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Original Citation

Harvey, Josie and Eastwood, Linda (2009) Changing Ways Teachers Teach in an Unpredictable Climate: Engaging and Motivating Students in a Creative and Innovative Way. In: London International Conference on Education (LICE-2009), November 9-12, 2009, London, UK. (Unpublished)

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Changing Ways Teachers Teach in an Unpredictable Climate: Engaging and Motivating Students in a Creative and Innovative Way

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Abstract

This paper focuses on one of the findings of a project 'Creativity and Innovation in Teaching in Higher Education' which has been to stimulate, evaluate and promote innovative practice within the University of Huddersfield and among its partners.

This part of the research investigates how one of the findings from this project has been used to encourage and support effective innovative practice in teaching and learning between University staff, through the Creativity Cafés, a practical textbook [1] and a DVD. But does creativity enhance theory and practice for students, or is it just the latest trend? Are teachers willing to take risks in an educational world measured by targets and results?

1. Introduction

The authors of this research have been working on a 2-year TQEF (Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund) project funded by HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) which was completed in July 2009. The aim of the project 'Creativity and Innovation in Teaching in Higher Education' has been to stimulate, evaluate and promote innovative practice within the University of Huddersfield and among its partners.

This part of the research focuses on how one of the findings from this project, the four categories of Creativity identified, have been used to encourage and support effective innovative practice in teaching and learning between different disciplines.

2. Background

At the start of the project, initial interviews with over 40 key University academic staff took place to identify examples of innovative and creative

pedagogy across the University. They were questioned about their understanding of creativity, its importance, and how they had applied it to their teaching.

One question generated a very interesting debate. What is creativity and innovative practice in teaching? All agreed that the purpose of their creative approaches was to engage the students and encourage learning. The responses from staff fell into four broad categories: Creative thinking; Creative Teaching Techniques; Creativity and Community and Employer Engagement; and Creativity in Information Technology. These themes formed the basis for other project outcomes, including the Creativity Cafés, the book and DVD.

Staff were keen to be involved in sharing their creative teaching with others across the University. Many lacked knowledge of innovative practice happening elsewhere, quite often in their own departments too! It became clear how beneficial it would be to get them together, to have a core of people who could establish 'communities of practice' [2] around their creative ideas. The concept of the Creativity Café emerged from this finding.

3. The Creativity Café and its benefit to staff and students

The Creativity Café is based on the 'Learning Café' [1] where 'the café theme is used to get learners networking and sharing ideas in an informal, but structured way' [p.21]. Tables are arranged in 'bistro' style, with tablecloths, candles, flowers and a menu showing the agenda. The facilitators at each table dress as 'waiters' and help 'spill' ideas from the group onto the tablecloth and feedback the discussions. Eight Creativity Cafés have been organised, each one based around the four categories of creativity.

Further research, using five case studies, investigated whether networking at the Cafés did develop creative ideas which impacted on the classroom. Three mentioned how they now had a

'variety of more engaging activities'. Sessions were more interesting to teach and the mood of the sessions were often much lighter. 'Teacher-talk' was less, and the use of PowerPoint was kept to a minimum. It was mentioned how they would now 'experiment with new ideas' and would be 'more flexible' in their sessions.

All the interviewees saw benefits in their students' learning and engagement through using more creative teaching techniques. Students were in a better frame of mind and found the lessons more enjoyable. It gave the opportunity for less able students to flourish, as they were given the chance to demonstrate their creative skills. Students preferred 'more practical activities and less teacher-talk', and liked 'being exposed to a diversity of learning approaches' and learnt better with a 'practical dimension to the theory'. Over time students 'became less resistant to change' and 'open to new ideas'. They 'developed their problem-solving skills', became 'more self-sufficient, and the 'quality of work' was much higher.

4. Developments out of the Creativity Cafés

Based on the evaluations and feedback from the Cafés, a DVD was compiled to film and capture short extracts of creative teaching by University staff, including interviews of students. Staff involved with the project have also compiled a book 'A Toolkit for Creative Teaching in Post-Compulsory Education' [1] offering practitioners innovative teaching ideas to use with their students. Both have received appreciative feedback as a useful resource to enhance creativity in lessons. Staff have gained confidence in trying out new ideas and making changes in their teaching style.

5. Should there be Creativity in the Classroom?

Does creativity enhance theory and practice, or is it just the latest trend? Do students learn any better this way? Furthermore, developing creativity in the classroom often means taking risks. This reflects Grainger, Barnes and Scoffham's [3] comment 'If teachers and lecturers are to adopt innovative ways forward, they need to recognise the tension between the incessant drive for measurable standards on the one hand and the development of creative teaching on the other' [p.244]. Although the participants were

enthusiastic and motivated about being creative, in an education system that is increasingly measured by targets and results, how many staff would prefer to follow safer options rather than risk failure? Eastwood and Ormondroyd [4] question whether 'teachers really (are) encouraged to take risks in their teaching in an ever accountable and unpredictable educational world?' Are the risks too high in making learning more fun and engaging?

6. Conclusion

This paper has focused on how the project has encouraged and supported creative and innovative teaching in the University. From the initial interviews with staff, a need for sharing and networking ideas was identified around the four broad categories of creativity previously identified.

Feedback from staff indicated that they have gained confidence in experimenting with creative ideas in their teaching, and have found students more engaged and motivated too. Important emerging questions developed as part of the research including: do students learn any better this way; and in a target-driven educational world are teachers encouraged to take risks with their teaching? Are the stakes too high?

7. References

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