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Original Citation

McCullagh, Joseph Felix (2009) Developing communities of practice and research through research informed teaching and learning in cross-cultural groups. In: Enhancing curricula : using research and enquiry to inform student learning in the disciplines : 2008 4th International Conference / Centre for Learning and Teaching in Art & Design (cltad). Centre for Learning and Teaching in Art & Design, London, UK, p. 536. ISBN 9780956038203

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Developing communities of practice and research through research-informed teaching and learning in cross-cultural groups

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Abstract

This conceptual research aims to answer three questions:

- What is the process for learning where teachers and learners research together?
- How can this process be enriched and enhanced, specifically working within an international and cross-cultural student population?
- How can a co-existence of a pedagogic research informed learning and teaching environment be embedded with staff and students?

This research looks into the way staff research informs pedagogic practice, and how staff work as 'joint partners' with students to deliver more 'iterative' education learning models. The research is aimed at the development of inclusive scholarly knowledge-building communities of practice (see Brew, 2006). The research highlights how staff work with students in an iterative communal process through project-based research activity and collaborative teamwork within cross-cultural groups. It also describes the processes of working with students and how it has helped to directly reinforce the curricula and informed the author's own learning and teaching strategies.

Significantly, this type of open engagement with cultural groups has alerted the author to how traditional linear 'Western' forms of academic research within art and design can be influenced by Eastern models of research enquiry. The research describes a coexistence of practice where research and enquiry can be fluidly exchanged between teacher and student.

Changes were made to curricula to develop a more social constructivist form of working (Gredler, 1997) where both the context in which learning occurs and the social contexts that learners bring to their learning environment were put centre stage. A short film entitled *Event digestion, a pedagogic filmic picnic*, where students came together to form a community event, highlighted this process. This process was also one of cross-disciplinary staff team-working within art and design where research work is enhanced through creating a more open social experiential learning environment.

The research methodology is a predominantly qualitative one through problem solving and action research. It is also situated within a pedagogic research-informed teaching approach where teaching draws upon enquiry into the teaching and learning process itself (Jenkins & Healey, 2005). Methods incorporated have been cross-cultural international focus groups attended by students, 'unstructured' interviews, student case studies and, importantly, practice-based work. The paper highlights how an active educational model can be developed through learning by doing (Gibbs, 1998) and thinking (Ramsden, 2003), however, coming from a perspective which addresses creativity across cultures (Lubart), is cross-disciplinary, and, importantly, by a practice-based collaborative international team project approach. The practical pedagogic findings will be of use to anyone working in design education wishing to develop cross-cultural curricula through practice-based learning and research.

Context

The research took place within an environment of a postgraduate education at Nottingham Trent University, England, consisting of students from a diverse range of postgraduate master's disciplines and international backgrounds within art and design. Key areas for the attention of the research when working in such an environment are the increasing complexities of:

- the research, teaching, learning nexus and relationships;
- students and staff developing a world view;
- problem-based learning;
- developing communities of practice;
- developing cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary collaborative work.

Theoretical underpinnings

The research draws on diverse yet interrelated theories within teaching and learning in responding to these complexities from the work of Brew (2006) in developing inclusive scholarly knowledge and building communities of practice, Jenkins and Healey's (2005) framework on research informed teaching, theories from social constructivism by Gredler (1997), how social learning and communities of practice can be formed from Wenger (1998), and 'animated' learning from Boud and Miller (1996).

Both Brew and Wenger offer interesting and dramatic perspectives as to how we can create dynamic environments for teaching, learning and research. Wenger's work has often been cited; however, by applying it within the contextual work of Brew, it has further relevance.

... what if we adopted a different perspective, one that placed learning in the context of our lived experience of participation in the world? What if we assumed that learning is as much part of our human nature as eating or sleeping, that it is both life-sustaining and inevitable, and that – given a chance – we are quite good at it?
(Wenger, 1998, p. 3)

... where the distinctions between teaching, learning and research break down as both teachers and students explore and share the issues that confront them. Yet this means facing up to elements of the academic environment that work against the integration of academics and students.
(Brew, 2006, p. 4)

It is clear that the current tired paradigms of current academic practice surrounding the nexus of teaching, learning and research are outdated and there is a need from the 'bottom up' to address these cultures. Brew polemically calls for the need to affect 'a different kind of university' (Brew, 2006, p. 172).

Facilitating research learning

As academics, how do we understand and, furthermore, facilitate 'research learning'? We can look to the work of Boud and Miller (1996) who have taken the traditional term of animation,

'bringing to life', but have applied it within a pedagogic context where staff should take on the active role of being 'animators' with the need to inspire and vivify as a core part of their teaching and research. We can assess this in light of our experience where we are increasingly becoming co-learners and act as producers or co-producers of learning. This is necessitated further when increasingly working within cross-cultural student cohorts where we need to engage educationally and also culturally with students. The animator's role becomes even more paramount within experiential environments: 'we see the function of animators to be that of acting with learners, or with others, in situations where learning is an aspect of what is occurring, to assist them to work with their experience' (Boud & Miller, 1996, p. 7).

