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Re-genering 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/visuallearning/) 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)
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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: Visual practices, pre-writing, critical thinking
(for context and references, please see page x)

Example 1: Collages

Typically we have found that our students are reluctant to express their thinking through formal academic writing; in this context the making of a collage becomes a really useful activity. In the first few weeks of their degree, we ask our students to reflect on their experiences so far – the good and the bad; the ups and the downs – and to make a collage that captures those feelings, see below for a range of our students' collages. The production of a collage is itself a form of reflective and creative, non-linear thinking that acts as a useful pre-writing activity. They learn how to express themselves – how to shape and convey their ideas to others. Moreover, when handled well, the collage process also starts our students on the journey to becoming creative action researchers (viz. McIntosh 2010).

How to:

Collage, from the French coller – to stick. A collage is a piece made by sticking various different materials such as images, small objects and/ or fabric onto a backing. If using collage – give a quick introduction to the what, why and how of collage – and have newspapers, magazines, scissors and glue ready for students to use. Once the collage is made, ask the students to free write 'to' the collage itself.

Possible activities:

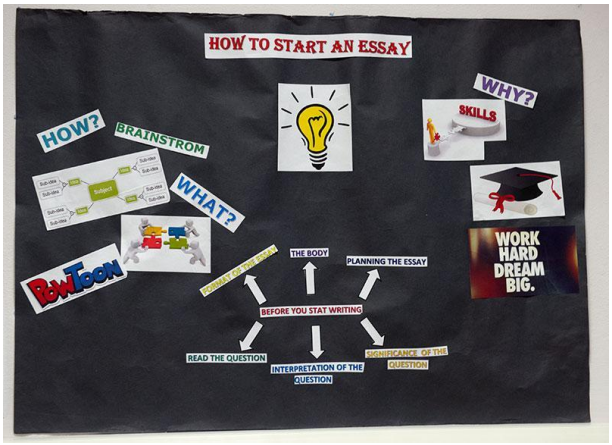
- Each student to produce a collage self-portrait using torn pieces of magazine or newspaper. The collage can be a literal representation as in a black and white or colour portrait photograph – or it can be more of an abstract, surreal representation;
- Each student to produce 'first thoughts' on an essay, project or dissertation via collage;
- Students to produce collage summary of a whole course – or part way through a course as part of reflective learning; or

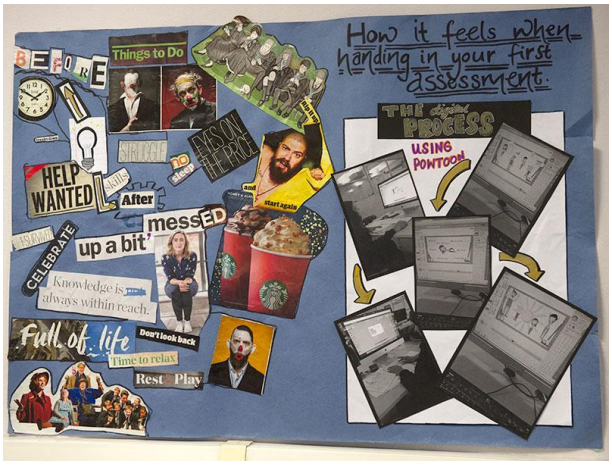
- Encourage students to utilise visual research methods in their Research Projects (viz. http://about.brighton.ac.uk/visuallearning/visual-research-methods/).

Analytical activities:

Require students to reflect on their collages in writing – this develops both analytical and critical thinking – and writing to learn. For example, ask students to write an Artist Statement for their collage:

1. Explain your process (medium and technique). *How* was it made? Which materials and approaches did you use and why?
2. Describe the idea behind your collage. *What* story or message does it get across? What does it mean to you?
3. *Why* did you create it? What are your reasons for creating that specific collage? What do you want your audience to feel and think while observing it?


HOW TO START AN ESSAY
HOW?
BRAINSTROM
WHAT?
BowToon
WHY?
SKILLS
WORK HARD DREAM BIG.
BEFORE YOU STAT WRITING
THE BODY
PLANNING THE ESSAY
READ THE QUESTION
INTERPRETATION OF THE QUESTION
SIGNIFICANCE OF THE QUESTION


How it feels when handing in your first assessment.
BEFORE
Things to Do
HELP WANTED
After
messed
up a bit
CELEBRATE
Knowledge is always within reach.
Full of life
Don't look back
Time to relax
Rest Play
THE PROCESS
USING PONTOON

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Key words: Curation, representation, alternative genres
(for context and references, please see page x)

Example 2: Cabinet of Curiosity

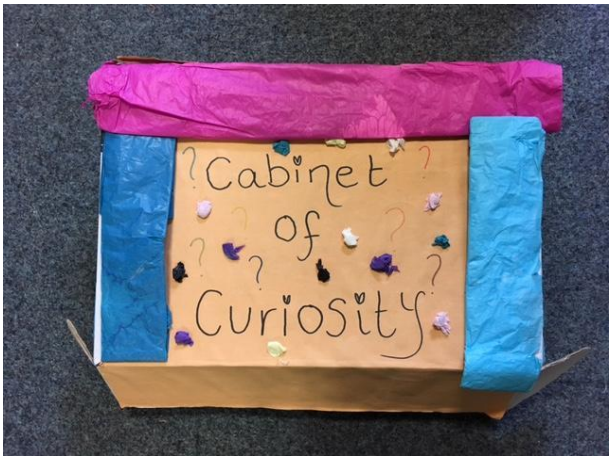
The task that we set our students was to investigate the University as a site or sites of learning. Rather than presenting their findings back to us as either a piece of formal academic writing, or even as an academic poster, we set them a range of genres or modes with which to represent and present their findings. The pictures here are of a Cabinet of Curiosity, also called a Wonder Room or Cabinet of Wonder. These Cabinets are microcosms, mini-representations of the world put together as a curation and also a commentary on the world itself. There is art in what is placed in and what is left out of the Cabinet, and the task that we have *de facto* set our students is successfully grappling with this art.

