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'Sit down, teacher!' experiential learning & deep reflective practice that cuts both ways

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‘Sit Down Teacher!’
Experiential Learning &
Deep Reflective Practice
that cuts both ways

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A uniquely university teaching context…

- We are often untrained teachers!
- We are qualified by (false?) expertise [teacher/expert] (yet mostly suffer from ‘imposter’ syndrome’)
- Institutional incentive structures favour research over teaching
- Workloading pressures in this context increasingly require ‘short cuts’ in teaching
- Reinforces discredited ‘banking’ model of teaching, where we articulate as ‘expert-teachers’

- At the same time, increasing pressures to ‘innovate’ and to deliver vocational training and ‘real world’ experiences
BROAD QUESTION

– How do University teachers (re)articulate in experiential learning classrooms?
Structure

1. Unpacking the ‘experiential learning’ classroom
2. Articulation of teacher in experiential learning classroom: our stories
1. Unpacking the experiential learning classroom
Experiential learning: NOT simply ‘experience’

- “I hear and I forget, I see and I can remember, I do and I understand” (Cricos 2000: 161 citing a Chinese Proverb in Moon 2004: 79)

- “If experience in itself was so valuable, then humans who are enmeshed in experience ought to be more knowledgeable than they are. Sadly the only conclusion that can be reached is that we do not learn from experience” (Cricos, 2000:161 in Moon 2004: 79)
Experiential learning: a shift from passive knowledge transfer

- **NOT** simply ‘knowledge production’ [transfer of knowledge, ‘banking model’]
Experiential Learning connects experience & classroom learning

- “the ability to act at the concrete level as well as reflect at the abstract level” (DeMartini 1983: 25)
- “... the application of knowledge in a practical setting. The purpose of this application is to effect some change in that setting” (DeMartini 1983: 18)
Teachers need to facilitate ‘experience’ and ‘reflection’

[Kolb & Fry (1975) reflective cycle in DeMartini 1983: 19]

- "Concrete Experience: Involvement in new experience
- Reflective Observation: The use of various perspectives to understand these experiences
- Abstract Conceptualisation: The creation of concepts and theories
- Active Experimentation: The use of theories to make decisions and solve problems"

- This entails transformation of passive students to engaged learners
- Q: What about teachers?
2. Articulation of teacher in experiential learning classroom: our stories

Our research questions

1. How do postgraduate ‘teachers’ experience designing and delivering experiential learning pedagogy?

2. ‘What forms of self-reflection does this produce and how does this affect the articulation of the teacher?

3. What can we learn from ‘reflective practice’ about the challenges and opportunities for academics to adapt to the changing tertiary classroom?
Our approach

- **Action-research:**
  - “Reflection-on-action... is viewed as teachers’ thoughtful consideration and retrospective analysis of their performance in order to gain knowledge from experience” (Leitch and Day, 180)
- Employed self-reflection (largely informed by our interactions with student feedback)
- Also emphasised collaborative reflection to minimise risk of ‘blind side’ of ‘self’ reflection (Wood 2012)
- Produce narratives – our stories - for analysis
- **Limitations** – all involved in social justice curriculum, which may produce specificities that comparative research would show
Structured questions for ‘self-reflection’

1. Reflect on your role as a teacher in the classroom: what role do you consider yourself playing?
2. Given that role, why did you pursue experiential learning?
3. What is the practice of your experiential learning (ie, what did you plan?) (this might be only a paragraph)
4. How did this impact students’ learning experiences? (what happened?) (please provide evidence here)
5. Did this teaching experience transform your understanding of yourself as a teacher?
6. What forms of self-reflection did you utilise?
A tale of three teachers

