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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/visualearning/>) 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 ‘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/>).



