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Reframing spaces

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Abstract

This film and text showcase an exhibition of materials created by academic staff in the School of Creative Arts as part of a learning and teaching initiative.

The exhibition documented the process of staff learning together about the practice of education and some of the outcomes this process created. The exhibition, held in a Gallery, included materials produced with and for students, and illustrated approaches to research into learning and teaching in this area.

The title 'Reframing Spaces' identifies that the framing of learning spaces influences what happens within them, and how reframing can lead to changed ways of thinking and acting.

Introduction

In this exhibition we bring together two themes: *reframing* and *spaces* to focus on our topic of creative arts teaching. 'Framing provides a means of "constructing" a world, of characterizing its flow, of segmenting events within that world … if we were not able to do such framing, we would be lost in a murk of chaotic experience…' (Bruner, 1990:56). Through

frames we see in particular and limited ways. Frameworks of thinking and action are part of our professional and social identity, and disciplinary frames provide the context for our work. We encourage students to be critical within particular frames and we also identify and challenge the frames themselves. Unnoticed and unquestioned frames allow assumptions about how the world is, rather than the critical challenge that should be part of a higher education context. As professionals, we bring our critical faculties to bear on our disciplinary and educational frameworks. As Barnett (1997:141) argues, 'it is not just a matter, therefore, of whether to act in this way or that, but also of: within what framework shall I act?' Possibilities for reframing can be opened up through critical discourse and action.

Spaces are vibrant with possibility and are not empty. They are populated by culture and expectation and are sites of power relations - 'drawing on a relational orientation to spatiality, space is understood to have meaning through human agency' (Southwood, 2012:89). Spaces may need to be reframed in order for people to use them to engage in reframing their ways of seeing.

Framing of university teaching

University teaching is framed currently within a neoliberal agenda and sustained by language, artefacts and routines around marketization, performativity, competition and individualism. Professionalism and learning by professionals is framed within the context of qualification, accountability and audit. The way these contexts influence our own framing of experience may be noticed or unseen, accepted or resisted. Change in learning and teaching is influenced by managerialist approaches which '…tend to adopt relatively linear strategies: deploying policies through the setting out of objectives and targets, providing guidelines for their implementation, and measuring performance through a set of objective criteria. In reality, this leads to compliance rather than reflective adoption of change' (Fanghanel, 2009:205). This exhibition explores ways we have worked with alternative staff-led approaches to professional learning and practice development.

Spaces for learning about teaching

'…the control of space and the way in which it is valued and represented is evident through timetables, meetings, teaching and office spaces and organizational practices' (Savin-Baden, 2008:9)Dialogic spaces for colleagues to share and mutually challenge ways of thinking and acting are essential for professional learning - 'taking up responsibility as a teacher demands that one critically examines time and time again one's deeply held ideas and beliefs about teaching and being a teacher, because these elements in the personal interpretative framework constitute the very basis for professional judgements and decision making' (Kelchtermans, 2011:124). Spaces for staff should provide 'spaces for disruption' (Quinn, 2012) in all aspects of academic work. This type of professional learning requires engaging with colleagues in a context of trust which is developed over time, and ways in which we have worked to do this are explored in this exhibition.

Structure of the Exhibition

This exhibition presents three spaces which have been created by members of staff in the School of Creative Arts, University of Hertfordshire, to explore staff and student framing and reframing in the field of university teaching and learning:

    The Going Out Project
    Processes of Learning in the Creative Arts
    Creating a Collaborative Text

1 - The Going Out Project

This project is designed to enable groups of staff to create a dialogic space for a day that is physically outside the University and which is not framed by a performativity agenda. Groups choose a mutually agreed topic in educational practice and 'go out' to share thinking and ideas for action. The project is funded by the Dean of School and Associate Dean (Learning and Teaching) but there are no directives or expectations of particular outcomes. This is vital for creating a context of trust and professionalism. Studies in the UK and Finland suggest that many members of staff proactively form informal 'significant networks' (Roxa & Martensson, 2009:214) consisting of small groups of colleagues to discuss teaching. This project enables the creation or extension of these networks.

The exhibits show the contexts and results of the process so far. Staff members commented on the process: 'working outside the University …allowed us to see the issues with fresh eyes…and come up with solutions'; 'ideas burst out when you're not here [on the campus]'; 'with no pressure to deliver anything - we actually delivered a lot'; 'we came away feeling energised - rare at the end of term'.

Spending extended time together enabled people to get to know each other better and establish professional learning relationships which are essential if dialogue is to include challenge. Challenge is needed for reframing thinking and for acting in new ways.

We connected going out with picnics, which can represent the idea of alternative ways of doing things. Picnics can help build community which in turn can enable people to create knowledge and develop the confidence to challenge and change accepted practice (Mandell, 2010). New ideas for practice, conversations, reading and presenting ideas at conferences or in writing, have developed from each of the 'going out' experiences and in some cases this has involved both local colleagues and those from other higher education settings. The engagement with others, and with scholarship, enables colleagues to have evidence to share within a wider context. This exhibition offers opportunities for other people to engage with the ideas.

2 - Processes of Learning in the Creative Arts

The purpose of this project was to engage staff and students in talking together about learning in the creative arts. This could enable both groups to reframe their understanding of each other and their practice. Students come to their courses with expectations framed by prior experience. They are likely to find learning in the creative arts challenging because of the particular pedagogical approaches used in the field: [There] 'is often the unspoken requirement that students experiment, take risks, learn to assess the appropriateness of solutions according to context and engage in a longer and more open-ended process of enquiry than they may previously have been used to' (Vaughan et al, 2008:132). Students need to understand the often tacit pedagogy that they meet when they enter higher education if they are to engage in the experience. This project was designed to support articulation of practice so that it could more easily be shared between staff and students. Shared discussion enables greater understanding about learning processes and provides support for development towards autonomous learning.