When we set the Cabinet option, colleagues did not believe that our first year students, in the first few weeks of their degree programme, would risk this way of representing their research findings. What we found was the opposite: curiosity itself makes students ask questions – and also to seek out the answers (Schmitt & Lahroodi 2008). The alternative genres offered intrigued and engaged the students; the difficult challenges we set became the ones that they wanted to have the courage to tackle.

How to:

If using the Cabinet of Curiosity, ask students to bring in empty shoe boxes in the first instance – and you might supply cardboard, scissors, glue, tape and silly putty.

Encourage students to work on their Cabinet inside and outside class – as an ongoing reflection. Consider: a final exhibition where students present their Cabinets – to each other and possibly other students.


Cabinet
of
Curiosity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formal / informal learning
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Key words ‘Game-ification’, multimodality, active learning, low stakes competition

(for context and references, please see page x)

Example 3: Games and Board Games

Another multimodal task that we set our students is the production of games for learning, including Board Games (see below. NB: We tend to get the students to design Real World rather than Online Games viz. https://www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/curriculum-design-and-support-for-online-learning/gamification). Typically there are two key points in our year-long course where we might set this task. One is where we bring in a sack or two of clean recyclable materials – empty plastic bottles, jars and lids, cardboard… along with a range of sugar paper, felt tip pens, blu-tack, scissors, glue, magazines, bottle tops and Index Cards – and ask the students to get into groups and devise some form of game to help the other students revise and learn key aspects of the module. The other is when we ask a group of students to take over the running of a week of the course, something that we require of students towards the end of the module. Here we never ask the students to ‘present’, but ask for ‘some sort of a performance’ which could be anything from an interactive workshop that promotes active learning in the other participants to an actual performance. Sadly, we have yet to have a group put on their own adaptations of ‘Educating Rita’, however, many of the groups design different learning games for the other students to play.

In each case, the students themselves have to analyse the module, its real aims and potential outcomes, and decide for themselves that which is the most important or powerful. They then have to devise ways to ‘game-ify’ that aspect of the module – in a way that will challenge and intrigue the other students. All the students introduce a level of competitiveness into the games that they design – and we have been amazed to see students who have stoically refused to join in any other activity, be pushed to compete and struggle and win a learning game.

How to:

You can just bring in resources, as above, and plunge students in: setting a task and requiring that they set to and make a game.

A more thoughtful way is to bring in any board games that you have, from a range of genres – memory games and board games, but also 3D games like Jenga – for the students to explore, analyse and discuss. They must work out the different types of games, the different goals, rules and strategies – the different pleasures and rewards of the different genres. Once they have undertaken this analysis, they can design and trial their own games.

Another way to start a game workshop is to use the resources produced by Alex Moseley and Nicola Whitton (viz. http://playthinklearn.net/ten-steps-to-game-design/).


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Key words: Narrative pedagogy, quasi-academic space, digital ownership

(for context and references, please see page x)

Example 4: Digital storytelling

Our world is digital and inevitably our approaches to learning, teaching and assessment will include aspects of the digital. Rather than denature this process by focussing on 'building the digital capacities' of our students, we wanted to set meaningful tasks that provoked a real encounter with the digiverse and with digital tools for meaning-making. Hence we asked all our students to blog their learning – and then to produce a 'Digital Me' for a Showcase event.

The creativity and authenticity of these tasks propels students into an engagement that the typical essay assignment tends not to do (viz. Abegglen et al. 2016). With blogs students can illustrate and write about the difficult topics that they are learning in their own voices before they wrestle with formal academic writing proper. Blogs are multimodal semi-public and quasi-academic spaces in which students can narrate themselves as they become academic (Burns et al. 2015). Our students have demonstrated in their blogs the power of being able to 'own' the learning through this mode of writing (ibid).

Once blogging is a natural part of the curriculum, the students are then asked to produce a 'Digital Me'. We leave this title slightly ambiguous, such that some students produce a digital representation of themselves and/or their lives whilst others produce a digital reflection on learning itself and still others might produce a digital commentary on digital learning and teaching. All are perfectly valid interpretations and all are appreciated by the other student participants when we have the Digital Showcase celebratory event just before Christmas.

How to:

Instead of setting the 'normal' reflective learning log, encourage students to write their own Blogs, developing the habit of writing on a regular basis (Blogging to Learn). We ask students to read and comment upon the blogs of their peers. Thus students are writing for a real audience, which helps them to realise they have something to say. The feedback they give and receive puts an emphasis on the dialogic and social aspect of learning.

Once comfortable with digital media, ask students to create a 'Digital Me' – a virtual representation of themselves – or aspects of their learning. We have found that students like playing with Powtoon and Pixton as well as with the video tools on their tablets or their phones for this task.

Tip:

Do not assume that students are 'digital natives' (Prensky 2001) and can seamlessly use the digital tools available to them – nor that they can use them for active learning. Encourage them to experiment with digital media beyond their comfort zone – and help each other to customise their Blogs.

Vanessa's "Digital Me': https://www.powtoon.com/online-presentation/bdQYwdFAuXX/blank/?mode=movie

Thanarsana's 'Digital Me': https://www.pixton.com/comic-strip/rtimsfe9

Katrina's 'Digital Me': http://zeega.com/170525

Charlotte's 'Digital Me': https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KOW3wq57Q5s&feature=youtu.be

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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.