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Learning and teaching partnership narratives relating to the open course 'Creativity for Learning in Higher Education' (#creativeHE)

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Abstract

In this article, the authors share their experiences about partnership learning and teaching approaches they experienced within the open course 'Creativity for Learning in Higher Education' (#creativeHE), linked to the postgraduate module offered by the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT) at Manchester Metropolitan University in collaboration with the Creative Academic, London Metropolitan University and colleagues from other institutions in the UK and further afield, such as the University of Macedonia in Greece. Through reflective narratives from student and staff learners on the course, a facilitator and an organiser, insights are gained about their experience. Lessons learnt are shared, so as to inform future iterations of #creativeHE, and may also be useful for others who consider opening up courses in higher education.

Introduction

Creativity is fundamental to being human; its use and continuing development is essential for humanity to flourish and therefore an important focus for learning and teaching in all phases of education. Creativity brings something fresh and vital to our experience of living. It nurtures our sense of personal fulfilment, feeds our curiosity and passions and transforms our thinking and actions. It enables us to imagine new possibilities and motivates us to invent new realities.

Creativity involves imagination, the capacity to form mental images, connections and constructs of objects, situations and ideas, and the capability, will and qualities to turn ideas into meaningful artefacts and processes. Creativity is a situated, contextual, ecological and emergent phenomenon, neatly captured by Rogers' (1961, p.350) synthesis description of the creative process: *"the emergence in action of a novel relational product growing out of the uniqueness of the individual on the one hand, and the materials, events, or circumstances of their life"*.

Higher education (HE) is a greenhouse for the creation of new knowledge through research and scholarship and the dissemination of this for the wider good. Creativity, along with criticality, is integral to knowledge development in many different disciplinary fields, while experimentation and improvisation facilitate the making of new and novel connections that lead to new understandings and new realities. Through their research and scholarship, many HE teachers are immersed in the development of knowledge, but they also have an important role to play in encouraging and enabling learners, the next generation of knowledge workers, to use and develop their creativity.

Overview of #creativeHE

The aim of #creativeHE is to help HE teachers build their capacity, capability and confidence for facilitating learners' creativity, as well as use creative learning and teaching approaches in their practice. The course site has been developed at Peer to Peer University (P2PU) – see <https://courses.p2pu.org/en/courses/2615/creativity-for-learning-in-higher-education/> – while the interaction takes place in a Google+ community – see <https://plus.google.com/communities/110898703741307769041> – and via Twitter using the #creativeHE hashtag. However, it must be noted that #creativeHE also attracts students in HE and further learners from outside the sector. It has been offered since 2015, with multiple iterations and cross-institutional collaboration, using a distributed facilitation model and a wide range of inquiry-based approaches that helped us, namely the organiser, a facilitator, a student learner and learner who was a practising educational developer, explore creativity in HE from different angles. Facilitated #creativeHE discussions and other forms of social interaction formed around challenges, provocations and the sharing of perspectives and resources provide abundant opportunity for participants to share their perspectives, imaginations and creative artefacts to co-create new meaning (Jackson *et al.*, 2016).

The particular iteration of #creativeHE offered in 2015 over eight weeks (September to November) in collaboration with Manchester Metropolitan University, London Metropolitan University, University of Macedonia and Creative Academic was used as a case to collect data for a phenomenographic study in which the qualitatively different variations of collaborative open learning as experienced by learners was explored. This study revealed new insights linked to patterns in collaborative open learning (immersive and selective) and illuminated the importance of boundary crossing within this context. The findings of this study led to the development of a new framework for designing and evaluating cross-boundary collaborative open learning (Nerantzi, 2017).

The course was organised around a series of weekly topics and activities, supported by appropriate resources, that were intended to encourage participants to think about a particular concept and reflect on and share their own beliefs, practices and experiences. During the eight weeks, forty-three active participants made over 350 posts and over 1000 comments, and many of the posts contained links to personal blogs or e-portfolios – that's a lot of contributions and conversation! It constitutes a huge collective resource to stimulate thinking and – from a facilitator's perspective – to acknowledge and value. But such statistics can never get to the heart of what is, after all, a process for sharing personal meanings and co-creating new meaning. The meaning is in the conversation and in the emotional responses that we make to the posts we read, the personal stories that are shared, the images we see and the videos we watch.

