Creation, curation and critique: teaching and assessing creative practice in the Liberal Arts

This paper will explore a Level 5 Liberal Arts module: The Creative Arts and Humanities, a two semester-long 30 credit core module on Keele's Liberal Arts degree.

In semester 1 students explore what creativity is in theory and practice through a series of creative writing workshops and then a series of lecture/seminars which delve into creativity within a diversity of art forms including literature, film, music, digital media, art, architecture and urban spaces. Here, the emphasis is on process and then product, in the form of genre, and the purpose of the Arts. In semester 2, students explore the arts in the community through a series of case studies of community arts engagement and community arts projects.

Both the teaching and the assessment of the module pose challenges for tutors. The module employs a range of pedagogical approaches from the conventional lecture/seminar through to the exploratory workshop; it draws on the expertise of lecturers from a variety of disciplines within the arts, humanities and social sciences; and it is assessed through a portfolio of written pieces from a range of genres.

To a large extent, the Creative Arts and Humanities module was constructed according to the principles of the Social Constructivist approach to teaching and learning. Principles which, I hope to demonstrate, are consistent with and exemplify the core values of a Liberal Arts degree.

The module is based on the notions that learning is an active process involving a search for meaning. Learning (and knowledge) are socially constructed. Learning is always contextualized (here through case studies) and the module structure allows for deep learning to occur when material is thoroughly explored and revisited. Teaching is therefore about empowering – allowing the learner to discover and reflect on realistic experiences. Many of the learning activities rely upon hands-on materials. Presentation of material starts with the whole, then moves to the parts with the emphasis on big ideas. The tutor prepares a learning environment, where learners can discover knowledge, and assessment is seen as an activity integrated with teaching and learning and occurs in this module through portfolios.

Many of the activities in the module were based on the principles of **experiential** and **enquiry-based learning**. An approach which is also **deductive**, with the principles underpinning the learning activity identified and articulated by the learners themselves, with the tutor's role being one of **facilitator.** This is invariably followed by a more **didactive** and **expository approach**, the intention of which is to link key concepts, ideas and theories to students' practical experiences and prior reflection. The intention is to teach about creativity by adopting a creative approach, so content and method are essentially the same thing. Some sessions took a **'flipped-classroom'** approach in which the key ideas, concepts and essential knowledge were presented to students **prior to the session.** Students then explored and **applied** these ideas through discussion-based activities in the seminar. This is in contrast to the more traditional approach of **transmissive** and/or **expository** lecture

followed by a seminar in which ideas could be explored through **illustrative examples** (and or case studies) and applied to students' own work.

When considering theory within a community of shared practice, and the aim was to establish a community of practice, it is useful to return to the original meaning of the word 'theory' from the Greek *theoria* (θεωρία), from which the English word 'theory' is derived, meaning 'contemplation, speculation, a looking at, things looked at,' and 'practice' from the Greek 'praxis' which is the process by which a theory, lesson, or skill is enacted, practiced, embodied, or realised. Students on this module are encouraged to explore ideas with a view to them, the students, articulating a coherent 'praxis,' the act of engaging, applying, exercising, realizing, or practising those ideas.

All of this raises questions regarding an appropriate mode of assessment which validates student learning and experience, provides them with a range of opportunities to demonstrate their learning, and, to a degree, provides them with choice. **SLIDES 4 & 5**.The approach adopted was something close to a patchwork assessment involving a portfolio consisting of three linked but distinct forms of writing: a creative piece (within which there is a variety of genres to choose from or within which to work); a reflective piece which may be an inchoate poetics, a commentary on the student's writing, a response to and reflection on the content of lectures within the module (or even a combination of these things); and an 'editorial' introducing five articles thematically-linked for a special edition of an imaginary journal: The Journal for the Creative Arts and Humanities. The assessment thus mirrors both the content of the module and the learning process. It enables students to demonstrate their learning, their engagement with course content, and to apply that to their own practice in relation to both product/outcome and thinking. This seems to me to be fundamentally consistent with Liberal Arts aims, values, and traditional practices.

Rather than focusing on one academic discipline, a Liberal Arts degree concentrates on the qualities that the student will have when they graduate. It offers a unique opportunity to develop critical and creative skills through study of a wide range of disciplines and approaches. The result is a challenging and engaging programme that contributes to the development of capable, and employable, citizen- graduates.

To quote for the programme specification, 'The programme offers students three main groups of skills. First, graduates of this programme will possess the traditional academic skills associated with most university degrees. Liberal Arts students think analytically, and critically, developing reasoned arguments on the basis of evidence. At Keele, they will be equipped with research skills, appreciating the range of methods and approaches to understanding the world that different subjects have to offer. They become self-reliant, independent learners. Second, Liberal Arts students are engaged with the environment around them, whether local, regional or global and equipped with the practical skills to address problems within that environment. They approach problems open-mindedly and in the spirit of inquiry, bringing a powerful combination of creativity and problem-solving approaches to find solutions. They see the world from many different perspectives and maintain an openness to new ideas. Third, Liberal Arts students are effective communicators, confident in their self-expression when dealing with a range of formats and audiences.'

