

Writing, Talking, Eating: Nurturing Spaces and Cultures of Pedagogical Creativity in Higher Education (0503)

Lewis Winks¹, Sarah Dyer¹ ¹*University of Exeter, United Kingdom*

Abstract

The University of Exeter Education Incubator was established in 2017 to encourage and support faculty innovation in teaching approaches across departments. In its first year, the Incubator supported the work of twelve faculty-researchers, each of whom developed and ran a project aimed at pushing the boundaries of Higher Education pedagogy within their own discipline. This paper focuses on four challenges faced by educational innovators: institutional alignment, time and space, peer support, and fostering risk. Specifically, the paper examines the final capstone event organised by the Education Incubator in its first-year fellows: a structured social writing retreat with the dual focus of providing time for writing as well as discussion as educational development. Utilising theories of brave space and critical hope, the paper examines the ways in which the writing retreat helped participants to engage with, and negotiate, the liminal spaces of pedagogical innovation and creativity in Higher Education.

Introduction

The changing landscape of Higher Education (HE) requires institutions and those who work in them do things in new ways. Some of these changes occur in piecemeal or reactive ways whilst others are proactively 'driven' by Strategic Development Units or Change Managers. In their education provision, universities are seeking to innovate in many ways, including: to teach more inclusively; to increase their use digital and virtual learning environments; and to increase graduate employability (Brennan et al., 2014, Bonk et al., 2005). This paper takes its empirical focus as a three-day residential writing retreat which ran as a capstone to the University of Exeter's first year of the Education Incubator, a project designed to support innovation within teaching and learning across the institution. We examine four challenges of HE in our positioning of writing retreats: alignment; time and space; peer learning and support; and the willingness to take risks and to fail. Our analysis makes use of the educational concepts of critical hope, and brave spaces for transforming HE and negotiating the liminal space encountered during the writing retreat.

Four challenges of innovation in education practice

Challenge 1: alignment

Innovating in educational practice presents challenge to Universities, not least with regards to how priorities are balanced and addressed. HE is a neoliberal market paradox; its success relies on the very fact that it is innovative, yet the creativity and dynamism which typifies much of what we know to be 'good education', also resists standards and metrics with which these institutions are managed (Brown, 2015). Research shows innovation requires systemic alignment at the intersection between individual priorities and institutional culture (Brennan et al., 2014, Hasanefendic et al., 2017, Hannan, 2005) Hannan and Silver (2000) suggest that innovation is most likely to take place when: educators are encouraged and given support by management; institutions place equal weight upon teaching and research, including for promotion purposes; colleagues and management promote, celebrate and disseminate outcomes of innovation; and where wider support was available through institutional investment.

Challenge 2: time and space

Innovation requires both structured and informal time and space for encounters, development and reflection. Specific spaces provided for faculty-faculty interaction are observed to be lacking in many institutions, as are ring fenced time in which innovation might take place (Jamieson, 2003, Hannan, 2005). Lippman et al. (2005) envisage university learning spaces as 'layered transactional settings' which encourage dynamic approaches to teaching, while faculty-faculty interaction time which might evolve out of space planning, places interaction and sociability of the 'learning community' at its centre (Jamieson et al., 2000).

Challenge 3: peer learning and support

Providing spaces conducive to innovation and teaching development requires fundamental shifts to cultures of learning within institutions toward a peer learning and support model. Hasanefendic et al. (2017) point toward social capital and motivational framing as core competencies for individuals working within HE innovation communities, alongside the authority to act and to draw down resources. In practice, management-led, or top down innovation does not work, rather a robust support for innovation from faculty as well as peer-peer and management-peer motivation are key principles (Brennan et al., 2014, Klein and Sorra, 1996, Noble, 1983).

Challenge 4: fostering risk and the willingness to fail

The final challenge is to engage with topics of risk, failure and challenge through discomfort, with regards to creating spaces for transformation. These more ephemeral and affective concerns are often neglected in HE innovation literature. The observation by Hasanefendic et al. (2017) that motivational framing of change processes within universities is a key trait – specifically concerning individual's ability to congratulate and celebrate others - is central to this challenge. While innovation is concerned with developing new approaches or building on and repurposing previous ideas, not these approaches will be sure to succeed.

