

Towards a periodic table of EAP teacher knowledge –

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On Saturday 22nd June the University of Northampton hosted a PIM on the topic of Knowledge in EAP. One of the aims of the day was to interrogate the position of knowledge in EAP and to drive our discipline forward as a consequence. In many ways this was a natural follow-up from the University of Leeds April 2019 BALEAP Conference themes of *Innovation, Transformation and Exploration*. It is also an area that I am particularly interested in as a consequence of having explored developments in teacher knowledge and actions as part of my PhD in Education.

Having presented at PIM events before, I always enjoy the diverse and healthy discussions amongst BALEAP members. However this PIM was characterised by a significant difference from the outset. Essentially, it was shaped around a *World Café* methodology where the speaker is a facilitator rather than a presenter. My role was thus to stimulate discussion amongst small groups of people sitting around tables and then summarise their findings on the basis of what they had written on their ‘tablecloths.’

As a natural consequence of this approach, there was a real sense of partnership between presenters and other participants. It had echoes of Vygotsky in the way that discussions were constructed around occasional input from the presenters. Yet at the same time there was a freedom to the form that made me think of Scott Thornbury’s *Dogme* approach – even though he is somebody more commonly associated with EFL than EAP contexts.

The reason for the Thornbury link is that the day was shaped by what participants themselves brought to the table – both literally and figuratively. The team at Northampton had equipped us all with a healthy arsenal of pens and paper to record our thoughts. During presentations, participants wrote their thoughts down on tables covered in sheets of paper which were collected at the end. These then provided not just a means of allowing each

group to come to the table aware of what had been discussed before but also provided the substance of reports and summaries such as this one of the various ideas that arose out of the hosts' facilitations.

Throughout a busy morning we must have gone through as many markers as might take us through a week on a Pre Sessional. By the time of my session in the afternoon I feared that there might not be much else left to discuss. In order to counteract this, I changed my presentation slightly to bring it more in line with what had gone before. The title of my originally-proposed café session was amended slightly to have a new focus of *'EAP passengers becoming drivers in the academic mainstream.'* I just thought that post-lunch, I needed something a bit different to generate food for thought and to connect my efforts with what had gone before.

The focus of my presentation was on considering what types of knowledge EAP practitioners have and how we can use this knowledge to advance our field and move out of what Alex Ding and Ian Bruce (2017) call the margins of the academy. Part of this discussion involved drawing on ideas from Lee Shulman's Pedagogical Content Knowledge framework of the 1980s and the later TPACK adaptation of this (shown as figure one below).

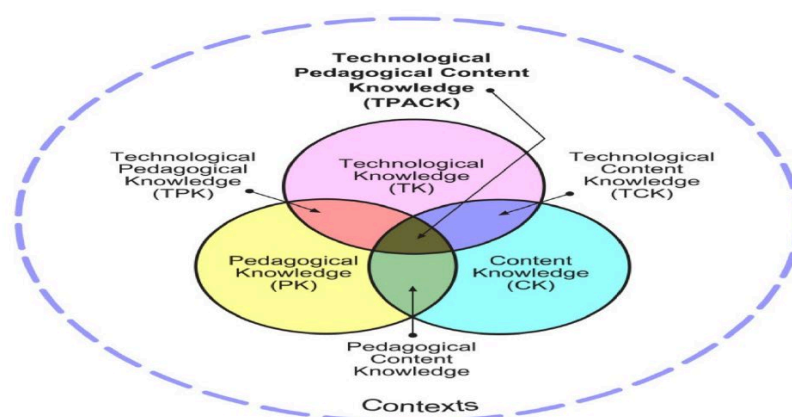


Figure 1: The TPACK framework and its knowledge components.
Reproduced from Koehler & Mishra (2009, p. 63)

This is the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge framework (TPACK) designed by Punya Mishra and Matthew Koehler (2006). It is

intended as “a professional knowledge construct” designed to create “expert” teaching in the classroom (Koehler & Mishra, 2009, p. 66). However, it is my contention that the Achilles Heel of this framework is the definition of technology. Although the creators use the term technology to mean any resource used in the process of teaching, that is not so explicit. As a consequence of that, the uptake of TPACK as a theoretical framework for teaching has been much less than it deserves.

