

Using drawing, model making and metaphorical representations to increase students' engagement with reflections

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Abstract

Within the current higher education discourse regarding student-staff partnerships key elements reported on are the empowerment of students, the roles and responsibility of the partners in the co-construction of knowledge, and the student engagement and motivation through such partnerships. However, what is often not really considered is the nature and depth of students' engagement. This article seeks to redress this gap by providing an example from a teacher education programme. At first, we provide a brief overview of the background and context of the teacher education programme, which forms the basis for this article. In the subsequent sections, we outline discourses around student engagement. Student engagement in this article is the meaningful, effective practical application of theoretical concepts, the students' readiness to apply learnt materials within and beyond the four walls of the teaching room (Zepke et al., 2014). We will then focus on engagement in relation to reflective practices within teacher education. Subsequently, we provide insight into the use of creative activities to improve students' conceptual understanding and application of reflective work. This will lead into an evaluative section where creative activities and student engagement will be discussed in a form that incorporates the points of view of two students (Aly and Vanessa) and one member of staff (Nicole). Our concluding thoughts will detail recommendations, next steps and the relevance of our experience for future work within the context of teacher education and higher education more generally.

Keywords

Student-Staff Partnerships; Student Engagement; Motivation; Reflection

Introduction

Over the last decade, higher education has seen drastic changes. Internationalisation and globalisation strategies alongside commercialisation and consumerisation have resulted in an environment where higher education is no longer viewed as a public good, but a consumable (Gewirtz and Cribb, 2013). Additionally, teaching excellence frameworks as well as the push across universities for staff to become fellows of the Higher Education Academy place an increased emphasis on the role of students within higher education. Against this backdrop, students' learning and engagement have become key elements in the development of relevant and effective teaching strategies. Nowadays, students are consumers of education, and at the same time, strengthened by their position as consumers as well as by research into effectiveness of learning, students are change agents. Students no longer passively accept knowledge transmission, they get actively involved in processes of learning and teaching (Dunne and Zandstra, 2011). This has given rise to a higher education sector that asks for students to be co-creators of learning and to get involved in partnerships with academic staff (Bovill and Felten, 2016; Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2014). Within the discourse of student-staff partnership literature the key elements reported on are the empowerment of students, and the roles and responsibility of the partners in the co-construction of knowledge. Successful partnerships are indeed powerful tools for learning and innovation (removed for review). However, what is often not really considered is the nature and depth of students' engagement. This article seeks to redress this gap by providing an example from a teacher education programme. Teacher education has for a long time sought to engage its students as active partners in learning within the context of a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This interpretation of partnership allows for the partnership to be viewed as "a process of engagement, not a product" and "a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself" (Healey et al., 2014, p.12).

In the following case study, we provide a brief overview of the background and context of the teacher education programme, which forms the basis for this article. In the subsequent sections, we outline discourses around student engagement, whereby we will then focus on engagement in relation to reflective practices within teacher education. Subsequently, we provide insight into the use of creative activities to improve students' conceptual understanding and application of reflective work. This will lead into an evaluative section where creative activities and student engagement will be discussed in a form that incorporates the points of view of two students (Aly and Vanessa) and one member of staff (Nicole). Our concluding thoughts will detail recommendations, next steps and the relevance of our experience for future work within the context of teacher education and higher education more generally.

Background

This case study reports on a bespoke Secondary Teacher Education Programme (STEP) that was delivered as a collaboration between the UCL Institute of Education and the Institute of Ismaili Studies between 2006 and 2018. The programme was set up as a two-year full-time programme taught in London that culminated in two Master's degrees: the Master of Teaching and the Master of Art in Education (Muslim Societies and Civilisations). The students on this programme were all international scholarship recipients who were recruited from the Shia Ismaili Muslim communities around the world. Once the students had graduated from the STEP programme, they returned to their home countries where they were employed as teachers in faith-based community

schools. Prior to the STEP programme, students would have had experience in a multitude of professions, with their previous degrees and qualifications ranging from business, psychology, dentistry to nursing. STEP was therefore not a traditional Master's level programme, in that the formation and training in London included teaching placements and reflection sections, sessions on helping students make connections between theoretical knowledge and practical application, as well as instructions on how to plan lessons and manage classrooms. As such, STEP was more closely aligned with traditional teacher education programmes, such as the Postgraduate Certificate in Education or non-salaried graduate-teacher routes. Therefore, as part of the programme, students were required to learn about and apply reflective practice, a concept that was entirely new for many students, which in turn impacted student engagement.

