



What if misunderstood creativity in learning creates barriers to participation and impacts students' sense of belonging

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Presentation abstract

The pressure which may be felt by staff to apply creativity when teaching, could potentially overshadow the benefits of it, by diverting the focus from meaningful knowledge building during the learning process (McGuire and Gubbins, 2010; Deverell and Moore, 2014; Sun, Wang and Wegerif, 2020). Experiencing the emphasis to be creative in my teaching as a learning development tutor, I am interested to explore the matter of replacing traditional teaching values with divergent ways of learning, and how this could affect the sense of belonging to a HE organisation. Karwowski (2022) argues that to achieve successful engagement with creative learning, students must recognise the act of building meaningful knowledge alongside the untraditional teaching approach offered to them. The main question to raise is if students do not perceive creative activities as meaningful knowledge building, would they disregard the opportunity to learn and disengage with the wider community of practice (Wenger, 1998; Pachler, Kuonath and Frey, 2019; Goulet-Pelletier, Gaudreau and Cousineau, 2023, pp.197-198)? Opening a professional dialogue will allow the investigation of the hypothesis that misunderstood creativity in learning could have an impact on students' perception of the HE institution and their positioning within it and will offer opportunities to tackle issues around students' sense of belonging.

Key questions

- What does a balanced use of creative approaches in teaching and learning look like?
- What is your experience with students recognising the link between creative activity and meaningful learning?

- Could the overuse of creativity in session delivery damage students' respect for academia?

Keywords: creativity in teaching; higher education; student engagement; teaching innovation; inclusive practice.

Community response

This presentation offered a stimulating perspective on motivations and practices around the use of creative prompts in teaching. The presenter began by sharing a personal account of disengagement as a student when tasked with building a spaghetti-and-marshmallow tower, illustrating how misalignment between a facilitator's intention to innovate and participants' expectations can be problematic. The community resonated with the notion that creative classroom activities, when transferred from one discipline to another without adaptation, risk losing relevance and authenticity. The discussion highlighted that participants might 'perform' creative tasks or offer positive feedback under perceived pressure, masking the reality that an activity may not be achieving its intended learning outcomes. Several contributors stressed the importance of balancing innovation with coherence, ensuring that experimentation in teaching remains relevant and meaningful to learners.

The community delegates reflected on the pressures, both institutional and societal, placed upon educators to demonstrate 'creativity' in their practice. It was observed that creativity is not a one-size-fits-all approach and must be adapted to diverse student needs and contexts. Comparisons were drawn with the use of learning technologies, emphasising that creative activities should have a clear educational purpose, be supported by structured briefing, debriefing, and reflection, and be mindful of realistic time constraints. Insights from other conference sessions reinforced the value of integrating both academic and enjoyable elements into creative tasks. The community agreed that defining 'creativity' at the outset of such discussions could help align expectations and reduce barriers to participation. Overall, the dialogue reaffirmed a commitment to purposeful, transparent, and context-sensitive creativity that fosters belonging and engagement in higher education.

Next steps and additional questions

Moving forward, the community highlighted three main actions. First, agree on a clear and shared understanding of what 'creativity' means in different subjects, avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach. Second, create practical guidelines to adapt creative activities so they are authentic, linked to clear learning goals, and balanced with the need for a structured learning experience. Finally, include opportunities for reflection and feedback to check whether these activities truly improve student engagement, a sense of belonging, and learning outcomes. These steps will help ensure that creativity in teaching is purposeful, inclusive, and effective.

Author's reflection

The community engagement with the topic offered an unexpected response to an existing issue observed by many learning development tutors across different institutions. The live discussions alongside with the further professional reflections, have highlighted the need for further investigation of the issue. Raising the subject of misunderstood creativity in teaching is a relevant matter to the learning development community of practice as many tutors shared that they have been exposed to the problem and some have faced difficulties bridging meaningful knowledge building and creativity in the classroom. Furthermore, some were aware how learning development's unusual positioning within university hierarchy and structure could urge the need for more creative teaching in order to leave a memorable experience for students, who would then remember the service provision and hopefully be more likely to access it. This being said, many colleagues recognise the importance of creative teaching approaches and acknowledge their benefits when it comes to teaching abstract academic skills. However, what was noted being crucial in the successful delivery of a session which contains creative teaching approaches was the need of clear instructions offered to those participating in the session. This brings another area to consider – the use of language and the issues which may be faced by students due to the level of their academic language proficiency. It has been observed that academic language proficiency has a direct impact on students' academic performance and achievement and could appear to be a barrier to engagement with academia (Read, 2015). Therefore, if similar disengagement due to language comprehension has been noticed even in sessions which are deemed to be exciting due to their creative nature, then more investigation would be required to study further the role which language

comprehension has in creative teaching methods. This would also support the points made above that language is crucial in this study area, especially when creativity in teaching could be perceived as a challenging concept to define and therefore fully understand its impact on students' learning journeys.

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