Even in the initial discussion generated around TPACK, I could see that it is not a theory that sets fire to the imagination in the way it should. Participants agreed that a category relating to *resource* would be a better fit with EAP/ELT than *technology*. There was a feeling that technological knowledge is perhaps not so much of a necessity for EAP teachers as other more relevant categories. Interestingly then, in line with the *World Café* methodology, the conversation veered towards a new line of discussion.

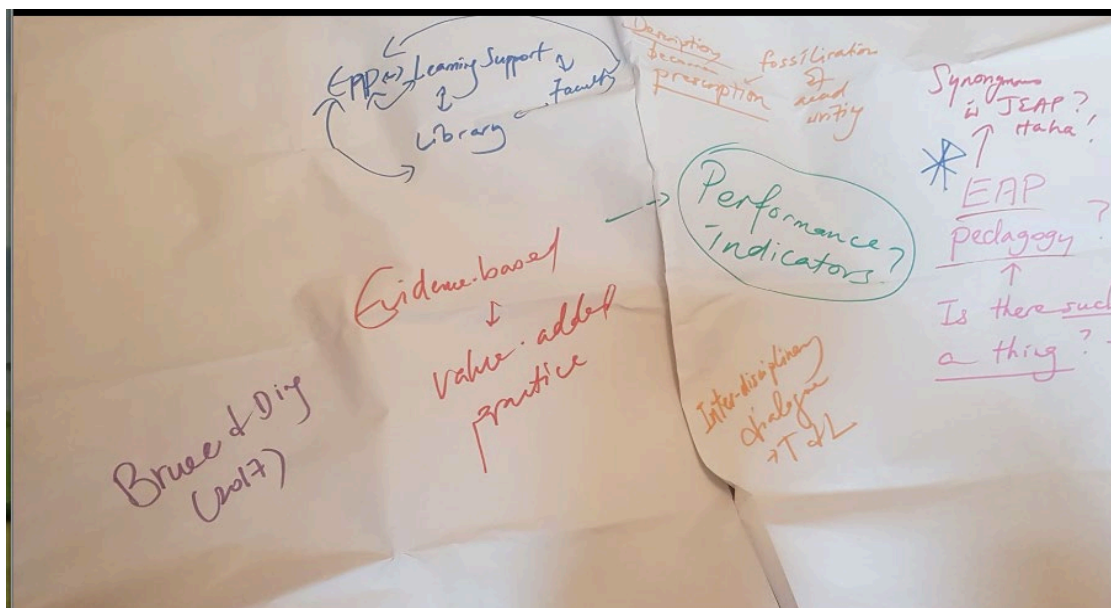
Almost inadvertently, I moved away from TPACK – retreating across the decades to the work of Lee Shulman once again. In doing so, I made reference to one of Shulman’s more seminal articles in which he advocated the creation of a periodic table of knowledge for teachers (1987, p.4). Such a construct would be designed along the lines of Dmitri Mendeleev’s periodic table of chemical elements which, at the outset of its publication in 1869, contained “distinct gaps for the then unknown elements” (Schwerdtfeger, 2011, p. 93). Shulman’s (1987) argument was that his own PCK framework was no more than a “rudimentary” outline of teacher knowledge (Ball et al, 2008, p. 397). As such, the gaps needed to be filled in differently according to subject areas and EAP certainly differs from many disciplines.

As a result of this anticipated difference, a discussion emerged about whether such a table might be useful in the EAP context. After all, the forms of knowledge described by Shulman (1986) are highly transferable across contexts, and can be readily mapped to BALEAP’s (2008) competencies, which in themselves can be seen as a type of periodic table of EAP teacher knowledge (Breen, 2018). The consensus that then followed was that such a

discussion was not about replacement of the 2008 competencies but to update the framework which itself was again intended to be rudimentary and open to adaptation and evolution along the way.

A lot of my discussion so far though relates to what was said in direct response to some of the ideas raised in the presentation. Yet, the unique feature of the *World Café* methodology is that it facilitates a type of discussion amongst participants that is more free-flowing and less pre-determined. As such, both on the day of my presentation and in this paper, I wanted to avoid spending too much time preaching about TPACK or PCK. The focus of the day was on bringing the voices of café participants to the fore and that is what follows in the subsequent sections. However, for the benefit of those who were not there on the day, Figure 2 shows the way that the data was recorded and gathered. After being prompted with a set of questions, participants wrote down their thoughts on paper provided at each table. These sheets of paper were then collected at the end with the intention of using them to report on ideas that participants generated in the sessions, rather than simply reporting on the thoughts of the presenters/facilitators.

