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Experimenting with inspiration: In-service education for HE teachers.

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Abstract

Experienced teachers at the University of Huddersfield participated in an experimental module, the Inspire Module, during 2013/14. The module was influenced by theories of transformative learning and arts-based education and aimed to offer participants freedom to experiment combined with intellectual support and challenge. Initial evaluations suggest that it has been partially successful, but that increased interventions, stimulus and opportunities for dialogue would improve the experience.

Rationale

Calling something the ‘Inspire Module’ seems to suggest a degree of hubris. I hope to explain why I decided to do something that sounds so ambitious. During my career I have noticed that people rarely do their best work in over-engineered situations. For example, many professionals have to produce critical reflections as part of their training. There is a plethora of documentation to support professionals to develop and record their reflections. I found, though, that the most profound learning and the most exciting reflections came when students were given freedom to reflect openly on a range of stimuli and to make connections between these and their own experiences. Some of the most pedestrian responses came when I was required to ask students to reflect on a proforma on how they had met each of the learning outcomes for a module. Most people don’t seem to think well when constrained—their minds are fluid and organic and need scope to range. The opportunity to develop a top-up to Pg.Cert. H.E. for colleagues already possessing HEA accreditation seemed to create space for imaginative work, because there were no professional standards to evidence and scope to focus on process rather than outcomes. I wanted to encourage participants to be

exploratory. Ironically, of course, one of the first things I had to do was write a set of learning outcomes, so one challenge was to design outcomes that offered a high degree of freedom and encouraged creativity.

The theoretical context

The inspiration for the module comes from educational literature relating to the role of the arts in professional education and from transformative learning theory. Two aspects of the literature on the relationship between the arts and education shaped the module; the idea that education is an art, and needs to learn from artistic practice (broadly defined) in order to be its best, and research that has demonstrated the effectiveness of using arts-based methods in professional education. Professional work, including teaching in HE, is challenging in what Barnett described as an age of super-complexity (Barnett, 2008). He argues that, in the modern university, academics face uncertainty about their role, and multiple, sometimes contradictory discourses about their profession and the expectations associated with it. I take from this that professional development also has to support living with uncertainty – that academics have to be able to manage a complex context in which there are no right answers. The literature on the arts and education seems to offer ways of meeting the challenges created by those uncertainties. Eisner (2002; 2008) offers perhaps the most comprehensive exploration of the idea that teaching is an art as well as a science. He identified eight ways in which education can learn from the arts; I mention the two most pertinent to this experiment. He wrote “education can learn from the arts that surprise is not to be seen as an intruder in the process of inquiry but as part of the rewards one reaps when working artistically” (2008, p.8). Current educational practices are target driven and focused on standardisation of practice in order to ensure certainty of outcomes. Eisner argues that surprise can result from securing new insights and that “educators should create the conditions to make it happen” (2008.p.8). Secondly, he stressed that “education can learn from the arts that open-ended

tasks permit the exercise of imagination” (2008, p.9) and goes on to argue that this is an important attribute for all disciplines, because it is the source of all new understanding and invention. It seems pertinent to encourage this kind of open and creative teaching in an institution like Huddersfield that is avowedly committed to enterprise education and research-led teaching. I wanted to design a module that envisaged education as an art; something that would engage teachers in thinking about their work as open-ended and improvisational – where they might be surprised by results and did not have to be confident about achieving pre-determined outcomes.

Eisner (2002) argues that practising and experiencing the arts develop people’s intellectual and sensory abilities. Many scholars engaged in the education of professionals have experimented with arts-based education. In recent reviews of these writings Patti Gouthro and I (Jarvis and Gouthro, 2014) noted that educators draw on the arts in a wide variety of ways, but that these often involve significant challenges to professionals’ epistemologies and their understanding of their own professional knowledge, practice and discourses. The practice and the study of the arts involves interpretation, and engagement in discussion about those interpretations - as such it can expose professionals to the constructive nature of meaning making, so that they recognise how individuals read the world differently from within their own frames of reference. Hoggan, Simpson and Stuckey (2009) reinforce this when they discuss the role of the arts in stimulating multiple ways of knowing, arguing that “a certain degree of imagination and creativity is needed in order to learn” (p.19). Kinsella (2008), drawing on the work of Greene (1995) and Evans, Greaves and Pickering (1997) uses fictions to stimulate the kind of reflective practice in nurses that enables them to see their practice differently, reflect on injustices in healthcare systems and become more conscious of diversity in their patients. McGregor (2012) harnesses the capacity of the arts to stimulate the imagination, challenge epistemological frameworks and

enable community leaders to understand concepts of social justice and transformative leadership. The arts are not only relevant to the education of those working in the people-professions, like teaching, health care and leadership, however. Snyder, Heckman and Scialdone (2009) used studio techniques of development and critique to support information professionals to recognise that there are many solutions to complex problems, rather than rely on narrow technological solutions. I wanted to provide learning opportunities, through workshops and discussions that embraced creative approaches to learning development, and introduced masterclass leaders who might stimulate thinking by, for example, looking at the development of games, or the use of visual and verbal metaphor.

