

Research in Educational Technology: framing MEG's Work

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INTRODUCTION

What frames MEG research? This paper explores the way we mediate a range of interests, negotiate a number of possibilities and make hard choices in a tricky environment. I will reflect on issues, tensions and actors which arise from the politics of our context, and comment on how we in MEG have responded to them, engaged with them and attempted to influence them.

The knowledge economy

"What counts as appropriate research in a given community is based on a negotiated reality...the truth is always a line of dialogue in a given historical situation" (To misquote Albaek).. At this moment in history, our dialogue is about a knowledge economy and we are caught up in various ways of interpreting it. Whatever the opinion of or attitude to these discourses, there is a common language informing and influencing higher education. Thus policy and research are framed by notions of the information economy, globalisation, instantaneous communication and the globally networked world, while people are described as knowledge workers and life long learners. We no longer see ourselves divided geographically into the third world and the first world, or even into developed and developing countries. Rather we are defined by our place in information-based economic nodes which occur within and across countries (Castells 2000).

At the heart of these debates and tensions are Information and Communication technologies (ICTs). Whether supporting the creation of a participatory democratic citizen, or that of a globally competitive life-long learning information worker, there seems to be consensus that people need access to ICTs. The alternative is to live in the twilight zone of a Fourth World (Castells).

The imperatives implicit in this global knowledge economy filter down to the Multimedia Education Group, a research and development unit that focuses on using and researching ICTs in higher education. It is after all the graduates of this sector of education who need to be prepared to join this knowledge economy. This means that we have to engage with the language and debates around competencies and literacies, with a view to preparing nascent knowledge workers/citizens for the world out there. We have to understand how to translate these into clearer and actionable outcomes, and work towards ensuring that technology related competencies or literacies become part of the daily work of teaching and learning at UCT.

The great divides

While global issues are relevant to us and infiltrate our work, they take shape in a local version as we are situated in a particular place at a moment in South African history that is fraught with tensions and seemingly irreconcilable demands. These tensions become even more explicit in work carried out within technology, teaching and learning.

Local tensions

While the language and discourses of the knowledge or information economy permeates higher education in South Africa, our situation is complicated by our own history. We are simultaneously preparing students for participation in a global economy with world-class requirements, and addressing or redressing the inequalities of the past. Specifically at this moment in history, the key national tensions that frame our work are epitomised in the tension between equity and excellence, or between widening

participation and quality or standards.

What this means in practice is that, given that only a very small proportion of school-leavers are adequately prepared for direct entry to conventional higher education programmes, in order to increase participation the higher education system must have the capacity to cater successfully for students who have potential but are seriously disadvantaged and under-prepared for traditional higher education, with all the implications this has for provision and resources (Scott 2002). While cultural and intellectual diversity is clearly enriching, the same cannot be said of diversity in the quality of prior learning and thus in preparedness for higher education, which is instead a major problem and obstacle to equity.

What does this mean for MEG's work and research? Like universities elsewhere in which available resources are declining, there is increasing pressure "to do more with less" while simultaneously producing graduates with the competencies needed for a new world economy. We must be world class, participate in international debates, research and development, support and develop students who can participate at a global level. At the same time we must overcome the obstacles to equity implicit in our broadened student body, and address the problems of students disadvantaged by poor education systems. Just a few years ago, this meant asking whether ICTs might be useful to us. We were asking whether we needed ICTs at all and we wanted to know whether they were necessary in the development of global information workers. (These were questions in our first grant seeking proposals in 1997). More recently, however, we have moved beyond asking simply whether or not to use ICTs. We now have to ask more complicated questions such as how best we can use ICTs to help resolve these tensions, what value we can get from technologies, how they can best be used to support teaching and learning, how they can be used most cost effectively and how can we manage to support all the needs of different students.

Digital tensions

Surely, these questions have been asked and answered in other countries that acquired ICTs long before we did? Certainly, studies addressing such questions have been conducted in other countries for a long time, and there is a valuable body of literature relating to educational technology from The UK, Australia and particularly the US.