Leticia

Susan

Elisabeth
Leticia’s story

Leticia has actively employed experiential learning pedagogy since 2010. She first designed what she considers a ‘not traditionally experiential’ postgraduate unit on ‘Religion, Peace and Violent Conflict’ to improve teaching and learning outcomes. The unit dealt with sensitive topics and regularly elicited often uncomfortable emotional responses from staff and students involved. Through a process of ‘reflection-action-reflection’, she ‘redevelop[ed] the unit of study so that both ‘the highly personal subject matter’ and the ‘diversity of students’ ‘could be reframed as a significant positive aspect of the unit rather than a challenge or even a problem’. She required the classroom (students and teacher) to articulate and engage each other’s experiences and beliefs in regards to religion and culture. ‘It shifted the focus from simply learning ‘about’ other religions and cultures to learning through the experience of working respectfully with people from different religio-culture backgrounds’. She recognised that in social justice education, ‘the means of education were just as important as the ends’, and accordingly hierarchical or ‘top-down’ teaching approaches were inappropriate. From early and disillusioned experience of university teaching ‘as an isolated, solitary expert who transferred knowledge to a passive audience’, Leticia’s understanding of her role as a teacher shifted dramatically. She now conceives her role as ‘an ongoing process of working in partnership with my students and my peers to challenge and expand mine and my students’ way of thinking about my domain, and about the world more generally’. She now also sees her ‘teaching’ as meriting ‘the same processes of scholarly engagement’ as her ‘research’ demands, signalling a bridging of the traditional ‘teaching/research’ divide in academia.
Susan’s story

Susan has employed experiential learning pedagogy across her teaching career, by designing and delivering a postgraduate simulation about human rights violations. She pursued experiential learning pedagogy because ‘it allows students to engage in active social inquiry in a curated environment, and gives students the chance to ‘be in the world’ in a ‘safe space’. She considers her role as a teacher is multifaceted, comprising 5 key attributes. She is (1) ‘a guide to integrated learning’, whereby she scaffolds student learning with material for discussion and individual or collaborative discovery. In this regard she also identifies her role as a (2) ‘curator’ whereby she mediates student access to information and equips them with the skills to identify and source credible information. She also considers a key role in her teaching is (3) ‘developing students’ capacity for integrity and ethical thinking’ and to (4) ‘encourage socialisation’, noting that ‘human beings are inherently social animals’ and a classroom should respectfully model positive social interactions. Finally, and most importantly, she works by the credo ‘non pro schola, sed pro vita’ [not for school, but for life]. This informs her role as a teacher, which in a broader sense is (5) ‘to allow students the chance to think about how they want to live in the world’. Given her consistent employment of experiential learning pedagogy, her experience of ‘transformation’ relates to a nuanced evolution of her role as an experiential learning teacher. For example, ‘the increasing importance of the social aspects of teaching have reached new prominence’ in her understanding of her role as a teacher and her teaching practice.
Elisabeth’s story

Elisabeth largely ‘fell into’ experiential learning curriculum and progressively became exposed to experiential learning pedagogy through coordination of postgraduate student placement programs since 2008. This process coincided with her early career research years, and her plight to understand and come to terms with the role of ‘teacher/expert’ she thought she had to fill; a role she feels increasingly liberated from through the adoption of experiential learning pedagogy. She initially pursued experiential learning pedagogy in an effort to improve student learning outcomes, recognising through student feedback that students’ ability to integrate knowledge and practice were often thin and that students – and she herself – struggled with the ethicality of unpaid placements as part of a University training program that they paid fees for. This led Elisabeth to ‘self-train’ in experiential learning pedagogy and redesign the curriculum accordingly. In a new complimentary seminar program (still being refined), she now scaffolds student placement experiences with experiential learning pedagogy, and as ‘facilitator’ encourages students to form their own learning goals/outcomes, which work to link the (internship) ‘experience’ to ‘classroom learning). She also facilitates discussions which locate student placements within key phenomena. Together, Elisabeth and her students reflect on placement experiences in relation to cross cutting issues, such as funding regimes and the ethics of internships, as well as key competencies in the sector, such as practitioner self-care and cultural competence. Elisabeth finds herself learning and unlearning collaboratively with her students. This cements transformation of her ‘teaching role’ from (false) expert, to facilitator and more recently co-learner.
Some preliminary findings

- Teachers are uniquely articulated (or transformed) when they embrace experiential learning pedagogy
  - Elisabeth & Leticia were ‘transformed’ from ‘false experts’ to ‘co-learners’ through engagement with experiential learning pedagogy
  - Susan’s approach to teaching is continually evolving on the basis of self-reflection and evolving analysis of ‘what works’ and ‘what’s important’
  - All experienced shift from ‘expert’ to ‘facilitator’ and/or ‘co-learner’
continued

- Transformation of teacher necessary to create experiential learning environments and therefore ‘transform’ student learning experience
- i.e. Elisabeth taught a traditionally ‘experiential’ curriculum, but lack of training meant she delivered an ‘experience’ disconnected from learning
- Leticia: ’For me, transformation of my identity as a teacher and my approach to teaching and learning was essential to applying experiential learning techniques in postgraduate social justice education’.
continued

Thank you!

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