Transformative learning theory (TLT) was originally formulated by Mezirow in 1978, and has undergone significant development since (Kitchenham, 2008; Mezirow, 1978; 1990; 2001; Taylor, 2000) to incorporate extra-rational elements (Boyd and Myers, 1988; Davis, Manigaulte and Kasl, 2006; Dirkx, 2000) into what originated as a predominantly cognitive approach to learning. There is only space here to summarise a complex and evolving theory very superficially, so I focus on aspects that seem particularly relevant to this experiment. Mezirow, using Habermas's (1972) theory of communicative competence, defines transformative learning as the kind of learning that takes place when our pre-existing ways of viewing the world are disrupted, shattered and remade. Mezirow himself, and others developing his work (Brookfield, 2005; Jarvis 2012) have identified the importance of the arts in stimulating transformative learning, so the links between the two key theoretical influences in the design of the Inspire Module are important. Not all valuable learning is transformative and I did not expect this would be universal, but it seemed important to provide learning opportunities for academic colleagues that would make it a possibility, by supporting them to try radically different approaches to teaching, if they wished to do this.

The students

Students are colleagues, highly experienced teachers and fellows of the Higher Education Academy. In order to recognise this, we are known as delegates rather than students. Delegates know this is a pilot and have signed up to the idea of being part of a community of discovery (Coffield and Williamson 2011) – a group of people seeking to support and challenge each other, make mistakes and help shape the module. I am both a delegate and the module leader. This dual role of teacher and learner is familiar to me from my background as an adult educator, where someone might officially be the teacher, but have a class full of experts in one or more aspects of the subject. There are challenges with this model. Delegates are busy people. It is designed so that much of it can be done through virtual communication, but it has already proved difficult for some people to make the few face-to-face sessions we do have. I am also conscious that because people have competing priorities they can become disaffected quite quickly, if the module is not really stimulating. For this reason the face-to-face workshops carry a lot of weight.

Assessment is a sensitive issue, because the whole process involves assessing colleagues. The opportunity to get a qualification, through a combination of APLA and the credits attached to the module is what gives the module its obvious value. At the same time, once something is assessable, learners' relationships to it and to assessors change. Things that should be about learning, distance travelled and the pleasure of the process start to be about credits and grades earned – the language of pleasure is exchanged for the language of the marketplace. This is not something I have resolved, but something that I will need to continue to reflect upon.

The experiment

Delegates design and deliver an experimental teaching and learning session and write it up as a conference paper to be shared with colleagues in the institution. The programme consists of an induction, three half-day sessions and the conference itself, which takes place

at the end of the module. The half-day sessions include a two hour master-class led by an external with an established record in the field, and a two hour workshop discussing the development of the experimental teaching session.

I tried to work out what delegates needed to do in between the sessions and to structure this through advice and guidance using our virtual learning environments. In addition to essential information about assessment and the workshop sessions and guidance on preparing for the conference, the course team developed materials designed to stimulate thinking about different approaches to teaching and learning.

Arts-based professional learning and TLT shaped the module design in the following ways. Firstly, the freedom to experiment is at the heart of the module. I hoped people would feel able to be creative and imaginative; to work artistically, without having to guarantee a pre-determined outcome from their work. The module was designed to make it possible to take risks and fail; in a highly constrained environment characterised by caution, it was unlikely that existing ways of practice would be challenged. The focus on designing small pieces of learning – perhaps a single session – meant that participants need not worry that if they did not achieve the results they had hoped for, student learning would be seriously blighted. Secondly, the intention was to create maximum support, so that if the process of trying new approaches did begin to deconstruct comfortable beliefs about learning, there would be a support network that would enable any potentially transformative learning to continue. A Yammer site was introduced as a space where people could challenge each other as well as support each other. Posting outlines of the proposed experimental session was a requirement of the programme as I hoped this would encourage people to start using this forum. Critically challenging groupwork is often key to stimulating significant learning, and it seemed unlikely that we would have much time to develop this except in a virtual forum. Thirdly, I wanted to introduce stimulation, in the form of masterclasses, held by individuals

who might challenge our existing practice by showing different ways of operating. I tried to find individuals who would offer participative and creative experiences, which might encourage reflection on the nature of teaching and learning, and on existing practice. I hoped these people would offer more than a few good ideas, but might help us to start to question what we are doing and why we are doing it. Similarly, I tried to provide case-studies and reading that would offer the widest possible selection of creative approaches to teaching, with a particular emphasis on arts-based approaches. I wanted the masterclasses and the learning materials, as well as the process of engaging in the experiment itself, to have the potential to be what Mezirow calls “disorienting dilemmas,” experiences that don’t quite fit with our existing view of the world, so cause us to review it. I used an activity based on visual metaphors about teaching, as part of the induction process, to try to encourage delegates to access some of their deeper feelings about teaching and learning.

