporting staff research in higher education, this paper is not crisis-oriented, but builds on the experience of those with formal responsibilities for supporting staff research, to describe some patterns of dialogue, and the significance of those patterns. The paper is based on experience of dialogue in higher education institutions in the UK, US, China (Hong Kong) and Germany. There appear to be three typical patterns of dialogue: dialogues of space (places to do research, including offices, homes, lunches, conferences, bars), of time (times to do research, including the labelling of time and the prioritising of time), and of practice (how to become expert, in writing and presentations). As well as theorising and describing dialogue, this work also involves theorising and describing the nature of research itself, including its "banding" (for example into "research" and "scholarship"). This paper is intended to contribute a distinct alternative to debates on research policies and practices in higher education, at a crucial time in policy development in the UK and internationally.*

Keywords dialogue, research, higher education, research agendas, Buber

Julian Stern, Faculty of Education Education & Theology,
York St John University, UK
j.stern@yorksj.ac.uk

Introduction

Dialogue is embedded in almost all of the activities of higher education. It can be seen in different ways, though. For example, it can be thought of primarily as functional, as a way of disseminating research or increasing the effectiveness of teaching and learning. Alternatively, it can be seen as of value in its own right, and as having a central role in the nature of learning and research. Buber differentiates "real" (or "genuine") dialogue (which is of the second kind), "where each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them," from what he calls "technical" dialogue (which is of the first kind), an exchange of information facilitating "the need of objective understanding" (Buber, 2002, p. 22). He also describes technical dialogue (the exchange of information) and "monologue disguised as dialogue, in which two or more men [sic] … speak each with himself … and yet imagine they have escaped the torment of being thrown back on their own resources" (Buber, 2002, p. 22). Real dialogue in this formulation is characterised by surprise, as "a real conversation … is completely spontaneous" and, like "a real lesson", it "develops in mutual surprises" (Buber, 2002, p. 241, and Stern, 2013). Technical dialogue and monologue disguised as dialogue, in contrast to real dialogue, are bounded by preconcerted outcomes or self-regarding interests of both parties. It is real dialogue that is explored here.

Work on the dialogic nature of higher education has tended to focus on learning communities or communities of practice. Nixon writes of the need for "authentic dialogue" in the "deliberative spaces" of what he calls virtuous universities (Nixon, 2008, p. 37), whilst Rowland uses Socratic dialogue as one way of integrating teaching and research (Rowland, 2006, pp. 105-106). Lewis complains of the "loneliness" of much academic life (in Harvard), where "[t]he ideal of the solitary poet or artist or scholar, producing a work of profound brilliance in a lonely garret room, serves as the model of how students should do their coursework," whilst "[l]earning would be more engaging … to the extent that it could be made more collaborative" (Lewis, 2007, p. 89). A similar view of the need for a dialogic approach to academic life, underpinned by a contrasting view of senior academics, is presented by Carnell et al (2008, pp. 29-31), who consider the dialogic relationship between academic writers and their readers. Barnett combines elements of both arguments, in promoting the idea of voice in the university: an individual, distinctive voice set amongst other voices (Barnett, 2007, p. 100). This has contributed to discussion of the purpose of higher education and its role in society (Barnett, 2005, 2007).

Recent work theorising dialogue, using the approach of Buber (1958, 2002), has looked more specifically at the dialogue that takes place in particular settings and circumstances in higher education: dialogue in assessment contexts (Stern and

Backhouse, 2011), and dialogue in times of crisis (Stern, 2009a, also related to wider educational work, Stern, 2009b). This paper presents a framework for understanding dialogue in higher education about research. Despite the challenges of supporting staff research in higher education (Barnet, 2005), this paper is not crisis-oriented. It builds on the experience of those with formal responsibilities for supporting staff research, to describe some patterns of dialogue, and the significance of those patterns. Where dialogue about research is real dialogue (in Buber's sense), it necessarily draws away from functional imperatives, such as the meeting of targets. Real dialogue about research, like real dialogue about assessed work, therefore presents an alternative to target-driven cultures in higher education.

Research is certainly a high-profile topic in contemporary higher education, in and beyond the UK. Debates on research tend to focus on auditing research, on financial issues, and on the impact (the influence or value) of research. The dialogue discussed in this paper includes aspects of those issues, but it is not intended to contribute specifically to audit, finance or impact debates. Instead, the intention is to explain how dialogue itself can be used as a form of support for research, contributing to the research environment (with environment of course also audited, as for example in Hefce, 2011). The paper is based on the extensive professional experience of the author, who has had responsibility for research teams in four UK universities, senior management responsibility for research in two UK universities, and collaborative research relationships with researchers in many higher education institutions (HEIs, mostly universities) in Australia, Europe, North America and China. The experience includes countless conversations, from the wholly informal through to the planned and therefore somewhat more formal, held in two UK HEIs, and in three HEIs in the US, Germany, and China. These conversations were held between 2005 and 2014, as part of the author's research and research management responsibilities. As the—more and less formal—conversations were not planned as part of a research project, and as informed consent was not sought in advance for their use as such, no quotations are used from the participants in the conversations, and the participating institutions are not named.