The #creativeHE Google+ space contained two types of spaces. The first was 'public' and therefore open to every member of the community, whilst the second one was 'private' in the sense of sub-groups of specific interest within the course community. Nevertheless, anyone could join these groups at any time, but there was an expectation that those who were admitted would participate in learning projects that were determined by the group. In this respect, these groups were intended to behave like 'collectives' in the manner described by Thomas and Seely Brown (2011, p.52) who state: "*a collective is very different from an ordinary community. Where communities can be passive, collectives cannot. In communities*

people learn in order to belong. In a collective, people belong in order to learn. Communities derive their strength from creating a sense of belonging, while collectives derive theirs from participation". Willis and Greenhalgh (2016) provide a perspective on our experience of being a collective.

What follows are four personal perspectives of participants involved in this event: the organiser, a facilitator, a student learner and learner who was a practising educational developer. They share their perceptions of the event and their reflections, as well as the professional risks and opportunities this experience entailed. Each narrative is written in the personal style of its contributor and captures the authentic voice of each individual. The narratives are followed by a synthesis of the voices and illuminate emerging partnership characteristics, which will be valuable to take into consideration, further to shape the course and the associated activities and discussions. The approach used in this article has characteristics of narrative inquiry, which aids the social construction to gain insights into experiences so as to inform pedagogical change (Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

Four partnership narratives

A student learner's narrative

Nikos Mouratoglou, nikosmouratog@gmail.com

My name is Nikos and I am a PhD student in the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. During my recent postgraduate studies at the University of Macedonia, I voluntarily participated in a course related to Information Communication Technologies and Lifelong Learning. During this course our Professor invited us to join the #creativeHE open course, which was carried out in English (a foreign language for me) with academics from other universities, as an extra and optional learning opportunity.

Reflecting now on my experience, I can say that the initial feeling was that my participation in the course was risky, not only in terms of time-consuming and engagement, but also due to the interaction developed among students, staff and academics with whom I was not familiar. Moreover, the fact that it was the first time that I participated in an online course, was also perceived for me as a risk. However, my interest was intrigued both by the topic of the course and the challenge of dealing with the above-mentioned risks.

Making the decision to get involved in the course was not easy. I felt 'vulnerable' as I was just a postgraduate student being encouraged to develop partnerships with academics from other institutions; also being Greek with English as a second language and therefore anxious to communicate effectively. However, the approach of distributed facilitation, as well as the shared goals, and the notion of collectives formed a reciprocal framework in which all the participants demonstrated respect, trust, joint commitment and emotional connection. They were all willing to promote discussion and reflection on the topics addressed, encourage participation, reassure for potential anxieties and provide substantial feedback. In this way a collaborative learning culture was formed (Mouratoglou, 2016a).

For instance, the formation of groups in the Google+ community, resulted in working closer with some of the participants, communicating more often through emails and Google

Hangouts and therefore developing stronger relationships through our collaboration. The bonds of partnerships started emerging. By exchanging views, experiences, personal stories and artefacts during our conversations, the sense of membership and belonging was enhanced (Mouratoglou, 2016b). I felt that I was not just an observer, but an active participant in an active social context. The support and guidance was a key factor for making me feel comfortable enough for starting sharing my own perspectives and experiences, a moment that I turned into a truly partner, both contributing and gaining.

One of the results of this partnership was that I co-published seven publications in two magazines, co-edited an issue of the Creative Academic Magazine and co-created and co-facilitated a Facebook Group related to Creativity and Learning, things that would not have happened if I had not participated in the course. Even, now, while writing this part, I can surely state that this is the result of that first partnership, which once mitigated my personally perceived lurking risks and since then supports further partnerships far beyond the implementation of the #creativeHE course. A partnership that co-creates other partnerships.

A staff learner's narrative

Debbie Baff deborah.baff@swansea.ac.uk

I'm Debbie, I am a Senior Academic Developer from Swansea University, South Wales, UK. I'm also a part time PhD student in E-Research and Technology Enhanced Learning.

I became involved with the #creativeHE course as a participant in 2015. For me, the idea of using creativity in Higher Education was intriguing and I wanted to see what it was all about! I found that taking part was instrumental in my personal and professional development and in finding the confidence to re-embrace creativity.

