

# **The nexus is learning: Teaching and research in a knowledge ecology**

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## **What is it about ?**

In recent years the university has undergone a sustained critique of its role and purpose. Academic development can draw upon these critiques to further develop its own sense of identity, and at the same time contribute to the ongoing enquiry into the idea of the university. In this conversation theme for TERNZ I outline an *ecological conception* of teaching/learning, and argue that an understanding of the idea of the university as a *zone of academic development* entails an epistemological shift towards *systemic models* of organisational structure and learning.

## **Why is it important ?**

In this view the relationship between research and teaching is of critical importance in the debate on new ideas of the university. It is also a central area for academic development, since the ecological approach and the associated concept of *enactive coherence* (Frielick 2004) imply that the zone of academic development is not only confined to the scene of teaching and learning, but extends across the institution as whole. A central tenet of the ecological approach states that, “just as the cognizing agent cannot be understood as a solitary component (but must be regarded as a subsystem of a larger system), teaching and learning cannot be studied as though they occur in isolated and closed systems” (Davis and Sumara, 1997:122). In the contemporary university this means that the activity of teaching cannot be understood in isolation from the systems, processes and activities that constitute the research arena, and indeed all the other systems and subsystems that constitute the larger ecology of ideas in which higher educational processes are embedded. I propose a model of the university as a *knowledge ecology*, in which a *new relationship between research and teaching* becomes a central focus for academic development.

## **How the session will be run**

The key ideas and concepts will be outlined in a brief presentation. As the notion of a ‘knowledge ecology’ may be unfamiliar some time will be available for clarification through questions and examples. The remainder of the session will be a dialogue on the implications for academic development, with a focus on how effective strategies for enhancing the relationship between research and teaching could be implemented in different institutional contexts (based on the experience of the participants).

## **References**

Davis, B., & Sumara, D. J. (1997). Cognition, complexity, and teacher education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 67(1), 105-125.

Frielick, S. (2004). The zone of academic development: An ecological approach to learning and teaching in higher education. Unpub. PhD thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.