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Arts-based pedagogy on the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice

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Abstract

What follows is a reflection on integrating arts-based pedagogy (ABP) into the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP), a course for early career academics with less than two years' teaching experience in Higher Education. The PGCAP aims to provide a broad introduction to learning, teaching and assessment in Higher Education but also invites participants to reflect deeply on their beliefs and assumptions about teaching. The course provides a community of practice for new lecturers and a space in which to discuss the challenges, frustrations and joys of lecturing. I have found that arts-based pedagogy encourages deeply reflective conversations to take place in the classroom and that these conversations contribute to the building of rapport amongst the participants. Three types of arts-based pedagogy will be discussed: photo elicitation; the use of postcards; and the impact of collaboration with the Drama department.

Keywords: Arts-based pedagogy; early career academic; photo elicitation; postcards; drama-in-education

Introduction

The Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP) is an academic and practice-based course for early career academics. Becoming an early career academic may be a challenging career transition (Sutherland, 2011) although potentially offers much opportunity for personal and professional growth. To be an educator is to acknowledge ourselves in the

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classroom and furthermore to begin to understand that emotions are intrinsic to learning and that any learning may provoke a range of feelings (Mortiboys, 2012). Teaching then, is never simply the transmission of information or the imparting of knowledge, but a participatory, collaborative process between the teacher and the students and amongst the students themselves.

The PGCAP offers early career academics a space for acculturating to learning and teaching practices in the academy. It is widely acknowledged that new lecturers hold beliefs about teaching that stem from their original discipline and about teaching in general (see Gibbs, 2014 and Jarvis-Selinger et al, 2007). This is often, but not always, linked to the idea of teaching as transmission of knowledge and the lecturer as expert. The PGCAP invites participants to make explicit these beliefs to themselves and the wider cohort with a view to gently questioning and developing pedagogic practice. Arts-based pedagogy (ABP) enables a 'way in' to this discussion whereby beliefs can be revealed rather than confronted. ABP also plays a role in encouraging connections amongst the participants on the course (Gravett & Lygo-Baker, 2024) and offers a counter-narrative to the current neo-liberal, metrics-bound culture in Higher Education.

The reflections in this article are based on six years of leading, teaching and marking on the PGCAP. It is a privilege to meet and teach early career academics and be part of their transition to Higher Education, knowing as I do the intensity of the journey and the steep learning curve. I acknowledge that there is strong potential for author bias particularly since I am a passionate advocate of the PGCAP and believe that it enhances the experiences of early career academics. I also derive immense personal and professional satisfaction from working with early career academics when they first begin teaching. My reflections are based on both formal and informal opportunities to consider the course. The formal reflections take place during meetings with the programme team, the moderation of marks, the Exam Board and subsequent Annual Review. Informal reflections are notes I make for myself during each academic year and conversations in person and via email with participants. This article is a composite of all these. It is not a research study and I have not sought ethical approval although I do have permission to use feedback from emails with former participants.

Arts-based pedagogy (ABP)

Arts-based pedagogy (ABP) is a "teaching methodology in which an art form is integrated with another subject matter in order to impact student learning" (Rieger et al, 2015, p.102). There are three broad forms of ABP: the first involves participants engaging in the artistic process itself, by creating, drawing, sculpting or taking photographs. A second form is where participants consider and react to an art form to develop their knowledge of another discipline (Hunter & Frawley, 2023). One example of this approach is the use of postcards to stimulate reflection and discussion. A third form of ABP is the involvement in a performance such as a Drama workshop. In using ABP on the PGCAP, I have drawn on all three of these approaches. Photo elicitation requires participant to select and frame a view, taking a photograph from their own perspective and as such is a creative and personal process. In looking at, selecting and reflecting on the visual images provided by postcards, participants are undertaking the second approach. And finally, the collaboration with Drama has required participants to take part in specific Drama activities and discussions relating to teaching and learning. However, I would add another dimension to the use of ABP which is that participants are not just learning about a discipline (in this case academic practice in Higher Education) but are learning about themselves.

