2016

The Power of Freedom: Setting up a Multimodal Exhibition With Undergraduate Students to Foster Their Learning and Help Them to Achieve

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ABSTRACT

The present paper explores the opportunities created by an emancipatory approach to learning and teaching when combined with embedded peer mentoring. First year undergraduate students—most from non-traditional backgrounds—were set the task to explore learning spaces at their university and to present their findings in creative ways in a Multimodal Exhibition during Enhancement Week. They were supported by second year students on their course who acted as coaches, role models, and critics. Our experience— and feedback by students—showed that serious learning is taking place when students are given "the freedom to learn."

INTRODUCTION

Our institution, London Metropolitan University, is concerned with social justice and widening participation[1] and seeks to recruit students from those groups not traditionally welcomed into academia. We acknowledge that while having the potential to succeed at university, many of our students lack the types of academic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) that the more typical middle-class students might have had instilled in them from birth via family, community, and school experiences. Hence, in our program we have paired a second year "Peer Mentoring in Practice" module with a first year "Becoming an Educationalist" module such that second year students facilitate a successful transition into the university and into academic life for the first years. Our embedded Peer Mentors also work with those first years to develop their understanding of academia in general and to increase their comprehension of and success in course-specific academic tasks. While not ourselves seeing this work as remedial—or that our Peer Mentors are in the business of remediating deficit students—we wanted to do more. We wanted to create spaces that celebrated the strengths of our non-traditional students. One of many ways that we attempt to address this is by introducing

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[1] The aim of the UK Widening Participation agenda is to offer opportunities to those who are underrepresented in Higher Education, notably those from lower socio-economic groups, people with disabilities, and people from specific ethnic minorities.

Enhancement Weeks[2] that form "a break" in the teaching program so that we can offer students a broader range of educational and cultural experiences while enhancing their employability, personal development, and study skills.

THE CONTEXT

London Metropolitan University is a post-1992[3] inner city university situated near the heart of London. Our student body is made up of almost 50 percent "non-traditional" students (Blagburn & Cloutterbuck, 2011); that is, our students are often mature (over 21), from working class backgrounds, and from Black and Minority Ethnic Communities—often they are the first in their families to enter higher education. In certain courses and programs the student cohort is as near as possible to 100% "non-traditional" as possible. Specifically students on the BA Hons Education Studies[4] come from a wide range of cultures and backgrounds and have mixed interests, abilities, expectations, and connections. This means the majority of the students in our course have to engage with paid work alongside their degree program and typically also have caring responsibilities within the home: their time in and for the University is limited.

While our students have many strengths, they tend not to be groomed from birth to succeed in higher education. They are taking an enormous (personal) risk in entering higher education, not least incurring over £9000 per annum in course fees and also taking out student loans to cover their living costs. Many of them are afraid even to speak of the "fear of failure" that haunts them, which is unsurprising given that they swim in educational currents composed of the over-riding narratives of assessment. Our students experience SATs, [5] League Tables, [6] OFSTED, [7] and moral panics about

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[2] See also Reading University blog on Enhancement or Opportunity weeks: http://blogs.reading.ac.uk/student-services-news/2015/01/27/enhancement-week-your-springboard-to-success/

[3] In 1992, UK Polytechnics were offered the opportunity to become universities in their own right. These are now called post-1992 institutions, sometimes in very dismissive ways, especially by what are called the Russell Group of universities, a self-selected association of 24 public research universities situated in the United Kingdom.

[4] BA Hons Education Studies refers to a Bachelor of Arts with a focus on Education Studies; an Honours Degree recognises depth of knowledge or originality and typically involves undergraduates producing a Dissertation or Research Project in the final year.

[5] SATs: Standard Assessment Tests are given at the end of years 2 and 6 (ages seven and 11) and are used to measure pupil achievement in primary education.

[6] League Tables: various League Tables exist in the UK education context. These tables rank schools by virtue of student performance in SATs and they rank universities against indicators such as student satisfaction, completion rates, student leaver destinations, staff-student ratios, academic and support service provision, and research outputs. League Tables are contested, on the one hand seen as introducing competition and choice, on the other as being divisive and unethical.

plagiarism and the "dumbing down" of education, for which they are personally blamed. As one commentator stated in a newspaper interview, "There are Mickey Mouse students for whom Mickey Mouse degrees are quite appropriate" (Brockes, 2003). Our students are caught in a political and cultural crossfire negotiating tricky academic space: welcome for the fees they bring but not valued for the selves they are.