Defining student engagement

As interest in student engagement has increased over the last decade, so have attempts to provide definitions for and of the term. The discourses around student engagement are firmly tied to and connected with understanding and improving effective learning amongst students. The idea is that students who engage in a course, their learning will automatically increase and teaching staff would be able to cover more content. However, this "common cri de cœur of teachers" (Bryson and Hand, 2007) does not truly reflect the variability and variety of definitions and concerns around student engagement. Most recent publications emphasise different approaches to considering what student engagement is: student engagement is sometimes the measurable, physical contributions in the classroom or lecture hall setting, thus an accountability measure in relation to student behaviour (Axelson and Flick, 2010); as such, it is linked to participation (Harper and Quay, 2009) and/or attendance (Rodgers, 2002); engagement is also seen as a factor related to student experience (Baron and Corbin, 2012); and it is also interpreted as entertaining and thus superficial learning (James and Brookfield, 2014). Furthermore, the discourses around engagement relate to the relationship between engagement and sense of belonging or connection and being part of a learning community (Ryan, 2005; Krause and Coates, 2008; Masika and Jones, 2016) and to the link between effective or inspirational teaching and student engagement (Kuh, 2003). A more nuanced approach to student engagement highlights its complexity in that it demonstrates the several angles, from which a discussion of student engagement could be provided: behavioural perspective, psychological perspective, socio-cultural perspective and a holistic perspective (Kahu, 2013). Students' engagement with their courses is seen as impacted by a range of factors, such as personal, emotional processes, socio-cultural processes of peer pressures and learnt behaviours (Kahu, 2013). Whilst the article proposes a conceptual framework in relation to student engagement, the outcome is again linked to measurable contributions to or involvements in course structures.

Our concern with student engagement is, however, not so much linked to such contributions or involvements, but relates to students' attitudes and mindsets. After all, a student sitting in a lecture hall or classroom can still daydream and be focussed on matters elsewhere. Our interpretation and understanding of student engagement is aligned with and echoes the outcome of research into staff and student perceptions of engagement (Zepke et al., 2014); namely, that fostering students' engagement is the responsibility of teachers and learners. The learners need to demonstrate a responsive, involved attitude, whereas the teachers need to allow and plan for a

student-centred environment, where students are given opportunities and means to take responsibility for their learning. This interpretation of student engagement may not be mainstream and commonly used, but it is what has been called for in order to advance understanding of engagement in its multifaceted nature (Zepke, 2014). Therefore, student engagement in this article is the meaningful, effective practical application of theoretical concepts, the students' readiness to apply learnt materials within and beyond the four walls of the teaching room. In practice, engagement means to willingly participate in the activities planned, to experience a feeling of happiness and self-motivation to construct and present a final product, to be involved with body, mind and soul.

Student engagement within teacher education

Teacher education courses are postgraduate taught programmes at higher education institutions. However, they are different from other taught programmes in that teacher education programmes are not only focussing on academic and scholarly debates, but also on disseminating and internalising practical teaching strategies and tools for self-improvement. Within the western context of teacher education, reflections and reflective practice play a pivotal role (see for example Korthagen, 1999; Spilková, 2001; Fox et al., 2015). Classrooms are complex societies with many factors impacting environment, dynamics and contents. Through formalising reflections in learning logs or reflective diaries trainee teachers are taught to make sense of their experiences in classes (Kaasila and Lauriala, 2012; Toom et al., 2015), and are thus provided with means for continuing personal professional development beyond the initial teacher education programme. However, reflections are notoriously difficult to teach (Rogers, 2001).

Often, trainee teachers are asked to engage with, apply and internalise models of reflections. In practice, especially at the beginning of the teacher education courses, trainee teachers' reflections tend to remain narrative, descriptive and superficial, lacking depth. The trainee teachers do not display the detailed level of engagement and application required. Trainee teachers lack interest and readiness to engage because they find a topic disinteresting or fail to see the link between academic course work and practical skills that could be valuable in the future. They do not fully realise the relevance of reflections for professional development purposes and so are not enticed to fully engage with reflective practices and processes. Given the aim of the course to prepare trainee teachers for future teaching practices, it is crucial to develop interesting course content and make face-to-face sessions relevant. For, how can our trainee teachers engage their pupils, if we fail to engage them in the first instance? What, therefore, needs to happen in teacher education sessions for trainee teachers to more readily engage?

As learners within the community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) of the teacher education classroom, we all consider ourselves as experiential learners. Experiential learning is a complex concept with a variety of definitions, but for us it relates to what extent all our senses are involved in the classroom. This does not necessarily mean that we will only be engaged when all our senses are involved, but if a lesson is designed in a way that involves several senses, we will be engaged to a greater extent. In this way, the Vikings are not just restricted to the pages of history but become alive in the classroom, so that we can see what they saw, smell what they smelt, touch what they touched, hear what they heard, taste what they ate, move how they moved,

communicated how they communicated. In order to respond to this sensory experience, the approach to reflective practice also needed to be anchored more carefully in sensorial experiences and thus become more embodied. Through the successful collaborative partnership between students and staff (removed for review) the approach to reflective practice was altered to include more creative and playful methods. As the process of developing the creative approach to reflective practice has been reported elsewhere (removed for review), we will only briefly refer to the activities that were introduced before providing our evaluation and reflections. A number of different approaches were trialled, but students' feedback led to the three most impactful activities to be firmly incorporated into the curriculum: the river of learning, model-making using LEGO® and metaphorical representations through the use of objects.