The limitations of the process of developing this paper are clear, as the author and researcher, on whose professional experience this account is based, is—patently—implicated in all the conversations, and might therefore be able distort the account of the dialogue that has taken place. This is exacerbated by the lack of any systematic qualitative or quantitative analysis of the various conversations, reflecting the absence of prior informed consent from participants. However, a certain degree of independent validation has been sought in three ways. Ten reports on research conversations have been generated between 2005 and 2014, for use in various HEIs, and these have been shared with a very large number of colleagues who were asked for feedback, including suggestions of corrections and additions. A second form of validation was sought when a very early version of this paper was

presented at an international conference in 2011 (Stern, 2011), with feedback given by conference participants at that time. Thirdly, a more recent version of this paper was sent in 2014 to more than 50 academics who had participated in some of the (more or less formal) conversations, with a request, once again, for feedback—with this feedback all handled entirely independently of the researcher, and entirely anonymously. The paper presented here has taken account of all suggestions made in response to those three forms of validation and feedback. The third opportunity for feedback, which was independently sought and anonymous, suggested no corrections or additions to the text. That is, in consequence, a particularly helpful validation and confirmation of the researcher's experience. It is therefore hoped that this paper succeeds as a valid attempt to theorise research dialogue, and to provide an alternative approach to the management of research in higher education.

The initial theorising of particular forms of dialogue (presented in the conference paper, Stern, 2011) suggested three themes: of space, time, and practice. Following a more general account of higher education and research, these three themes therefore structure this paper.

Higher Education and Research

Before theorising and analysing dialogue about research, it is worth exploring the nature of research itself, including its banding—for example into research and scholarship—and its position in higher education. Working backwards through those concepts, "education" refers to the more-or-less systematic support for learning. "Higher" education refers, in current UK policy (QAA, 2009a, 2009b), to those working at a higher level than the highest level typically attained at age 18 (in the UK including A Level qualifications). People gaining qualifications at the first level of higher education:

> will have a sound knowledge of the basic concepts of a subject, and will have learned how to take different approaches to solving problems. They will be able to communicate accurately and will have the qualities needed for employment requiring the exercise of some personal responsibility. (QAA, 2009a, p. 16.)

Higher education takes place in many institutions, of course, including but certainly not only in universities. In the UK for example, higher education has been provided in teacher education and technical colleges since the early 19th century, albeit alongside a university system that had a monopoly on the awarding of full degrees. Currently, the largest UK providers of higher education outside the university and university college system are further education colleges which commonly provide Foundation Degrees.

Research is briefly defined (in policy guidance on research audit) as "a process of investigation leading to new insights, effectively shared" which:

> **includes** work of direct relevance to the needs of commerce, industry, and to the public and voluntary sectors; scholarship; the invention and generation of ideas, images, performances, artefacts including design, where these lead to new or substantially improved insights; and the use of existing knowledge in experimental development to produce new or substantially improved materials, devices, products and processes, including design and construction. It **excludes** routine testing and routine analysis of materials, components and processes such as for the maintenance of national standards, as distinct from the development of new analytical techniques. It also **excludes** the development of teaching materials that do not embody original research.
>
> It **includes** research that is published, disseminated or made publicly available in the form of assessable research outputs, and confidential reports. (Hefce, 2011, p. 48, emphasis in the original)

In this sense, just as higher education refers to the highest levels of support for learning, research refers to the highest levels of learning itself. That is, learning that is original (new insights) rather than routine, and learning that is, in one way or another, externally reviewed or validated and published (effectively shared). However, unlike the definition of higher education, this broad definition of research could apply to forms of learning by people of any age including school-age children, if that learning is original and so on. Somewhat ironically, a research audit process (embodied in Hefce, 2011) intended to encourage the very highest forms of research—with international and global significance—also promotes a very inclusive definition of research. Using this definition, it would be appropriate to expect research not only in higher education institutions but also in schools (as argued in Stern, 2010). Research could be seen as an activity of any or all students and academic/teaching staff. There should be such an inclusive definition, notwithstanding some more *exclusive* operational definitions for particular purposes: for example, being deemed a "research student," or staff being deemed "research active" members of staff.

Research is in these senses a form of learning and not an activity essentially separate from other forms of learning. Those with distinguished titles, such as that of *Professor* (a title used for roughly 10% of UK academic staff), are those who publish (or profess) at a particular level, rather than those who do a quite separate activity from that of other staff.

