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Powerful conversation for learning

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The challenge

The challenge we faced was how to enact online an inclusive, critical, and practical approach to teaching for university educators on a Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching. We were adapting three-hour face-to-face workshops for a multi-disciplinary cohort in a module addressing the nature of the higher education student experience.

Participants themselves were facing significant extra work and new demands at home. We wanted to avoid Zoom fatigue and didactic online delivery and maintain the camaraderie and collegiality usually identified as key benefits of the face-to-face workshops.

Those studying included international staff stranded abroad, many completely new to the university, who had never met colleagues in person or even visited campus. Module assessment involved a challenging collaborative small-group project plus an individual element of extension work.

This cohort of 40+ staff connected with a network of hundreds of students facing enormous disruption in their own study and personal lives. If we could get the design right we could support colleagues in supporting their students through learning in an unprecedented period of disruption.

The response

We began with the idea that, 'taking a critical approach to teaching requires us actively to gather ways of looking at it beyond our personal standpoint' (Jarvis and Clark, 2020, p.23). Each learner brings their own experience, values, and beliefs about lecturing and we wanted to acknowledge, and consider these together. So, we created time for dialogue in which real narratives from seminar and lecture rooms could emerge and be collectively explored. Assumptions could be noticed and probed, useful studies suggested and practical actions identified. We wanted to show ourselves taking this approach in our own teaching and we scheduled one-hour weekly conversations sandwiched between individual preparation and post-session group consolidation – a flipped approach (Bergman and Sams, 2012), with special emphasis on reflection (Baker, 2002). The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework with its emphasis on critical reflection and discourse also shaped our design (Garrison, 2017).

By 'conversation' we intended attentive dialogue between and among tutors and participants which could 'open up judgments and assumptions' (Bohm, 1996, p.46), creating space for an exchange in which new ideas and understanding would emerge. We recorded short conversations among ourselves after each online session to make our thinking visible. We encouraged everyone to complete a Critical Incident Questionnaire to capture and lay hold of their own learning and keep us in touch with how things were working (Brookfield, 2017). The results of these reflections and post-session group activities were used to inform planning and were fed back before the next sequence began.

The linchpin of the design was the hour together where we sought to model the benefits of purposeful conversation about teaching. We generally began with an input of a few minutes which picked up preparatory work. Prompts included introductions from the teaching team, visiting colleagues, and student advocates as different dimensions of inclusion were explored. Sometimes we stayed as a large group, inviting participation one-by-one by using microphones or typing in the chat; in other sessions we split quickly into smaller rooms with specific questions to consider and bring back to a plenary. Post-session work was gathered through discussion threads or walls.

Keen, from the outset, to nourish social presence in a Community of Inquiry (Garrison, 2017), we invited participants to join tutors in creating introductory slides about themselves. These were compiled and shared. We always opened our online classroom early for 'coffee and chat'; Garrison acknowledges the need for this varied dialogue, including social conversation, in order to build trust and respect. Cohort diversity is a great strength, and indeed resource, and we tried to encourage appreciation of this with a focus on the discipline of noticing (Mason, 2002) and work on compassionate group interaction (Gilbert, 2017). We hoped that participants would build a conversational approach into their own working contexts. As Baker notes, learning occurs when 'candid and respectful conversations among people involved in similar situations can be an ongoing norm' (2002, p.102).

From the outset, groups of three or four participants were working on what was to be an assessed enquiry into the ethnicity awarding gap at our institution and within the wider sector. Assessment is undoubtedly a pressure, but it also recruits energy and focus and for most proved a bonding task which created collegial ties stretching beyond the module.

In our final session we encouraged reflection on the module experience and while one or two participants found things to be a little 'light on content', the majority responded well to the format which illuminated for them the power of diversity. In the words of one rapporteur: 'we all praised how, although we initially thought the one hour sessions were just scratching the surface of complex topics, we were actually encouraged to expand our own thoughts and opinions – sometimes even without realising it!'

Recommendations

- Integrate your design: try to articulate everything around a coherent path. We planned a semester-long conversation about inclusive practice – we spoke together about ourselves and our histories, ways to interact compassionately, barriers implicit in our ways of working, assumptions (for example about race, language, introversion, and ways to teach). Our assessment had the same focus and we tried to signpost how key themes were playing out in our time together.
- Be available: arrive early, leave slowly, offer many chances to talk and spend as much space in these as you can listening. Be prepared to be wrong and adapt.

- Be explicit: be clear about what you are doing and why. You won't convince everyone but the more you explain your choices the more likely you are to keep learners with you.

- Build in reflection: planning time to do this each week together meant we could notice what was happening and respond. Organisation is important and responsiveness needs to be part of it. Participants should also be encouraged to see the importance of personal reflection for learning.

- Be prepared to feel out of control: flipping the learning and planning for learner autonomy can feel like letting go. Trust your learners.

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