Supporting Practice-based Undergraduate Students in Academic Study through Creative Learning Strategies

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ABSTRACT

This case study disseminates research and reflection on teaching practices which sought to address the needs of first year BA (Hons) Theatre degree students who were transitioning from a BTEC performing arts background. Drawing on reflections upon the delivery of a first year, second semester core module (Theatre History) which introduces students to theatre texts from different historical periods, this case study will reflect, and offer initial thoughts, upon the effectiveness of using creative learning to engage and improve outcomes for undergraduate students on this module. The case study outlines and evaluates the teaching strategies that were adapted and implemented to support students transitioning from practice-based further education courses and who were finding the theoretical and academic aspects of the course difficult in terms of personal engagement. The study concludes with a summation of the achievement of students on final assessment in relation to their previous achievements on the module and reflects upon the success of the teaching practices adopted to support the students’ academic development.

Keywords
Creative learning | Engagement and participation | Practice-based learning | Torrance

INTRODUCTION

The case study institution is a UK university. The University’s BA (Hons) Theatre course combines learning in partnership with a professional regional theatre, and students have the opportunity to study and explore the work of theatre by means of an innovative partnership between the two organisations. The partnership provides undergraduate students with the opportunity to observe the process of play production in a working theatre and gives them access to professionals working in the theatre industry. By providing a blend of practical and academic learning, students study a range of modules that deepen their understanding of theatre practice.

Students begin the second semester of their first year by studying a range of modules which includes a core module, Theatre History, which is designed to introduce them to a range of historical play texts and theatre practices. The learning outcomes for the module seek to develop the students’ understanding of the relationship between historical periods and the plays produced, contextualise their form and function culturally, historically and theatrically and...
identify and explain the functions of the elements of dramatic texts. The module develops individual academic skills through collaborative group work, with students being assessed in a group presentation and seminar format and academic writing through an individual essay-based assessment.

The course delivery was led by the module leader and supported by two post-graduate trainee teachers completing initial teacher training at the University. The trainee teachers are given the opportunity to undertake placement practice in a variety of educational settings. The Theatre and Performing Arts programmes at the University offer them placement opportunities within the department under the guidance and leadership of the course leader and supporting academic staff. Two trainee teachers were assigned a placement on the 2016/17 academic year, having come from quite diverse academic backgrounds.

Previously the trainees had completed undergraduate studies in Contemporary Theatre and English respectively, bringing a wider, varied range of experience and skills to the course. Their teaching roles were integrated into the overall delivery of the learning programme, with the students taking part in lecture delivery, leading segments of seminar discussions and acting as support mentors for the students. Trainee teachers on placement are also required to develop their own understanding of the course content alongside developing their practical and theoretical teaching knowledge and to regularly take part in the learning activities themselves, working alongside the undergraduate students.

**The Challenge**

A key dramatic text that is explored on the course is “The Rover”, by seventeenth century playwright Aphra Behn (1677). Possibly the first commercially successful female playwright in the UK, Behn’s play, set in Naples during the Lenten carnival, explores how in a time of oppressive laws and customs, the carnival setting was used for the inversion of traditional roles and identities (Aughterson, 2003). Restoration play texts may be linguistically challenging for students, many of whom have not studied drama from this historical period before. Although all students on the degree course had completed their first semester in higher education successfully, it was observed through this module delivery, that many of them were not still comfortable with the transition from further education to higher education. The group were from varied backgrounds with varying levels of experience and knowledge. Many had come from courses which were heavily practice-based and there was a reluctance to study theoretical and academic material, a vital aspect of degree-level study and central to the understanding of the module.

The difficulties the students were experiencing in accessing play texts from earlier periods of theatre making, and especially from the early modern periods of European theatre history, became observable through a decline in student attendance from 90% to just over 50% by week five and poor engagement, generally, in the lecture and seminar discussions. Also increasingly noticeable, was the changing student behaviours. They became distracted, impatient to leave the sessions and often did not complete the directed reading given to them between classes. Low level disruption during scheduled sessions also began to hinder progress. The achievement of the students on the module, as well as their apparent developing apathy, became a concern. To address the teaching team’s concerns over student academic disengagement, and to encourage greater motivation, the module delivery was reviewed by the teaching team and redesigned to include more practical and kinaesthetic activities which reflected the students' prior learning experiences and their qualification route to higher education, many having previously undertaken BTEC qualifications. This also contributed to the decision to change the teaching strategy from a traditional lecture-seminar structure to more creative-based approaches that would take place in the learning environment of the theatre spaces.

Students participating in undergraduate studies, who have progressed to higher education from practice-based and vocational courses, can face a different set of challenges from students who have transitioned from the more traditional A-level progression pathway (Kelly, 2017). The need to explore and develop higher education teaching strategies that engage these students in higher education is a pressing one. There has been a significant rise in the numbers of students entering university to study under graduate degrees from non-traditional academic progression pathways in recent years (UCAS, 2016). Whilst A-level qualifications still constitute the route for gaining level three qualifications to access higher education, by 2015 the number of university applicants applying with BTEC qualifications accounted for just over a quarter of all applicants and had increased by 37% from 2011 (UCAS, 2016).