Having research as a form of learning that is not essentially separate from other

forms of learning can upset some of the approaches to research in higher education institutions, and especially to research in universities. The current UK education system, in common with those in much of the world, uses the quality and quantity of research as a way of differentiating between universities. "Research-intensive" (or "research-led") universities are contrasted with "teaching-intensive" (or "teaching-led") universities (Jenkins & Healey, 2005), with the latter not—typically—seen as any better than the former at teaching, but simply lacking their quality or quantity of research. In Germany since 2006 there has been a research-determined designation of "Universities of Excellence" as part of an "Excellence Initiative" (*Exzellenzinitiative*, see BMBF). A similar differentiation in the US has "Research I" (or "RU/VH" in the current but less frequently used category) as the most research intensive category (Carnegie Foundation). However, if a more inclusive definition of research is used, then the descriptions "research-led" and "teaching-led" might be replaced by "learning-led." This would not prevent the hierarchical differentiation of universities, but it would focus on the whole of learning (at all levels, including research) in a single term, and it would better reflect the idea that research can be completed at all levels. All universities could be described—and if appropriate judged—as learning communities, rather than as primarily *either* teaching *or* research institutions.

The research-related conversations that form the basis of this paper were all with staff on academic contracts responsible for work in either education or religion (as the author specialises in education and religious education research), with all the staff having some expectation, therefore, of completing research. The three themes presented here all emerged from the analysis of earlier conversations (Stern, 2011). They are not presented in chronological or rank order. Building on these three themes, the article goes on to consider the implications for research management of the process of dialogue itself.

Dialogues of Space
One theme was that of space. Spaces discussed included sites of empirical research, most commonly schools. It was *access* to these sites that dominated conversations, rather than what to do at the sites, with the formalities of permissions and consent seeming to be a barrier to research activity. Yet even more frequent than discussions about sites of empirical research were discussions about where to read about and write research. Having a separate (i.e., not a shared) office on the HEI campus was seen as particularly important. And the nature of the room was relevant, with access to books important, and a number of mentions made of the importance of shelving. (In one HEI, the amount of shelving allowed is doubled, in one faculty, for those with the title *Professor*.) Having a "room of one's own" to aid thoughtfulness and creativity has been recommended for centuries. Montaigne in the 16th century recommended that "[w]e should set aside a room, just for ourselves, at the back of

the shop, keeping it entirely free and establishing there our true liberty, our principal solitude and asylum … [and l]et us not fear that in such a solitude as that we shall be crouching in painful idleness" (Montaigne, 1991, pp. 7-8). Whereas Montaigne specifically wrote for powerful men, with the room being a place where "we should talk and laugh as though we had no wife, no children, no possessions, no followers, no menservants," (Montaigne 1991, p. 7), Woolf repeated the liberating power of a room of one's own, and developed the idea as a feminist recommendation for increasing the power of women (Woolf, 2014).

As well as a room for solitude, at the same time, and perhaps a little awkwardly, academics often talked about the need to have space at home to research, and the opportunity to work there. The idea that an HEI campus is a worse place than a home in which to complete research is what is awkward, and certainly worth addressing. Other places mentioned, less often, were what might be referred to as "intermediate" places. Bars, trains, and waiting rooms were all mentioned as places where reading and writing was often done, as in comments about being happy going to a (non-research) meeting in London, as the train journey would provide an excellent opportunity for research. Other sites were mentioned, such as lunch halls and staff rooms for "sociable" research (discussing or getting advice on research), and quiet rooms and libraries (sometimes used to "hide" from colleagues or students, sometimes described as an alternative to working at home).

Attendance at academic conferences was rarely discussed as an opportunity to complete research: conferences were mostly seen as places to present or disseminate research, rather than as places of research itself. Evidence of this included questions from colleagues about how to have conversations about research, notwithstanding their regular attendance at conferences. One answer to the question was that conferences should be used to "confer," that is, to have conversations about research. Answers also included some of the other sites discussed in this section. However, no mention was made of virtual sites, as significant for research. Despite the obvious importance of virtual learning communities and virtual research communities in higher education (Lewis & Allen, 2005), virtual spaces were not seen as alternatives to physical spaces. They either complemented physical spaces (for example, adding a person to a meeting, through video-conferencing, or using email to prepare for a face-to-face meeting), or intruded on physical space (so an office with email access was described as a place that could be disturbed by email and other forms of virtual communication).

Trying to understand the different spaces relevant to research, it seems that there are two fundamental requirements. One requirement is for forms of solitude, and the second, and apparently contradictory, requirement is for sociable spaces. The need to be alone is sadly ignored in educational institutions, including schools (Stern, 2014), but the history of lone researchers in universities has been important. Medieval monasteries combined opportunities for solitary work in "cells" (Webb,

2007, pp. 71-72) alongside what might now be described as open plan cloisters and scriptoria for other kinds of collaborative or at least collective scholarship. The solitary tradition has since then been overshadowed by the open plan tradition. The need for solitude and sociability is confused by this battle between individual offices and open plan offices. It is the combination of both kinds of space that characterised monastic traditions and can be seen in some, if a shrinking proportion of, modern institutions.

