

## **Disrupting Learning Landscapes: mentoring, engaging, becoming**

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### **Introduction**

The present paper explores the pairing of a second year *Peer Mentoring in Practice* with a first year *Becoming an Educationalist* module and the role that reflective writing – in logs and blogs – plays in encouraging our students to engage with the material, to write to learn and to produce narratives of the self in times of transition.

For the second year, we ran a 15-credit Level 5 module, *Peer Mentoring in Practice* (PMiP), in parallel with a 30-credit Level 4 module, *Becoming an Educationalist* (Becoming), whereby mentoring theory and practical strategies were utilized by second-year students to mentor a whole cohort of new students to aid their transition into the University. The first year students met their mentors within the timetable and both, mentors and mentees, were invited to reflect on their experience via weekly journals as well as in their final reflective yet discursive essays. The present paper discusses the benefits of this particular teaching and learning model; focussing on quasi-academic writing as a teaching and learning strategy, especially in relation to students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds that typically struggle with academic literacies. We argue that these creative and discursive practices help students to develop their emerging academic selves in times of transition.

### **Creative teaching, learning and assessment**

CELT's Tom Burns and Sandra Sinfield (summarised in Burns & Sinfield 2012) have been advocating creative approaches to teaching, learning and assessment for a long time. Together with Sandra Abegglen, we had the chance to embed some of these

active and creative teaching and learning strategies into practice by designing two new modules – *Peer Mentoring in Practice* and *Becoming an Educationalist*. Both modules were designed as part of a wider re-structuration of the *BA Hons Education Studies* at *London Metropolitan University* (UK).

The Education Studies degree itself considers the place of education in the modern world, and operates with a strong sense of social justice. The University's students as a whole are made up of at least fifty percent non-traditional students (Blagburn & Clutterbuck 2011); internal statistics show that the majority of the students in Education Studies come from a working class and/or ethnic minority background. Students undertaking the two modules are likely to struggle to achieve authorship (to write with authority) in the midst of 'jostling voices' (Carter et al. 2009) asking them to 'write and reference properly' and to 'be more academic'.

### **Peer Mentoring in Practice**

*PMiP* is a 15-credit module that offers second year students (Level 5) an introduction to mentoring, coaching and supervision – and is a two-fold entity. On the one hand, it allows students to develop their mentoring skills and their reflective practice. On the other, it facilitates the transition, engagement and bedding-in of 'newcomers'.

The mentors are introduced to different theoretical models of mentoring, coaching and supervision and their underlying philosophies. They learn strategies to manage difficult situations in the mentor-mentee relationship and to take account of their impact on individuals, groups and organizations. Students are encouraged to reflect on the ethics of professional practice, and their possibilities and limitations as mentors via discussion and written learning logs. The logs can be in any form or format, but need to be genuine accounts of the students' own (learning) experiences.

### **Becoming an Educationalist**

*Becoming* is an intensive 30-credit module that occupies students for four hours of class-time per week plus an additional five to six hours of independent study. The module extends the concept of academic and digital literacies by including Inquiry- and Problem Based Learning (IBL, PBL), role-playing, music, dance, visual practices and real research in its repertoire. It is geared to orientating students into the University, into the Department and into becoming successful students on their own terms. *Becoming* embodies the praxis that learning is multi-modal and multi-faceted and demonstrates through practice that creativity facilitates 'whole-brain learning' (Herrmann 1989) that allows the whole learner to enter the learning process.

The module treats writing heuristically as part of the active learning processes designed to improve the quality of the learning and of the writing. Students are introduced to a range of writing styles (expository writing, descriptive writing, persuasive writing, narrative writing) and creative writing tools such as ‘free writing’ (Brandt 1934/1981, Elbow 1975) – where they learn to write continuously for a set period of time without (first draft) correction – and blogging – where students are encouraged to reflect on their learning in a more personal, owned space.

## **Writing to learn**

Teaching and learning in both modules is heuristic and creatively challenging with periods of collective reflection and individual feedback. The staff model collaborative practice and writing – and write their own reflective blog on the learning process. In both modules, students are asked to maintain a learning log. Mentors keep a personal journal – a unique record of their thinking and learning – whereas mentees are encouraged to write a blog. This writing forms the heart of a final reflective assignment that asks students to scrutinize and review their practice via the range of theoretical tools explored and discussed in the modules.

## **Why Writing?**

Why focus on writing in the *PMiP* and *Becoming* partnership? There is much research, both anecdotal and more formal, on the fear that academic writing holds for students. In a study at our own University Burn, Burns and Sinfield (2004) found that even successful PG students said “...I’m still not sure if my writing is academic. I still don’t know what makes one essay better than another...”

Arguably the academic essay as a genre exemplifies academic writing per se: inviting ‘your opinion’, but excluding you the person: passionate, humorous, playful. Traits that are valued parts of the individual – needed especially when coping with the implicit threats inherent in transition (Winnicott 1971) into hostile academic spaces. Writing in the academy acts as a metonym for the academic: implacable, reified, classed, exclusionary. It is the space where our students most feel like ‘a fish out of water’. They are often good at expressing themselves verbally, however, as Bowstead (2011) states, ‘we can’t speak as we write’ – especially not in an academic environment. These boundary-crossing modules and the journal/blogging process are therefore designed to help students enter not only academic writing, but also the academic world per se. The peer mentoring element helps students form partnerships with each other for support and guidance – which increases confidence – including in the more formal writing.

