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Creative Psychologists: reflections on teaching and pedagogic practice inspired by an arts-based Away Day

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Abstract

In an unusual departmental Away Day, instead of delving into discussions about established disciplinary modes of teaching and research, colleagues from the Department of Psychology at MMU were invited to attend a very different type of event, and to engage with explorative activities more associated with the creative arts. The idea behind the departmental event was to facilitate us to bond as a group but also to encourage us to pursue and develop continuing professional development (CPD) by engaging with elements of teaching and pedagogic practice from a very different disciplinary perspective. In this reflective commentary, the authors share their experience and reflections from taking part in and engaging with this meeting. The authors reflect on issues such as the effect of traditional academic criticism on students' self-esteem and creativity, as well as alternative assessment and teaching methods that aim to enhance student agency and engagement. In summary, this *Think Piece* is a reflection on the authors' creative selves, and the role of expressive freedom and creativity in relation to teaching psychology in higher education.

Keywords: Creativity; Authentic Assessment; Appreciative Inquiry; Teaching; Psychology; Art

1. Context

For academics from the Department of Psychology at Manchester Metropolitan University, a UK Higher Education (old Polytechnic) institution, an Away Day is an annual meeting that aims to inspire and motivate staff. Historically, Away Days include discussions and presentations, along with stated aims and outcomes for attendees, with a view to developing teaching and learning practice under the remit of Continuous Professional Development (CPD). However, the Away Day that is to be the focus for this Think Piece was very different. Instead of perpetuating dominant discourses involving metrics and the mechanics of established practice, we were invited to engage with a range of creative arts based practices, guided by an artist. Having an artist to encourage us to get involved in activities such as painting and writing poetry was important and inspirational, as most of the attendees do not normally engage – either formally or informally – in such activities.

It was made clear at the outset that the purpose of this alternative Away Day was to encourage the academic team to not only bond as a group, but also to

engage with the arts-based activities, in order to facilitate potential ideas for fresh and alternative pedagogic, teaching and assessment practices. The meeting took place at *Friends' Meeting House*, located in the centre of Manchester; in addition to being a meeting place, it is also place of worship for the Quakers, a faith group largely opposed to conflict, and who engage in the experience and practice of shared contemplation.

2. The Away Day & the events

The first activity of the day involved a long roll of paper being placed on to the floor; this was made available for us to paint on. A little later, we were encouraged to dance, write haikus and draw. Whilst drawing, it was noticeable that a number of colleagues were engaging in relaxed conversation, (a phenomenon that generally did not occur as part of the previous Away Day contexts). This meant that as a group, we started to learn new information from and about colleagues, including that quite a number of them were already talented artists.

Of course, a spectrum of thoughts and responses were expressed by participating colleagues, which ranged from being very positive to very negative. Some felt somewhat inspired by the nature of the event, and got involved in the majority of activities; (although some felt that an explicit and critical reflection on the aims of the Away Day would have been useful and added value). On the other hand, some colleagues felt that this was not the best use of their time, and took the decision to leave early. The authors belonged to the initial group of attendees, and whilst feeling challenged, engaged with most of the activities, (although neither of us had the courage to dance on the table, as a couple of our more *liberated* colleagues did). We felt that the aim of bonding the group was, in the main, achieved; this also includes the small number of colleagues who decided to bond by escaping early and going to the pub – as a result of their discomfort with the session.

3. Embracing risk

As we immersed ourselves in drawing, haiku writing and dancing, it occurred to us that we were being given the freedom to take risks in a safe space, and to discover avenues of potential practice that we had not previously explored. Naturally, as part of – and as a consequence of – this, we began to consider the types of learning environments that we create for our own students, and whether our more traditional and disciplinary-staid approaches foster creativity. Biesta, (2013) talks about the importance of being able to embrace risk in education; creativity and risk-taking unfortunately tend to be oppositional to dominant educative climates. However, they are compatible, indeed essential for the belief that positive and constructive change can be possible; especially where developing critical and creative skills and abilities in students, teachers and researchers is concerned. Teaching that invests time and effort to identify social injustices can facilitate an agenda to explore, address and implement change. Teaching and learning in Higher Education should not be restricted to existing practices or competency-based assessments, but should also address the political (in the sense of politicised and politicising) aspects of education, to critique and seek positive and constructive change in wider society. This reconstructive approach to educational practice broadens the scope of learning from a narrow curriculum to one which engages the learner in cultural and ecological politics.

4. Silence in the classroom

Meeting in a hall where silence is a key feature of Quaker worship was serendipitous, as a number of colleagues embrace silence as a pedagogical tool. Silence can be used to stimulate, to engage and to challenge. For example, when a seminar tutor who subscribes to this approach asks a question on a topic, they might simply wait – for a protracted period of time – for a response. In the main, answers and responses are generally forthcoming. It is worth the wait in silence, though the wait can be discomforting for tutor and students alike. Speaking in front of a group can cause considerable anxiety and the classroom should be a safe space in which students are encouraged to develop this very important skill.

On the other hand, silence of the students should not always be viewed as something that is negative (Ollin, 2008; Wang & Moskal, 2019); for example, students

may be silent because they need time to process what they are learning. They might need time to think about the material, and/or to write their thoughts down. Vocalisation does not necessarily always lead to effective learning, and silence should not always be interpreted as non-participation or passive learning (Ollin, 2008; Wang & Moskal, 2019). It is therefore important to consider the value that silence can have in the classroom and be inquisitive about what it might mean in different occasions.