While interesting, this work arises from contexts so different from ours that the interest is academic rather than immediate. We exist in a very specific context, where issues pertaining to "the digital divide" are paramount. The digital divide bounds our work, and informs it and defines it. And central to describing that divide is context.

Other researchers of educational technology have criticised study in this field for not taking context into account (see for example Means 2000, Tolmie 2001 and Boyes 2001). Certainly this has been our own experience. Our work is framed by the specifics of digital access in the university, Cape Town and South Africa. We cannot render invisible those elements of our context which help explain issues of technology use and impact in education. Too many research designs require us to focus on technological input and educational output. But this black box approach is not useful to us. The specifics of our situation particularly regarding technology and access frame how we work and what we investigate.

It is important for us to acknowledge that access issues are not simply about the physical. Not only is there a digital divide between our university and those located elsewhere (most of which are in the so-called developed economies), but we live with a digital divide within our very university itself as suggested by the excellence / equity tension mentioned. I have found the five factors suggested by Warschauer for describing digital tensions useful: physical access, human capital, content, social capital and what he calls institutional reform. While each factor could be an umbrella for numerous other factors, I have expanded the institutional factor beyond issues of reform as there are a number of institutional and organisational issues relevant to understanding matters of access and educational technology.

Physical access is obviously a serious matter for us. Physically, we have narrow bandwidth (most US homes have more bandwidth per person than UCT (the University of Cape Town) does for its 17000 students and 5000 staff). We have limited numbers of computers and a low student : computer ratio (in the Humanities Faculty for example, it is 15 students per PC). Students have very limited access to computers at home, in the residences or in libraries. Our students come to us from a school system where fewer than 5% of schools have any computers at all.

We cannot even assume that lecturers have computer access at home. With large undergraduate classes and a limited range of software licensed and supported, this can be particularly challenging in certain disciplines. All of this impacts directly on our curriculum possibilities, our pedagogical options and our potential research studies. Our work in the media studies programme grapples with the challenges of large and diverse student bodies, the demand (by students and National Department of Education) for more practical and vocationally-orientated courses, and the lack of resources (both equipment and human resources).

However, physical access is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the use of ICTs in higher education, especially when it comes to teaching and learning. What Warschauer calls human capital is equally important, and our lack of resources includes a lack

of human resources. Students and lecturers' knowledge skills and attitudes, their previous experience and prior learning (or lack of them) all impact directly on our work. We cannot assume that people are literate, technologically "wealthy" or remotely homogenous. Our experiences indicate that lecturers' skills and attitudes are central to successfully utilising ICTs to support learning.

Central to understanding human capital are literacy and language. A complex and important area, the understanding of literacies involves identifying the set of necessary practices required to function in a particular environment. The conceptualisation and defining of computer literacy, technological literacy, web literacies, electronic literacies, multiliteracies and so on cannot be described so briefly, but are a crucial component of our work as they determine how we frame specific research projects.

In an environment where almost a third of our students do not speak English as a home language, and where MEG's research and interventions are more likely to be targeted at those second language learners, this is a relevant aspect of context and research. Of course, issues of academic development are not simply related to language issues, but they must be considered a factor. Therefore our work in online writing, for example, confronts issues of language and literacy head on.

Language issues are also relevant when considering content, especially the paucity of local and African content online (or even on CD Rom), as well as the lack of content available in African languages. Our work in the Centre for African Studies (CAS) in particular attempts to contribute to equalising this imbalance. We are also aware of the importance of linking technology to specific content and we heed Laurillard's (1993) call to focus on investigating the best way of teaching a particular topic where the content is primary and the technology is secondary.