The postcards that are chosen and the photographs that are taken reflect to the participants what they think, feel and see. Engaging in this process facilitates a different way of seeing, bringing into view feelings and insights that were not previously visible. I was drawn to using ABP by a personal inclination towards bringing the visual and creative into the classroom

and because, as an educator, I was seeking different ways to make visible the embedded beliefs and assumptions we all carry in relation to teaching (Gibbs, 2014 and Jarvis-Selinger et al, 2007). When presented with a visual image, whether new to us or one of our own making, as Leavy notes, “our response may be visceral, emotional, and psychological, before it is intellectual” (Leavy, 2018, p.3) thus creating or reacting to an art form bypasses the rational mind and enables access to a more imaginal and emotional response.

There is a small body of research which has explored the effects of using ABP in the classroom. Eaves (2014, p.147) reports that students find these approaches “engaging, accessible and empowering, with nuanced capabilities to alter relationships with phenomena, experiences and people” whilst Hunter and Frawley (2023) found that ABP encourages deeper levels of thinking and analysis. In addition, as Berger eloquently writes, “we never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves” (Berger, 1972, p.9). It is in this space where we ponder our relationship to the ‘thing’, object or visual that is imaginal, creative and reflective. Using photographs and postcards is a way of using images as mediating artefacts between the person and their thoughts and feelings, stirring “alternative ways of thinking about the subject at hand” (Coe et al 2021, p.133), of which we may be barely conscious. Within the context of a course for early career academics, this serves to unsettle existing assumptions, invite new connections and surface awareness of the emotions connected with teaching.

Below, I will discuss how I have used photo elicitation, postcards and collaboration with the Drama department to bring arts-based pedagogy into the PGCAP course.

Photo elicitation

Photographs are polysemic; they carry multiple meanings both literal and metaphorical. They also capture a specific moment in time enabling a more direct connection with the emotions and feelings relating to a person's experience of the world (Hidalgo Standen, 2011). Photo elicitation, that is inviting participants to take their own photographs can, in this way, offer “a visual dimension to the unobservable thoughts, feelings, experiences and understandings” (Richard & Lahmann, 2015, p.4). As an induction activity on the PGCAP I invite new participants to take a photograph at St Mary's University. The photograph they take represents the university through their eyes and also anchors them to a particular place and time as they embark on the new role of lecturer in Higher Education.

In this activity, participants bring their photograph to the first session and share them in pairs. Photographs are taken anywhere on campus or even on the journey to work and enable important conversations about the decision to make the career transition to academia and the connection to the university. Whilst I have not in the past asked to see the photographs, participants have later reported to me how much they enjoyed the activity and how much it made them reflect on themselves and their journey into academia. In addition, this activity seems to facilitate the connections amongst the participants on the first day of the course. Building this community of practice with other new lecturers is an important element of the PGCAP and helps to address feelings of imposter syndrome.

Postcards

The postcards I use in my teaching are from my own collection, bought in galleries, museums or other visited places. The images on the postcards are mainly of art, architecture or places in nature. I bring these postcards into the teaching space to provoke reflection and stimulate conversation. I use the postcards as suggested by Curry and Ward (2014, p.101), as “a device to enable dialogue in groups that allows participants to connect together past, present and futures, to build new stories about the future, and to put themselves in the picture”. Ways of utilising postcards include choosing a postcard to surface reflections on tricky teaching moments; prompt discussions on the role of the

teacher and/or student; as a way of checking in or taking stock and finally, by writing postcards to a future or past self.

Each postcard activity begins with spreading out a range of images on a large table and inviting the PGCAP participants to look at the postcards and identify which postcard(s) they are drawn to. It is important at this stage not to 'overthink' it and to be guided simply by what resonates or appeals rather than getting drawn into applying a rationale for the choice. Then, usually in pairs, participants will talk through why they chose that card and how for them it connects to the topic under discussion. The choice of postcard is very personal and the resulting discussions thus have a particular meaning and resonance for participants.

A memorable example of using the postcards to take stock was when I did this activity with PGCAP participants in semester two. March is a challenging time for lecturers in their first year of teaching. They are halfway through semester two and generally in the midst of another round of assessments. Marking is a new skill which must be acquired and which is often very time-consuming. March seems to be a pivotal moment, at the same time in the thick of the action but with a sense that the end of the academic year is in sight. Using the postcards prompts more emotional reactions to that moment in time prompting reflection on past, present and future. The value of the professional reflection here is in acknowledging feelings of being overwhelmed yet feeling a sense of solidarity with others in the same situation. A final example of postcards in the classroom is to use them for participants to communicate with themselves from the past or future. For example, writing to a past or future self with messages of support, guidance and encouragement. This activity can be adapted depending on the context.