I have always loved being creative as a child, but if I am honest, I felt I had lost touch with my creativity as an adult. I felt a sense of constraint in my former role within the surveying profession, as there just did not seem to be the opportunity to be creative. Changing direction after redundancy and moving into education opened the door to creativity but it was the open course #creativeHE that kickstarted my interest to have a go and fired my inner creativity by working in partnership with others!

I remember feeling apprehensive and out of my depth. I worried that I wouldn't be as creative as other people. Sometimes life gets in the way of best laid plans, and I felt frustrated at not making as much progress in the course as I would have liked and fell behind at the start. I talked about this in an article for the Creative Academic Magazine (Baff, 2016) Instead of giving up, I persevered and shared my frustrations. To my great delight I found that people were very supportive across the #creativeHE community. Participants and facilitators commented that they also experienced problems in finding time to contribute and finding their way around the learning environment. Knowing that others were also going through difficulties helped a lot. I found a sense of community, which meant that it became a very familiar place.

I found that as the course went on, our shared sense of community developed across the wider #creativeHE participants who seemed willing to take more risks through engaging with various tools and mediums that were new to them. People seemed able to 'put themselves

out there ' and this in turn encouraged others, including myself. Sharing our thoughts through our creations helped us see others as 'real' people (Gunawardena and Zittle 1997).

I felt a real sense of community and warmth in the collaborative nature of the course. One of the strengths was the partnership between participants and course facilitators. It felt like being on a level playing field within which we were all on a journey together. The willingness of participants and facilitators to contribute and comment gave participants the confidence to think outside of the box and have a go. We were encouraged by the facilitators to make use of different technologies through their own experimentation with new tools. I would like to mention a specific example in this respect in relation to using mobile apps for sketchnoting. Although I had already started to experiment with sketchnoting, through using paper and pens, I felt encouraged to use my Ipad and various mobile apps to visualise things. I felt confident to submit my creations in a supportive environment. Later, this made me think about different ways that I could use creativity within my daily work both from a personal aspect and also within my professional life. I have found a love of sketchnoting using my IPad and now incorporate this into my studies and my own professional development such as sketchnoting at conferences. I also now use it in many situations in the workplace ranging from taking notes at meetings, brainstorming for course development, and as a communication tool. One of my sketchnotes is even now used to communicate our new Continued Professional Development Framework on our departmental website!

<https://salt.swan.ac.uk/cpd/>

A facilitator's narrative

Norman Jackson lifewider@gmail.com

The idea of creativity has interested me for as long as I can remember but the belief that higher education needs to encourage and enable learners to be creative has been a focus of my work for the last two decades. Three years ago I co-founded Creative Academic (<http://www.creativeacademic.uk/>) with Chrissi Nerantzi to support a community of people interested in helping learners use their creativity. One of our goals is to facilitate professional learning relating to creativity in HE so I was delighted when Chrissi invited me to be one of the facilitators in the second iteration of the #creativeHE Creativity in Higher Education course. In fact, this was on-the-job learning for me as it was my first complete experience of participating in an open online course. I approached the task as I do with every other collaborative project I am involved in – I am a learner like everyone else. We are all in it together - we all have something to offer and we can all learn from each other as was so clearly demonstrated below.

Over the eight weeks of the course I engaged in many productive conversations, met and formed good relationships with many people, learnt about and used new technological tools and enhanced my understandings of many things. My involvement took two different forms. As a facilitator in both the course community and one of the smaller groups, I was expected to encourage and engage other participants and value their contributions. As a participant I offered my own perspectives on the topics being discussed. Like most participants I recorded some of my learning, thoughts and feelings in a blog (Jackson 2015 - October/November posts) which enables me to look back on my experience.