We have observed too that students' social capital is relevant to how they interact with educational technology. The benefits they can potentially receive from participating in communities and networks (Bourdieu in Warschauer) means they can receive assistance, encouragement, information and so on from their peers, families and other networks. Writers such as Agre and Warshauer argue that since technology networking is mutually constitutive with other kinds of networking, the most useful way of promoting the appropriate use of educational technology is understanding and growing relevant social networks. Of course in order to do so, one needs to understand such networks, and researching them implies specific kinds of research approaches and methodologies. Projects in MEG which acknowledge the importance of social capital include a study of the visual literacy of South African student web users, as well as one of South African novice web users which suggests new design considerations relating to user literacy profiles.

Finally, a central factor is that of the institution itself. An understanding of educational technology and the digital must be contextualised within a specific institution with its unique power relations, interests, strategic decisions, forms of governance, methods of reform and so on. UCT's vision of being a "world-class African University" suggests certain priorities (standards acceptable throughout the world, localisation and so on). The decision to remain primarily a residential university implies that distance education (in its traditional guise) will not be a focus of research, and that educational technologies will form part of face-to-face courses. Institutional issues arise in more detail as I examine the particular actors and roles, both within the university and outside of it, and the implications of their particular "takes" and interests for MEG. I will explore who these actors are, what are their particular interests are, and how these impact on us at MEG. I will also describe the way disciplinary debates related to the nature of the work itself are also relevant to how we frame our work.

Institutional tensions

Broadly speaking these roles tend to fall into two groups: academics and non-academics. (Of course, the same actors may change roles. For example, academics also implement policy, and have organisational roles). Furthermore neither of these groups is homogenous. As academics located in CHED, our interests and perspectives are different from those of academics in the mainstream faculties.

Similarly, non-academics at different levels include academic planners, senior leaders and strategists and policy makers, within the university. The people in these positions may come from or move to academic positions, and should have an understanding of academic interests, obligations and constraints.

Interested parties outside the university also play a role in institutional politics. These may include particularly grant giving research bodies, policy groups, and non-governmental organisations. Government bodies and agencies also form part of the organisational political mix.

While one tends to think that non-academic decision-makers have a more applied interest in research outcomes, I will argue that the basic/ applied distinction is too simplistic for our purposes and context. All research undertaken by MEG is useful and supports the understanding and application of technology in education in some way.

In addition, within our context the distinction between academics and non-academics as positions and the changing roles they each play is particularly problematic given the variety of skills, interests and potential of the kinds of individuals we need. The distinction we are forced to make when we employ individuals on either academic or support staff terms is particularly meaningless when working in educational technology which requires the ability to work with and connect the technical and the theoretical as well as the organisational. This causes tensions for people who would like to (or are required to) succeed as academics with very narrowly delineated acceptable research outputs, yet who would like to explore the unique possibilities of the terrain.

While this distinction may be less problematic outside the particular world of MEG and of educational technology, I will use academics and non-academics as ideal types rather than neatly recognisable individuals or roles, and will describe the positions and interests of these types, as well as discuss the tensions and compromises that they each suggest.

Non-academic roles and needs

The non-academic role is organisationally based rather than disciplinary based. While people in such roles may also be academics they are usually policy makers, academic planners and so on. Heads of Department often find themselves in particularly tricky positions as they have to fulfil quite different roles simultaneously. (These was made very clear recently when the results of research commissioned by UCT's Vice Chancellor in 2001 highlighted these tensions* All heads of department were interviewed, and were unanimous about the changing pressures, the increased organisational demands, the difficulties of leadership roles and so on). The needs of planners and policy makers are often quite specific, and research done in their areas of concern may need to be explicitly useful and thus be planned and implemented in particular ways. A study done by Weiss suggests that the characteristics of useful research from the point of view of policy makers are: the relevance of the research to the planner's own work, its conformity with the prior knowledge of the decision makers, high technical proficiency (which was understood to mean more valid research), and an orientation to action. Weiss concludes that policy makers want to know about truth and about usefulness.

According to Weiss, research has four functions: legitimating (i.e. to support pre-existing views), warning, guidance and enlightenment. She comments that guidance is often understood to be the most common function, but that in fact this is not the case in the sense of immediate action, and rather in the sense of enlightenment and education.

