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Bringing creativity, risk and reality into the classroom

Jackie Mulligan

Since joining higher education as a member of academic staff, I have focused, like many of us, on how to make learning a transformative process, in particular in the areas of enterprise and creativity. One of the key methods I have used in lecturing and learning activities has been engagement with the 'real'. Engagement with the real, through work-based learning or simply engagement with uncertainty, can help students to nurture their own creativity and sense of enterprise.

It is challenging, when faced with a class of over 30 or a theatre of 300, to feel as though we can inspire enterprise. Moon (1999) argues that the fewer contact hours and larger class sizes now so prevalent in higher education "influence student learning by reducing direct contact with the staff who might have inspired them." She believes that the middle ability students have the most chance of losing out in this system as these students have, through direct contact with enthusiastic tutors, the chance "to take off with some personal inspiration, but will otherwise regard higher education as simply a stage towards the world of work" (Moon, 1999, p. 128).

There is a problem for higher education if students view degrees as simply a stage they have to pass to secure employment. However with vocational degrees like Events Management, I do not find that belief very surprising. In spite of the students' somewhat misguided beliefs or limited expectations in this regard, it is our responsibility to provide a wider base of education and thinking than an apprenticeship.

"The teacher cannot do all the work if learning is to be the outcome. As designers of courses and as teachers, if we want to produce graduates of Higher Education able to think, act, create and innovate at a relatively high level, then we need to consider how we lead learners beyond being regurgitator, copyist or operative." (Fry, Ketteridge & Marshall, 2000, p. 33)

The challenge is how to inspire and bridge the gap between the practical and theoretical with a student who really just wants to learn operational and practical skills to prepare for work. By reflecting on these issues I investigated methods to embrace the two elements and was drawn to 'experiential learning', which means according to Beatty (2000), "if the relevance is directly experienced by the students themselves, then the learning will be reinforced" (Beatty, 2000, p. 136).

Case studies seemed an obvious way forward. When I started teaching, I could see the students gained much from anecdotes that I used to illustrate

key learning points. I developed these examples into case studies. I could find many textbook case studies, neatly constructed to point to clear learning outcomes, but for me, those studies seemed too tidy – real experiences are far messier and far more ambiguous than these post hoc rationalised packages. Through my involvement with third stream work, I decided to bring examples to class, creating anonymised examples from a meeting 'yesterday' rather than 'yesteryear' to demonstrate a theoretical point. The students appeared to appreciate that this information was current and their engagement with the real made me wonder if we ought to find new ways of bringing the real into the classroom.

Assessment plays a critical part in this process. Students in Events Management often respond in their course work to actual case studies or provide strategies for assisting real organisations to improve their businesses. In addition students manage events for actual clients – all exciting and innovative methods for engaging students in business. However, while the assessments appeal to our strategic learners, I am keen on ensuring that a deeper level of learning happens each week for all our students (Biggs, 1999).

"If the only assessment on a course unit or module is the final exam, many students are likely to leave doing any serious work until a week or so before that exam. So, if we want to help students to pace their learning, and to engage seriously with the material from week one, we need to build in regular assessment tasks." (Rust, 2002)

One of my missions was to develop course content to see how I could encourage the students to engage with the wider interpretations of 'enterprise' and 'creativity'. I decided to take a risk. I decided to ignore the 'transparency' of learning outcomes, to be deliberately unclear in my objectives and to see what happened if I provided students with a calculatedly ambiguous task. I worked with colleagues to devise an enterprise afternoon at Old Broadcasting House, the home of the Institute of Enterprise at Leeds Met. I wanted to test the students' ability to tolerate ambiguity – a key component in entrepreneurial and creative thinking (Rae, 2005; Burns, 2007).

Creative spaces

I invited the students to spend two hours on a variety of unspecified tasks. Their only preparation would be to bring an object that symbolised 'enterprise'. No other details were provided. In contrast to my fears I was delighted to see that attendance was excellent. As part of the tasks, students had to explain their object in a Big Brother-style diary room, then display the object with a description and take a photograph of their object for the display. The objects were wide-ranging, from a mixing bowl to a student presenting herself as the exhibit. Following their exhibition creation, the students received a tour of the Enterprise building and had to say what made the space creative and how it could be improved.

Creative events

After the tour where students considered the space, they moved on to more in-depth creative sessions on how they would market, stage and manage a conference about enterprise for students. The exercise inspired many ideas and provided some insights into what would inspire students to attend an event about enterprise. Throughout the day, the students were challenged to apply theory to actuality. Their thinking and ideas were being processed as they moved between different spaces and activities. At the end of the event, the students were asked to write reflections on enterprise, and it was interesting for me to see how many students engaged with the subject and concepts, and how many contributed to this, despite the fact that this was a non-assessed piece of work.

Sometimes in higher education we forget how inspiring our students can be at moments like this. This one mysterious 'enterprising' afternoon seemed to infect us all with enthusiasm for enterprise.

Creative thinking

At the start of new term in 2009, we are embarked on another experiment, this time testing our students and ourselves to consider responses to the ambiguity of the future for the events industry. A team of six students is to be selected in 2009-10 to work with a number of academics to consider emerging trends and what the future holds for the events industry. The creation of this 'thinktank' will enable us all to test our capacities for creative thinking. In March, the student panel will face representatives from the events industry and be prepared to answer their questions. We are both excited and terrified at the prospect of this new venture. We will need to support our

students to feel confident and able to be 'the experts' on the day. From my experience so far of successes and failures, we all learn something from taking on risks. The opportunities for our students to engage with reality and ambiguity and on these occasions to face uncertainty provide critical learning outcomes – nurturing the life skills of creativity and enterprise. No matter what evolves from this exercise, I know the process itself will provide our students with an insight into their own resourcefulness and creativity. To support their learning, we will ask them to reflect on that process. On that former challenge at the Institute of Enterprise, when risks were taken with that same feeling of apprehension and students developed their tolerance of ambiguity, one student reflected:

"The word enterprise used to mean nothing to me, now however I've begun to understand that enterprise can mean whatever you want it to mean, being creative, innovative, being prepared for a challenge and almost playing a dangerous game. Taking a blank white wall and creating something inspiring to go on it, that not only inspires you but everyone who finds themselves within the space of that once white wall.

Enterprise is being willing to take a risk, being wacky and adding colour to people's lives. Allowing your imagination to flow and not being afraid of making a mistake, enterprise is not about right or wrong answers, but being willing to work hard to find a solution to a problem. Enterprise is about opportunities and grabbing what you can when it comes your way. We were asked recently to reflect on an object which we think represents enterprise, well mine was a blank piece of paper with a question mark on it, all of life's great ideas start off with a blank piece of paper and a question mark, it's what we decide to do with that blank sheet of paper and the question mark which either makes or breaks us."

Hers was just one of a series of reflections the final-year students provided voluntarily after the event. Not only did the experience inspire this student: her reflection still inspires me.

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