The case study The Education Incubator

The University of Exeter's 'Education Incubator' was established in 2017 to encourage and promote educational innovation across departments within the institution. In its first year, the incubator supported twelve projects headed up by 'incubator fellows' who developed a range of projects throughout the academic year across three project strands. Incubator Fellows are supported through direct project development funds as well as allocated time in their workload. These resources sit alongside the opportunities to engage in development and training opportunities throughout the year, consisting of workshops, mentoring, supported conference attendance and a three-day writing retreat. The writing retreat made use of a three-day intensive social writing 'pool' model as developed by Rowena Murray (Murray and Newton, 2009, Murray, 2014), involving both structured and unstructured time for writing alongside discussion and socialising.

This paper examines and discusses the residential writing retreat, as an attempt to create a space of pedagogic creativity and development. The paper draws on qualitative research using pre- and post-event surveys, facilitator observations, reflections written by participants during the retreat, and interviews conducted during the retreat. We discuss the space of the writing retreat as both a construct of and a challenge to the neoliberal university by articulating the findings emerging from these reflections and observations and through engagement with the four themes of alignment, time and space, peer support and cultures of risk. We explore individuals' use and experiences of the space created during the retreat to reflect on their identities as educators and members of the university and question the notion of the 'retreat', suggesting that instead it involved deep engagement invoked through an opening of space and the availability of peer support.

To better understand the possibilities created by such space, we make use of previous articulations of 'brave spaces', and 'critical hope'; considering that challenge, risk taking and the willingness to fail is fundamental to transformative change within institutions and society. Supporting innovation and transformative educational approaches have been central to the work of Boler (2004), who advocates the concept of 'critical hope' in change processes, while cultivating willingness to take risks is articulated through work on 'brave spaces' (Cook-Sather, 2016, Arao and Clemens, 2013). This paper applies these concepts to the writing retreat in order to suggest that such liminal spaces can be seen as both hopeful and brave, enabling meaningful engagement with educational creativity and innovation.

References

- Arao, B. & Clemens, K. 2013. From safe spaces to brave spaces. *The Art of Effective Facilitation: Reflections from Social Justice Educators*. Stylus Publishing, Sterling, VA, 135-150.
- Boler, M. 2004. Teaching for hope. In: GARRISON, J. & LISTON, D. (eds.) *Teaching, learning, and loving: Reclaiming passion in educational practice*. Routledge.
- Bonk, C. J., Kim, K.-J. & Zeng, T. Future directions of blended learning in higher education and workplace learning settings. EdMedia: World Conference on Educational Media and Technology, 2005. Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE), 3644-3649.
- Brennan, J., Ryan, S., Ranga, M., Broek, S., Durazzi, N. & Kamphuis, B. 2014. Study on innovation in higher education: final report. In: EDUCATION, D. F. E. A. T. S. O. I. I. H. (ed.). Luxembourg: Office of the European Union.
- Cook-Sather, A. 2016. Creating Brave Spaces within and through Student-Faculty Pedagogical Partnerships. *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, 1, 1.
- Hannan, A. 2005. Innovating in higher education: contexts for change in learning technology. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 36, 975-985.
- Hannan, A. & Silver, H. 2000. *Innovating in Higher Education: Teaching, Learning and Institutional Cultures*, ERIC.
- Hasanefendic, S., Birkholz, J. M., Horta, H. & Van Der Sijde, P. 2017. Individuals in action: bringing about innovation in higher education. *European Journal of Higher Education*, 7, 101-119.
- Jamieson, P. 2003. Designing more effective on-campus teaching and learning spaces: A role for academic developers. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 8, 119-133.
- Jamieson, P., Fisher, K., Gilding, T., Taylor, P. G. & Trevitt, A. 2000. Place and space in the design of new learning environments. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 19, 221-236.

Klein, K. J. & Sorra, J. S. 1996. The challenge of innovation implementation. *Academy of management review*, 21, 1055-1080.

Lippman, P., Jamieson, P. & Dane, J. Moving beyond the classroom: Accommodating the changing pedagogy of higher education. Refereed Forum Proceedings of the Australian Association for Institutional Research, 2005. 17-23.

Murray, R. 2014. *Writing in social spaces: A social processes approach to academic writing*, Routledge.

Murray, R. & Newton, M. 2009. Writing retreat as structured intervention: margin or mainstream? *Higher Education Research & Development*, 28, 541-553.

Noble, C. E. 1983. Anatomy of an unsuccessful innovation. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 2, 197-204.