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Student - tutor relationships in art and design higher education: tutor perspectives (0231)

Introduction

Art and design disciplines have informal processes for student engagement based on the nature of the disciplines themselves and the ongoing interaction between staff and students.

> Alongside this informality is a greater sense of community and partnership between staff and students in the Art and Design and Performing Arts disciplines than we detected in the other disciplines that were part of our study. (Little et al 2009 p38)

In spite of continued economic pressures the one to one interactions with close attention to individual's development persist. This approach might be characterised as an emphasis on the ontological, rather than the epistemological in learning (Dall'Alba and Barnacle; 2007) the intention and focus is perhaps more on *becoming* a practitioner, rather than acquiring sets of skills or knowledge, which have to be remembered, recalled or applied. The signature pedagogies (Shulman 2005) for art and design are characterised by materiality, the public nature of learning and the processes of learning which are characterised as 'a kind of exchange' with ambiguity and uncertainties embedded in them (Shreeve et al 2010).

Although a student-focused approach to teaching predominates in these disciplines (Trigwell 2002, Drew 2004) the activities of the tutor are still critical to the engagement of the student (Tinto 2006).The authors are aware that not all students are enabled to achieve their full potential even though learning may be student-centred and fulfil criteria for engagement (Umbach and Wawrzynski 2005). We therefore wanted to illuminate practices that might inform students and tutors about maximising student-tutor interactions. Whilst bearing in mind Ashwin's (2009) exhortations that teaching-learning interactions are dynamic, fluid and relational, this research is predicated on experiences of students and tutors, as separate aspects of a relational activity. This project is supported by a small grant from the Art, Design and Media Subject Centre of the Higher Education Academy.

Methodology

The research is a qualitative study based on appreciative enquiry; that is, we set out to identify the positive aspects of successful student-tutor relations for learning. The project interviewed students (using student interviewers) and tutors from a range of disciplines and academic levels in order to ascertain their perceptions. Ethical procedures were followed in line with University guidelines and clearance from the ethics committee. Pseudonyms have been used throughout the reporting of this research and references to specific discipline areas removed to retain anonymity.

Outcomes

Whilst the emphasis of the interviews was on student-tutor relations and tutors' understanding of that, the learning activities described in the interviews ranged from pre-

entry learning, exemplified by the interview process and socialisation of students before enrolment, through to group sessions, critique, study trips and the informal one to one interactions that characterise studio based learning. In some cases tutors emphasised the importance of peer learning, when the tutors were not directly involved in learning activities.

Factors deemed to have impact on relations were varied and included:

Demographics and biographies:
- Gendered relations and the sex of the tutor, particularly in relation to the discipline norm
- Age influences and differences including mothering or parental aspects of relations
- Identity and status of the tutor including credibility in relation to the subject area

Conceptions of learning and teaching in the discipline:
- Tutor expectations of the student including being prepared for the encounter, interested in the subject and prepared to take ownership and responsibility for their learning
- Tutors' expectation that learning in art and design is not didactic, but open-ended, individually focused and about realising the potential of each student

Power in relationships
Tutors stressed the importance of relationships which were equitable, whilst frequently recognising that power resided within their position. They strove to develop and encourage an approach where they wanted students to treat them as equals with mutual respect and trust within the relationship. This was considered essential to good learning experiences. However, this was hedged by describing the relationship variously as professional or adult to adult rather than one where they were friends or colleagues. There were finely nuanced examples of how this was enacted in practice and power retained in subtle ways. One tutor described the use of her name, it is normal to refer to tutors in the UK by their first names, but adapting or familiarising a name is going too far in the relationship. Boundaries obviously exist and 'professional distance' created. Perhaps part of successful learning is being able to negotiate the boundaries with identities and respect intact for both student and tutor.

Barriers to good learning relations from the tutor's perspective:
- time constraints
- workload - admin
- poor physical spaces for tutorials
- different cultural expectations of the learning relationship
- students wanting their practical work to be liked
- students uninterested and not taking responsibility for their own learning

Conclusion
Biographic, cultural, social and environmental factors all influence the tutor's description of good learning relations. As each individual brings their own trajectories of participation to the encounter and each set of contexts on the course, the learning activities described, the course politics and team members, all add up to a complex picture in which it is impossible to precisely define any common, specific rules of encounter, although generic issues such as

trust, mutual respect, understanding of tutor expectations are deemed essential. Many of the descriptions contained issues with which the researchers, as partial outsiders, had concerns; not least issues of cultural capital and subtle ways to control relationships, but the research design and scope limited how far we were able to take the analysis of the views expressed by the tutors. This would require a more extensive and ethnographic study of learning relations and encounters, perhaps one similar to that described by Mann (2003). However, in terms of recommendations it is clear that work should be done with students and tutors to explicate the formation of relations to support learning in practice based subjects such as art and design.

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