With regard to policy-making, MEG's work plays a role both overtly and less obviously. One of our projects (still in progress) is an analysis and review for the UCT Council which will serve to begin the process of developing a policy framework for educational technology at the university, the lack of which has become increasingly problematic. This is an interpretive research project which we approached differently from our other work. It has required us to acknowledge that "the reorganisation and restructuring of knowledge at a less ambitious and less original level can have profound significance (Albeik 1995)". While there may indeed be a tension here, we find it useful to recognise that this kind of analysis is complementary to, rather than an alternative to, the other kinds of research we do and the choices we make (as Trow 1984 suggests).

But we envisage all our work playing a role in broader policy making, as there are important lessons to be learnt from our interventions and investigations. While our innovations are being generated on the ground, and our research is localised, we expect that our innovations will ripple across and up the system having an influence at the level of practice and influencing policy in diffused ways. In short, we expect our influence to be predominantly bottom up rather than top down.

We have noted that those within an organisational or institutional perspective tend to ask for bigger picture views with less of a focus on finer grained detail and individual stories or individual students. Rather than an isolated slice of the problem, they may prefer an inter-disciplinary approach and an ability to handle more complicated global problems (Trow 1984). We believe that there are important lessons to be learnt from those small stories, and that they may have functions which include creating curiosity and encouraging other practitioners to try out something new with technology. But we acknowledge that there is a tension between a kind of global, broadly sketched research and a localised and finely contextualised kind of research.

Within the institution The kinds of questions we are asked at UCT (in discussion, forums and via documents) have changed over the past few years. Just a few years ago the main questions were "Should we invest in technology to support teaching and learning?" and " Does it make a difference? " More recently, the questions have been "Is the use of technology in teaching and learning worth the time and effort?" and "Will the costs of investment (time and money) pay off, and if so, when and how?"

These questions still matter but now we realise that there is no option but to go ahead with educational technology as we experience pressure from many different quarters (students, parents, higher education policy). The questions have become more focused on where and how ICTs are and can be used. These more specific questions include:

What are the benefits of computer-mediated approaches to teaching and learning?

Do students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds benefit from technological interventions?
Does this allow them to enter academic discourse more rapidly and effectively?

What lessons does the work of MEG contain for teaching and learning at UCT more generally?

In addition, given that UCT's Strategic Framework expresses a commitment to "Fully information-literate graduates" and "Teaching, learning and assessment supported through information technology" issues to do with the development of appropriate technology-related competencies arise. Thus we encounter questions such as:

How do academic practitioners learn to use technology in order to support teaching and learning?

How can the development of appropriate technology-related literacies be supported?

How can we ensure that all our graduates leave the institution with computer literacy skills, and how can we provide the opportunities of acquiring them in a cost effective way?

Very often the kinds of research designs suggested by these questions are an attempt to link technology enabled innovations with learning as measured in grades/ marks. One particular body of literature makes a strong case that measuring grades so bluntly means that other relevant factors are ignored (Laurillard for example and others), and that the most useful findings will not be noticed. There are increasing numbers of researchers, including those at MEG, who believe that one needs to measure both implementation and context (Means and 2000):

Similarly, these kinds of questions have often been answered through random control group experiments. These too have been criticized because it is so difficult to keep all variables stable, the exception being one that exemplifies the technological intervention which might be having an effect. There is almost always more than one variable of a course that changes at the same time as a technological intervention (Collis and Moonen). That is, there is "a whole cloud of correlated variables in technology - activity, goal setting, teachers roles, culture- exerting their combined effect" as Salomon (quoted in Collis and Moonen 2001), put it. Furthermore the variables are mutually defining, each being "independent, mediating and dependent" at the same time.

We believe that an understanding of context and its inter-relationship with educational technology is essential. The diverse student body makes it impossible to assume homogeneity in skills, abilities, background or effects. In addition, we don't understand enough of the social practices that students bring to and use in educational technology, let alone how they inter-relate with those technologies. Understanding context and how it interrelates with educational technology interventions suggests a different kind of experimental design from that of the traditional randomised control group.

