'Creative Perspectives on Learning and Teaching'

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In the seminar I have been asked to offer a 'Creative Perspective on Learning and Teaching'. I will use some PowerPoint slides to keep me on track for that, but as a stand alone they will not be of much interest, so I am writing this as a summary speaking directly to the reader, for anyone who is interested in reflecting on this further.

In thinking about doing this session I asked myself how I took a creative approach. This may come from a chance remark or observing others, it may also be the result of a deliberate attempt to learn to think differently. I remembered a party game called 'consequences' that would have been played at family gatherings and children's parties when I was a child, and 'tricks' you into making random connections. I wondered if this might work as an illustration so I decided to experiment with a version of it at the seminar.

How to play 'academic consequences'

You need a minimum of three players (no maximum) and each needs a pen/ pencil and a piece of paper. Each player writes an activity that they enjoy doing at the top of the paper (reading, riding a bike, cooking - anything!) they then fold the top third of the paper down so that what they have written is hidden and pass their paper on to the next player. At the (new) top of the paper the players now write a medium of communication (pen & paper, flip chart, finger paint, text, yammer). Again, the paper is folded down so the words are hidden and it's passed on to a third player. Finally the players write down an aspect of learning, teaching or assessment that they would like to tackle differently- maybe you dread doing a large formal lecture, or you feel you want to develop your skills at facilitating workshops.

In the seminar everyone gamely joined in – it threw up some potentially good ideas and some daft ones, as you might expect. We agreed that if we did it again we would mix up the exercise, so that instead of passing the paper to the person next to you each time in went into the middle of the room, so that they were more mixed up. Also, instead of using an oblong strip of paper a triangle could be used with the three corners turned down. This would leave a space in the middle to jot down ideas of how the combination might work.

The main thing it did was get us to think about different ways of tackling things, share techniques that had worked [reflecting and walking, using drama, colour, music] and new solutions to old problems. We talked about

Walker and Avant's book on theory construction in nursing, which has some other exercises for encouraging lateral thinking.

On reflection there are a few things that come up regularly when people talk to me about trying to bring creativity into their work:

Don't let regulations get in the way of a good idea:

Regulations are frequently 'blamed' for taking a defensive or narrow view. 'We have to do this' ' We are not allowed to do that'. Before you give up on a good idea take a long hard look at your regulations, and where you think the problem lies. Consider ways that you might be able to bring about change without violating the rules.

I find the imagery of a ferry crossing water useful for this (this picture is the crossing from Aran to Holy Island). If you want to visit Holy Island, you have to get the ferry: you have to turn up at the right time, on the right day with the right money to pay for the crossing. A simple, transparent rule that is the key to success.

How you get to the ferry stop, what means you use to acquire the currency needed, and what you do when you disembark on the other side are all in your control.

Back to the regulations… Ask yourself what is really essential, and what can you be flexible with. Finally remember that the regulations are created and reviewed by a committee of your peers. If you don't like them, try to think of strategies to change them. Have a look at the QAA precepts- they are written as overriding principles, in order to allow for flexibility and variation. (Ref http://www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/quality-code/Pages/default.aspx)

Manage risk, don't avoid it:

Risk is inevitable. The more creative and the less defensive you are in your practice, the more risk you take. You take risks with your own practice; reputation, self confidence, appraisal. You also take risks with your students; their safety, their chances of success, their self confidence.

I wrote a paper a few years ago about this [the link is below] and wondered if the utilitarian ('greatest good to the greatest number') principles that I applied in that paper might be of use:

1. In order to make decisions based on utility it is necessary to think through the possible consequences of actions, so identification of all the consequences of a given action is a good starting point.
• What are the likely outcomes of a given learning and teaching strategy?
• Will it work for all students? staff? the institution?
• What is the intention for a given plan?
• What is the worst possible outcome of this strategy? What is the best?
• On balance, how great is the risk that the positive consequences of this strategy will outweigh the negative ones?

2. Having identified all of the possible variables it is now possible to evaluate the outcomes and identify if there are ways of shifting the balance of probability favourably in the direction of success.
• Would greater support make a difference?
• Would a different assessment task ensure students could complete the module without being compromised by uncertain outcomes?

In summary:

I took a risk in using a technique that was new to me – I judged that the number of people, and their motivation would make it a fairly safe place to try this, but I minimised the risk by thinking through what other materials I had with me, and how I would manage the outcome.

- Don't be afraid to try something out - look for a new a new solution to an old problem.

- Find solutions to your learning and teaching problems, not barriers!

A few resources ….

Hargreaves, J (2008) 'Risk: the ethics of a creative curriculum'
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