Figure 2 – Sample sheet of data showing ideas generated by questions used in my *World Café* presentation.



Though I had some opening questions relating to the role of EAP practitioners within higher education, the greatest amount of data was generated by the second set of questions as follows:

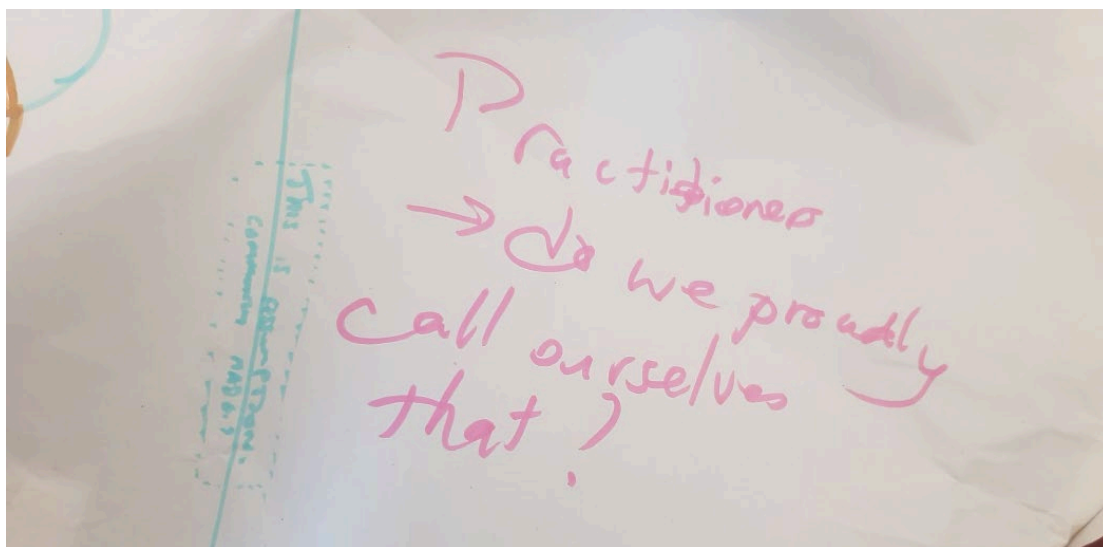
- How does this all (*TPACK/PCK*) fit with EAP? What is the knowledge base of EAP teaching? Isn't it context heavy?
- Have EAP and EAP practitioners played down the strength of our own pedagogic approaches within higher education?
- Do we sometimes feel inferior in our academic knowledge but superior in our pedagogic knowledge?

Although there seemed to be minimal discussion on TPACK itself, there were a whole series of further questions and issues that arose from these prompts. In one case, someone has asked the highly pertinent question – *“Is there such a thing as EAP pedagogy?”* and *“is it defineable?”* They then went on to ask whether *“if not, can we make one?”* On the same sheet though, a tone of scepticism emerges with the comment that *“we never have a chance to play up our strength”* and that is then labelled as *“pedagogic”* – in brackets, perhaps for emphasis. In terms of designing a knowledge base for EAP teaching, someone suggested that *“description becomes prescription”*. Though I cannot know for certain, this appears to be an argument against the defining of a specific knowledge base for EAP teaching. Possibly this comes from a fear of being constrained, being bound to a specific set of characteristics that limit freedom and versatility.

Indeed the issue of definitions is a recurring one. One of the groups asked the pertinent question – *“Is an EAP practitioner the same as an EAP academic?”* This then generates the further question of whether *“we know what the core knowledge of an EAP academic is.”* Someone amongst a previously mentioned set of participants also raised the question of *“Practitioners – do we **proudly** call ourselves that?”* (see figure 3). Certainly, Alex Ding and Ian

Bruce would argue that we ought to, going by their book title: *The English for Academic Purposes Practitioner. Operating on the Edge of Academia*. Again, in the spirit of the methodology, it is not for me to comment extensively but the choice of words, especially “*proudly*”, creates fertile ground for further consideration and debate.