THE MODULES AND STUDENTS IN QUESTION
"Becoming an Educationist" is a 30-credit year-long module taken by first year undergraduate students embarking on the journey to *become* an educationist;[8] that is, to develop an emergent graduate and professional self, ready for the fields of teaching, mentoring, and support. The aim of the module is to introduce students to a range of study and academic skills, including reading, note making, writing, preparing and giving presentations, engaging in qualitative research, and developing their academic voices. We have designed the module to be rigorous and challenging but have done so in creative and engaging ways that aim to enhance student self-efficacy and self-confidence (Bandura, 1994, 1997) as they get a first-hand opportunity to experience what academia is "about."

Second year "Peer Mentoring in Practice" students are taught the theory and practice of mentoring, and they also have weekly timetabled space wherein to support these *becoming* first years as they wrestle with the social and academic challenges of university life. In this way, our peer mentoring is embedded within the *Becoming* module, with the fourth hour of the first year students' class being timetabled to be the third hour of the Peer Mentors' course. Peer support is valuable not only because "[p]eers, by definition, are close to each other in age, ability, status, ethnicity and other characteristics" (Walberg, 1998, p. x), but also because they help foster dialogic (Bakhtin, 1981) and social learning (Wenger, 2009, 2010). Peer learning also proves that learning can be democratic (Dewey, 1997) and emancipatory (Freire, 1993, 1998). The relationship between mentor and mentees is posited as reciprocal (Kossak, 2011) and collaborative. As Keenan (2014) states, peer learning creates a sense of belonging and community which helps to enhance student learning and experience and hence student retention, progression, and achievement.

Both modules, "Becoming an Educationist" and "Peer Mentoring in Practice," embody the praxis that learning is multi-modal and multi-faceted; they are creative in design, geared to orientating students into the university, into the department, and into becoming a successful student. For some they might be said to demonstrate through practice that creativity facilitates "whole-brain learning" (Herrmann, 1989) that allows the whole learner to enter the learning process; for others they could be said to be emancipatory, embodying Freire's (1997) concept of education for critical and engaged

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[7] OFSTED: The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services, and Skills. They inspect and regulate services that care for children and young people and services providing education for learners of all ages.

[8] Educationist: a specialist in educational theory and practice.

action. For us it is also a space for students to re-territorialise tricky educational space (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987/2005), but on their own terms.

MODELS OF LEARNING: COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE
The formal education landscape traversed by our students is hostile. At the time of writing, the Secretary of State for Education is eradicating adult education that does not lead directly to employability and has placed renewed emphasis on the solely academic curriculum, with standards maintained by setting the writing of "lines,"[9] detentions, and yet more rigorous testing, instituted at ever earlier ages (Adams 2014a, 2014b). For non-traditional students this is a place of judgement and exclusion. Wenger-Trayner (2014), however, argues that learning involves negotiating identity in a complex dance in complex landscapes of practice that navigate multiple tensions and meaning. It is identity-construction in a time of super-complexity: it is a learning relationship between the social world and the personal. More than ever, learning is not engaging with a *corpus* of knowledge, nor even the *process* of engaging with a *corpus* of knowledge. Learning can be seen as *how* we negotiate a range of processes of becoming that oscillate between the individual and the group (Wenger-Trayner, 2014). We wanted our students to experience this more collaborative, complex, subtle, and nuanced version of education and to see themselves as actively learning and to see learning as *becoming*: a realignment of competence and experience, socially defined, personally experienced, and collaboratively expressed.

The two modules in question were therefore designed to empower in and of themselves and to act as a tool or lens to critique reductionist education and reductionist curricula. The modules are blended in the sense of combining some direct didactic teaching alongside active and engaging peer learning, including creative and visual learning strategies (see http://learning.londonmet.ac.uk/epacks/look_make_learn/) and contribution to the university's annual student-facing Get Ahead conference (see http://learning.londonmet.ac.uk/epacks/get_ahead_conf/). Our students are expected to talk, listen, discuss and *be with* each other, both face-to-face and online. They are expected to attend music improvisation and dance workshops and to design and present their own interactive workshops. They are expected to make notes, read actively and interactively, share their findings, and produce collages, blind drawings, conference presentations, "real" research, and digital artefacts. We hope that they join in with energy and enthusiasm to all the different things that they are asked to do and then make the learning conscious and successful within their online blogs and in a variety of exhibitions and showcases that they put on for themselves and for the wider academic community.

