Hereford College of Arts

Developing pedagogical practice at HE in FE through the creation of less formal online learning spaces

How can we support our less confident learners at L5 in developing criticality and independent study skills? During 2014-15, Sarah Crowson and Simon Denison carried out a small action research project at Hereford College of Arts. We wished to foster the conditions necessary for learners to feel confident enough to engage in critical discussion, question their views and values (Hase and Kenyon, 2001) and thus develop the skills necessary for transformational learning (Illeris, 2013).

Learners were asked to identify areas of 'least learning' within taught sessions and we reframed these areas as non-formal learning sessions. Tutor facilitated discussion was used as a way to support learners' critical thinking (McGivney, 1999). We tried to use the space as a way of affirming positive relationships and supporting student confidence (Burns, 2004). Plus, we shared tea and cakes and let the discussion become broad so students could raise areas of concern and interact socially within the classroom setting as part of their learning (Norman and Hyland, 2003).

This was a very small project with many variables. However, results did appear to show the study could be worth pursuing further, with a more rigorous methodology in place. We tracked a small but significant increase in learner achievement for those working on pass/fail borderlines. This was evidenced through attendance data, summative outcomes, and qualitative feedback. Building on the project we held optional 'dissertation tea parties' and lunchtime critical discussion groups that proved very popular.

A dissertation tea party

In 2015-16, the project could not be pursued further in its original form and we looked for ways to reframe our research.

With no physical time available we questioned whether less formal learning spaces could move from the physical classroom to an online learning environment? Learning technologies in the workplace or informal learning environments can have a significant impact on learners (Attwell and Hughes, 2010) and online distance learning in HE involves discussion and tutor/learner interaction (White, Warren, et al. 2010). Could we build a model to facilitate this type of online learning? We had just built a Wordpress site as part of our multi-modal action research.

With the vision of creating a small, less formal, collaborative learning space in the cloud that might in some way mimic our research on the ground we built a framework for our, at first very empty, site and asked learners what they felt would support them.

This site is not framed as a research project although it could be. It is a learning space, a trial space that is constantly being shaped – an iterative activity carried out within a framework of constant discussion with learners. As a collaborative discussion space I am not sure it 'works' in the way we intended.

Instead, the site has become a flipped classroom, full of short screencasts and videos to support learning. It is a trial space for various digital technologies; Padlet boards where students can post images and anonymous comments, a signpost space, a place that students visit asynchronously to remind them of session content.

Data from access visits shows that it has become popular. More interestingly, initial feedback suggests that learners have started to invest in it regularly as part of their weekly activity. In class, we have started to adopt the language of 'our site'. Students visit at all hours of the day and night. A surprisingly popular page contains a podcast of a tutor reading an extract from Barthes.

We need to work on encouraging collaboration and critical discussion. We have started trialling 'Realtime' boards, creating a 'studio space' in the sky where tutors can carry out a 'walkthrough' of learners research and ideas, dropping in questions and starting discussions asynchronously. Next term, forum software will be linked to our Wordpress site to see whether this can support critical peer-to-peer discussion. Feedback shows that we should keep the Padlet boards.

It is worth mentioning that our college already has a successful VLE in place. A further research question might be to look at how far the delivery of learning through a traditional VLE can be equated to traditional pedagogy – knowledge transferred to

learners in a relatively linear fashion. I wonder how far we can develop this alternative online space into something that is mutually owned, a space where learners and tutors collaborate and where non-traditional learners feel confident, critical and creative. A tea party in the cloud?

[Sarah Crowson](#), Critical Studies Tutor

Useful Links:
Action research: https://transforminglevel5learning.wordpress.com/

L5 Wordpress teaching site: https://l5criticalthinking.wordpress.com/

Padlet: https://padlet.com

Realtime Board: https://realtimeboard.com

References:
Attwell, G. and Hughes, J. (2010) Pedagogic Approaches to using Technology for Learning Literature Review, http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20110414152025/http:/www.lluk.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Pedagogical-appraches-for-using-technology-literature-review-january-11-FINAL.pdf [last accessed 27/11/15]

Burns, T. and Sinfield, S. (2004) Teaching, Learning and Study Skills, Sage, London

Hase, S. and Kenyon,C. (2001) From Andragogy to Heutagogy http://www.psy.gla.ac.uk/~steve/pr/Heutagogy.html [last accessed 27/11/2015]

Illeris, K. (2007) How we learn: learning and non-learning in school and beyond, third edition, Routledge, London

McGiveney, V. (1999) *Informal Learning in the Community. A trigger for change and development*, Leicester: NIACE.

Norman, M. and Hyland, T (2003) "The role of confidence in lifelong learning." Education: Journal Articles. Paper 7. http://sprite.bolton.ac.uk/201/1/ed_journals-7.pdf [last accessed 27/11/15]

White, D. Warren, N. Faughnan, S. and Manton, M. (2010) Study of UK Online Learning, Report to HEFCE by the Department for Continuing Education, University of Oxford http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/pubs/2010/rd1710/rd17_10.pdf [last accessed 27/11/15]