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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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*(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>