**Figure 3 – Sample extract of data which we might well label as -
‘A question of EAP pride – in bold pink lettering.’**

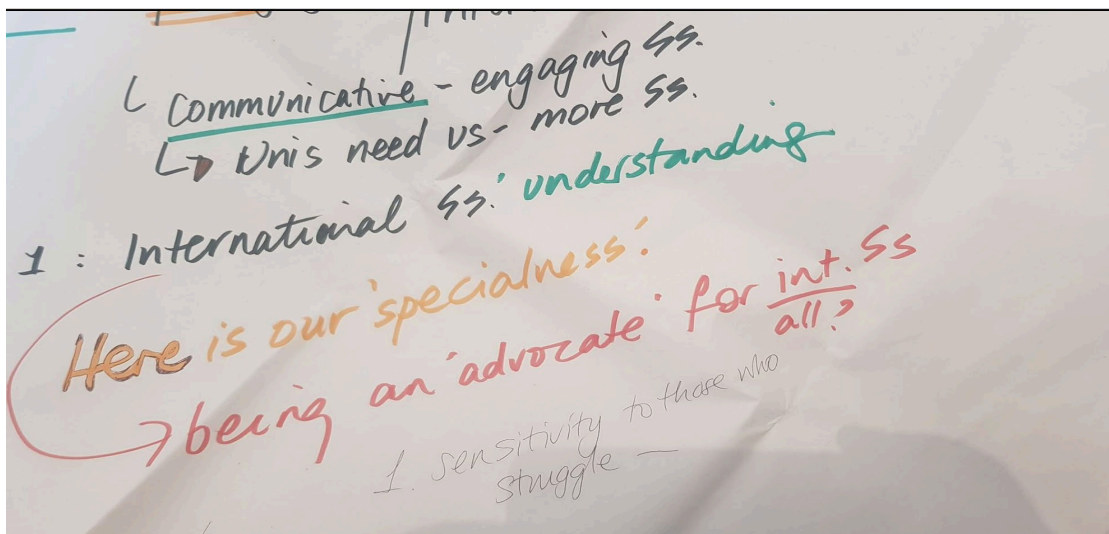


Throughout the comments there was a sense of people being proud of what they do as EAP teachers but feeling that this work is not always recognised. Several groups made reference to cultural awareness and intercultural communication being key aspects of pedagogic approaches and pedagogic knowledge in EAP. One of the groups drew upon the EAP literature to quote Professor Jigang Cai of Fudan University who argued that “*EAP teachers are supposed to have composite skills: language and subject specific knowledge.*” Further to this the knowledge base must allow for teaching students about “*genre knowledge, rhetorical devices and language of a particular subject, how to analyse and research discourses etc.*”

In terms of our practical contribution, there was a clear sense of where our strengths lie. Some suggestions included the sharing of “*teaching techniques that work with students from different cultures*” and to “*help other lecturers design courses/assignments.*” In this way we can make our “*specialness*”

apparent to the rest of academia if we get the chance. The group who spoke of EAP's "specialness" then go on to ask a very interesting question as shown in Figure 4, which also gives a sense of how the discussion amongst participants at the tables took shape. Here, you can almost imagine the flow of discussion that has given rise to how the question is eventually worded. At the same time, there seems an awareness too of how our views of our special contributions might be different to institutions' market-driven perspectives.

Figure 4 – Sample extract of data that asks the question of “our specialness” and whether that can be used for ALL students.



A further point that emerged was the question of whether there is “any EAP knowledge that is independent of context.” Someone else reiterated a point that I had made in my presentation about our knowledge of teaching itself. This was the notion that, as EAP professionals “**our power is in our pedagogy.**” Interestingly here inverted commas are used for emphasis whilst previously I had seen an instance of “pedagogic” – in brackets. There seems to be a recognition then on the part of teachers that our pedagogic knowledge base is a key variable that heavily shapes our “specialness.” However, going back to the question of whether we play down the strength of our own pedagogic approaches within higher education, there is a sense that sometimes we are not allowed to realise our full potential which might entail a branching out to “all students” within the university.