BTEC qualifications have been regarded as an important agent in widening university participation by increasing the number of students who come from unrepresented backgrounds (Nartey, 2014). Quantitative analysis by Round et al., (2012) confirmed that students...
progressing from vocational routes are more likely to have progressed from lower social-economic groups. BTEC qualifications are more vocationally-based than A-Leves, offer a more practical learning experience and are continuously assessed throughout the students' learning, eliminating the final summative assessment that is part of the A-Level course (Pearson, 2017). Whilst the number of undergraduates who have gained entry from vocational routes is increasing, students who have studied vocational courses are less likely to achieve high academic results in their chosen degree course, with 51% achieving a first or upper second-class degree compared to 70% of A-Level students (Shields and Masardo, 2015). Additionally, students entering university with BTEC qualifications also have higher non-completion rates than those entering with A-Leves (Kelly, 2017).

Vocational courses may support the widening of participation for students accessing higher education (Kelly, 2017), but students who enter with vocational qualifications appear to be disadvantaged when completing undergraduate study. Vocational students from practical-based BTEC courses acquire skillsets that are beneficial for succeeding in higher education studies, such as independent learning, idea generation and creativity, but the applied nature of the BTEC course may make them less prepared for academic study at university than their A-Level peers (Kelly, 2017).

**Addressing the Challenge**

The growth of the application of creative teaching in education has become widely accepted (Amabile, 1996; Baer and Kaufman, 2006; Craft, 2000; Cropley, 1992; Kaufman and Beghetto, 2009; NACCCE, 1999; Puccio and Gonzalez, 2004; Torrance, 1963). The development of the use of creativity in education can be grouped into three main facets (Lin, 2011):

1. **How creative and innovative practice creates the development of multiple intelligence, higher level thinking and problem-solving skills** (Armstrong, 2009; Torrance, 1963; Torrance and Myers, 1970; Craft, 2000).
2. **Creating social environments that are conducive to supporting learning through increasing intrinsic and extrinsic motivation** (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2002).
3. **Teacher ethos** (Lin, 2011) which examines the role of the teacher's approach to fostering creative ideas and adopting a student-centred ideology (Lin 2011; NACCCE, 1999).

Critical thinking is related to creative thinking and problem-solving abilities (Ulger, 2016), and is a key development area for higher education students (Bahr, 2010). To enhance students' critical thinking in relation to the theoretical aspects of the play text, and encourage engagement, a combination of creative teaching and adaptations to the learning environment was selected.

Torrance, a pioneer in the field of creativity and education, developed the idea of creativity as a process that can be defined and developed (Hébert et al., 2002). In his longitudinal studies Torrance identified that skills in creativity were different from those which supported intellectual study and, when developed, they could make a significant difference to personal growth and development (Hébert et al., 2002). The Torrance Incubation Model of Creative Teaching (TIM; Figure 1) provides a framework for lesson design that encourages creative thinking.

The primary focus of the model is to teach and enhance a creative skill whilst maintaining the core objective of the curriculum content (Worwood, 2011). The process is in three stages: (i) heighten anticipation, (ii) deepen expectations and (iii) keeping it going (Torrance, 1979). It is a flexible enough model to be applied to any module, lesson or project and encourages students to explore their creativity through experience, where the student becomes central to the learning, rather than being a recipient of information. One of the key strengths of adapting teaching design using this approach is the ability to create an environment where students are encouraged to think creatively and critically.
model is how students are encouraged to develop strategies for putting ideas into context, exploring deeper meaning and synthesising aspects of their learning (Worwood, 2011).

For students who have chosen a creative art learning programme, transitioning from a practical-based learning environment, the approach of exploring play texts through interaction with the text in a creative context offered a more accessible and engaging alternative to the traditional lecture and seminar model.

**Creative Learning in Practice**

To adapt the learning environment, the module delivery was moved from the classroom to the practical theatre space available at the University (Figure 2). The theatre space was used for all stages of the learning, including the creative tasks of decorating masks that the students would later use in their improvisation work.

The students were introduced to the project following the TIM model for creative teaching. They were asked to explore the theoretical concepts of the carnival by engaging in a creative process of mask making, creating characters that they could act behind and to explore movement and interaction by linking the concepts inherent in the text with their own explorations and experiences, and reflecting upon them. The following gives a description of how the TIM model was applied.

Stage 1: Heightening anticipation – Create the desire to know; heighten anticipation and expectation; get attention; arouse curiosity; tickle the imagination; give purpose and motivation (Torrance, 1979).

Students were first introduced to the aims and objectives of the project which were to use improvisation in dramatic performance and to experience, and reflect upon, how masks can alter identity and persona. They were given the opportunity to create their own masks and use them in an improvised dramatic performance, either individually or as a group. There were no restrictions placed on the students on how they would work or create the performance. Initially, students began to experiment with character creation through performance without masks and then repeat the exercise whilst wearing a blank full-face mask. They then reflected upon how they experienced each exercise and made comparisons between them.

