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It's not just a Game: Educating the Educators

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Abstract

This paper presents one of the findings from a TQEF (Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund) project on 'Creativity and Innovation in Teaching in Higher Education'. It focuses on how the learning by academic staff who initially engaged in the Creativity Cafés has been transferred into the classroom.

One of the ways the project has promoted creative and innovative teaching in academic staff is through the organisation and practice of Creativity. These have been developed as informal, but structured network workshops where staff have had the opportunity to present and share their creative teaching practice with others across the different academic disciplines. Emphasis is being placed on teachers to be more creative in the classroom, and to network and share ideas across the different disciplines through establishing creative communities of practice to help explore new approaches to teaching.

In a climate where Ofsted is wanting 'a "crackdown" on boring teaching' (Curtis, 2009), the findings from the Creativity Cafés demonstrate how teachers are keen to develop their skills further. Case studies of staff have been used to show how their own learning experience at these events has made them eager to push the boundaries of creativity in their own classrooms.

This paper explores how the emphasis to use new creative approaches in teaching has changed these teachers' own practice, and how effective it is on their learners.

Keywords

Creativity in teaching/ Communities of Practice/ Engaging students/ Encouraging learning/ Networking

Introduction

The two-year TQEF project in 'Creativity and Innovation in Teaching in Higher Education' funded by HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) finished in July 2009. Its purpose was to develop, encourage and support creative and innovative practice within the University of Huddersfield and amongst its partners. One of its objectives was to disseminate creative practice to other staff in the University through workshops and knowledge cafés. This approach is summed up by Csikszentmihalyi,

But how can the joy of learning be instilled in modern universities? First make sure that teachers are selected in part because they model the joy of learning themselves, and are able to spark it in students; second, that the curriculum takes into account the students' desire for joyful learning; third, that the pedagogy is focused on awakening the imagination and engagement of students; and finally that the institution rewards and facilitates the love of learning among faculty and students alike. (in Jackson et al., 2006 p.xx)

This paper will: firstly outline how the Creativity Cafés originally emerged and were run; secondly, by using five case studies, investigate why staff were motivated to attend the Cafés and why they wanted to explore creative teaching approaches; thirdly, question whether the Cafés changed their approach to teaching; and finally, ask what benefits, if any, they perceived in the students' learning and engagement. This paper will critically reflect on the findings from the case studies, and assess the value of the Creativity Cafés in helping to support the need for teachers to be more creative in the classroom.

How the Creativity Cafés emerged

In May 2007, initial meetings with over 40 key University of Huddersfield academic staff took place to identify examples of innovative and creative pedagogy across the University. Details of these interviews were published in the Escalate ITT Conference Proceedings for May 2008 (Harvey, 2009, pp.74-81), but briefly there were three main findings:

1. Four broad categories of Creativity were identified: Creative Thinking; Creative Teaching Techniques; Creativity and Community and Employer Engagement; and Creativity and Information Technology.
2. Staff were often unaware of creative teaching practice outside their department, and often inside it too!
3. All welcomed the opportunity to meet others and share their work on creative practice.

In this paper, the focus is on the second and third findings from the interviews. Although it was found that staff were keen to be involved in sharing their creative teaching with others across the University, many lacked any knowledge of the innovative practice which was happening in the University. Quite often, this was within their own departments too!

These interviews highlighted that staff from different schools were often using similar creative ideas, but usually did not know each other. It soon became clear how beneficial it would be to get them together, to have a core of people who could establish 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1999) around their creative ideas, and develop sustainable networks which, in turn, would encourage more creative teaching to happen. The concept of the Creativity Café emerged from this finding.

The Creativity Café is based on the 'Learning Café' where 'the café theme is an excellent way to get learners networking and sharing ideas in an informal, but structured way' (Eastwood et al, 2009, 21).

To set the right mood, tables were arranged in 'bistro' style, with tablecloths, candles, flowers and a menu showing the agenda for the day. The facilitators at each table dressed as 'waiters' in black and white uniforms, and helped 'spill' ideas from the group onto the tablecloth and feedback the discussions. The participants enjoyed the fun and the creative feel to the room, and this encouraged them to be innovative in their thinking too.