In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century explicitly-labelled "open plan" offices were developed in the USA, based on Taylorist principles of supervision. That is, open plan offices were intended to eliminate solitary places, and were not simply aids to sociability. Later, more flexible and creative open plan offices were developed in Germany. They were described by designers and architects as Bürolandschaft ("office landscape") (Price & Fortune, 2012, p. 3, and BBC - open plan offices and Burolandschaft).

However, the "either/or" debates about research and more general working spaces in universities continue. Research on the significance of open plan offices in higher education has ranged in its conclusions from the cautiously positive to the very negative. Positive examples are provided by Price and Fortune (2012), as open plan arrangements can break down hierarchies. However, they provide a balanced conclusion based on the idea that "space and the way it is perceived reflect the cultural patterns and assumptions of those who occupy it" (Price & Fortune, 2012, p. 29). More negative examples include Harrison and Cairns (2008), who note that

> [t]he provision of space for individual work is a critical issue for
> academic staff and if staff do not have individual enclosed offices, it is
> imperative that there are sufficient other quiet spaces nearby for staff
> to move to if they need to concentrate or hold confidential meetings
> with students or other colleagues. (Harrison & Cairns, 2008, p. 43)

Although "open workplaces have been successful in encouraging interaction and collaboration," they say that "this openness also brings with it the potential for disruption through noise and unplanned/unwanted meetings" (Harrison & Cairns 2008, p. 43). Baty (2007) describes objections to open plan working as it is seen as damaging collegiality, and this is supported by Mroz (2010). Gray (2011) says such offices are "bad for your brain," whilst Hey describes the move to using such offices in terms of "infantilisation" (THE, 2005). Baldry and Barnes (2012) is one of the most systematic criticisms of open-plan working in higher education. They conclude that, although "[t]his article is not an argument for architectural determinism" and "we do not say that [open plan offices] will automatically result in degradation of work for all academics" (Baldry & Barnes, 2012, p. 242), nevertheless, "[i]f tomorrow's university starts to look like a call centre, this should

be taken as a visual index of the extent of the current assault on professionalism" (Baldry & Barnes, 2012, p. 243).

What this research seems to find is that when sociable spaces are available, they have advantages, but these advantages can only be beneficial when there are also opportunities for occupying solitary spaces. In recent decades, it is these solitudinous spaces—in higher education as in other institutions—that have been eroded, as offices shrink or are expected to be shared, and as there has been an increase in expectations of staff accessibility—accessible to students, administrators, academic colleagues, and managers alike. Covering up a glass panel in a door—to increase privacy—is now seen as something of a rejection by colleagues, even if it is fire safety that is the reason most often given for leaving the glass uncovered.

Solitude is not required merely or primarily for silent contemplation (and in the conversations leading to this paper, no mention was made of contemplation in any form), but for what could appropriately be called solitudinous dialogue. That is, dialogue with authors of books (see Sell, 2011 on literature as dialogue), dialogue with research respondents (whilst analysing data), and dialogue with oneself. Academics need not talk out loud to themselves, fuelling reputations as eccentrics, to have internal dialogue that is central to the creative research processes (as described by many contributors to Carnell et al, 2008). The solitudinous dialogue is well captured in literature. Spending time in solitude to think of people who have died is a cliché of Romantic poetry set in graveyards, but the sense of solitude as a way of being in dialogue with the dead predates that trope. The seventeenth century poet Philips writes of how solitude is "my sweetest choice," in order to be in dialogue with the natural world and, indirectly, with people (from times gone by, as well as more recent visitors) and with gods and mythical beings (demi-gods, Naiads, nymphs, Echo, Tritons) (see Philips).

Solitude is described in Thoreau's *Walden*, the account of the author's withdrawal to a hut by a pond, as a way of gaining "the most innocent and encouraging society" through connection with nature (Thoreau, 2006, p. 141). Soliture served also for good quality dialogue with the relatively few people who visited his hut: "I had three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society" (Thoreau, 2006, p. 151). In a much more "ordinary" sense, a person sitting alone in a room reading a book by a long-dead author can perfectly sensibly be described as being in dialogue with the dead. This can be facilitated by providing solitudinous spaces for academics—alongside their books. (We may also read living authors, of course, but their writings may well be more accessible than they are in person: "dialogue with published texts," rather than "dialogue with the dead," would therefore be a more accurate if less poetic description.)

Academics also need social spaces, for dialogues directly with research participants, and, perhaps even more, with colleagues and friends. These sociable

spaces include the lunch rooms and conferences and staff rooms. Yet it is not simply the spaces that are needed, but the willingness of others to participate in research conversations there. Are lunch halls places where people talk about research, or is research seen as an essentially private activity? Perhaps if academic staff see universities as poor places in which to do research, and homes as better places, then this would exacerbate the sense of the university campus as the space in which research conversations should not take place. Creating research-friendly places in universities seems sensible, and would certainly help universities to view research as a form of learning that is not separate from other forms of learning. Yet without appropriate undisturbed places of solitude on campus, the full range of research is likely to be unavailable to academics. They may sensibly choose their own homes, and achieve sufficient solitude (if that is available in the home), along with occasional conversations with the family dog, one assumes.