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[9] The writing of "lines" was set as a punishment in schools in the nineteenth and mid- to late twentieth centuries. Punished pupils were required to write a prescribed number of lines, repeating a morally uplifting statement. This punishment fell out of favour when writing came to be seen as something that was pleasurable. Watchers of *The Simpsons* cartoon may note that each episode starts with Bart Simpson writing "edifying" lines on a chalkboard.

OUR TAKE ON STUDENT ENHANCEMENT

To celebrate student contributions to the teaching and learning process we also built the students' work into our Enhancement Weeks. At our institution we currently offer two Enhancement Weeks per year. In these weeks we seek to offer opportunities for students to do something different—something enriching. Typical Enhancement Week activities include special film shows, visits to museums and galleries, external guest speakers, and tailored sessions to improve employability, study success, and/or mindfulness and self-confidence. In our Enhancement Week, we wanted to indicate that, yes, we can enrich ourselves through cultural activities, but we wanted to emphasise that our students can also contribute to the cultural and intellectual enrichment of others.

Rather than underscore the fact that in the eyes of many, our students start from a point of academic and cultural deficit, our Peer Mentors worked with our first year students to produce their own Enhancement Week activity in the form of a Multimodal Exhibition that focussed on the university's learning spaces and to which other students and faculty members were invited. This exhibition was put on in the seventh week of the first year course and was a big challenge. First year students not only had to conduct their first piece of research, they also had to communicate their findings to a broad audience in the most challenging of ways. Despite their nerves, they succeeded and accordingly their sense of self-efficacy and resilience (Bandura, 1994, 1997) was encouraged and developed.

The pedagogy

In our teaching and the outline of the Enhancement Week task, we take a dialogic rather than a didactic approach, which leads us to consider pedagogy, andragogy, and heutagogy. As emancipatory educationalists, we want our students to take control of their learning, finding their academic identities in ways that are recognised by the academy, but which they negotiate on their own terms and in powerful ways. We were well aware that changing our approach to teaching can be confusing for students as they are used to the lecture-seminar format where the lecturer presents—and represents—the all-knowing teacher (Illich, 1971). However, as Jackson (2013) and Johnson (2010) argue, for creativity and innovation to happen students need time. They need time to be creative, to take risks, and to lose a fear of failure; they need time to "be with" (Nancy, 2000) and learn from each other. As Johnson (2010) argues, ideas need to "collide" with other ideas in order for something bigger to emerge. This means students need the space and time to swap and to mingle—to connect—with their lecturers and with each other.

Peer-led learning has been found to enhance students' learning and learning experience. With an embedded mentoring experience, we have witnessed our students show fuller engagement (Keenan, 2014) and take more risks. As Boud (2001, p. 5) states, "[p]eer learning is promising because it appears to maintain or increase student learning with less input from staff." This means students, both as facilitators and participants, seem to be able to learn from each other as much as they are able to learn from a supposedly more "knowledgeable lecturer." This enables them to go beyond what is normally possible in a seminar session as they become creators of their own learning and learning experience.

The task

Taking Illich's (1971) idea and arguments about de-schooling society, we believe that our students first have to distanciate or un-learn dominant education narratives. We wanted them to see university teaching, learning, and assessment "as if for the first time" (Burns & Sinfield, 2016) and that became the focus of both their first research project and their first Multimodal Exhibition. We asked our students to explore and then represent the university's formal and informal learning spaces as an embodied way of experiencing and then critiquing taken-for-granted educational practice. As it is so difficult to see differently, we asked our students to present their findings in unusual ways—knitting, jigsaw puzzles, cartoons, 3D models, animations, videos, cabinets of curiosities, and poetry—where the very act of re-genring (English, 2011) forces the students into new ways of thinking, seeing, and communicating. We then invited them to present their findings in Enhancement Week as a celebratory exhibition of their achievements. For an overview of the Enhancement Week Exhibition, please see our class blog: https://becomingeducational.wordpress.com/2015/11/11/mentees-multi-modal-exhibition/