All diners were given name badges, and were instructed to sit with staff from a different School, or beside someone they did not already know. Individual 'business cards' made from sticky labels, were given out with the participant's e-mail address; this was to encourage informal networking to continue afterwards.

On the Menu, 'Starters' provided the introductions and aims, followed by the 'Dips'. These were short talks given by a selection of staff who presented their own creative teaching approaches, and these were followed up as topics around each table. For example, at one cafe on Creative Teaching Techniques, the themes included: use of music and games, and the use of models and metaphors (Eastwood et al, 2009, p.18). During 'Mixed Grill', 'diners' got the opportunity to select a table with other staff they did not know to share experiences and ideas. After a time, the delegates moved to a new table and selected a new topic to discuss. The 'waiters' stayed to capture the new discussion, and then at the end of the session fed back to the whole café. These were written up and distributed to the delegates after the event.

It was found that networks which were developed out of the morning sessions carried on over lunch. This created a very easy and informal atmosphere which encouraged others to join in. Music played in the background to add to the 'bistro' feel. Before delegates finally departed, the final 'café rule' was to hand out their 'business cards' and agree to network with at least one new contact. They also had to complete a 'luncheon voucher' to 'spill their ideas' about this session and future events. These were used as feedback to evaluate and plan future cafés.

Why staff chose to attend the Cafés

Over the last two years, eight Creativity Cafés have been organised for staff at the University, each having a different theme around creativity.

The inquiry for this paper has been to find out why staff attended these Cafés, and whether it has influenced their teaching. There were three presumptions made:

1. Some academic staff had chosen to come to the Cafés because they were supposedly teaching creatively, and were bringing a wide range of knowledge and expertise with them to share with others.
2. Some visited the café to find out about how to teach creatively and to be inspired by others.
3. All wanted to network with other like-minded staff from across the University, and to make links afterwards.

Were these presumptions correct? Jackson and Shaw had found 'that many academics report that creativity, while recognised by their discipline, is not really valued beyond the rhetorical level' (in Jackson et al., 2006, p.104). This paper is seeking to determine whether practice matches the rhetoric.

For this inquiry, case studies of five staff were randomly selected from across different departments, Computing and Engineering; Business; Childhood Studies; Police Studies; and Initial Teacher Education for Secondary School Music. Although the sample was small, the range of disciplines would provide useful data. All had been keen to be involved with the Cafés, and had been in contact between the events, which made it easier to set up the interviews. As a lecturer myself, I have learnt and been influenced by the events at the Creativity Cafés, and therefore cannot distance myself as a researcher from the issues raised by the inquiry. (Marshall, 1995)

I have situated this paper in a continuous inquiry process. The Creativity Cafés have run a number of times, and my interest has changed to the 'so what?' aspect of them and their future impact on the participants and their students. The following extract by Shaw (2002, p.152), although referring to a different form of event than the Creativity Café, is illustrative. She writes:

'The design of both Open Space and Future Search Events regularly produces the enthusiasm, collective focus and new action plans that its advocates suggest. The experience often generates optimism and goodwill. What happens after is not examined or written about in any great detail. My question is not 'Is it worth doing?' Much may come of such events. Much will come of them and this will bear a complex relation to hopes, fears and aspirations of the participants'.

In this author's experience, staff development events do take place but their impact is rarely determined. This paper therefore seeks to inquire 'what happens after the Creativity Cafés'.

Therefore, using qualitative research, data was collected by individually interviewing the five staff. Notes were taken by the researcher when asking the interviewee the following questions:

1. Why did you choose to come to the Creativity Cafés?
2. Why did you want to explore creative approaches in your teaching?
3. What creative ideas did you develop from networking at the Creativity Cafés?
4. How have these approaches affected your teaching in the classroom?
5. What benefits (if any) have you seen in your students' learning and engagement?

The first question addressed their motivation about getting involved with the Creativity Cafés in the first place. Four of the staff mentioned that the Cafés were a 'chance for

networking'. All of them wanted to know about any new ideas around creative teaching, and also 'to consolidate ideas'. One mentioned about the Cafés being 'contagious – you picked up ideas whether you wanted to or not, just by being there'. Two of them mentioned that the word 'creativity' in the title was a factor too.