The Keele Liberal Arts programme employs a series of approaches to help students develop these skills. Primarily, the programme is designed to expose students to a broad range of ideas and challenges. Much of the approach is based on inter-disciplinarity: the use of approaches from a range of different academic disciplines, either singly or in combination, as analytic tools. Students are exposed to a wide range of disciplinary perspectives, theories and methods which they are encouraged not only to explore in detail, but also to use and apply in analysing and understanding the complexity of the contemporary world.

To give an example of this, the assessment for the second part of the module requires a creative response to one or more of the case studies of arts in the community presented to the students and a more conventional essay/reflective commentary exploring the relation between theory and practice. The original assessment, it should be noted, was to be an individual or group project which was either a piece of art for an identified group within the community or created with that group. It quickly became clear, however, that there were insufficient resources, and time, available to facilitate this even given a level an assumed level of skill within the students. All that being so, the assessment is still innovative and demanding for both students and tutors.

The students are in the process of completing this assignment but three have already undertaken or completed creative projects. Inspired by the case study sessions, one student has written a play, one has made a documentary film, one composed an 'album' of music part of a collaborative Super Heroes project with a class of primary school children. Two of these projects were personal explorations, the third was an example of arts in the community, modelled to an extent on the kind of project explored in the module. The projects typify a particular type of engagement with curriculum content, ideas and practices.

In their 2005 paper on *Engaging the curriculum in higher education,* Barnett and Coate argue that in the C21st a curriculum should involve engaging students in three dimensions or 'building boxes':
Knowing – which consists of a personal relationship between the person and the intellectual field in question
Acting – which includes various activities which lead to the development of discipline-based, generic and employment-related skills and taking on the identity of what it is to be say a geographer, an earth scientist or an environmental scientist, and
Being – how students develop a sense of themselves and their capabilities, how they gain in self-confidence.

These are ideas and principles which underpin the design of this module, along with Baxter Magolda and King's Learning Partnerships Model. In the latter, learning partnerships support self-authorship via *three principles*: validating learner's capacity as knowledge constructors, situated learning in learners' experiences, and defining learning as mutually constructing meaning.
- Validating learners' capacity to learn and construct knowledge is necessary for them to realize that they can go back to the potter's wheel.
- situating learning in their experience instead of the experience of authority gives them a context from which to bring their identity to learning.

- defining learning as a mutual process of exchanging perspectives to arrive at knowledge claims supports their participation in the social construction of knowledge

The module design and delivery reflect and to an extent embody these principles and afford students the opportunities to develop self-efficacy and agency, to be self-shaping in their learning, and to explore identity through their own and others creative practice.

In practice, though, the delivery and assessment of the module has been very organic with much of both the curriculum and the assessment being negotiated with the students within the limits imposed by formal university structures.

One element which emerged rather than having been designed is that of 'curation.' To an extent, the module is a model of curation. A range of creative arts and research projects have been undertaken in recent years at Keele, which reflect and embody a range of theories and practices. Examples were sometimes chosen for pragmatic reasons but also because of the synergies between them. However, space was allowed for the unexpected and the serendipitous. For example, the order and juxtaposition of examples of creativity in different genres in the first semester and the case studies in the second was not always planned, but in the delivery and experience of their content it was possible for both the tutor and the students to make links between them and to review, revise and re-make as the module progressed. Similarly, the assessments, require students to curate their learning and research.

In this way, they reflect the core elements of creativity identified by Pope in his seminal text: Creativity: Theory, History, Practice. In his book, Pope states that Creativity can be expressed as 'the capacity to make, do or become something fresh and valuable with respect to others as well as ourselves.' It 'can be realized through an object (made), an action (done) or an ongoing process (of becoming).' Creativity offers ways of viewing and valuing and also re-viewing and re-valuing. Similarly, in 'Becoming a Person,' Carl Rogers states that creativity may be defined as 'the emergence in action of a novel relational product, growing out of the uniqueness of the individual on the one hand, and the materials, events, people, or circumstances of his life on the other.' The core elements of this theory are an openness to experience, the development of an internal locus of evaluation, and the ability to play with elements and concepts, ideas, shapes and relationships. These elements can be observed in all of the projects the students observed and also in their own creative work.

The structure and the opportunities for this were planned. How it would work out in practice was not nor perhaps ever could be. The qualities Rogers identified for learners to flourish are the same required of tutors. If allowed to develop and to become embodied, together, tutors and students can form a community of practice and a genuine engaged partnership in the exploration of the Creative Arts and Humanities. I would like to give the final word to the students: **see SLIDE**