One group made several pertinent points relating to our position within our institutions which supports the aforementioned Ding & Bruce's (2017) sense of us being on the margins of academia. The first of these comments was that *"sometimes our status in the institution doesn't allow us to do things."* This was followed up with the more practice-related assertion that *"subject lecturers don't approach us for help/we don't know there's a problem."*

There was a sense here that this helps foster division but one group member pointed out that it is not as clear cut as EAP professionals sometimes feeling inferior in our academic knowledge but superior in our pedagogic knowledge. In an earlier session Steve Kirk had also commented that working with people across disciplines had given him a stronger sense of some of the good practice that is happening in other parts of universities. It is not as clear cut as *us* being the teachers and *them* being the academics.

Linked to this, one group remarked that the academic element is *"not included in our job description/workloads"* and in an echo of an Anne Burns quote about teachers having "busy classroom lives" (1999, p. 14), somebody laments the fact of *"no time."* Mirroring the earlier reference to EAP academics versus practitioners, there was a feeling that the academic contribution of EAP *"needs to be valued by senior management."* This was also explored by another group who raised points about the contractual aspects of EAP and the sense that there is *"little scope for progression/promotion"* which begs the question – *"is this formal lack of status fuelling insecurity?"*

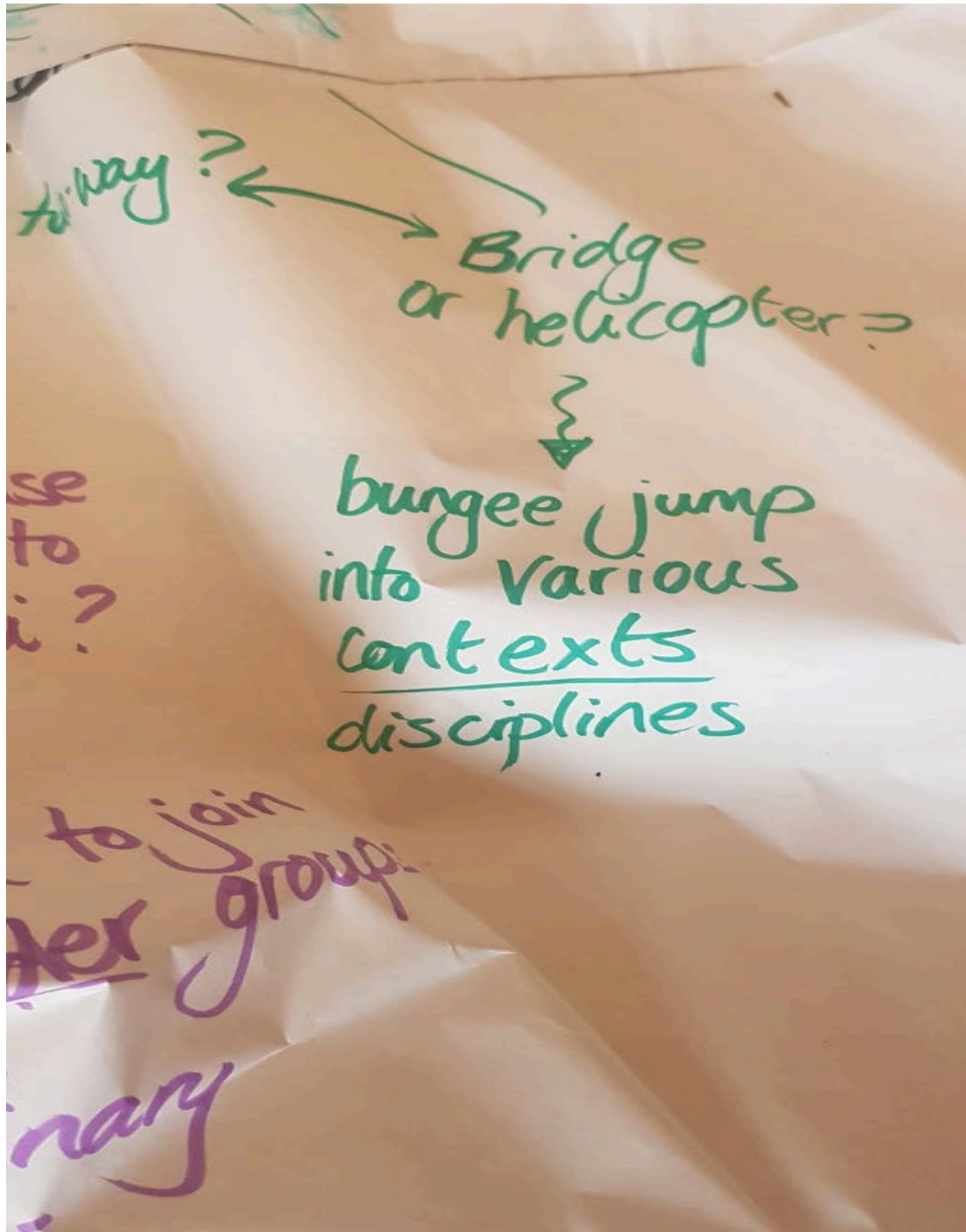
Significantly though one member in whole-group discussion suggested that in the present higher educational climate, there is insecurity across disciplines. As such we should not be too quick to see ourselves as being sole proprietors of business on the edge of the academy (*my words*). Various departments in our universities are facing the same threats listed by several groups of such issues as *"temporary contracts"*, *"institutional barriers"* and an interesting view on the rampant neoliberalism of the present day. Somebody remarked that *"we don't have the language to speak to departments"* and that *"using the language of executives is not always normal for us."*

