

## **Choosing to work in the margins: creative practice, building bridges and belonging in HE.**

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### **Research Domains**

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

### **Abstract**

Higher education's devaluation of humanities threatens students' intellectual growth. By prioritizing technical skills over creative thinking, universities risk producing graduates who lack skills in critical analysis, empathy, and innovative reasoning. Creativity is not a peripheral skill, but a core competency that drives progress across all disciplines. Using hooks (1989) as a theoretical lens, this research paper features case study data and artwork from NTU year two Education students and staff. It will discuss lessons learned and signposts opportunities for future innovation in student-centred, co-constructed curriculum design. We will argue that creative practice can enhance students' wellbeing and sense of belonging, helping to ensure that our crucial humanities subjects survive and flourish.

### **Full paper**

Education stands as a profound intersection of almost all academic disciplines, requiring a holistic approach that celebrates intellectual diversity and creative thinking. The current trajectory of higher education policy, which increasingly marginalizes humanities and creative disciplines, poses a critical threat to comprehensive student development. Drawing from hooks' (1994) insights into marginalization and resistance, we must recognize that true academic growth occurs when students are empowered to explore ideas across disciplinary boundaries. The margins are not spaces of limitation, but of potential, where innovative thinking emerges, and transformative learning takes root.

This case study presents data from a year-two undergraduate module exploring how arts-based pedagogy (ABP) impacted students' engagement and sense of belonging. The module required students to articulate their own understanding of the links between creativity and education, drawing on the work of Cremin and Chappell (2021). Sessions included exploration of theory, structured discussions, and practical creative activities that aligned with the theoretical focus for the week. The module's outcomes included the creation of a portfolio of work, combining an academic piece with a collection of the students' own artistic work. Alongside traditional, classroom sessions, we incorporated a series of visits to local cultural sites. Here we drew on place-based pedagogy in an attempt to encourage students' sense of belonging within the city's cultural spaces, fostering meaningful links between the taught curriculum and students' real-life experiences (Inwood 2008). Furthermore, an emphasis on the importance of collective and community-based art disrupts the myth of an artist as a lone genius, instead positioning art as a driver for social change (Gablik 1991).

Co-construction of knowledge featured throughout the unit of learning, student feedback shaped content and sessions were co-constructed between lecturers and the resident artists within several cultural institutions (Nottingham Playhouse and Nottingham's Theatre Royal, Nottingham Society of Artists and Nottingham Contemporary). Through partnership with creative colleagues, an arts-based pedagogy approach can create inclusive, collaborative learning environments. Through creative interventions, we challenged traditional educational models, prioritizing student expression and collective exploration. By engaging with exhibitions and artists, we developed approaches that embrace the inherent discomfort in learning, shifting focus from measurable outcomes to transformative experiences. This method disrupts the neoliberal educational framework, using creative activities as pathways to deeper understanding and empowering students to develop critical thinking skills beyond conventional academic boundaries.

Vulnerability was central to our practice, being 'wholly present in mind, body and spirit' (hooks 1994 p. 21) and we were keen to draw on Arao and Clemens' Brave Spaces (2013) work, to facilitate meaningful dialogue and reflection. This was particularly pertinent as our students attend a post-1992 university, with a large WP population, where the predominant student demographic come from non-

traditional backgrounds, therefore questions of one's space and belonging were central to our teaching. Students were encouraged to draw on their own funds of knowledge and empowered to engage in discussions that directly related to their experiences (hooks 1994). In this space, we were able to facilitate something akin to the 'climate of free expression...the essence of a truly liberatory liberal arts education' (hooks 1994 p. 44).

Data collection involved the creation of physical artefacts and a focus group interview with students about their engagement and participation in the module. Findings highlight the challenges students experienced themselves as learners within a neoliberal, assessment-driven curriculum and the impact of this on their sense of themselves as creative. They spoke positively of how the practical sessions facilitated positive relationships within the classroom, both with other students and with their lecturers. One of the most interesting outcomes of our research is the strong sense of belonging reported by students. The module's focus on personal identity ignited vulnerable and transformative dialogue within the classroom and within the wider community. As these students intend to go into teaching, we feel that their experience of arts-based pedagogies has sparked their creativity and encouraged their desire to make a real difference to the lives of the students they will one day teach.