In preparation for the Exhibition, the Peer Mentors were clustered into small groups and assigned slightly larger groups of *Becoming* students with whom to work on a regular, weekly basis. The pairing of student groups in this way created a form of cross-generational community of practice, or communities of practice (Wenger-Trayner, 2014), where each class has its own identity and tutors but where they came together to form a new whole with a new, richer identity. The role of the Mentor was to act as a helping hand or a supportive guide, providing encouragement and constructive feedback to the *Becoming* students as they engaged with this challenging task. For example, Mentors assisted with a video-production or the development of an animation *if asked*, but mainly they were there to convince the first years that they could do it. In the Exhibition itself, Mentors constituted a positive and encouraging audience for the first year students' multimodal artefacts, celebrating together the achievements of those first years. This positive reflecting back from those with such a close, almost "parental" role increased the pleasure and pride of the exhibitors, arguably in ways that tutor encouragement alone cannot.

STUDENT SELF-EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK

> When l heard we will be having enhancement week, my head was filled with all sorts of random thoughts, what was it all about? l could not have anticipated how refreshing, entertaining and educating the experience was. … The wait to meet my colleagues, seeing their work is killing me inside, knowing what we did as a group is making me bounce like a little girl with confidence.

> As l walked in the room, I am greeted with smiley faces filled with love, joy and happiness. I don't remember this class as colourful as it was today, creativity at its best and l could tell with the mood inside the room that more was coming.

On the day of the Exhibition the students themselves organised the room into an exhibition space and set out their exhibits with their names alongside. Each exhibit had a blank A3 sheet of paper beside it with post-it notes

available so that all attendees could give and receive feedback. Students took this process very seriously, moving around the room, intensely inspecting the exhibits, and writing usually supportive comments. There were also "external" guests, both staff and students, who commented on the work displayed and asked participants about their artefacts and personal experience.

Subsequent to the Exhibition itself, students reflected on the process, the event, and the experience in their blogs. A typical extract has been used as a header for this section. See also:
https://noblechloe.wordpress.com/2014/12/18/week-twelve-learning-log/

Our peer mentors were the most positive and supportive audience for the Multimodal Exhibition. They came, they explored, and they gave positive and encouraging feedback, both on the day and in their own blog reflections on the event: https://tanyapinnock.wordpress.com/2015/11/11/mentees-multi-modal-exhibition/

Finally, the modules in question also go through an annual review and evaluation, with specific items inspected in detail, particularly students' feedback and achievement. The intervention presented in this article is one that we wish to continue for the joy and the learning that it inspires and because it sets students rigorous challenges that they can struggle with and at which they can meaningfully succeed. The external examiner, Steve Bartlett, commented on the Peer Mentoring module, highlighting the importance of this: "As previously mentioned this is a useful reflection on the links between practice and theory for students."

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS
Seeing our students stretch themselves in their thinking and in their practice shines a light on our own learning, teaching, and assessment. If we are not giving (non-traditional) students the opportunities to work hard, to be creative, and to succeed, then we are failing them—they are not failing. Here, embedded peer learning helps first year students to embark on learning and assessment as "a group," seeing it as combined effort rather than a privilege of the already privileged. As Bostocks (n.d.) states, peer assessment can "improve the quality of learning and empower learners, where traditional forms can by-pass learners' needs."

The results of our Enhancement Week Exhibition, coupled with embedded peer support, follow and confirm what Tinto (1998, p. 167) has found in his research on the factors contributing to student retention rates:

> The more academically and socially involved individuals are – that is, the more they interact with other students and faculty – the more likely they are to persist. And the more they see those interactions as positive and themselves as integrated into the institution and as valued members of it, the more likely it is that they will persist.

This means that students are likely to be successful in their learning and have a positive learning experience if they are taking responsibility for their own learning, together with others. Following on from this we would recommend that more institutions and more courses find ways to celebrate

that which the non-traditional students bring to the university, setting them difficult but interesting and engaging challenges such that they are enabled and inspired to develop their strengths together. As a *coda* to this piece, Norman Jackson, whose article on creativity inspired the students, has asked the students to produce an article on their experiences for his Creativity Journal, showing that real opportunities can emerge when students are given the freedom to learn (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994).

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