Like many other participants I can see that my journey began with confusion and frustration with not understanding how the process and technologies worked. It felt that I was the only one experiencing these difficulties but of course most people are. As I got more familiar and comfortable with the technology and I shared my thoughts and experiences with other participants in my group my relationships with the environment for learning changed. I can see that a significant part of my journey was relational. Gradually new understandings emerged together with enjoyment and feeling part of something that was a meaningful part of my everyday existence. In making this journey I was helped by other participants who joined me in a Google hangout every Sunday evening for a chat that focused on our experience of the course and how we felt about it (Willis and Greenhalgh 2016). There were eventually fifteen people in the group, including four student members, with eight participants regularly contributing to conversations. Each week I invited participants in the group to a Google+ hangout and the friendly chats usually involved at least five members of the group. While interactions in the main group focused on the topics that formed the structure of the course, in the smaller group we shared our experiences of the course, our personal interests and perspectives on questions we were interested in. This social and personal dimension made all the difference to our individual experiences and out of it grew new and significant relationships and a deeper commitment to each other: without this commitment new partnerships will not form.

Collaboration and partnership works best when there is commitment to a shared activity. This might have a focus on the learning process or a project as a recent phenomenographic study revealed two learning patterns, selective and immersive collaborative open learning, which indicates specific differences how collaborative learning is experienced (Nerantzi, 2017). One of the case studies of this study was the #creativeHE iteration used in this article.

While the course was running we undertook a project to map our own involvement and emotional experience as the course was running. This was something that we determined for ourselves. As the course was finishing our small group shared the belief that although much had been learnt it would be lost as there was no way of organizing and curating the learning or artefacts that had been produced. The Google+ platform does not provide the tools to organize content and it's a significant deficiency of the platform in supporting online learning communities. The group decided to curate the learning from the course using Creative Academic Magazine as a medium. Through December and January we met at least fortnightly in the Google+ hangout to plan, develop ideas and construct the magazine which was published online at the end of January with five members of the group, including two students as co-editors and co-writers of articles (Jackson and others 2016). Producing the magazine enabled us to look reflectively, analytically, critically and synthetically at the event as a whole - each member of the editorial team contributing articles based on their own analysis. As a result we gained much deeper insights into the experience, the pedagogy and the outcomes.

The combined course experience and post-course production of the magazine showed me that for an effective partnership involving students and educational practitioners you need an environment in which people can come together and forge relationships and commitment to each other. Out of this set of relationships ideas can be shared and grown and eventually projects emerge and are acted upon to achieve something that is valued.

An organiser's narrative

Chrissi Nerantzi c.nerantzi@mmu.ac.uk

I am an academic developer within the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching at Manchester Metropolitan University in the United Kingdom. My interests lie within creative and open education and my approach is collaborative, open and evidence-based, and a willingness to experiment and try new things.

As the originator of #creativeHE I designed and developed the initial open course and the associated approved postgraduate module that is part of our Masters in Higher Education within CELT. Designed-into the open course are pedagogical and collaborative features that extend and foster flexible and creative engagement that can be fully contextualised to learners' needs, interests and aspirations as well as enable the exploration of a wide range of thematic areas, concepts, practices and research. Freely available social media make engagement beyond the module and institutional boundaries possible, creating opportunities for cross-institutional collaboration and professional development not exclusively for academics but also for students and individuals from the wider public. The open course #creativeHE is inquiry-based and dynamic. No two iterations are the same. However, the wider focus remains on creative learning and teaching.

Ideas grow when they are shared. Sharing also means letting go of control. This can be risky. However, research shows that professional development in cross-boundary networks and communities as part of cross-institutional collaborations in the area of academic development has a positive impact on engagement (Nerantzi, 2017). Furthermore, Shagrir's (2017) study highlights that collaboration more generally within academic development promotes new learning and teaching ideas. This is definitely something that is at the heart of #creativeHE as novel pedagogical ideas, concepts and approaches are introduced and modelled to create experiences for experimentation, risk taking and reflection.

Social leadership based on trust developed in social networks (Stodd, 2016) characterises how I work with others. It is democratic and collaborative expressed through shared course responsibility through a small team of distributed facilitators. Beyond co-facilitation it also includes course co-design and co-evaluation. I also shared the role of course organisation. I feel that this strategy empowers team members and creates a sense of co-ownership and partnership. It also has practical benefits such as sharing of workload and troubleshooting. For example, the facilitation team consists of a range of individuals, new and more experienced from different disciplines and professional areas and not only support learners in their development, but it also creates opportunities for professional learning and mentoring for the facilitators. My research (Nerantzi, 2017) has shown that facilitators as co-learners is something that is valued by learners as it makes participation in an open course horizontal and enables learning with and from each other, not just among learners, but also among facilitators and learners.