In order to answer some of the questions asked by decision-makers at UCT we need to ask other questions. Moreover, we need to make them understand that there are other questions to be asked and answered. Thus we need to know: "What social practices do students bring to their use of educational technologies?" and "What are the conventions of the web literacies used by different students at UCT?" Our experience on the ground and our context also shapes our research and our relationship with decision-makers within the institution. We experience a tension in the different understandings of what we should be doing, and what others in the institution expect of us.

This makes it sound as if the university is a homogenous institution, although we know that it is not. Regarding technology-related questions, knowing exactly who in the university is asking the question influences the research and affects what they want to know. MEG researchers may be sensitive about their location in CHED and feel wary of the reputation of policy-related research. They have heard the kind of criticism so well articulated by Weiss, who describes policy-oriented research as often being "mediocre, atheoretical, taking a short term view, ignoring earlier research on the subject, focusing on only a sub set of the variables that are operative, and using obsolete methods, or making recommendations beyond the data". No-one wants to do what is considered poor-quality research.

Outside the institution The concerns of decision-makers outside the institution differ from those within the institution - mostly in scale, and sometimes in purpose. The kinds of research which sets out to address these concerns often attempts to identify generic factors from a wide range of sites. In order to create a comprehensive picture of broader experiences with technology and of the cumulative impact of technology use, this kind of research wants to know what is typical, and wants to create the aggregate from many examples across different sites. This means framing a whole range of research projects similarly within one institution and across research sites in different institutions. It requires from researchers a commitment to agreed, standardised and shared tools and approaches.

Even when a group of researchers agree to collaborate at the outset of a project and even when attempts are made at the outset to standardise approaches and tools, intentions translate in practices in local conditions interfere with neatly agreed parameters and intentions.

Examples from our own experience in observation include the CEUTT (Cost-Effective Uses of Technology in Teaching) Project and the PEW Program. The CEUTT program has the explicit goal of helping address whether, and under what conditions, educational technology might be deployed in ways that reduce institutional costs and promote pedagogic gains. The program advocates a comparative approach, either comparing different technological interventions for the same objective or comparing between similar technological interventions in different circumstances.

Since we have been encouraged to explore this approach we did so, and consequently we have experienced a number of problems and tensions. On the whole, this research design has not seemed the most useful for answering the kinds of questions we are interested in and which we will find helpful. We do not consider our attempt to use this approach a success. We have also noted that although several programs, speak the language of comparison, there are different emphases and interpretations when results are reported, presumably due to factors in the local context, and in the feasibility and immediate possibilities of conducting the research. While the hope at the outset might be to use research across several sites to offer full blown solutions, what seems more realistic is research that illustrates pieces of the puzzle (as Twigg of the PEW Project puts it).

Although these research approaches have so far proven problematic in our context, they remain part of the conversation. We have to continue to consider when and how randomised control group type experiments might be useful to us. These approaches form part of our environment, add an element of tension to our discussions and continue to inform our work.

Other interests/ voices Other voices express opinions regarding what kind of work MEG should be doing. One is that of a non-governmental organisation with expertise in distance education. After working with MEG for a period of time, they argued that a decision to focus on the small-scale implementation of interesting pedagogical models, rather than to target larger-scale, systemic practices, is questionable given the current pressures facing UCT. Acting on such comments would require re-orientating the unit in terms of skills, the purpose of its projects and the kinds of research engaged in.

Other, less vocal interests, are those of commercial content providers who express an interest in the packaging of MEG research output. Setting out to create marketable commodities from research projects would also require a different approach and orientation to the work MEG does at present.

Academics

Researchers within MEG People who work in MEG tend to have multiple and interwoven interests within the curriculum and within issues such as academic literacy, as well as in the innovative and unique potential contributions of technology for teaching and learning purposes.