As an educator, the backbone of practice is through 'learning by doing' (Gibbs, 1998) and 'thinking' (Ramsden, 2003). In this context, how do we acknowledge and work within a cross-cultural research and learning environment? By adopting a more social constructivist approach (see Gredler, 1997), we can extend the notion of how we are able to learn and work with cross-cultural student groups. The utilisation of constructivist approaches (Piaget) is taken further into social constructivism (Gredler) by the added emphasis on the importance of background and culture of the learner. Social meanings and knowledge leads to personal understanding and meanings. This is combined with the inter-subjectivity of community understandings, as shaped by the interaction and negotiation with other groups. Gredler believes that to understand culture we do not look at a snapshot of life but that human behaviour is far more creative, and culture can be maintained through communication. Once in this learning environment, group ideas/minds change, but, importantly, so does the individual. Therefore learning should not be isolated from the environment. We have to understand that someone's identity is more a fusion of contexts, which are familial, professional, national, which fuse together to form a student's identity. There are clear educational dangers if we are not proactive in developing sustainable teaching/research/learning cross-cultural pedagogies in our education environments leading to a sanitisation of cultural differences: 'the sanitizing of cultural differences has the potential to limit the educational opportunities that can be found in culturally diverse learning environments' (Goodear, 2001, p. 5). In Eastern cultures, creativity is seen as part of your own well-being and is holistic, circular and emotional (see Lubart, 2004). Conversely, it could be argued that in Western cultures creativity is cold and linear with a finite end. The point here is that there is a need to develop a learning experience that is not simply about research in a traditional sense, but allows students to experience culture; we do this by assisting them with their experience (see Boud & Miller). Brew identifies this in the context of research being personal and bound to identity: 'students develop their skills, their personal epistemologies and the emotional dimension of their lives'. Research can thus have both personal as well as social dimensions for the students. Making this explicit within a university education would mean that 'through the process of inquiry students' and academics' individual growth and personal development would become an integral part of their university study' (Brew, 2006, p. 172). Arguably, our new role therefore is to make things happen, to explore the notion of animators by breathing life into situations ... 'by building environments and relationships in which people can grow and care for each other' (see infed) and where research is seen more holistically and humanistically as part of our education environment.

Project study

To highlight the theories above, we shall now look at a project that put these ideas into practice. The project was entitled 'Feast'. What we did – had a picnic! A picnic was staged in the centre of

the school of art and design (Figure 1) where students brought traditional food and non-alcoholic drinks from their respective countries.



Figure 1

The project's overall objective was to celebrate a cross-cultural and collaborative master's culture with students and staff. However, underlying aims of the project investigated how to:

- explore communities of practice within a cross-cultural environment;
- explore the nexus between teaching, learning and research;
- address that teaching can be *researched based* and it can be *research informed*.

Methodology/methods

The research methodology was a predominantly qualitative one through problem-solving and action research. It is also situated within a pedagogic research-informed teaching approach where teaching draws upon enquiry into the teaching and learning process itself (Jenkins & Healey, 2005). Methods incorporated were cross-cultural international focus groups attended by students, 'unstructured' interviews, observations, student case studies and, importantly, practice-based work. The methods also incorporated methods of design; video ethnography combined with practice-based pedagogic research.

During the picnic, students were given cameras to interview each other about their respective picnics (Figure 2), the picnic was also filmed using video cameras and a design/filmmaking approach was taken with the intention of producing an edited 'designed' film as a result. We used multiple sources for the data gathering, documenting photographers, documentation of the event by students and the use of formal aspects of two stationary cameras giving a two point perspective on the whole event. A 'process of inquiry' to quote Brew was positively 'animated' (Boud). The space was designed with the intention of creating an open social learning practice and to examine how the cross-cultural groups and staff reacted to the space to form 'communities of practice' (see Wenger, 1998). We were intrigued by utilisation of the learning space and whether students converged or not within the exploration of the social spaces. We were also interested in how staff would intervene or not within a designed yet still improvised space, and how they could form their own research and learning investigation within such a setting.



Figure 2

*The data was evaluated and a short 'film' was produced working with a motion graphic specialist and academic, Jon Hamilton. The film, *Event digestion, a pedagogic filmic picnic* (Figure 3), was subsequently deconstructed and analysed from design practice and pedagogic perspectives as part of the research process. While analysing the film, we turned the cameras on ourselves and recorded our deconstruction of the film (Figure 4). This process is an interesting one where we turned pedagogic reflection simultaneously into a practice through the filmmaking. We reflected on our work by creating an accidental pedagogic practice. It became a film about a film capturing our own practice as pedagogues.*



Figure 3

The research approach has much in common with ethnographic inquiry, in which the researcher tries to make meaning of both the explicit and tacit knowledge of cultural settings and social behaviour, which we strove to investigate through the explication of the picnic. Significantly, the resulting film allows you to understand pedagogy and research through visual means, acting as a way to visualise your research. The process was a fascinating one. By working with a motion graphics specialist we were able to intervene throughout the film cutting and editing, with the purpose of highlighting the central pedagogic aspects. These highlights resulted in the emergence of a new pedagogic filmic syntax based around pedagogic enquiry. The intention was to visualise pedagogy, whereby we enhance our own understanding through a creative practice-based process.