Stage 2: Deepening expectations – Digging Deeper; looking twice; listening for smells; listening/talking to a cat or crossing out mistakes; cutting holes to see through; cutting corners; getting into deep water (Torrance, 1979).

For the second stage of the project, students were given a blank full-face mask and asked to decorate it to create a character. As with the previous task, the students had no restrictions. The character they chose to create could be an element of their own personality, or a cultural archetype. Students completed the mask making activities in the theatre space, working alongside each other using the floor space. Most students simply chose to create their own fictional characters, beginning with an archetype and then adding more detail to define the role and purpose of the character chosen. Students began the exploration of character through a simple presentation and each student introduced their characters to each other, using the masks as a visual aid.

There were a wide variety of outcomes for the initial task. Some students had put a great deal of thought into their character and based it on persona, whereas others had simply decorated the mask in a way they found aesthetically pleasing, with the view to creating the character afterwards. The students appeared at ease when both explaining their characters and answering queries from the teaching team and their peers. Following this discussion, students explored their characters through physicality and movement. They were invited to explore the space as their characters, to move as much or as little as they saw fit. Whilst explaining the task, some learners suggested that they did not feel entirely confident demonstrating their character’s physicality. However, it soon became apparent that once the students had put on their masks, most of the group were confident in their performance.

During the discussions and reflections that followed this activity, many students commented that the masks had made a significant difference to their confidence as performers and to the way they presented their characters. They suggested that they felt protected by the masks, that their own persona was hidden behind the outer persona, which also affected the way they responded to one another in their improvisation.

Stage 3: Keeping it going – Having a ball; singing in one’s own key; building sand castles, plugging in the sun; shaking hands with tomorrow (Torrance, 1979).

With this new understanding of masked anonymity, each group member was each asked to select a character from Aphra Behn’s, The Rover, whom they wished to represent in performance.

They were each given a fresh mask, this time only eye masks so that vocalisation could be added to the per-
formance and asked to decorate these in the style of their chosen character from the play. Although some students had put more detail into their masks than others, the whole group were able to justify their choice of colours, materials and designs, relating these to their characters’ objectives and motivations.

For the final part of the project, students were asked to select a short section of the play themselves for practical exploration, extending their understanding of the theme of the masquerade within the text.

**CONCLUSION**

The team were very pleased with the increased levels of engagement and, although a very small study, improvements in attendance from just over 50% to 95% by weeks 9–14 were readily observable and could be deemed indicators of good practice being implemented.

The overall balance between tutor delivery and student participation was far healthier and, most rewarding. Student ability to interrogate the seventeenth century text (and other challenging materials on the module) was increasingly more assured. Gone were the behaviours that signalled complete unfamiliarity and distance from the content of the module and in their place were a range of more personally and academically engaged ones.

The outcomes of the first assessment, an academically informed group seminar in the middle of semester one, flagged up a significant degree of concern amongst the staff team and assessors who were not satisfied with the mark range of 35% – 55%. The second and final assessment at the end of semester two, a 2,000-word academic essay, presented even more challenges to the students.

Having reviewed and re-considered our practice in the light of current research and understanding regarding the challenges of transition and the processes of adaptation to learning in higher education, the outcomes for the second assignment were very pleasing with a general increase of at least 5 - 10 marks and with a grade range of submitted assignments located between 55% – 67% for the academic essay.

Student feedback on the module was very satisfactory considering that students had such low levels of engagement and attendance in the first weeks of the course. Responses to the questions relating to: module relevance and currency; teaching and learning; learning materials; library resources; facilities and teaching rooms; assessment relevance; helpfulness of tutors; and quality of feedback - all scored 100% in the strongly agree or agree categories. The overall satisfaction with the module in the agree category pleasingly scored at 62.5%.

Student satisfaction with the module was generally positive, with marked improvement from previous informal student feedback during the early weeks of the module delivery. The atmosphere in the learning spaces was totally changed over the course of the module and a spirit of cooperation and enjoyment in learning prevailed which was good for learners and staff alike. Whilst there is still scope for development in the design of the teaching and learning, it can be considered that a more creative and practical teaching strategy delivered...
a successful outcome.

This study has emphasised how practice-based learners making the transition from Further Education Level 3 to Higher Education Level 4 (HE4) quickly disengage if the learning environment is too dissimilar to their experiences of prior learning. Learners will make the adaptation to more traditional modes of delivery as they progress, however, care needs to be taken when delivering modules at HE4 with 100% written or traditionally academically focussed assessment items on them.

NOTES


2There were seven students taking part in this module, of which two had transitioned from A-level studies and the remaining students from non-traditional qualification routes, including BTECs.

3Named after the previous awarding body: Business and Technology Education Council.

REFERENCES


**AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

The authors confirm being the sole contributors of this work and approved it for publication.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT**

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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