

Facilitating Student Learning: a staff development module that *is* Education for Social Justice

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Keywords: *Embodied learning; creative classrooms; reflective practice; cohort identity; Education for Social Justice.*

Introduction

This article refers to our Postgraduate Certificate and Masters in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (PGCert and MALTHe) programmes with a special focus on the core module Facilitating Student Learning (FSL). We discuss how we overtly aligned FSL with our new Education for Social Justice Framework (ESJF) and its dimensions, also covering how we adapted the module for online delivery during Covid-19 .

Our MALTHe and PGCert courses have always been designed to support liberatory education for widening participation students. FSL is the first module and initiates that journey and, as with the ESJF, it is designed to enable all staff to take action to promote student success and eliminate awarding gaps through the design of empowering curricula and creative practice. In this way we are aligned with principles of equity, intersectionality, accessibility: preparing participants to tackle the supercomplex challenges facing London and its communities and beyond.

Our goal is that our staff-as-students explore and enhance their own practice, developing *their* students' voice and agency and success through inclusive learning, teaching and assessment practices (ESJF) that harness our students' own autobiographical and contextual specificities (ESJF) for liberatory 'action' (Freire, 1996; ESJF).

FSL is a creative (Crème, 2003) and dialogic (Bakhtin, 2010) module, where learning takes place through interaction, discussion, 'making' and doing. This builds individual self-efficacy (ESJF) and facilitates a class with a sense of group identity (ESJF; Wenger-Trayner, 2014), ready to experiment playfully (Winnicott, 1971) with their own teaching, learning and assessment approaches. With Covid-19, we explored how to sustain the success of this class, online and at a distance.

Here we discuss how we foreground the liberatory potential of FSL and our ESJ framework, including whilst teaching online, emphasising provocatively from the 'get go' our initiating activity - the Apron challenge. This activity is a metonym for FSL and highlights how we sought to bring our students playfully and meaningfully into our classroom through an embodied learning experience, whilst online.

FSL and the ESJF

The design of FSL draws on the seminal work of bell hooks, Paulo Freire and other critical theorists that leads us to focus our pedagogy for a wider purpose, where we undertake an unlearning and relearning of the world we live in - and of education itself; reimagining an equitable future together in partnership with our students. This is designed to enable the transformation of pedagogic processes so that every student can fulfil their potential.

In FSL we work in partnership with our staff-as-students to make transparent the contested forms and processes of academia and to rehearse empowering strategies that promote higher learning (Angelo, 1993; ESJF). Critical pedagogy (ESJF) is explored through the lens of creative classroom activities that transform the learning experiences of all students and especially those who have previously been placed as academic 'outsiders'.

In FSL we explode the notion of the 'deficit' student as staff participants experience in playful and embodied ways activities and processes that enable all students to participate actively, powerfully and with agency in their own learning and assessment processes (ESJF).

In line with the overarching ESJF principle to 'de-colonise' pedagogy, we shake up notions of what 'education', teaching and learning are (viz. Illich and Holt). Through emergent and playful practice we welcome all students into the classroom: their voices, experiences and cultural wealth; building the time and space to encourage relationships between all participants (Tinto, 2006; ESJF).

We want our staff-as-students to 'be with' (Nancy, 2000) each other as they experience that learning itself is not just a cognitive process, but is experiential, emotional, interpersonal and embodied (Wenger-Trayner, 2014; Creative Academic Magazine). And we are determined to start the dialogic, embodied and playful process before our participants arrive in the module itself.

The best courses are born digital

To launch FSL online, we opened ourselves up to conceptualising Digital Education that is creative, liberatory and embodied. Whereas previously each F2F session harnessed play, collage, making, drawing, free writing and other forms of emergent and playful practice to facilitate learning, we needed to capture that emergence, that potentiality, online.

Together the FSL team explored how to bring ludic practice into the virtual 'classroom' and how to harness the student's home space in engaging and accessible ways, taking cognisance of the socio-political issues at play as well as issues of physical and technological access (ESJF).

FSL always integrated active use of the VLE (Weblearn, Blackboard LMS) to support flipped activities and to enable dialogue amongst participants between classes. This continued in the online iteration and we used a variety of tools to facilitate interactivity, community and dialogic learning. In the Discussion Board, participants posted links to reflective blogs and responses to weekly challenges and flipped tasks and we used the blog function to enable peer review of draft writing. We always used Collaborate to hold some FSL sessions online, with the pivot, we expanded our use of Collaborate for delivery of the module as well as for staff and peer observation of teaching.

Each online FSL session was supported by a Google doc that acted as an interactive and sustainable record of the sessions: the class whiteboard and 'memory'. It was the space where we could all add additional content that might interest and intrigue the rest of the group, creating an emergent online revision notebook that was flexible, interactive, change-able and yet offered a sense of coherence and structure that could 'hold' participants in uncertain times.

Bonding creatively: The Apron challenge

Before the FSL classes started, we wanted to initiate bonding and belonging (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; ESJF) and an embodied sense of the FSL learning process itself - online and even before the students arrived.

Previously, our colleague, Simone Maier (AAD), had developed a 'jeans to study apron' activity, where the making process allowed her to think about preparing herself for study. She captured that in a [short video](#) and we decided to adopt that as a pre-session activity for our FSL students.

At the same time - and wanting to foreground inclusive practice (ESJF) - we thought that we should not just set one challenging task with no alternative options for engagement. We wanted people to have fun - and succeed. So we adapted the challenge offering choice and 'resistance', as this extract from our Google doc for FSL#1 indicates:

Before: We would like you to make something that would get you ready to study.

