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Re-generating Academic Writing: Case Study Examples

Key Words: Widening Participation, Ludic spaces, Playful learning and teaching

Context

We operate in the multi-disciplinary fields of Education Studies and Education Development harnessing ludic spaces for empowering practice (Sinfield et al. *forthcoming*). The chain of mini case studies interspersed in this issue reveals how we use playful, creative and visual strategies to enable our students to become the professionals that they wish to be as they enact academia more on their own terms. Play and playful practice is not 'dumbed down' learning, but 'serious business' (Parr 2014). Given that for our Widening Participation (WP) students, Higher Education (HE) is experienced as a mysterious, mystifying and exclusionary space, we argue that a playful approach is a necessary freedom (Huizinga 1949): the freedom to experiment, question and be creative. Arguably, for our students, the transactional nature of pre-university education, the constant measurement, the League Tables, the SATs and the stats, obscures the fact that education is not autochthonous (sprung ready made from the earth itself) but is a set of social practices constructed by a community of which they are now members. Hence, we seek to destabilize the notion of education itself: to disrupt the 'taken for granted' perception that it is memorisation, and that study involves rote learning fixed forms of knowledge that already exist. Rather, we emphasise that education can involve the search for emergent knowledge and as yet unknown answers. Moreover, if education does involve transformation of the self, we *need* play for 'It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self (Winnicott 1971, p.54)'. Thus we developed playful and visual practices (viz. <http://about.brighton.ac.uk/visualllearning/>) as a means of processing information, communicating ideas, developing understanding and, most importantly, to facilitate the *exploration* of new topics and fields of study – in writing, yes, but also in a variety of other communicative, multimodal genres. As with English (2011) we see 'language

as meaning making, as knowledge, as system; literacies as practices (Street 1984); and communication as multimodal (Kress 2010)'. However, probably the most important point of this for us is the unleashing of the creative potential in our students; a creativity that once harnessed develops self-efficacy and self-belief and that builds our students' confidence in themselves as emergent academics – and as academic writers. These brief case studies reveal how we have used creative, visual and playful practices to develop the confidence, the academic potential and the academic writing capacities of our 'non-traditional' students.

Example 1: Collages (to be found on page x)

Example 2: Cabinet of Curiosity (to be found on page x)

Example 3: Games and Board Games (to be found on page x)

Example 4: Digital Storytelling (to be found on page x)

Example 5: Multimodal Exhibition (to be found on page x)

We have found that our students are excited by the challenges that we set, and engage with enthusiasm and joy. This is not because these tasks are easier – far from it – but because they are challenges the students want to have the courage to do. This is a world away from their attitudes to formal academic writing. Here they are told repeatedly not to plagiarise and that their spelling, punctuation and grammar – like their deficit selves – are not quite good enough. Typically whilst it is extremely rare for an academic colleague to be impressed by a first year student essay; many are impressed, even moved, by the different artefacts and art-works that the students produce. Thus a virtuous circle is created: students realise their own abilities and perform better even in the more formal academic tasks; and academics see the students differently, appreciate their diverse strengths a little more – and start to see the advances made in their academic writing as well. We therefore recommend educators – lecturers and learning developers – be playful and make use of all the genres available.

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Key words: Creativity, re-genre, showcase, celebration

(for context and references, please see page x)

Example 5: Multimodal Exhibition

We have argued that the tasks that we set our first-year undergraduate Education Studies students are inspired by the notion of multimodality itself; that we can think differently and powerfully when we play with form, when we transliterate, when we re-genre. We set our students a range of creative multimodal tasks throughout the year, and at the end of the year, we ask our first year students to exhibit the artefacts (digital or real-world) created during the first year of studies with us in a Multimodal Exhibition, pictures below. Thus in our module, we have tried to re-genre teaching itself. We de-stabilise the notion of education, shifting it from memorisation to empowerment. We engage our students and provoke them to creativity and self-efficacy via the multimodal tasks we set. And, at the course end, we shift the focus from assessment that is done to the student – to a celebration that we conduct together.

Moreover, this act of collective curation is a powerfully enacted metaphor for real learning. As Mihailidis & Cohen (2013) state:

‘Curation is an act of problem solving. Curating information to tell a story creates a sense of responsibility for the curator. Storytelling advances the core media literacy principles of analysis, evaluation and creation. By curating, students can compose a story using content acquired on their search with heightened awareness of purpose and audience (Hobbs 2010).’

How to:

Ask students to produce a Multimodal Artefact – individually or in small groups – and to showcase their artefact in a Multimodal Exhibition. Tell students not to panic; there will be support for this in class. Artefacts can be ‘physical’ or ‘virtual’ – and be in any form or format – as long as they address the task.

Tip:

Do not forget to celebrate with students – their achievements and learning on the course/ module.