In summary, academics seem to need solitudinous spaces for dialogues with the dead (e.g., authors of texts), and social spaces for dialogues with the living.

Dialogues of Time
The most common defensive statement about research, in conversations about research in the US, UK, Germany and China, is something of the form "I just don't have the time to do research." Time seems to be absent, even if a quite specific time allowance is given for research (with 20 or more working days specifically allocated to research and scholarship in many UK universities, including those contributing to this paper). Where does the time go, if it has been given? Why does it seem as though everyone would like to be given more time for research? To illustrate how puzzling these questions are, academics do not, at least in recent years, say they "just don't have the time to do teaching," and do not ask for more time for teaching.

Part of the puzzle is about the labelling of time spent on research. It is often described as a kind of precious and private time, more like leisure time than work time. One unattributable UK university vice-chancellor described how he and colleagues were so busy they could only take part in "hobby research"—a telling phrase. That perception of research-as-leisure is exacerbated by the terminology (in UK universities) of "research leave," for the days allocated to research, and "sabbatical" (i.e., a period of rest, as on the Sabbath) for an extended period to complete research. The remaining—roughly 200—working days in the year are not referred to as "teaching leave," and an extended period of teaching is not called a "rest."

So if research time is closer to leisure, to weekends, then it is hardly surprising that academics use it either to catch up on "real" work (i.e., teaching work), or to catch up on "real" leisure (i.e., watching the television, or whatever else might go on during the Sabbath—including contemplation and religious observance).

The only "hobby" reference to teaching was in a German university, where a senior member of staff talked of his wish to continue teaching a particular group of students, as, he said, senior staff are allowed to teach their own "hobbies." He explained this in terms of having a choice over "favourite topics," rather than in terms of "leisure," however. The difference is not regarded as reflecting a significant difference in the culture of research or teaching.

It therefore appears that academics prioritise other things over research. Not "I do not have the time to do research," but "I choose to spend time on other things, prior to or instead of spending time on research." The most common approach seems to be "I'll do some research when I've done everything else," which includes everything else at work and everything else outside work (home, family, leisure). The separation of research from other forms of learning (and teaching) allows the separation of times for research. Either research time is given a separate and lower-priority status than teaching time, or, as with some staff in "research-intensive" universities, research time is given a separate and higher-priority status than teaching time. Sarason (1999, p. 5), writes of those academics "whose picture of heaven contains only research, not teaching." This separation makes time seem to disappear. More helpful conversations were therefore not about what time people had, but how and why people made decisions about prioritising activities, including research activities. Conversations about the "absence of time" for research can often, helpfully, be replaced by conversations about particular "kinds" of time, such as blocks of time.

Overall, the significance of the conversations about time seems to be about understanding time itself, as something that—in these circumstances—is a matter of choice and priorities rather than presence or absence. That is most certainly not meant to trivialise the absolutely fundamental issues involved, or to give the responsibility to individuals on their own to "choose" to spend their time correctly. As has been mentioned, university policies on research and teaching (including the labelling of time, such as "research leave"), along with university and national policies of intensification of work in higher education (through a long-term reduction in the unit of resource for teaching), and changes in the patterns of non-research work expected of academics (particularly administration related to teaching), all put pressures on the time spent on research (Hey, 2001, Murray, 2011). Intensification of work can be promoted by policies of "going the extra mile" or "performing above expectations" or providing "exceptional" service (if "exceptional" refers to the quantity, as well as the quality, of service). Research will be more adversely affected if these extra miles are expected of teaching but not research, but staff will probably be adversely affected even if it is research that constitutes the extra mile. (As the poet Larkin says, "Where can we live but days?") Yet conversations about research and time should still take account of the difference between time itself and priorities and choices to be made.

Dialogues of Practice

The third of the conversational themes was about the practice of research. "How do you manage to write?" was often asked, often extended to "how do you manage to write, as you are doing a busy job?" This covers an interesting set of issues, including issues of space and time, addressed above. Some of the practice issues, however, were quite distinctive. Perhaps the most surprising issue of this kind was what is—or what "counts as"—research. A number of people expressed the idea that there was no obvious connection between their teaching activities and forms of research. So, although almost all academics write a great deal of material for public use by colleagues and students, following many hours spent exploring the topic and the relevant literature and working out how to present that in a distinctive way, the writing of research was thought to be a quite separate type of activity. Discussion of research as a "normal" activity therefore became important in the conversations. The staff who were themselves experienced in supporting research by their own students found it difficult at times to see that their own research might be rather similar to that of their students, albeit generally—if not always—at a higher level. An article for a peer-reviewed journal might be five or six thousand words long, and it may seem more "normal" to newer researchers if it is compared to student assignments of a similar length.