A snap shot of individual MEG members' research interests is revealing:

"qualitative research re educational effectiveness, without any quantitative measurement of cost." "the design, development and evaluation of integrated learning environments."

"the measurement of educational effectiveness of online collaboration"

"relationships between online and face-to-face learning conversations in mixed mode courses"

"to define the most effective ways of communicating through various technologies and to develop re-useable, flexible, modular learning and teaching materials and interventions (both lecturer support and interactive) accordingly"

"a deeper understanding, from a socio-cultural and cognitive perspective, of the obstacles to learning that confront disadvantaged students"

"theoretical ways of articulating and measuring the larger rationale for teaching new media literacy practices"

The interests of MEG members reflect the developmental concerns of being located within CHED (the Centre for Higher Education Development), an institute which is tasked with "widening access and promoting excellence through equity" amongst other things. Thus the location of MEG within CHED, its interdisciplinary nature, and the organisational structure of its work and structure impacts powerfully on the kind of work we do.

Despite the diversity and range of topics and subjects focused on, what is shared amongst the researchers is a pedagogical passion, a commitment to technology for teaching and learning in ways supporting learning and addressing problems brought by our particular circumstances, and a fascination with the possibilities of interactive computer based technology approaches, especially in view of their possibilities for disadvantaged students.

In particular, MEG members share a commitment to integrating technology into the curriculum rather than providing an add-on component. Thus all our work must acknowledge and work within specific contexts as it is not possible to disentangle aspects of educational technology from the overall curriculum

Beyond these shared elements there are differences in theoretical approaches and disciplinary training which impact on the work; there are differences in emphasis as indeed there should be; there is a lesser or greater interest in assessment.

None of the stated interests say anything like "to see what happens", or, the exploration of educational technology "for its own sake" Research interests are rooted in daily practice, in closeness to academics and in exposure to students in classrooms and labs. As research is only one part of a MEG member's work, members of MEG are undoubtedly influenced by their partnerships with academics and in the faculties. In addition the close alliance with the academic development programme means that MEG staff are exposed to specific local student problems and issues daily and are not researchers who operate at a distance from the coal face.

This location and these interests spill over inevitably into the preferred choice of research methodologies. Academics with a pedagogical passion do not generally have an interest in costs or cost effectiveness analyses (as noted by Fisher and Nygren 1999). The kind of global picture research that identifies typical elements is not the preferred *modus operandi* of people who want to capture fine-grained processes in nuanced contexts. As academics elsewhere have done, people in MEG have expressed concerns about trying to measure learning and trying to break down complex and deep processes into measurable indicators. There is a sense that turning learning into something measurable and quantifying leads to a superficial analysis and evaluation. There is also a sense of frustration and a feeling that the really interesting and valuable things can't be measured. These views are echoed in the literature elsewhere, and the implication that there is a need for new ways to measure learning and learning outcomes would be supported by most people in MEG.

The description of MEG researchers thus far suggests a coherence and shared interest which may be exaggerated, and may suggest more consensus than actually exists. While academics in MEG are quite aware of their location and its implications, they also share the expectations of academics who require the space to pursue their own interest. Issues of academic freedom, including the rights and autonomy of individual academics, are therefore also part of the tension and an important element in the kaleidoscope I have been attempting to take apart.

MEG associates in the faculties and disciplines Academics in the mainstream faculties are distinctly discipline-based. That is, they are interested in developing research in their areas of expertise. There is little requirement or reward for an interest in teaching and learning. Many academics in the faculties have a poor sense of student skills and academic literacies; many do not know how to respond to issues of diversity and disadvantage. Many believe that problems of educational disadvantage should be addressed before students get into mainstream courses. Traditional passive curriculum models do not inherently develop the required skills which would help academics. Many academics are anxious about technology, and are suffering from change fatigue. This means that for many the issues mentioned elsewhere, and the questions asked by decision-makers and by people in MEG and CHED are not relevant or urgent or even interesting.

Those who do get drawn into the discussion, and with whom we form partnerships ask questions such as:

How can technology take the drudgery out of my work?