All the female staff interviewed mentioned about needing to develop their confidence in some way. Some were concerned about whether they were 'teaching at the right level' and whether they were they 'doing a good job'. Three were relatively new to the University, and so wanted to know whether they were 'meeting requirements' and whether 'teaching creatively in Higher Education was acceptable'. One said she 'thought she taught creatively, but wasn't sure'. This uncertainty was an unexpected response from an outwardly confident group! This reflects Grainger, Barnes and Scoffham (2004, p.244)

'If teachers and lecturers are to adopt innovative ways forward, they need to recognise the tension between the incessant drive for measurable standards on the one hand and the development of creative teaching on the other.'

Finally, three mentioned they wanted to change their teaching style. They were conscious that 'overusing PowerPoint caused disaffected learning amongst their students', and that 'teaching can get into a rut'. Cropley talks about 'transformative learning', where creative thinking skills are used to solve novel problems:

'For the present purposes transformative learning would enable people to break away from seeing the new in terms of the past and always dealing with it in the same way as previously, and thus facilitate production of novelty' (Cropley, 2001, p.161)

These responses led to the next question about wanting to explore creative approaches to teaching.

All of the interviewees said they did not want their students 'to sit in boring lectures'; they wanted 'to inspire them' and 'get them thinking'. A couple of staff mentioned that they wanted to be 'more creative in their approach' so that it was 'more enjoyable', and information was 'more accessible to students'. They wanted to 'use ideas that other staff had tried out'. One of the staff members, who was a teacher trainer, thought it was important to 'model ideas', to 'demonstrate good practice' and 'set an example for teacher trainees'. These were apt responses at a time when the Chief Inspector of Schools, Christine Gilbert, stated: 'the changes in inspections would amount to a "crackdown" on boring teaching'.

"I think that it should do that. When I was a [local authority] director of education I wanted to know if there was a strong link between boredom and achievement. We did a piece of work on it and there was strong evidence that a lot of it was boredom." (Curtis, 2009)

All of the staff interviewed were keen to use new ideas, keep up-to-date, and not get stale in their teaching styles, to keep their students motivated and inspired to learn and achieve. They were focused on using techniques which would engage the students with their learning, and make it more fun and memorable. Cropley (2001, p.160) comments that traditional education favours linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligence (left-

brain learning), but neglects what Gardener (1993) calls 'intuitive' intelligence (which is a feature of the visual, imaginative and holistic right-brain learning). So many staff want to redress this balance by using all the senses in their students to nurture creativity.

Did the Cafés change approaches to teaching?

The next part of the investigation considered whether networking at the Cafés did develop any creative ideas and whether it impacted on the classroom. All of the interviewees have been affected by the Cafés. Three of them mentioned how they had a 'variety of more engaging activities'. Sessions were more interesting to teach and the mood of the sessions was often much lighter. 'Teacher-talk' was less, and the use of PowerPoint was kept to a minimum. A couple of them mentioned how they would now 'experiment with new ideas' and were happy to be 'more flexible' in their sessions. Two interviewees also commented how they used more peer-assessment and feedback and much more self-assessment with their groups.

The types of creative ideas used in the classroom varied greatly. Some staff used playdough, drawing and Lego for reflective exercises, which had provided some powerful and rich insights into their students' studies. Other staff who had wanted to develop community or employer engagement further, had incorporated more real-life scenario case studies, visits and guest speakers into their activities. This made linking theory to practice much easier to achieve, and students' understanding greater. Creative use of Information Technology featured too, where some staff had developed social networking sites and wikis (Eastwood et al, 2009, p.102) to encourage student networking and collaboration. The above examples suggest that the Cafés had impacted on the staff and their approaches to teaching.

Benefits in students' learning and engagement

All the interviewees perceived benefits in their students' learning and engagement through using more creative teaching techniques. One person mentioned that the students were in a better mood, finding the lesson more enjoyable and were 'more motivated to stay in lessons'. A couple mentioned how it gave the opportunity for less able students to flourish, as they were given the chance to demonstrate their creative skills, which boosted their self-esteem amongst the group. They found that students preferred 'more practical activities and less teacher-talk'. They liked 'being exposed to a diversity of learning approaches' and learnt better with a 'practical dimension to the theory'.

