

Rebellion in a creative city: how art & creative writing can add to our students' cultural rucksack.

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Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

Higher education runs a profound risk of alienating students from the benefits of creative thinking and artistic practice. Using Arts Based Pedagogy (ABP) to harness the creativity of our students, this Nottingham Trent University funded project, served as a pilot to understand how ABP might enhance two Nottingham Institute of Education (NIOE) modules. In partnership with Nottingham Contemporary and Theatre Royal and Royal Concert Hall, final-year BA (Hons) Education and ITE English students embarked on a joint project to investigate their creative identities through poetry and fine art, articulating their academic understanding in new and innovative ways. Preliminary findings suggest that students must be encouraged to resist the fear of 'failure' often blocking them from creative practices. Additionally, students produced work examining aspects of identity and social justice, thus reinforcing the importance of connecting to the cultural sector to encourage students to be active producers in their own learning.

Full paper

As education policy from primary through to higher education continues to cut its emphasis on the humanities and creativity, higher education runs a profound risk of further alienating students from the benefits of creative thinking and artistic practice. This Nottingham Trent University funded project attempted to resist the current educational practice which promotes students as consumers and centres our students as active producers in their own learning. We argue that since Education is at the intersection of many academic disciplines (for example Sociology, English, Philosophy, History), to build more dynamic and critically analytical students, we must encourage them to draw from a variety of disciplines to understand their academic and theoretical course content more fully. By incorporating cultural visits, mentorship, and creative assessments, art can enhance subject teaching while simultaneously encouraging students to think more deeply about their own practice (Fleming, 2012). Hunter & Frawley (2023) defined arts-based pedagogy (ABP) as a process by which students can observe

and reflect on an art form to link different disciplines, thus encouraging students to lean into uncomfortable subject matter and explore their place within in the wider world.

The project sought to understand how, if applied, ABP could enhance two Nottingham Institute of Education (NIOE) modules. The research question was: *To what extent can classroom learning and student confidence be enhanced by using artistic / cultural spaces to model creative pedagogies?* The project aimed to:

1. Introduce our students to arts/cultural spaces they normally do not occupy or feel they belong in
2. To understand how a cultural partnership can enhance students' understandings of their taught Education subject
3. To create a small artistic pamphlet to demonstrate the student journey entitled 'I am NTU Education'.

Commencing in February 2024, students studying year-three BA (Hons) Education Studies (51 students), BA (Hons) English with Secondary Education (5 students), and English Post Graduate Certificate in Education (19 students) visited two cultural sites: Nottingham Contemporary and Theatre Royal and Royal Concert Hall. At the Nottingham Contemporary, students viewed exhibitions exploring representation, race, and environmental justice and produced creative writing and drawing responses to the subject matter. Later, they explored the archives of the Theatre Royal and were asked to curate their own 'life story' by placing an emphasis on representation and the importance of identity, voice, and storytelling. Students reflected and evaluated their experiences surveys and a focus group. The surveys and focus group transcripts were analysed using a thematic approach. A resident artist (Nottingham Contemporary) and an archivist (Nottingham's Theatre Royal) supported the co-construction of a pamphlet entitled, 'I am NTU Education'. This production demonstrated participants' articulation of the intersecting nature of their self-identities through a social justice lens, uniting the political and the personal. Through publication and sharing of students' work we hope to encourage their sense of themselves as independent creators. Furthermore, this form facilitates wider exposure of their work to 'a much larger readership than that of a typical education study, with more immediate and lasting impact' (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008, p. 13).

Preliminary findings from the thematic analysis suggests that helping students resist the fear of failure allows them to respond more fully to creative practices. We must support students to move beyond the mental barrier that one must be 'good' at art or writing to participate. Academics must encourage students to live in the discomfort of walking through the practice of art or writing to enhance module understanding and to view creativity as the journey (process), rather than the destination (outcome). The last finding examined whether exposure to cultural spaces enhanced students' feelings of belonging and encouraged more active participation in the arts. This aim ended up perhaps being the most

important outcome in the project as connection was central. Exposure to the two cultural sites created a feeling of connection with the cultural heart of the city. Students also, perhaps more importantly, reported that they became more connected to an understanding of themselves, becoming more autonomous and engaged in their own learning.

References

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