All members of staff were invited, at a School event, to contribute ideas for illustrating learning processes in the creative arts. These illustrations acted as metaphors which provide a natural way of sharing conceptual understanding. Cartoon-style pictures were created to identify processes of learning. Staff groups then used and developed these materials through discussing the processes that are important on their particular programmes and how students' learning in these aspects was planned and facilitated. Questions included: how is this particular process developed on your programme? Is it assessed? In what ways is your disciplinary pedagogy discussed with students?

Groups of staff talked about their 'pedagogical content knowledge' (Schulman, 2004:203) which involves understanding disciplinary subject matter in relation to teaching, identifying potential issues with key concepts and understanding the needs of learners in relation to the topic. Similarities and differences between programmes and subject areas were identified. Some members of staff asked their students to explore these ideas and examples of this work are included in the exhibition. Different ways of using these materials to explore learning processes at different stages during a degree programme are being developed. Transitions, including moving into university education, a new discipline, another culture, a new undergraduate level and postgraduate work, can be explored using practical materials to discuss abstract concepts.

3 - Creating a Collaborative Text

This work developed from groups of staff engaging in critique of the 'Processes of Learning in the Creative Arts' project and looking to extend it to include other aspects of learning. 'Knowledge and knowing in art and design is complex and not readily rendered through text. Many practices develop ways of knowing through experience of the tactical, visual and spatial and these ways of knowing are elusive to those outside our community' (Vaughan et al, 2008:142). Colleagues identified aspects such as 'inspiration' and 'space' that needed to be included alongside the processes approach. Following the lead of creative arts colleagues we created workshops for exploring these ideas and for creating materials to share with colleagues and students. The importance of this part of our work was to acknowledge and facilitate staff expertise and leadership so that we were all collaborators and co-creators of the sessions. We used a 'cake methodology' approach described as: relational, co-owned, participatory, reflexive and praxis-orientated (FLΔG Collective, 2014: 58). The process was important as the aim was both to produce a resource for students and to develop a group dialogue around disciplinary learning and teaching practice. Creating a space for conversation about practice was important for ideas to move on. As Zeldin (1998:14) notes, 'when minds meet, they don't just exchange facts: they transform them, reshape them, draw different implications from them, engage in new trains of thought. Conversation doesn't just reshuffle the cards: it creates new cards.'

During the workshops the focus of the text became the documenting of the experiences of students engaged in creative practice. The aim was to share insights between students, as well as between staff and students, about learning and creating. Colleagues also decided the form in which the text should be produced so that it became clearly a School of Creative Arts' product. The product itself is still developing and will be seen in embryonic form in the exhibition. It will continue to be developed, forming a focus for articulating practice.

The importance of continuing dialogue to create practice is central to this work. 'Dialogic spaces are those that increasingly seem to be marginalized and ignored across the higher education sector…Dialogic spaces need to be framed, delved into, argued for and prized'(Savin-Baden, 2008:65). Spaces to enquire into learning and teaching are vital if strong disciplinary educational practice is to be maintained, and if it is to be developed as the discipline itself changes.

Reframing Processes

In this exhibition we show the spaces we have created and the products we have made to support shared understanding of process of learning. We show how the ideas and materials are being used in practice and how they are having an impact students' engagement with thinking about learning in the disciplinary area of creative arts. We are continuing to consider the questions below in relation to learning process and these questions will apply to teaching in other disciplinary areas:

> What are the key aspects of disciplinary practice that students need to understand and be able to do?
> In what ways is your teaching underpinned by ways of knowing in your discipline?
> How do you share your teaching purposes and approaches with your students?

In addition to exhibiting products we seek to show something of the process of working together as staff. This involves taking a particular approach to joint working. We have drawn on ideas from work on building 'communities of practice' (Wenger et al 2002) and 'professional learning communities' (Stoll & Louis, 2007) to identify the importance of enquiring together, developing a shared focus and creating energy and purpose within a responsive structure. Leadership needs to be framed to enable colleagues to take initiative and the ideas of 'host leadership' (McKergow & Bailey, 2014) whereby the leader takes the host's responsibilities including preparing the context, connecting the participants and drawing things together at the end, have been important. In a host role, the leader steps both forward to take initiative and backward to allow others to lead. The leader needs to be attuned to the needs of the context, to listen to all involved and to be energetic in communicating with colleagues in a range of ways. Questions we can all ask about our own contexts include:

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Where is the importance of ongoing enquiry into disciplinary teaching evident in your context?
In what ways do you nurture spaces for conversations about teaching?
How do leadership approaches enable colleagues to contribute to the development of principled, effective disciplinary educational practice?

A Provocation

This exhibition shares ideas for practice in the development of learning and teaching, but intends to do more than this. It is designed to provoke thinking about how educational practice in higher education is currently framed and how it might be reframed. As Barnett (1997: 155) notes, practice is set within particular ideologies which academics can accept or contest. He identifies three challenges: 'of framing, of voice and of strategy.' In relation to disciplinary teaching our framing is shown in the exhibition and our voice and strategy *are* the exhibition. We hope this provokes you to share your own.

← Read 'State education for state control...'   Read 'Is there place for rote learning multiplication tables...' →

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