Less surprising was the theme of choice of topic, in the research conversations. With the need for research to be original being well known, a number of people talked of choosing a topic that was entirely novel, something no-one had thought of before. This made research seem unnecessarily inaccessible. The topics of published research are rarely "novel"; it is the treatment of those topics, or the way in which the findings of previous research can be applied to different contexts, that is the most common source of originality (Phillips & Pugh, 2000, pp. 63-64).

An issue that links "what is research" to the choice of topic, that was reasonably common in the conversations, was whether higher education processes were themselves suitable subjects of research. One person said that they did not think they would have any time to do research during the second half of the academic year, because they would be sorting out so many student problems. The conversation continued about the possibility of researching how the university dealt with student problems. This not only provided a possible research topic, but also helped with the problem of time. Recognising research topics in the everyday activities of academics, rather than searching for the novel, is important, especially in those HEIs which do not have a great deal of separate funding for research.

How to write (or how to write research, or how to write for publication) was a popular topic, with this being one of the most common requests for support. The fear of the blank page facing the writer is something of a cliché, but no less significant for that. Even an experienced writer such as Barnett refers to the "pain" of writing:

> Why does writing cause me bodily pain? I think it's partly that one is drawing out from within oneself what is already there. This goes back to an old Greek idea that actually we know far more than we realise, and learning things is actually articulating what one already subconsciously knows. And I find writing is of that kind, one actually has a great deal stored up inside one in one way or another. And the challenge is of articulating half-formed sentences and values, and dredging them up, as it were, out of one's body. That's the sense I have; it's as if I'm pulling them out with wires, painfully, from within myself. (Barnett, quoted in Carnell et al, 2008, p 39.)

Although the how-to-write conversations were common, they tended to disappear when people had decided on topics to research and, even more, if they had journal editors or book publishers interested in what they might write. It seems that if people are pushed towards the word-processor, the blank page seems to be more intimidating than it is if an audience (students, colleagues, editors, or publishers) is pulling the person to write something.

The conversations tended, even over the nine years of work drawn on for this article, to become more about the fine details of writing (is this journal better than that one, or is there another publisher who might be interested in this book project?), than about the process of writing itself. Once people were involved in these ways, the practice issues seemed to diminish.

The last of the common topics discussed, to be presented here, is that of academic conferences. A number of people talked about how to get access to and, especially, how to overcome concerns about presenting at academic conferences. Again, this may seem surprising when asked by people whose main job is to present academic material to adults. But there is clearly an expectation that academic conferences will require a different style of presentation (sadly, a considerably duller style, in this conference-attender's experience), or—and this seems to be the nub of the problem—will open the presenter up to more fierce criticism than they would get from their students. This is indeed the case, at many academic conferences. Academics can be much more severe as members of the audience at a conference than they would ever be the rest of the year. What seemed most helpful, in the conversations around this issue, was to talk of conference presentations as ways of conferring about the research, rather than as ways of presenting perfect research papers. A more dialogic approach was thought to take some of the sting out of comments from the floor, as without comments (positive or negative), there would be no conferring at all. Rather than building up courage to face comments, the idea was to reframe the whole process as wanting and needing comments. The distinction is significant between conferences as a means of disseminating research (for which courage might be needed), and conferences as means of developing

research through conferring (for which openness and humility and curiosity might be needed). This is built in to the OECD's Frascati Manual guiding research funding across the world (Matsuo et al, 2002), which explains that "[t]he specialised activities of … [d]isseminating … [by s]cientific conferences … are to be excluded [from being counted as research], except when conducted solely or primarily for the purpose of R&D support" (Matsuo et al, 2002, p. 31). That is, if a conference is intended to support the research, rather than simply inform others about the research, then it can count (in funding terms) as being a research activity.

Broadly, the remaining practice-based issues, in addition to those of what is research, how to write, and how to present, were about connections to people (mentors, individuals with expertise or parallel interests, or support groups), finance for doctorates and conference attendance, and organising teaching work (especially timetables). There was some mention of library resources, and of administrative support for research, but these were mentioned less often. In the later years, there was an encouraging increase in requests for transcription services and other forms of research assistance types of support, implying that the research itself was well under way. Along with the presence of some surprising topics (such as what is research), there was a surprising absence of other topics. Notably, there was almost no mention of research techniques themselves—research methods and methodologies—despite the disciplinary expertise of the various conversationalists. Dialogue seemed to be focused more on confidence, and on access to groups or activities that would enhance confidence, than they were of what might be called purely technical practice issues. The presence and absence of topics of conversation, as described here, have been common to all the countries in which conversations took place. Although there has been no systematic analysis of conversations, it may be worth noting some of the impressions of differences between practice-based research concerns in the different countries. In the US, for example, research was more often associated with academic tenure; in the US and China, gaining research funding was more often discussed; in the US and UK there was more discussion of access to schools as sites of research; in the UK and Germany there was more discussion of the role of managers in supporting research.

