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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 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

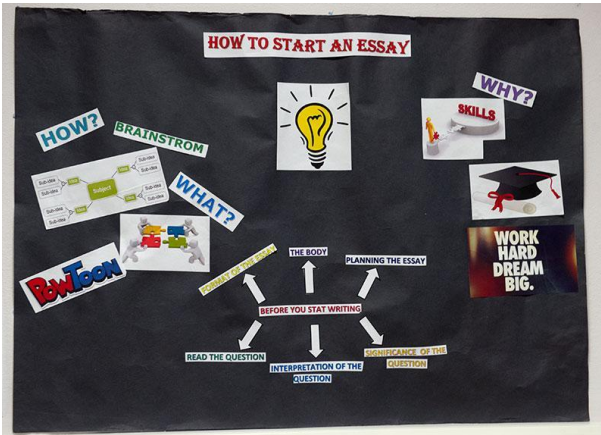
- Encourage students to utilise visual research methods in their Research Projects (viz. <http://about.brighton.ac.uk/visuallearning/visual-research-methods/>).

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 it feels when handing in your first assessment.

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 PONTTOOL