All the staff mentioned how the students changed their attitudes over time. They started to 'become less resistant to change' and 'open to new ideas'. They were beginning to 'broaden their horizons and vision' and 'develop their problem-solving skills'. They became 'more self-sufficient' and 'able to do things independently', and the 'quality of work' was much higher.

Staff members did add a note of caution too. One mentioned that it was important not to 'lose focus of the lesson' as 'it is important to get the theories across as well'. Lessons must have 'a means to an end'. Also 'weaker students do not always get the message', not always grasping the creative methods being used, and they need more structured input.

Another comment made by an interviewee was the need for creative resources. Sometimes it can be costly and time-consuming to gather materials if they are not readily available within the department. These notes of caution are important as they reflect the practical realities of learning engagement in this University setting.

The value of Creativity Cafés to support teachers' creativity in the classroom

The findings from the five case studies highlighted some interesting factors why these staff attended the Cafés. Although they were bringing their own expertise to share with others, they also wanted to develop their confidence in teaching this way. They also wanted to pick up new ideas through networking, to inspire and motivate their students. All staff interviewed found the space to meet and find out about new ideas from others across the University both novel and refreshing.

I found that, although the staff enjoyed networking on the day, informal networking with each other outside of the Cafés was limited. I was expecting this aspect of the Café to be much more widespread. Feedback from participants commented that limitations on time were the main factor. In other words, the pressure on limited time resource meant that choices had to be made of what to devote energy to. In this case, it seems that informal networking does not have that high a priority.

All of the staff in the case study agreed that the Cafés had changed their approach to teaching. They were happier to experiment with new ideas, and would consider different approaches to their lessons where possible. They did comment that lack of resources and session time sometimes restricted their approach. All perceived the benefits of creative teaching with their students and increased motivation and engagement were noticeable. They found that linking the practical dimension to the theory had a beneficial effect on their learning and quality of work. Similarly, staff found that the students were becoming more self-sufficient and were developing their problem-solving skills. Many of these skills were lacking when they entered the University.

As Csikszentmihalyi comments '*Schools teach how to answer, not to question. They teach isolated disciplines that, as years pass, become more and more difficult to integrate..... Young people have to learn how to relate and apply past ways of knowing to a constantly changing kaleidoscope of ideas and events. And that requires learning to be creative.*' (in Jackson et al., 2006, p.xix)

Conclusion

This paper has sought to determine to what extent University staff, introduced to new creative approaches to teaching discussed at the Creativity Cafés, have changed their practice, and what impact this may have had on their learners.

Base on the five case studies, it appears that the Creativity Cafés have benefited the staff in developing creativity both within their own teaching and their students. As one person commented, 'the ideas are contagious, they are picked up whether you want to or not'. Staff have gained confidence in trying out new ideas and changing their teaching

style. In turn, they perceive that students feel more motivated and inspired, becoming less resistant to change, and the quality of their work is higher.

On a cautious note, it was mentioned that the theoretical knowledge must not be lost amongst all the creativity, and some of the weaker students may need more guidance. Also, these case studies have been taken from the lecturer's perspective but this paper questions whether students see creative approaches in the classroom in the same way; a further inquiry needs to be centred on student responses to such initiatives.

Furthermore, developing creativity in the classroom often means taking risks. Although the participants were enthusiastic and motivated about being creative, in an education system that is increasingly measured by targets and results, how many staff would prefer to follow safer options rather than risk failure? Eastwood and Ormondroyd (2007) question whether teachers really (are) encouraged to take risks in their teaching in an ever accountable and unpredictable educational world?' A further inquiry is needed to investigate how important this question is to teachers when considering creative pedagogical approaches.

It has been recognised that these findings and resulting observations were from a small case study of staff. However, these staff comments are supported by feedback given by larger groups of staff involved in the Creativity Cafés. The focus of this paper, principally has been to determine the 'rich stories' (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007, p.29) of staff representing a range of different disciplines attending the Creativity Cafés.

One of the assumptions brought to this study was that the particular academic discipline of the staff would influence the response to the café. However, this does not seem to be the case, it was more about using creativity as a practitioner irrespective of academic discipline (Jackson, 2006, p.95). Moreover, this paper demonstrates that the individual responses of staff, based on their own insecurities, classroom settings and readiness to engage in different ways of working, were far more vital factors.

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