Conclusion: Support for Research

A senior academic researcher and head of department, recently retired, said to the author of this paper (who has not retired), "You keep your research going? You're lucky!" Is research activity by academics a matter of luck? The conversations that stimulated this paper indicate that research activity is less a matter of luck than it is a matter of dialogue, especially on space, time, and practice. Intra-institutional as well as inter-institutional dialogue, dialogue about the nature of research, and the nature of higher education and HEIs, can help reframe research as a form of learning, and HEIs as learning-led institutions. This overcomes the dichotomous

relationship between research and teaching, reframing both in terms of learning. Then, learning communities of particular kinds can be created—that is, created through dialogue amongst colleagues. Learning communities that support research are both horizontal (amongst support groups, peers, friendly conversationalists) and vertical (with advisors, mentors, supervisors). The horizontal learning communities are of the form described by writers such as Bolam et al (2005) on "professional learning communities," whilst other theorists of learning communities (such as Lave & Wenger, 1991) describe and theorise the vertical dimension of learning communities, with learning typically being somewhat like an apprenticeship. Both seem to be needed in supporting research in higher education. The need for dialogue is also, on the professional evidence of the author over nine years of conversations, much more significant than the need simply for finance and other practical resources.

The dialogue needed is not, or certainly not predominantly, information or instruction, but genuine—even if vertical—dialogue. This seems to encourage people to be more research active, rather than pushing them into it: carrots rather than sticks. More fundamentally, the conversations should, as much as possible, be dialogic in the specific sense described by Buber. That is, they would be personal and would be expected to allow for surprise rather than be dominated by progress towards preconcerted ends (Stern, 2013). The lack of conversations about targets, or at least the lack of using such targets as dominant priorities in the conversations, is therefore an important characteristic of the conversations if they are to be dialogic, and an important characteristic of (real) dialogue about research in all of higher education. Much the same can be said of narrow discussion of targets in assessment processes, as discussed in Stern and Backhouse (2011). The presence of research audits in the UK (e.g., Hefce, 2011), and the emergence of such audits in Germany and other countries, raises the risk of narrowly target-dominated and therefore non-dialogic research conversations.

Inevitably, the biases consequent on the leading researcher on this project being a manager of many of the people involved in the research, could lead to a distorted picture of research support (especially, it might be said, the low priority given to finance) and of the dialogic nature of the conversations. This raises issues of hierarchy, both as a research issue (i.e., is there a biased description of the conversations reflecting the views of the senior staff involved in the conversations?), and as a research management issue (i.e., is there a tendency of those involved in the conversations to say what they think is expected of them by the senior staff involved in the conversations?). Real dialogue, in Buber's terms, is equalizing, in the sense that both parties to any real dialogue treat each other as ends in themselves. It does not, however, overcome power differentials, so it cannot be said to be necessarily democratic in the strong sense of equalising all power relationships. One reason for referring to the conversations in Germany, the US and

China, in addition to the UK conversations, is to provide some basis for a claim that the hierarchical relationships evident in the UK-based research did not distort the findings—as the lead researcher had no managerial power outside the UK. The common themes and issues raised in all countries provide at least some evidence of a lack of hierarchically-based biases.

Notwithstanding the possible biases, it is hoped that this paper is a good starting point for further research on this topic, crucial as it is to the nature of research, the nature of higher education institutions, and the nature of learning at all levels. Judgement is needed, more than luck—even if luck will also always be welcome. Only then can those who support research feel that they have achieved something. A dialogic approach to research support involves more than comfortable chats: it involves an approach that avoids prioritising target-setting and promotes discussion of research that is necessarily characterised by surprise. This is a distinctive alternative to much research management in higher education.

References

Baldry, C. & Barnes, A. (2012). The open-plan academy: Space, control and the undermining of professional identity. *Work, Employment and Society*, *26*(2), pp. 228-245.

Barnett, R. (Ed) (2005). *Reshaping the university: New relationships between research, scholarship and teaching.* Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Barnett, R. (2007). *A will to learn: Being a student in an age of uncertainty.* Maidenhead: Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.

Baty, P. (2007). Open-plan risk to collegiality. [Electronic version]. *Times Higher Education*, 16th March 2007, from: http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/208231.article

Bolam, R., McMahon, A., Stoll, L., Thomas, S., Wallace, M., with Greenwood, A., Hawkey, K., Ingram, M., Atkinson, A. & Smith, M. (2005). *Creating and sustaining effective professional learning communities.* Bristol: Bristol University.
http://www.gtce.org.uk/133031/133036/133039/133358/eplc_final_report

Buber, M. (1958). *I and thou.* Edinburgh: T&T Clark.

Buber, M. (2002). *Between man and man.* London: Routledge.

Carnell, E., MacDonald, J., McCallum, B. & Scott, M. (2008). *Passion and politics: Academics reflect on writing for publication.* London: IoE Press.