Useful, stimulating, challenging learning happens without transforming someone’s world view, and I thought it unlikely that the relatively limited time available to us would lead most delegates to transformation, but I thought it was important to sow seeds that might lead to critical reflection and deeper change at a later stage. I hope that because we are experimenting and taking risks we will all encounter some things along the way that might give us cause to question some of our assumptions about teaching and learning. This might come as a result of our own experiments, or as a result of discussions with colleagues taking the module, who have very different views about what teaching is or should be, or as a result of the conference itself.

Critical Discussion

The module will not be completed until the conference at which this paper is presented, so I have had to write the paper before I can evaluate fully the outcomes of the process. The conference papers themselves constitute evidence relating to the effectiveness

or otherwise of the module. As an interim measure, I have interviewed the course leader, posted a questionnaire to participants (and received 4 responses) and held a focus group with nine colleagues who were delegates and subject mentors on the module. This has supplemented my own reflections which are based on looking at delegates' project outlines and postings on the module's Yammer site, on observing interactions at the half-day sessions and on various communications with delegates and mentors. Conventional module evaluations will be collected, although these rarely provide much qualitative detail. The questionnaire, interview and focus group asked for delegates' perceptions of the open ended approach to the module, its structure, including the frequency and duration of sessions, the resources on Unilearn, and the effectiveness of the Yammer site.

Scrutiny of this data suggests that the module has been partially successful. It created, for some people, a degree of excitement and challenge. Those responding have mostly liked the curriculum and the freedom involved "a standard curriculum was not what I wanted"; "I don't think I would have wanted more structure personally", "I've found the encouragement to reflect and, particularly, to experiment, with teaching methods to be an inspiring and engaging process."

At the same time, most found it difficult to give the programme high priority and some asked for more sessions "some set of regular meetings, even for half an hour each week"; even if these were shorter or optional (whilst other said this would have been impossible). One delegate said, "I am a very target driven person and I need the deadlines." The learning resources on uni-learn provided people with both stimulus and all the information they needed, but delegates admitted that they used it infrequently and only when they had to. One found that the way it was used was "inspirational" and made him think about how he might use it better in his own teaching. At the same time, he admitted that he made very little use of it. Related to this, one delegate expressed a wish for a bit more

direction to kinds of theories of learning”. One experienced teacher educator recommended a “drop, drop drop approach to stimulating serious engagement with the literature.”

Suggestions for reading and actual copies of articles were on Unilearn, but this is not the same as having the opportunity to discuss these with others.

Other aspects of the programme received a mixed reception. The master-classes were very well received by some; others found that not all of them offered the innovation or excitement they had wanted. They did lead to changes in behaviour – several people followed up new approaches as a result of the first master-class in particular. One delegate claimed, “if you hear even one that is useful to you that can be something quite transformational” and indicated that adopting this new approach had been “really brilliant.” My own feeling was that the timescales were unrealistic. It might be better to have a whole morning’s workshop, so that people could engage more fully with the activities. In some instances I think the leaders felt unable to do themselves justice. Similarly, some delegates found working with their mentors mentors invaluable and others felt they had not had much contact at all, although focus group members reminded me that there could be a lot of contact without me knowing. There is no system for holding mentors to account – I relied on their professionalism. I found having mentors invaluable for my own learning on the module, as I have had to develop new ways of thinking and working using blended learning, even though this was not the focus of my experiment. Those who participated in Yammer enjoyed it. Yammer had some regular contributors, but only slightly more than half the delegates visited it once they had done their statutory post and one commented, “I never got the sense of a debate.” Delegates generally took personal responsibility themselves for their lack of engagement with subject mentors, Unilearn and Yammer, but I feel it is my responsibility to find ways of ensuring that these resources are fully utilised if the module is to have maximum impact. Some of this is about the competing priorities in the lives of busy academics. The

lack of regular required contact, and of direct engagement with the module tutor makes it easy to let this slip to the bottom of the immediate priority list. I have to find ways of pushing it up that list.

At this stage I think that the conceptualisation of the module is strong but that the delivery, and particularly the role and organisation of the subject mentor/ module tutor interaction will have to be revisited. Where delegates have managed to give the work some priority, the results have been exciting. However, it is the mundane details of module management that make the difference between this being a resounding success and a partial failure. My discussion with one interviewee confirmed my own view that more time between sessions needs to be devoted to ensuring delegates and mentors are engaged. The module is already staff-resource intensive. Working across seven schools meant that briefing subject mentors came down to one-to-one discussions in many cases, compared with for example, holding a course or module team meeting. There were often at least three levels of staff to go through to get things started – general agreement from Deans, then endorsement from a nominated individuals in each school, who named possible mentors, then direct contact with mentors. I relied heavily on mentors, once briefed, being pro-active. I think they have to have a stronger role next time and be committed members of a course team. The course leader suggested, based on his experience, that subject mentors should be asked to lead Yammer discussions in turn, to stimulate conversations between sessions about progress.

There is scope for developing the module to ensure that it incorporates structures that can support its theoretical goals. The open nature of the curriculum model does offer opportunities for creative and imaginative work, and if the workshops are suitably challenging, they can act as a stimulus for significant, even transformative, learning. In order to strengthen this, there needs to be more secure support and more regular stimulus, so that challenge, critical discussion and a deeper engagement with the literature takes place.

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