Interestingly, we naturally adopted the language of both design and pedagogy to deconstruct the space in enhancing our understanding. When ethnography is applied to 'design', in this case the editing of the film, and also contextualised through pedagogic theory, it helps educators, designers and students to create further research into teaching and learning and also, fundamentally, enables us to understand the complexity of people and culture within education environments. The ethnographic approach combined with a design analysis provided substantially greater insight.



Figure 4

Reflection and evaluation

On reflection and evaluation, the project was an example of how to link teaching and research and the exploration of those relationships. In *Institutional Strategies to Link Teaching and Research*, Jenkins and Healey (2005) give further possibilities in this aspect of research and learning. Jenkins developed a typology of the nexus between research and teaching (2005, p. 21), instigated from the developing framework by Griffiths (2004). The research evaluation showed that teaching can be *researched based* (Jenkins & Healey (2005) in the sense that:

- the curriculum is largely designed around inquiry based activities, rather than on the acquisition of subject content;
- the experiences of staff in processes of inquiry are highly integrated into the student learning activities;
- the divisions of roles between teacher and student is minimised;
- the scope for two-way interactions between research and teaching is deliberately exploited.

However, it can also be *research informed* (Jenkins & Healey (2005) in the sense that:

- it draws consciously on systematic inquiry into the teaching and learning process itself.

The video ethnographic research and the production of the film enabled an understanding further of the cultural influences on behaviour, which are often difficult to understand using other methods (Figure 5). It was used throughout the process to help us gain an understanding of social educational environments. Video enables us to understand the complexity of the research and the context. It enables the new thinking of future pedagogic work, where new insights and concepts aids further work. The relationship between video ethnography and grounding it within a 'design'

practice is extremely exciting. How through being 'pedagogic designers' and through the staging and editing of sequences we are able to understand meanings over a period of edits.



Figure 5

By returning to 'communities of practice', Wenger's proposed models help us to understand further the research work where he conceptualises the four basic dimensions needed for the challenge of design for learning (Wenger, 1998, p. 232). Wenger, alongside the dimensions of learning, also addresses the components for a learning architecture (Wenger, 1998, p. 237). An important reference point for the research evaluation is how Wenger forms a matrix showing how the components can articulate with the dimensions to form a design framework (Wenger, 1998, p. 240). Wenger helps us to understand further the need to form a set of working relationships with students (and, in this research, specifically cross-cultural groups) where we share, ideas, memories, and a communal understanding of individual and group identity.

Conclusions

Through design and improvisation, the animator as educator provides the picnic with loose yet working scamp 'sketches', a framework, a blank canvas, but allows for spontaneity and something that cannot be explained. To quote Bill Evans, jazz producer of Miles Davis, when discussing improvisation in jazz he alerts us to group improvisation: 'group improvisation is a further challenge. Aside from the weighty technical problem of collective coherent thinking, there is the very human, even social need for sympathy from all members to bend for the common result. This is the most difficult problem' (1957). Students struggle to deal with problems such as 'uncertainty', the 'unknowing', dealing with 'meaning' and the complex mix of art, design and life, but they start to assimilate the importance of a community of practice. Conversely, significantly, staff find it more difficult, as we become culturally institutionalised in our ways of doing and thinking. It could be argued that communities of practice should become a major transferable and core skill; it should be taught. This represents a cultural move from Western obsessions with individualism to a more collectivist educational environment leading to new working processes and to new art and design research practice. The research highlights the need for a coexistence of practice where research and enquiry can be fluidly exchanged between educator and student. It is not simply a traditional Western linear 'serial' research process of getting from A to B, but possibly a more non-linear 'natural' holistic model. In the same way that Wenger argues that learning cannot be separated from our social activities, we see research as not

being separated from teaching and learning. It is not an isolated process. We would do well to adopt a different perspective in addressing the research and teaching nexus and learn from Wenger: 'so what if we adopted a different perspective, one that placed learning in the context of our lived experience of participation in the world?' (1998, p. 3). And also reflect on the natural 'inquiry' model proposed by Brew: 'we shall see ... how teaching is becoming more like a process of inquiry; how research is becoming more like inquiry-based learning; how learning is becoming more akin to research, more focused on inquiry with students being involved in learning through their own inquiries and teachers through investigations into their own teaching' (2006, p. 4).

Acknowledgements

Thanks to all postgraduate students and staff at Nottingham Trent University. Particular special thanks to Jon Hamilton (academic) who produced and edited the film and was in conversation as part of the research.

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