This collaborative partnership at course level between organiser and facilitators has led to varied and thought provoking learning and development activities which emerged through contributions and leadership from individuals in the facilitation team. I am pleased I took the risk, trust collaborating facilitators as this has led us to the development of the #creativeHE community, online and offline.

Conclusion

The reflective narratives shared in this article have enabled the analysis and synthesis of learning-partnership concepts linked to #creativeHE from different perspectives. Key observations are shared below:

1. How new partnerships have been sustained and grown

The open course #creativeHE, combined with facilitated open conversations on the #creativeHE platform has, over three years, led to the development of the online #creativeHE community, which at the time of writing this article has over 640 members. It must however be recognised that only a small proportion of the members actively contribute through posts and discussions: this is the nature of such fora.

Reflecting on the narratives in an inductive approach, it can be ascertained that there are some factors that contributed in the mitigation of risks in the #creativeHE course.

The first one was the development of significant interpersonal relationships among the participants, which formed a culture of acceptance. Consequently, the participants were openly discussing their concerns/frustrations with the rest, pointing out commonalities, receiving support and guidance and therefore constraining the impact of their risks.

Moreover, the collaborative approach which was fundamental during the course, as well as the notion of social leadership, resulted in a horizontal approach for partnership. There was therefore a deeper, joint and authentic commitment in relation to a shared and genuine interest, which established the sense of a supportive context. Another important element was the flexibility and openness of the course in terms of personalisation, either based on the content or the tools of engagement. In this way, the participants, were able to post their contributions with the content and tool of their choice, felt more comfortable, without having to comply with any predetermined practices.

What began as an online platform for periodic developmental experiences relating to creativity in education has expanded into a platform for explorative discussions linked to specific creativity projects led by the Creative Academic. This partnership, that was initiated at the event that forms the basis of this article, has resulted in a range of scholarly explorations and dissemination activities through Creative Academic Magazine.

From September 2017, #creativeHE also had a local dimension and the offer of monthly meetups hosted by different HE institutions. By these means, partnerships developed through the online platform have extended to social face-to-face interactions in institutions.

2. How conditions are created for networks to include students and practitioners: the centrality of meaningful relationships in which people share their feelings as well as their intellectual knowledge

Respectful and collaborative staff/student partnerships facilitate a culture of active participation. Status does not matter; what matters is that the culture which is established during the on-line conversation enables and facilitate interactions through which relationships can grow and people are able to develop a sense of commitment to each other. Out of this, new things will flourish. To create these partnerships with learners at different

stages in their lives, we need to be proactive in recruiting a diverse group of participants - it won't happen by itself. The sharing of highly personal life circumstances and stories reveals a culture of trust and enables participants to engage emotionally not just intellectually.

3. How the #creativeHE course might be designed to capitalise on what has been learnt about productive learning partnerships

Surprisingly, the #creativeHE course has never repeated the use of small groups in any of the subsequent iterations because the duration of courses has been shortened – typically to five days. Should a longer course be offered it would be possible to re-design #creativeHE in such a way that collaboration and partnerships within small groups would be an explicit pedagogical goal.

For example, it would be possible to structure a #creativeHE 'course' or 'exploration' over eight weeks, beginning with large group interactions (e.g. the first two weeks) that encouraged people to share their interests; then, from these interactions, smaller groups could be grown for those who wished to learn in these, working together on one or more 'themes or projects' that they determined for themselves (four weeks). Over this time, the groups could share what they were doing with the course community. Then, in the final two weeks, the groups could share the results of their explorations and any artefacts that had been produced with the community.

The project would be the vehicle for individual and collective creativity and any artefacts produced, with their meaning and formation, would be the substance of what was shared. Given the limitations of the Google+ platform as a vehicle for curating the learning from such, perhaps production of a magazine could be designed into the enterprise as a choice, with each group synthesising the results of its project and what it had learnt, for the benefit of the wider HE community if they wished to do so. Furthermore, a synchronous online event using webinar technologies or face-to-face where feasible could be organised to share learning and outputs. This format might represent an opportunity for collaborative learning to be experienced, both as process-based or project-based collaborative open learning and any production of artefacts determined by the group.

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