

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Out of the Box: Creativity and the Teaching-Research Nexus – The Role of the Academic Developer

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Abstract:

Fostering creativity and criticality in relation to pedagogical practice among new lecturers can be a challenge for academic developers. A key aim in our teaching on a PgCert module on Research-Led Teaching was to disrupt perceptions of the teaching-research nexus. Seminars showed that lecturers regard themselves primarily as either researchers or practitioners. Their critical reflection on research-led teaching was limited and knowledge of relevant pedagogical research minimal. To enhance criticality, we drew upon creative arts strategies and introduced the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning to promote discussion into the thorny relations between practice, teaching and research. Lecturers were encouraged to reflect on how they socialise students into their disciplines and relevant research approaches. To generate and enliven debate, they used installations, playlets and peer teaching observations. By focusing on creative processes rather than output, the module prompted lecturers to frame ideas they could take forward in their teaching or research.

Paper:

Contexts

As academic developers co-ordinating a PgCert module on research-led teaching, we were well-placed to review the curriculum and introduce art-based methods, peer teaching observations, and formative groupwork ('playlets' or presentations). Bringing in artistic approaches when working with academic colleagues whose background can be anything but the arts – lecturers in fields such as accountancy, chemistry, history and nursing – has its risks and difficulties. Working with colleagues with such a diversity of experiences, interests and skills, it can seem difficult to engage all of them at the same time. One way to do this is to design group projects which draw on the arts but are sufficiently open to allow for a range of distinct interpretations. There is a cliché in art education around how, in art, there is no right or wrong, and while this belief might benefit from rigorous examination, it can be useful to take this playful, open approach, using it as an 'enabling fiction' when working with lecturers with diverse backgrounds.

Last year's coursework showed that, while new lecturers understood existing models for research-led teaching, they had only a limited level of self-reflection, their creative and innovatory input into teaching being also fairly restrained. So we wanted to disrupt received perceptions of the teaching-research nexus, and to design an inclusive learning space in which novice lecturers would be presented with novel ideas. Some of this year's participants saw themselves primarily as researchers, others as practitioners (e.g. in the health disciplines). All had different ideas about disciplinary research and its connections with teaching, and few were familiar with pedagogical research; none had encountered creative methodologies. To create a common ground, we introduced the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) as a concept that could guide researchers' reflection on the research-pedagogy nexus and on their teaching practice as a possible object of inquiry.

We considered the encouragement of creativity as an empowering strategy as seen in the examples below. The tendency for academic staff to take control of their own creative/intellectual development is discussed by Felten et al (2013) who propose the formation of 'mentoring communities', that is, small groups of academics meeting regularly to enact change on a small scale, but with a view, in the long term, to effecting change at a much more radical and far-reaching level. This approach influenced the construction of our module, as did a general belief in the power of play as a transformative force within education.

Examples of our approach

1. Working with chairs

As Csikszentmihalyi (2013) observes, 'creativity...is a process by which a symbolic domain in the culture is changed. New songs, new ideas, new machines are what creativity is all about'. (97:34) Such novelty was an intended outcome of our module sessions. Without assuming any prior knowledge of visual art, we introduced art-based approaches and techniques, notably 'automatic writing' and assemblage, asking lecturers to externalise their ideas on research' and 'scholarship' through these unfamiliar practices. Artists' creative use of the common chair by, for example, Joseph Beuys, Bertolt Brecht and Andy Warhol provided a way in. The focus, however, remained on the discussion around the artefacts and not on the artefact themselves, to ensure benefits were gained in terms of criticality and reflection on practice. Our teaching approach also provided a model that could be directly adapted for application with the lecturers' own students, as students' acculturation into discipline-specific knowledge was a key discussion point.

2. Peer observation

In asking participants to assemble 'artistic' objects, our aim was to prompt discussion and persuasive interpretations of what people have made. It was not to decode exactly what the maker intended, but to provoke curiosity, getting people to discuss critically what was placed before them as viewers. Laying bare the implicit values that may otherwise remain unexamined was of prime importance. The mix of staff disciplines was beneficial, as the diversity of skills can be charted, whilst subject specifics may also be clearly seen. Lecturers learn and develop by engaging with teaching strategies from outside their own disciplines, yet also recognize important shared beliefs, values and concerns. Participants then moved from assembling objects to 'assembling' practices through observing colleagues' research-led teaching and collating/collaging their conclusions in presentations or playlets.

3. Presentations rigorously discussed

To paraphrase Gauntlett's book on the power of creativity (2018), *making is connecting*. Given the present incursion of reductive corporate values into the education system, creative approaches to teaching require dedicated recognition (Baume and Popovic 2016). Making and presenting creative works within the sessions was fun, but also a serious way to initiate complex discussions around teaching, discipline-based skills and their transmission, and the importance of critique as a means of opening up powerful teaching strategies. Participants presented the disciplinary skills and subject-values they had already acquired, with a view to be critiqued from a variety of perspectives, always with improvement in mind.

Value and implications

Our overall aim was to disrupt, in a productive way, perceptions of how research is used to shape learning environments for/with students. The use of creative methodologies among lecturers not aware of such strategies surprised but also energised them, as is often the case when such methods are introduced (Brown and Leigh 2018), and most engaged well with module activities. The desired and achieved outcome was a community of supportive critical friends. By focusing on peer support and on process rather than predictable results, the module exemplified possible directions for creativity and criticality that lecturers could take forward in their teaching and research. The point was to expand the armoury of teaching strategies available to novice lecturers, providing new angles from which to address teaching (and indeed research) in an enlivening, enthusiastic way. Although it should be emphasised that, in employing modes of creativity, we were taking a risk (given the discipline-driven nature of academia), the view that the PgCert offers a safe space in which new approaches might be tested was at the forefront of our thought. Adopting creative strategies proved a powerful way to scrutinise and reinvigorate conventional pedagogic practice.

References

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