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'Tech Geeks' and 'Ad Freaks': Fostering Connections and Collaboration Across Disparate Student Groups (0219)

Research Domains:
- Learning, Teaching and Assessment
- Student Experience

Part 1, Abstract:

In an effort to enhance student experience and reflect professional practice, I facilitated an interdisciplinary collaboration between creative advertising students and interactive media students at the University of Wales, Newport.

Bringing together groups which were polar opposites in terms of personality, technical ability, and creative concept generation presented a multitude of challenges. The 'tech geeks' and 'ad freaks', as they called each other, worked and communicated in such different ways that substantial team-building and ongoing interventions were required.

With special consideration given to educational theory in creating a safe learning environment in which students could thrive, a number of methods were used to establish group cohesion. Student experience was measured in surveys and interviews throughout the collaborative period. Quality of student work was measured through self, peer and summative assessment, as well as a final formative assessment.

The process was a unique learning experience for students, and also for myself.

Part 2, Outline:

This proposal is research in progress, with results to be formally compiled and presented at the SRHE Conference. The aim of this research is to address challenges faced by academics in facilitating interdisciplinary, collaborative learning in groups divided by subject expertise and personalities.

No man is an island. Yet, when I joined the University of Wales, Newport, I found that the Advertising Design students were isolated, segregated from other programmes. An intervention was carried out, bringing together two contrasting student groups.

In *Freedom to Learn*, Carl Rogers emphasised the importance of creating a learning environment where students are engaged in collaborative activities and peer teaching. Rogers believed that students need to carry out their own enquiries and participate in classroom discussion that requires multiple levels of thinking. With this in mind, I changed the structure of a first-year creative practice module.

Fostering a collaborative environment allows students to feel part of a group and encourages participation. (Haslam, 1997). Haslam (2000) has put forth the idea that individuals who categorise themselves as part of a group (high congruity) are likely to engage.

Students in the isolated advertising programme had a tendency to become restless and disengage in the second semester of their first year. To excite and engage them, I hoped that bringing in new members would breathe life into this traditionally 'quiet' part of the year, when student attendance has fallen in the past. I brought together the advertising students with Interactive Media (referred to as IM in this paper) students to work on a live industry multimedia project over six weeks.

Prior to my intervention, neither group of students had met one another or worked with anyone outside of their respective programmes. Students in the IM cohort of 10 would be mixed with 30 advertising students and would then be divided into small groups based on student strengths and personalities.

Ironically, students who enrol on the creative advertising course tend to be outgoing and confident individuals. The 'idea' people in the industry, 'creatives' will develop a concept on behalf of a client, and then turn to experts in a particular field to execute these ideas. As a result of their isolation, students weren't benefitting from the collaborative experience that is common in the advertising industry. It was essential that students learned to work with others outside of their area of specialty in order to prepare for life after university.

Creating a learning community across disciplines meant that it was necessary to incorporate active and collaborative learning activities. Using complementary academic and social activities and bringing them together is required to convert student experiences into authentic learning (Chickering, 1974; Newell, 1999).

In this way, learning communities can reflect a constructivist approach to knowledge (Cross, 1998), whereby knowledge is not simply "discovered" but is socially constructed. Rather than the lecturer transmitting information, students actively construct and assimilate knowledge through a reciprocal process (Bruffee, 1995; Schon, 1995; Whipple, 1987). These approaches are linked with positive behaviors like increased academic effort and outcomes such as social tolerance and interpersonal development (Johnson &
Johnson, 1994).

Building learning communities helps students make connections consistent with this theoretical orientation. The primary way of making these connections is by encouraging students to connect ideas from different disciplines; this is aided by using groups of students who are enrolled in two or more courses (Klein, 2000; MacGregor, 1991).

There are several data sources for measuring the success of collaborative work in terms of student experience: surveys, focus groups and interviews were carried out before, during and after the initial melding of these two student groups. Prior to reintroducing them to one another in the upcoming semester, surveys and focus groups will be carried out again, as well as ongoing methods of data collection throughout the six weeks.

The planning which was necessary for this project was intense and time-consuming. Of chief concern in the implementation of this cross-programme project was group dynamic, and the polar opposites in personalities of the students on each course. The IM students tend to be quieter and more introspective than the advertising students (who had been described by other lecturers as "rowdy"). The stark contrast between the cohorts led to the use of traditional and innovative methods of team building.

The timid IM students had negative preconceptions about group work, so it was necessary to facilitate group bonds from the beginning. I introduced group exercises, including the use of media attractive to introspective students. I teamed 'quiet' students with more outgoing ones, and aimed for an inclusive team feeling so that all could participate in their learning. (Haslam, 1997)

There is a great deal of literature that deals with the emotional and motivational basis of learning and teaching. Keeping in mind that the IM students may feel threatened by the boisterous advertising students, I paid particular attention to Rogers' *Freedom to Learn*, considering that fostering a climate of trust will establish a climate that enhances learning. (Rogers, 1994)

I will share the successes and failures of the two phases of this collaborative and cooperative learning project, including the exercises that I used to build relationships and

the student feedback that resulted. The second phase of this study will be implemented in the first semester of the upcoming year, when students have emotionally matured. Findings on the ease or difficulty of students working together once more will be shared at the SRHE Conference.

While not without its problems, the professional practice that resulted from the collaboration was valuable, and the strength of final designs and executions were of note. The overall benefit of the project led to increased student satisfaction and long-term relationships, as well as peer evaluation and feedback.

In the upcoming semester, a year after the initial introduction of the forced collaboration, the IM and advertising students will again be collaborating. Through surveys and interviews, along with a review of student work, the long-term benefits and detractions of this collaboration will be measured and presented in a formal paper.

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