Gray, R. (2011). Working in an office is bad for your brain. *Daily Telegraph*, 7th August 2011, from: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/8685938/Working-in-an-office-is-bad-for-your-brain.html

Grove, J. (2013). Go open plan to open hearts and minds, says V-C. *Times Higher Education*, 30 May 2013. From (including comments): http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/go-open-plan-to-open-hearts-and-minds/2004227.article

Harrison, A. & Cairns, A. (2008). *The changing academic workplace.* Glasgow: DEGW/University of Strathclyde/Scottish Funding Council. From: http://exploreit.sfc.ac.uk/content/the_changing_academic_workplace.pdf.

Hey, V. (2001). The construction of academic time: Sub-contracting academic labour in research. *Journal of Education Policy, 16*(1), pp. 67-84.

Higher Education Funding Council for England (Hefce), Scottish Funding Council, Higher Education Funding Council for Wales & Department for Employment and Learning. (2011). REF2014: Research Excellence Framework: Assessment framework and guidance on submissions. Bristol: Hefce. From: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/research/ref/pubs/2011/02_11/

Jenkins, A. & Healey, M. (2005). *Institutional strategies to link teaching and research.* York: Higher Education Academy.

Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lewis, D. and Allan, B. (2005). *Virtual learning communities: A guide for practitioners.* Maidenhead: SRHE & Open University Press.

Lewis, H. R. (2007). *Excellence without a soul: Does liberal education have a future?* New York: PublicAffairs.

Matsuo, T., Sirilli, G. & Gault, F. (2002). *Frascati manual: Proposed standard practice for surveys on research and experimental development (6th Ed.).* Paris: OECD.

Montaigne, M. de (1991). *On solitude.* London: Penguin.

Mroz, A. (2010). Mavericks won't be corralled. *Times Higher Education*, 13th May 2010. From: http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/411579.article

Murray, R. (2011, September). *Engagement with writing for publication/disengagement from other tasks.* Paper presented at the annual conference of the British Educational Research Association, London.

Nixon, J. (2008). *Towards the virtuous university: The moral bases of academic practice.* New York: Routledge.

Price, I. & Fortune, J. (2012). Open plan and academe: Pre- and post-hoc conversations. In Then, D. S-S. & Finch, E. (Eds.). *Proceedings of the W070 conference: Healthy and Creative Facilities*. Rotterdam: CIB, pp. 613-620. Available from: http://shura.shu.ac.uk/909/

The Quality Assurance Agency *for* Higher Education (QAA). (2009a). *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.* Mansfield, Nottinghamshire: The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). (2009b). *Verification of the compatibility of the framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ): With the framework for qualifications of the European higher education area (FQ-EHEA): Report of the FHEQ Self-certification Advisory Group*: Mansfield, Nottinghamshire: The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.

Rowland, S. (2006). *The enquiring university: Compliance and contestation in higher education.* Maidenhead: Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.

Sarason, S. B. (1999). *Teaching as a performing art.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Sell, R. D. (2011). *Communicational criticism: Studies in literature as dialogue.* Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Smith, S. (2012). *The open-plan academy.* Cambridge: Vitae. From: http://www.vitae.ac.uk/researchers/156431-542771/The-open-plan-academy.html

Stern, L. J. (2009a). Monologue or dialogue? Stepping away from the abyss in higher education. *London Review of Education, 7*(3), pp. 271-281.

Stern, L. J. (2009b). *The spirit of the school.* London: Continuum.

Stern, L. J. (2010). Research as pedagogy: Building learning communities and religious understanding in RE. *British Journal of Religious Education, 32*(2), pp. 133-146.

Stern, L. J. (2011, September). *Dialogues of space, time and practice: Supporting research in higher education.* Paper presented at the annual conference of the British Educational Research Association, London.

Stern, L. J. (2013). Surprise in schools: Martin Buber and dialogic schooling. *Forum for Promoting 3-19 Comprehensive Education, 55*(1), pp. 45-58.

Stern, L. J. (2014). *Loneliness and solitude in education: How to value individuality and create an enstatic school.* Oxford: Peter Lang.

Stern, L. J. & Backhouse, A. (2011). Dialogic feedback for children and teachers: Evaluating the "spirit of assessment." *International Journal of Children's Spirituality, 16*(4), pp. 331-346.

Thoreau, H. D. (2006). *Walden.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Times Higher Education (THE). (2005, 16 September). The open-plan office gives "Infantilised" staff the blues." *Times Higher Education*. From: http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/198397.article

Webb, D. (2007). *Privacy and solitude in the Middle Ages.* London: Continuum.

Woolf, V. (2014). A room of one's own. Adelaide: eBooks@Adelaide. From: http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/virginia/w91r/index.html

Author Details

Julian Stern is Professor of Education and Religion and Dean of the Education & Theology Faculty at York St John University. Contact address: Faculty of Education & Theology, York St John University, Lord Mayor's Walk, York, North Yorkshire YO31 7EX, UK. Email: j.stern@yorksj.ac.uk