Making time for 'Freedom to learn' in higher education (0139)

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Abstract

Carl Rogers published his classic text *Freedom to learn* in 1969, arguing for students to be given the opportunity to break away from the constraints of a formal syllabus and benefit from the richer learning that he considered possible through experiential and flexible learning experiences. His work, and that of later scholars of critical pedagogy promoted the role and responsibility of students to contribute to and influence their own learning. Rogers' work informs some of the current activity in both schools and higher education, focused on co-created curriculum and 'students as partners' in learning and teaching. In this paper I examine recent evaluation data from co-created classes with academic staff on a Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice to explore their rationales for choosing to lead or not to lead class activities, and I ask whether staff have time for freedom to learn in the 21st Century higher education context.

Introduction

Carl Roger's work, *Freedom to learn* was published in 1969 as a response to growing dissatisfaction with government approaches to schools education and narrow versions of what was deemed to be valuable knowledge. Rogers (and in a later edition of the book, Rogers and Freiberg) argued that "Students want opportunities to be responsible... with freedom, not license…students want to have choices" (Rogers and Freiberg 1994:6-7). He called upon students and staff to collaborate and negotiate new forms of knowledge based on their own experiences. Rogers and other scholars appealed to university lecturers "...to step off the lecture treadmill and rely instead on students' natural inclination to learn, by providing unthreatening opportunities to explore their own interests" (Northedge, 2003:169).

So in the time since Rogers first published *Freedom to learn* have we stepped off the lecture treadmill? Some progress has been made with many lecturers now using more interactive forms of learning, such as flipped lectures (Cockbain et al, 2009; Sams & Bergmann, 2013) and jigsaw classrooms (Aronson & Patnow, 2010; Honeychurch, 2011). Indeed there has been a real surge of interest in co-created learning and teaching in higher education (Cook-Sather et al, 2014; Healey et al, 2014); an approach that shares many of the principles from *Freedom to learn*. Yet Rogers and Freiberg argue that

> ...nearly every student finds that large portions of the curriculum are meaningless. Thus education becomes the futile attempt to learn material that has no personal meaning. Such learning involves the mind only: it is learning that takes place 'from the neck up'. It does not involve feelings or personal meanings; it has no relevance for the whole person" (Rogers and Freiberg 1994:35).

Academic staff co-creating learning and teaching within a PGCAP

An evaluation of a new Student Engagement course that forms part of the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP) at the University of [XXX removed for anonymity], offers an interesting perspective on staff views of co-created learning and teaching. During the course, I invited academic staff participants to co-create one of the teaching sessions by bidding for time in class to either test, share or discuss something related to student engagement with peers.

One member of staff from Urban Studies had a new idea to invite her students to work in groups to research topics about which she would normally lecture. She planned to ask a different group of students to present a different topic each week, and then she would give a reduced lecture and lead discussion on the topic, responding to the student presentation and so ensuring that all the important concepts were covered but in a more discursive and engaging way. She was keen in the Student Engagement class to present her plan and then focus discussion upon some key issues about which she thought her class peers would be able to offer her advice in running her new course. Another member of staff from Life Sciences asked the whole class to brainstorm ideas of how to enhance student engagement in large classes. There were many useful and relevant contributions to class from different participants. These activities were evaluated positively by those leading the activities as well as by those participating. For those who chose to lead an activity, their rationale for doing so varied, but tended to be seen as an opportunity to get feedback from peers.

However, a substantial number of staff did not lead sessions and the overwhelming reason for this was a lack of time. The following are illustrative comments: "...last week my normal duties occupied 65 hours. I didn't have time to prepare anything on top of this"; " I have more things to do than hours in a day!"; and "...sadly due to constraints on my time this term". This feedback suggests that the time constraints under which academic staff operate create very real barriers to participating (as students) in co-creation as part of a PGCAP course, but may also influence their time for planning co-creation of learning with their own students.

Is there sufficient time for freedom to learn in 21st Century higher education?

Students and staff are often constrained by time, and it can sometimes seem easier to continue with business-as-usual learning and teaching. Suggesting alternatives that require new ways of thinking and new ways of students and staff relating to one another can lead to resistance and a clinging to familiar pedagogical habits (Bovill 2014). Rogers argued that new styles of learning can be threatening to students because "...students have been directed for so many years that they long for the continuance of the security of being told what to do" (Rogers and Freiberg 1994:214). The lack of familiarity with more collaborative relationships and decision making can feel risky for both students and staff (Bovill, 2014). Yet when students and staff share responsibility, there are mutual benefits in terms of enhanced engagement, motivation and learning; greater meta-cognitive awareness of learning and teaching and a more developed sense of identity; and enhanced teaching and classroom experiences (Cook-Sather et al, 2014). hooks argues that "all too often we have been trained as professors to assume students are not capable of acting responsibly, that if we don't exert control over them, then there's just going to be mayhem" (hooks, 1994:152).

At the heart of Rogers' ideas in *Freedom to learn*, and the more recent ideas of co-created learning and teaching is the relationship between the teacher and the students in a classroom. Although co-created learning and teaching requires students and staff to think about alternative forms of learning and teaching, this is less about requiring extra time so much as demanding different ways of relating to one another within the existing class time (Bovill forthcoming). So perhaps we can be creative with the way we use time for planning and enacting learning and teaching, but equally, I would argue, we can make time for freedom to learn if we consider this kind of learning to be important.

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