One creative idea could be to make a study apron (see below) - something customised to help you 'feel like a student'. You can interpret the challenge: Make a study space at home - and take a picture that you would be prepared to share with the class. Or you might make - and share - something that you would set your students to make before starting your own online classes.

Make a study apron ([see example video](#)):

Find a large old pair of jeans or similar - transform the jeans into a study apron - something that makes you feel like a proper student. Share the information/product in the class Padlet.

Whichever challenge was accepted we also asked that they take a picture and post it to the class Padlet - with a brief commentary, and asked participants to read and respond to posts from classmates.

Evaluation: Build it - and they will come

We reflected on the success of this initial bonding activity ourselves as tutors, exploring the Padlet to see how people had responded and noticing the creativity, diversity and variety of the ways that they had interpreted and engaged with the challenge.

We were pleased to see where people had adapted the task - writing poetry instead of making an apron - and where they had played with it - making more than one sort of study space at home. Inclusive assessment (ESJF) should pique curiosity, should encourage creativity and there should be the possibility for resistance: not everybody has to 'like' an assessment, but they should be able to re-define it in some way.

We sought feedback on the activity in our first formal FSL session, asking participants how they had engaged with the challenge. The response was that this had been a positive activity that had made them think about FSL before joining and that had initiated their own thinking about bringing their students into the learning community.

Ironically the person who had actually made the study apron was the most overtly sceptical of the task itself ("Really? How is this going to help me with my teaching skills?"), but who then plunged in with energy, excitement and frustration. This person had made an apron - published it to the Padlet wall - and also published her reflective blogpost on the whole experience.

And oh was she angry with herself! She had rushed in too quickly; she had made numerous mistakes; she had made a terrible apron and was a terrible person! Having the opportunity to see this experience through that student's eyes enabled powerful discussion about the complexity of the student experience itself. This is one of the points of embodied practice - that it unleashes real pedagogical and practical insight into issues that would not be surfaced by reading alone.

Reflecting on FSL online

The 'bonding' aspects of the online design worked very well: from before the classes started people were collaborating playfully on the Padlet wall and this continued throughout the programme. Each week participants posted reflections and responded to challenges in the Discussion Board (DB). This demonstrated the power of dialogic collaboration between peers (ESJF), how it facilitates a deeper and richer learning experience through sharing authentic communication.

According to the metadata, the participants spent a total of 517 hours in the module out of class time, with an average of just under 21 hours each. (This total would be higher but there were four students included in the results that dropped out of the module because of workload rather than study issues.) Overall, there were insightful comments made on the DB forums and the shared Google docs that exhibited a deep level of thinking and reflection on how the experience of engaging with FSL could be used in future planning for inclusive teaching, learning and assessment (ESJF). It was clear that the sharing of these reflections pushed all participants into deeper and richer learning.

Participants tend to write positively about the FSL module and the powerful ways it helps them to think about and re-think their practice and create education for social justice - this continued in FSL-online. There was a deep appreciation for the module design and for the dedicated spaces provided for participants to literally play with ideas, express themselves and explore with others their own practice through the dual lenses of critical and creative pedagogy.

It was clear from reviewing reflective blog posts that FSL participants had enjoyed the module and appreciated FSL as a space that supported them in their teaching and that sustained them through the challenges of the pandemic:

And looking back I think it was also very important to be enrolled in this Course during the pandemic, we faced incredible new challenges in teaching... and it really felt like having a safe and secure place :) (Participant feedback).

Considering the module in its entirety, it is clear that the new online design was successful. We created a virtual space where tutors could reflect on, and be supported in, their teaching throughout the pivot. The strong reference to the ESJF allowed them to explore the development of their teaching alongside and through the creative and embodied practices we covered together. Activities that had previously succeeded in the F2F class also worked virtually: participants still made representations of themselves, of students and of HE systems to seed discussion about who and what learning is for and how to change the university to include rather than exclude our students (ESJF). We had seeded inclusive, creative, ludic and embodied practice in our participants that they could take back to their classrooms whether in person or online (ESJF).

We demonstrated that it is possible online to stimulate embodied and creative experiences, running role play discussions in Collaborate to foster engaged discussion about 'refractive' teaching and learning and how to surface our students' voices in positive ways (ESJF). We discussed inclusive teaching and learning, assessment and feedback seeded by metaphor, images, music, provocative questions and judicious reading. This module, we argue, exhibits the ESJF in meaningful action, allowing staff insights into the many ways they can bring the ESJF itself alive in their own practice, whatever subject they teach.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The FSL assessment prompts staff to articulate how they will bring education for social justice into their own praxes. Staff have gone on to develop creative and interactive ways of teaching Chemistry and Pharmacology. To facilitate student reading, they have incorporated active and collaborative 'textmapping' into the Education and the Design classrooms. They have run integrated writing workshops within their teaching practice to ensure that their students experience writing as a learning process. Still others have developed multimodal assignments as alternatives to the essay or scaffolded qualitative research in first year undergraduate programmes.

The majority have taken the plunge to write up their own practice as innovative action research. Our participants - and their students - are at the heart of the process, where the focus is clearly on enhancing our students' learning experiences through making, doing, thinking, writing, drawing and

reflecting - together - for action - for education for social justice. The pandemic revealed that Digital Education can be as liberatory and creative online as F2F.

Our MALTHE and PGCert courses have always been designed to support liberatory education for widening participation students. In FSL we develop and model activities, knowledge-claims and values that combine principles of critical, creative and inclusive pedagogy. The new ESJF allows us to underscore that even more explicitly in our programmes and staff welcome the opportunity to develop their practice as they experience the module and critically examine education itself, in theory and practice, together. The value of taking a module like FSL is that it creates the time, space, place and the 'community of practice' for participants to own the ESJF in authentic and meaningful ways.

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