How can technology free me to focus on the real educational issues; and how can it free me to do what I ought to be doing?

Can technology enhance the teaching and learning of my subject? Can it help the students in ways that cannot be done without technology?

Since partnerships with academics across the disciplinary departments are MEG's chosen *modus operandi*, the questions raised are taken seriously.

Several of our projects explore the possibilities of specific computer-based savings or automation. These include the use of automated feedback in Newsframes, the automated marking system being developed and utilised on numeracy projects and the intelligent FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) handler being trialled in the Education Department.

An issue here which provides an example of the complexity of such partnerships is the challenge we face when a joint intervention is made, or a unique collaborative development is put in place, and MEG and non-MEG partners wish to research the intervention or write it up. The question of who "owns" which disciplinary approach to the research becomes problematic as partners in the disciplines claim that disciplinary theories and understandings are theirs first. The organisational and the theoretical are closely interwoven in these tricky collaborations.

Disciplinary issues: the nature of educational technology

In addition to these external contextual elements, our work is also framed by issues relating to its content. . There are politics to knowledge production in our field as elsewhere; and the content itself contains intrinsic elements which are more likely than others to focus attention. This all means that the ways in which we understand the kind of knowledge that is produced through our research, and how that knowledge is recognised more broadly (or not) also influences and is interrelated with the research decisions made, the methodology used and the day-to-day decisions themselves.

For space reasons I am unable to explore these issues here, although I do so in a longer paper elsewhere. My points include that that our research is also framed by its intrinsic content, and that issues of disciplinarity are important to explore too.

Concluding comments

Space does not permit a discussion of these observations. In short, a whole range of contextual issues and interests position our work and our choices in particular ways. When I started this job I thought we could achieve a good fit between all the interests which press on us and need addressing, and the skills and personal interests in the group. Now I realise that there will never be a perfect fit. Interests change. The institution itself contains divergent positions and interests, which shift as does the broader environment. Academics' personal preferences and foci change (as is inevitable in academia, and as no doubt they should). We can work towards a fit that works, but we must accept that we will never achieve it. This means accepting an organisational structure and unit that is in a continual state of flux and reflection, one that is reassessing and renegotiating permanently.

The business of doing educational research simultaneously expresses a whole range of diverse contextual, organisational (and of course technical) issues. Doing research in MEG is about mediating compromises, negotiating interests, managing trans-disciplinary tensions, and developing appropriate methods in response to these delicate (and changeable) resolutions of interests. Our work requires each of us to be a translator, an interpreter, a negotiator and a mediator. So, our research is a kaleidoscope of linked, connected and disconnected patterns, shapes and elements existing in relation to one another, but changing even as we and our environment move.

NOTE that this paper has been substantially shortened. For a copy of the full paper complete with footnotes and references please copy the author.

*Key issues identified by the draft report included conflicts within the strategy & purpose of the academic HOD role in particular there was an unresolved tension for the academic HOD between management and administrative responsibilities, and academic leadership which the University has always stressed as a core component of the role. I was noted that given structural transformations that have occurred in the University over the last few years, particularly devolution, the creation of a new-style deanship and a new Faculty office structure, there was a need to re-examine the role of the academic HOD. Academic HODs were experiencing structural constraints impeding their ability to exercise leadership. These constraints included time constraints, unclear limits of authority, autonomy and power in relation to the Dean (and sometimes other colleagues), inadequate induction into the role, and inadequate departmental structure in the face of demands on the role. The sense of "service" in taking up the academic HOD role appeared to be becoming increasingly strained and fragile. Reasons identified for this were numerous and complex, ranging from budgetary and financial restraints, to unwillingness to constrain research and teaching opportunity. Reluctance by academics to take up the headship would have profound implications for succession planning not only at the departmental, but also at the Faculty and ultimately institutional levels. Details of this research available at www.uct.ac.za under the AIMS (Audit and Integration of Management Systems) Project.