## **Mentoring writing**

The *Becoming* students are timetabled to meet with their mentors, the second-year *PMiP* students, on a weekly basis. Relationships between mentor and mentees are reciprocal; both contribute to the dynamic; both potentially have their lives shaped in a positive way (Kossak 2011). In this context, mentors are encouraged to use writing both as tool to facilitate learning and as a way to reflect on their own learning. The mentees – more tentative with their learning identities – are encouraged to use the blog writing as part of playing with and owning their own learning in the process of becoming ‘educationalists’.

This constructivist view of different academic writing narratives, alongside the collaboration between the students and the staff teaching on the two modules, allows both mentors and mentees to actively construct their emerging academic selves.

At the end of the module mentors said:

*“Peer mentoring has helped me to develop my communication skills and also my organisational skills.”*

*“This class has reinforced my decision to be a counsellor for kids, it is not the same as being a mentor but the feelings I get when I know I have helped the mentees is so rewarding to me.”*

*“Overall the module was both practical and informative which allowed me to put theory into practice, using what I have learnt to benefit others and myself.”*

Mentees said:

*“I thought the weekly sessions were beneficial ... they would [help] as much as they could.”*

*“It has ... increased my confidence.”*

*“Insightful, productive, enlightening.”*

## **Narrative works**

Narrative and more personal writing can constitute the cracks – the boundaries – the borders – the space for disruption, irruptions and eruptions: the place of collision and encounter. Such writing in an academic context, as Deleuze & Guattari (1987/2005) might argue, offers an opportunity for the student to smooth out the striations of oppressive writing practices and use writing to create and recognise the emergent academic self.

Thus throughout the modules, we presented the reflective journal and the blog to the students as quasi-academic and semi-public space. This invites ownership: this writing matters because you have something to say. It is a space to perform one’s self as it becomes academic – and to perform that more wholly than in an academic essay. Here you can be playful (Winnicott 1971) – and it is play we need to tackle

the threat implicit in transitional spaces – those becoming spaces (ibid) – and it is in play that we are wholly fiercely alive – and fiercely ourselves. As Bowstead (2011) notes with her student Gill – all the passion – all the energy – all the power of that person is deemed invalid in the academic essay – it becomes transgressive in and of itself. We hoped that the logs and the blogs allowed the passion and the play – and that our students would utilize these lines of flight (Deleuze & Guattari 1987/2005) to narrate a more powerful self.

## **And they said**

mcbell79 (2013), Year 1 student:

*“Week 9 was all about my nightmare....drawing! My drawings always mock me:*

*“Ha! I have defeated you! You may have many words, but give you a pencil, and watch the intelligence disappear! That’s not how you wanted it to look, is it? Is that a person or a tree? Dumbo!”*

*“In a class of five year old children, I am quite happy to display my ridiculous sketches. I explain to the children that drawing is not my strong point, and they assure me that I have done a very good job of representing the characters, props and scenery in the storyboard. However, if someone were to come in, they would be quite convinced that the children had drawn the pictures – and not the most artistically gifted children, either!”*

*“At the moment, I feel afraid of failure, but I have to remember that I have been here before. In 2011, I graduated with merit at the Barbican, from a Foundation Degree in Education: Primary Pathway. So I need to keep three things in mind:*

- *Keep taking risks!*
- *It will be worth all the hard work!*
- *There are people to help me on my journey!”*

Mo (2013), Year 1 student:

*“In this week”’s lecture, we were subjected to a 10 minute free writing exercise. If we stopped writing, then we were to write the reason why we did so on a separate piece of paper. Seemed easy enough, but the question given was very ambiguous to us:*

*“Winnicott (1971) argued that play is necessary to counteract the implicit threat that occurs when we are in transitional spaces – between worlds, between classes, in alien educational settings. Discuss in relation either to becoming a successful student or becoming a successful teacher.”*

## **Conclusion**

We paired a second year accredited module in ‘Peer Mentoring in Practice’ with a first year ‘Becoming an Educationalist’ module – and encouraged students to write reflective learning logs and blogs to engage with their material – to write to learn –

and to struggle with narratives of the self in times of transition. We were interested in the stories that students tell themselves and each other about studying at University; and how this quasi-academic writing harnessed ‘play’ (Winnicott 1971) and Deleuzian ‘lines of flight’ – that allowed students to narrate their learning selves and become familiar with and secure in the – for them often alien – academic world.

Our hopes for the mentoring process were, as Freire (1987) stated:

*“The fundamental task of the mentor is a liberatory task. It is not to encourage the mentor’s goals and aspirations and dreams to be reproduced in the mentees, the students, but to give rise to the possibility that the students become the owners of their own history. This is how I understand the need that teachers have to transcend their merely instructive task and to assume the ethical posture of a mentor who truly believes in the total autonomy, freedom, and development of those he or she mentors”.*

And for the *Becoming* students that their engagement with both mentors and this celebratory and emancipatory academic course and its quasi-academic writing moved them from feeling like a ‘fish out of water’ struggling against the tide – to a sense of purposeful struggle for meaning and self in academia, the community of students and scholars engaged in higher education and research.

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