5. Critique and creativity

One aspect of the Away Day that made an impression on us was the fact that our artistic work was not subject to critique by either colleagues or the instructor. Evaluation and critical reflection are important, as without it, it can be difficult to achieve higher academic standards. Critical thinking is one of the most valuable skills that one can learn at university (Foundation for Young Australians, 2015); by evaluating students' work, we teach them valuable skills, such as being able to write in an accurate, concise and clear way.

However, it is also true that academic judgement and critique can, at times, have an adverse effect on students, especially where expressive freedom, creativity and confidence is concerned. Intensively policed practices and routines associated with academic discipline has the potential to decrease the intrinsic motivation to study. Rule-based rigidity can make it difficult for students to find their voice, and freely explore what they are genuinely interested in. It is common to find that a student's first response to critical feedback on an assessment is to compare themselves and their academic performance with others in relation to marks awarded. This, in turn can lead towards issues with confidence and low self-esteem. Given that undergraduate students are making their first hesitant and fragile steps in to the academic world, it is important that we provide appropriate levels of support, whilst also recognising that it is important to prepare students for the demands and rigours of a competitive workplace. It can be a difficult balance to strike.

Research suggests that the relationship between criticism and creativity is complex. Being highly self-critical has been shown to reduce creativity (Zabelina & Robinson, 2010) and lower self-esteem (Värlander, 2008). Furthermore, performance-related stress has been associated with decreased creativity (Byron et al., 2010). Nevertheless, there is evidence that certain types of critique and evaluation are beneficial for divergent thinking (Wang et al., 2017), depending on the agreement between the individual's motivation and the type of evaluation. More specifically, Wang et al. (2017) showed that when there is helpful and positive critique and evaluation, individuals exhibited a positive personal growth attitude. These individuals became more focused on satisfying personal aspirations and manifested higher levels of divergent thinking, in comparison to those that adopt avoidance strategies aimed at resolving perceived mistakes and satisfying other people's aspirations. Further studies are needed to explore this effect on creativity more comprehensively (Runco & Ancar, 2012).

One approach that has been developed and used to empower students is *appreciative inquiry*; this aims to involve students in the development of the teaching curriculum and academic communities (Kadi-Hanifi et al., 2014). The approach focuses on building upon existing strengths and successes of the student, rather than correcting problems and critically highlighting deficits. Lecturers and students become more equally involved in dialogue about the nature and direction of teaching and learning – focusing more on what is effective for the student. There is some evidence that appreciative inquiry can have a positive effect on the student experience, including acceptance of diversity, support in achieving higher expectations, and helpful peer support (Kadi-Hanifi et al, 2014).

Another relevant approach is *authentic assessment*, i.e. 'the extent to which the assessment of an educational course matches the key aims and intended outcomes' (Murphy, 2006, p 44). This approach emphasizes the importance of establishing an ecologically valid context for assessment, as opposed to an abstract context that many traditional types of assessment tend to adopt. The aim is to create a form of assessment that is similar to a situation that students could perhaps encounter in the real world (Herrington & Herrington, 1998). Another approach of interest is

'ipsative assessment', whereby students' coursework is compared to their own previous work, and not to the coursework of other students (Hughes, 2014). The focus of this approach is on the progress of the individual student and the achievement of their own personal best, instead of trying to conform to an external standard that is the same for all.

As with any situation in life, studying can be a source of positive and negative emotions, and we cannot always shield students from disappointment. Värlander, (2008) suggests that emotions should be considered as part of the learning experience, rather than something that impedes learning. A positive climate could be achieved by encouraging students to show empathy towards peers and address the range of emotions that may be experienced upon receiving written and / or verbal feedback, (including – but not exclusive to – anxiety, confidence and joy). It would be interesting to explore the effect of such activities on the students' creativity.

6. Increasing student agency

The academic journey should be about increased student agency: undergraduate students start their degree usually with very little freedom, and they are increasingly given more freedom to explore topics that they are interested in as their degree progresses. The question is, are we as academics and educators effective in helping students become gradually more independent in their learning?

There has been an increasing emphasis on the importance of students being actively involved in their own learning and assessment, rather than being passive subjects of a top-down policy (Adie et al., 2018). With some subtle help and scaffolding from lecturers, students can become active agents in their learning and become much more effective as independent and confident learners. Co-creating course curricula with the students is one way of increasing student agency. Bovill, (2014) provides tentative qualitative evidence on the effect of co-creating curricula with the students in three universities. The results indicated that students appear to show greater group cohesion, higher levels of confidence, motivation, performance and understanding of the material.

7. Alternative *vs* traditional assessment

The need for alternative and creative practices in education has been widely documented (e.g. Brian & Clegg, 2006; James & Nerantzi, 2019). The question remains, should contemporary ideas around assessment practices such as authentic assessment replace more traditional methods? Quansah (2018) suggests that both have their virtues. More specifically, traditional assessments tend to be high in validity, objectivity, and reliability. They are typically easy to measure and can be very effective when used as a learning tool. For example in the preparation and participation of an examination, students often delve into the literature and critically evaluate the studies, material and source, thus broadening the scope of information that they are exposed to. Furthermore, there is some evidence to suggest that alternative forms of assessment do not always guarantee higher engagement with learning, Ellis et al. (2019) notes that authentic assessment does not always prevent or discourage plagiarism. This is surprising, given that authentic assessment is thought to increase student engagement and interest in their coursework. Alternative ways of teaching and assessment should be considered as additional tools in our teaching toolbox, rather than as a panacea (Quansah, 2018). Having more options and teaching techniques can only be beneficial for addressing an increasingly diverse student population.

8. Closing remark

The creative-arts-based Away Day encouraged the authors reflect on their pedagogic and teaching practices. We will continue to explore how we can make our teaching more relevant, effective and creative for our students.

9. Disclosure statement

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11. Open Access Policy

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