Creative approaches and student engagement

The first reflective task introduced was a group reflection task was the river of learning. Students reflected on their learning journey, the challenges, successes, feelings and experiences. In their group they then drew a river with natural and man-made features and ascribed meaning to those individual features through the metaphors. Challenges became rapids and stepping stones were successes or incidents of support. Some students interpreted this task as a problem-solving activity, as they were challenged to create their journey using the metaphor of a river. This activity probed students to think if they could relate to a river at all and there was an element of confusion in that students worried it may not be possible to relate their learning to the structure and features of a river. However, as it was presented as a challenge, students persevered to solve and resolve the tensions. For students, the numerous ways in which the mountains, river source, tributaries and the river bed became personalised through this activity was revealing. For them, the personalisation was a key element and they found themselves very engaged with the assigned task without having to be concerned of not having the words to articulate the process of reflection.

For some students drawing was a difficult task because they emphasised the aesthetics of the product. We therefore introduced model-making activities using LEGO® bricks, where students created a model of their learning and their learning journey. Due to the pre-set shapes of the bricks, students could not focus on the beauty of the art and instead focussed more readily on the meaning-making process. For many students this was the first time they used LEGO® to create something, so it sparked their interest. This, in turn, not only motivated them to participate but also helped them think creatively as well as critically. Through the creative work of building and making students were critically involved in thinking how they could represent the deeper meaning of their experiences. In the verbalisation part of the lesson, where students explained their models it became obvious that students related to each other's models to such an extent that it further engaged their critical reflections. What appealed to students was being able to personalise the LEGO® pieces, which motivated students to reflect on their attitude towards life as well as assign meaning to that non-living object. The meaning assigning process went to such a degree that students started giving the meaning to the colours of individual bricks, the dress that the LEGO® figures wore and the expressions on their faces.

We then sought to expand further on the notions of human understanding being based upon metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003) and the “paradox of intentionality” (Statler et al., 2011), which relates to the idea that a fun activity can lead to serious results. This led to activities that specifically worked with and were based upon metaphorical representations. Students were asked a question like “Who are you as a teacher?”, but had to answer using a physical, material object. Although the principles of the activity were the same for all activities, the students experienced this task as very different to the other two tasks. This was due to the fact that the task was laid out to be carried out on an individual level rather than as a construction of group members. Additionally, there was no limit to the metaphors to be used, as there was a variety of objects from which students could choose, rather than having to superimpose learning onto a river or working within the constraints of LEGO® bricks. This, in turn, has led to students engaging more deeply with their own assumptions and biases, through strengthening their reflective practices. Having to find an object and test if that object resonated with personal experiences and feelings made the reflective practice an intellectually rigorous process and hence, improved engagement. What made this activity particularly impactful was that each individual student was able to explain the meaning of their chosen object. This resulted in students’ being involved and invested not only in their own chosen objects but also in those of their peers. Through this mutual engagement with reflections students were able to deepen their own understanding of feelings.

Conclusion

All three activities helped students articulating thoughts and provided them with a new set of vocabulary and indeed language to explore thoughts and biases further and led also to them reflecting on their reflections and reflective practices. For many students the process of reflection was initially boring, badly understood, badly executed and therefore leading to disinterest and disengagement. Using the creative approaches to reflections captured the students’ interests, provided creative avenues to practise the process of reflection and so helped them grow as teachers; so, reflective practice now spoke to students in unique ways and inspired them to continue the process of reflection. And indeed, students were able to understand “essences of phenomena” (Husserl, 1970/1900) in a way that traditional reflective tasks did not encourage.

Given the practical outcomes of students being able to understand “essences of phenomena” within the concept of reflections, the major implication for future practice is to allow for non-verbal, non-textual reflections within teacher education, and more broadly to incorporate these into the teaching of all higher education courses (James and Brookfield, 2014). At the same time, this requires a careful redefinition of what student engagement is and what it is that makes student engagement effective. Student engagement as we see it, is the individual’s or group’s understanding, application and internalisation of theoretical concepts. One implication therefore, is that future work surrounding student engagement will need to incorporate such immeasurable and intangible aspects if they are to address student engagement comprehensively. In our view, student engagement can be encouraged through creative activities and approaches, as they personalise learning, speak to individuals and enable students articulate thoughts and complex concepts. We think these activities motivate students to continuously think about, question and challenge and therefore foster deeper reflective practices.

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