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Pausing at the threshold: using arts based enquiry to promote reflective, appreciative learning on entering an '*identity workspace*'

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Creating opportunities for individuals to act confidently and respectfully to promote well-being and prosperity is central to the mission of higher education practice across the world. Our graduates confront uncertain futures and enabling them to explore their values, purpose and identities requires purposeful approaches and the use of pedagogical time and space founded on authentic and value-based academic practice.

Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010:44) consider that a community, whether it be an institution, a course or a cohort may be regarded as an '*identity workspace*', a '*holding environment*' (Winnicott, 1975) for identity work. A post-modern constructivist view of identity regards it as 'work in progress', shaped by interaction, experience and communities of practice (Whitchurch, 2008), but significantly affected at specific transition points (Van Maanen, 1998) where feelings of uncertainty as well as anticipation may surface (Alvesson and Wilmott, 2002). Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010) suggest that identity work may be facilitated by providing three mutually reinforcing elements;

'conceptual frameworks and routines that help members make sense of themselves and their environment, as well as feel comfortable and act competently in it; communities they identify with and that provide a mixture of belonging, support and challenge; and rites of passage that facilitate and integrate identity development and role transitions' (Petriglieri, 2011:7).

This paper considers an example of the third of these three elements, a ritual that marks entry into full-time postgraduate programmes of study in a business school and which contributes to the development of the second, a loyal and mutually supportive group. These programmes aim to develop collaborative communities where self-awareness, working with others and leadership development are promoted through experiential learning opportunities, framed by the Relational Leadership Model proposed by Komives et al (2011) and Komives et al (2013). Although relating to a business school, the concepts and practices discussed may prove to be useful to other disciplines where identity development is central to practice.

Field and Morgan-Klein (2010) consider studenthood to be a liminal status, '*betwixt and between*' (Turner, 1987:3). As 'inbetweeners' new student groups have an undifferentiated homogeneity, lacking individual status but collectively sharing a spirit of '*communitas*' (Turner, 1969/1995:96) as a group of equals stepping into the

unknown and submitting themselves to the mercy of a group of elders...the university's academic community. Van Gennep, (1909, in Turner 1969/1995) considered that all changes like this (rites of passage), are marked by three phases, separation from the past, an ambiguous, transitional phase and re-aggregation into society with a new identity or social status. It is from the transitional phase that future, relatively stable social states and structures may emerge, so making the most of it is an essential part programmes planning to influence identity development (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010).

Liminality brings the opportunity to be playful and creative (Turner, 1982), enabling unseen or unused potential to become apparent to a group on the threshold of their own development. Although later in the postgraduate programmes critical reflection is an essential part of understanding behaviour and progress, at the start the participants need to feel welcome and get to know their peers and what they bring to this collaborative space. Ghaye et al (2008) explains how reflective practice is becoming institutionalised, looking for negatives and problems to be solved. Instead, appreciative reflection which focuses on positives, offers the opportunity to be creative and to recognise the affective dimensions of experience often absent in more critical forms (ibid). At the start of the postgraduate programme, a ritual which provides the opportunity for shared appreciative reflection is what is required in order to capitalise on the spirit of *communitas* and prepare the ground for the future. This is not easy to do but essential for future development (Turner, 1982).

Arts-based enquiry can provide an effective medium for reflective practice (Eisner, 1997) and as le Cornu (2009) indicates, the form of reflection and whether it is done alone or collaboratively directly influences what may be learnt. The students together visit Guildhall Art Gallery and are asked to use the resources in the gallery to create a short, photo-based presentation '*All about me: past, present and future*', to be shared with their cohort the following week. The presentation event is celebratory, marking entry into an appreciative space which praises prior achievements, supports commitment to the course and encourages aspirations. It values individuality as well as enabling the development of a collaborative community appreciative of each other's possibilities. It marks the start of 'I' becoming positioned within 'we'.

Visiting an art gallery at the beginning of a postgraduate business course provides an unusual and somewhat unsettling introductory experience, echoing the uncertainty of the participants' liminal identities. Although part of visual cultures (Rose, 2012) this opportunity to create an explicit link between 'seeing' and 'knowing' comes as a bit of a surprise. Undertaking an internalised process of meaning making by using images is embodied through moving in, looking closely, stepping back and discussing, creating a conscious link between reflection and growth and development (le Cornu, 2009). Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010) comment that university admissions procedures often put value on a decisive narrative of 'career development' as a reason for embarking on postgraduate study. However, the reality

may be that understanding 'who I am, why I am here and where I want to go' may be only felt or partially formed. Like writing in a journal (Moon, 2006) the visit and the presentation become an alter ego within the liminal space, encouraging thoughtful learning and enabling this to be externalised in a form which is meaningful and encourages dialogue.

Data collected *in situ*, plus reflective accounts from participants contributes to calls to research identity workspaces in HE and to how entry to such spaces might be facilitated. It particularly suggests the value individuals place on feeling acknowledged. It also includes reflections on the experience by the organising tutor, and considers the (un)settling experience of using arts-based enquiry as a threshold activity and the challenges associated with creating a programme aiming to be a collaborative 'identity workspace'.

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