Drama

Throughout the PGCAP, I curate a series of guest speakers from across the university. This varies each year but one collaboration that has endured for the past four years is the work with the Drama department, specifically the Head of Drama. Each year I have invited him to make a contribution to the PGCAP providing a short brief which has been interpreted in different ways.

The first invitation was in 2020. We were mid-pandemic and all PGCAP teaching had moved online, thus this was an online guest lecture in which teaching was spoken of as a visceral act, a moment of communion with people in a room which would never happen again. He encouraged his audience to consider how they take ownership of a space (whether online or in person) in order to really inhabit it and connect with the students they were teaching. A powerful message from this talk was that all teaching is fundamentally relational in nature.

In 2021, we were back on campus and so we were able to arrange a real Drama session in one of the studios. Participants made 'living statues'; working in pairs, they shaped each other into sculptures of 'father' and 'mother'. There was a stage where participants were sculpting and a stage where we paused and looked at the sculpture before moving on to discuss their meaning. This opened up a wide-ranging and imaginative conversation which touched sensitively on people's ideas, gently prodding at preconceptions and stereotypes. Had there been more time, this workshop would have continued to incorporate the role of Teacher.

In 2022, the third year of collaboration, there was less time available and so the guest talk took place in a traditional teaching room with a computer and screen and rows of tables facing the front. The talk this time invited participants to consider the space, to consider the assumptions that had been made when the space was designed and the lack of room (literally) for alternative ways of being in the room.

In 2023, mindful of the restrictions of the previous year, we agreed to bring the PGCAP participants to a Drama studio again so as to be back in a very different space from the one in which they were all teaching. The cohort this year were teaching in three main spaces: labs, classrooms and lecture theatres. Again, a major point was made about how the setup of a room conveys particular messages about how that room could and should be used. The encouragement this time was to subvert this structure and to consider how each of them might be able to influence the spaces where they teach.

Feedback from participants in this cohort revealed that the message had landed deeply and this was conveyed in their reflective portfolios; many wrote about how they had never considered space in this way and that it had deeply influenced their teaching. For myself as the Course Lead, whilst undertaking teaching observations for the second module of the PGCAP, I noted how one lecturer had responded to the suggestion to claim the space. For the session I observed, he had moved the chairs and tables from their traditional rows into a horseshoe, more suitable for the debates he encourages in his subject. In an informal email conversation, another participant wrote that the Drama session had made him realise that the physical environment could have an impact on learners' experiences and engagement, noting the importance of where the lecturer stands in a room and how moving from one side to the other enables different connections to form. Another former participant arranged to take her students into the Drama studio to practise presentation skills noting that this was a great experience enabling the enhancement of communication and body language skills.

Reflections

Using arts-based pedagogy on the PGCAP has evolved organically. I never set out to embed these approaches, rather they arose through my own interest in images and creativity and in stimulating different ways of seeing which I view as essential to deep reflection. At the core of the PGCAP is a focus on reflective practice as a way of developing professionally. This can be undertaken in a surface level way or it can lead to profound realisations and potentially changes in practice. Many assumptions about teaching and learning are deeply held, partly because many of us have spent years of our lives in education. For those who become lecturers, most have also completed further university studies such as a Master's degree or PhD, at times further entrenching a particular view of teaching. During the PGCAP, I aim to provoke reflection such that the participants will make visible to themselves their beliefs and assumptions. ABP facilitates these reflections by moving away from the rational, cognitive mind and towards the imaginal and emotional.

Conclusions

Using arts-based pedagogy has felt meaningful to me and I feel has given the participants a different way of seeing. In the midst of a Higher Education sector with a strong focus on metrics and quantitative ways of evaluating success, it is also vitally important to keep hold of what makes us human, what lights a spark and what reaffirms our purpose in being educators. I like the way that creating or responding to visual images brings forth something hitherto hidden and evokes responses closer to our feelings than our cognitive thinking. In conclusion, I feel that arts-based pedagogy has huge potential to make visible beliefs and assumptions, develop the relational aspect of teaching, strengthen connections amongst participants, nurture the imagination and encourage more creative ways of thinking, seeing and reflecting.

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