The question to arise from that line of discussion then might be whether or not a definition of our knowledge base can protect us in such a climate. Personally, I would argue that it could help to improve our status. Not everyone is fortunate enough to be an EAP “*academic*” and if we are to move out of our marginalised status we do need mainstream recognition. Would the formalising of a periodic table of teacher knowledge help with this? Possibly for some, but looking through the data it is also apparent that many people define themselves by their practice and not their knowledge. That practical aspect of EAP though was seen as a potential “*springboard for collaboration*” by one group which suggested that we “*use common ground of inclusive teaching, internationalising the curriculum and implementing new/digital technologies.*” This in turn, they suggested, would allow for “*more neutral discussions in pedagogy (in discipline).*”

The question of our relationship to the disciplines was then explored at a later stage in my presentation where I asked about our specific place in the academy. Again, there were a diverse range of opinions that very often reflect individual circumstances rather than a cohesive sense of who/what we are. One group, for example, sought out some very imaginative metaphors for the linkage or the relationship that we have with the disciplines, moving from the generic and oft-quoted notion of a “*bridge*” to more quirky forms of journeying.

These, as seen in Figure 5, include a notion of EAP crossing or hovering over disciplines in a “*helicopter*” format or acting out a “*bungee jump into various contexts/disciplines.*” Though I monitored and interacted with the discussion, I can only surmise here that this could relate to differences in the way that EAP interacts with the disciplines in different teaching contexts. For example, the “*helicopter*” approach might be the one that is commonly deployed on Pre Sessionals and the “*bungee jump*” an image for the in-sessional context. Perhaps too, drawing upon the idea voiced in the previous section, the bungee jumping could offer more scope for a finding of “*common ground.*”

Figure 5 – Ideas generated about the direction of our travel into EAP teachers' collaboration with other disciplines.



Having waded through reams of paper decorated in various levels of calligraphy, the bungee jump metaphor might be a nice one to close on. Firstly, this is because of the great unknown that we seem to be leaping into as regards the future of higher education and the future of Britain. In part, this is an exciting time for EAP but also a challenging one. The ground beneath us is constantly shifting and to survive in such an environment we need to be

able to stand firm as practitioners with a strong sense of who we are. I would argue that we are both “*academic*” and “*practitioner*” – which is something that everyone throughout the university is expected to become with the growing emphasis on the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) alongside the continuing but also ever-changing measurement of research output.

In terms of pedagogic knowledge, I would argue that we are ahead of the field. However, in the spirit of World Café methodology, it is the voices of the participants that matters most and not just the facilitator. That is why I hope to see something come out of this session where some of us get together to put together a periodic table of knowledge for our profession. I know that in the aftermath of the event there was some enthusiasm for this but many of us have our busiest classroom lives in the heat of Pre Sessional summers. Therefore maybe this is a project for the autumn, born out of a very enjoyable June afternoon in the University of Northampton.

Paul Breen is the author of *Developing Educators for the Digital Age – a framework for capturing teacher knowledge in action* – available to download for free at <https://www.uwestminsterpress.co.uk/site/books/10.16997/book13/>

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