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Sharing Distinctive Vocational Cultural Practices to Review Teaching and Learning Strategies Across CBHE: a Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Boyer (1990) suggests that in considering the concept of scholarship we take note of four distinct aspects, including that of teaching. His model offers a framework for the comparison of specific pedagogical practice and is employed for that purpose in this paper. College-based Higher Education (CBHE) is dominated by a number of vocational and professional curriculum areas. These professions each have their own distinct culture and ethos. This may be evident in interpersonal relationships, dress codes or the patterns and hours of work. There is a potential clash between establishing a cross-college consistency of good practice and respecting the traditions of distinct workplace environments. This case study draws on a number of sources to explore subject-specific approaches to, and understandings of, teaching and learning. It starts with outcomes recorded at a staff conference. These findings were taken further in peer observations shared with the CBHE teaching teams at a meeting of the HE practitioners' forum and developed in focus groups. Fifteen colleagues from disciplines including art and design, construction and engineering, social work, childhood studies and education contributed. Finally all those engaged in CBHE, around 80 members of staff, had the opportunity to read and comment on an initial draft of this case study. Written feedback was received from ten colleagues and some of that feedback is included here. This case study reviews some specific aspects of teaching and learning practice. What is meant and understood by the task of writing, being evaluative or critical and the process of reflection are tentatively explored. There is evidence to support the view that discipline- or curriculum-specific understandings of key concepts in teaching and learning exist. It is suggested that further consideration should be given to the origin of these differences and their possible impact on graduate employability.

Keywords: College-based Higher Education; Scholarship of Teaching and Learning; vocational culture; peer observation; graduate employability.

Introduction: The scholarship of teaching and learning

Boyer's (1990) brief, seminal paper sought to enlarge our understanding and appreciation of the notion of scholarship. He outlined four elements of scholarship:

- Scholarship of discovery
- Scholarship of application
- Scholarship of integration
- · Scholarship of teaching

These four elements should not, of course, be seen as discrete – they are part of a larger and profoundly inter-related whole (Simmons & Lea, 2013, p. 6; Healey, Jenkins, & Lea, 2014, p. 56) – but like any heuristic device Boyer's model may help us better to make sense of something that may become so vast as to be beyond useful comprehension.

Over the past 20 years, a huge literature has grown up around the fourth element above, albeit slightly renamed as the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). For a helpful starting point see Mick Healey's (2013) bibliography.

There are two online journals published by American universities. Dating from 2001, and published by Indiana University, is *The Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* (http://josotl.indiana.edu/). The 35th issue was published late in 2013. *The International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*

(http://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/ij-sotl/) has been published twice a year since 2007, and each issue includes 20 or more substantial essays or case studies. The material dominance of American academics ought not to obscure the possibility that SoTL in particular, and learning and teaching in general, are open to different interpretations. Parker (2008) argues that there are different paradigms and research bases in use in the US, UK and Europe more generally.

Given the quantity and range of literature that has been published, it may surprise that there seems to be some ready agreement about the defining and distinctive characteristics of SoTL, though Boyer's own definition was fairly vague. Healey (2003) carried out an intriguing piece of work to try and establish to what extent leading academics had a shared view of what SoTL is (and is not).

Gilpin (2007) suggests that there are four key elements. It is important that teaching is seen as being concerned with learning – teaching is not merely a set of skills or practices developed and used by professionals. Anything claiming to be 'scholarship' must be open and shared. It follows that anything that is in the public domain must be open to review and questioning. Finally, in sharing our scholarship we should make a deliberate attempt to make it available for the use and scrutiny of those closest to us in our community of practice. Crucially, perhaps, SoTL is not about "excellent teaching" (University of Queensland, 2007), though no-one is suggesting that professional competence should not be a critical personal and collective objective.

In reporting this case study, we seek to examine how we might make better use of this aspect of scholarship in professional and vocational practice by focusing on how similar language, ideas and concepts used (for example, in grading criteria, learning outcomes and assessment tasks) are differently understood and interpreted in different curriculum disciplines and cultures. Further, the ways in which different schools or faculties use ideas and phrases like 'critically evaluate' or 'ethically sound' may have implications for their notions of 'graduateness' or how graduate attributes can be assessed and confirmed.

The Stockport context

The University Centre at Stockport College has a long-established tradition of College-based Higher Education (CBHE). HNDs and HNCs in engineering have been delivered for about 50 years. Over the last 20 years or so there has been a considerable expansion in the range and mix of the HE on offer. Over that period, the centre has worked with a number of universities in the north-west, designing and teaching degree and foundation degree courses for students of illustration, photography, design, engineering, construction, forensic science, business, computing, social work, counselling, education and childhood and youth studies.

Currently, 1,000 students are enrolled on full- and part-time programmes, and thousands have graduated successfully this century. The Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review (IQER) completed in February 2012 expressed confidence in HE delivery at Stockport, identifying four areas of good practice for dissemination, two of which have some relevance here:

- The clear structures and effective processes with which the college manages its higher education and empowers higher education staff to maintain good academic standards;
- Effective management by the college of its staff development strategies supports the achievement of good academic standards and enhances learning opportunities. (QAA, 2012)

The phrases "maintain good academic standards" and "enhances learning opportunities" are interesting in this context because they are essentially managerial in tone and the implications for open, evaluative scholarship that focuses on how learning takes place are, at best, obscured. There is plenty of evidence that IQER has identified a clear and strong HE ethos in many colleges and has commented as such. It may also be the case that in some colleges a residual FE target-driven, managerial focus prevents a more questioning set of habits from developing (Simmons & Lea, 2013).

Methodological approaches

At the time that this study was undertaken, HE at Stockport was managed within curriculum areas. This reflected, in part, the physical reality that HE is taught and delivered in different buildings, albeit on the same campus. Students and staff in different curriculum and vocational areas have little day-to-day contact. This division is unhelpful, and several practical steps, aimed at mending it in some way, have been taken. HE students hold an annual conference, called Widening Horizons, which focuses on the transition from the world of study to the world of work and enables ideas and experiences to be shared and appreciated to some extent. HE staff also hold an annual research conference, and a staff research journal is published twice a year. Additionally, HE teaching and support staff meet at an HE forum five times a year; about 80 people are invited to the forum, and typically one quarter of that number attend. Meetings of this forum, were crucial to this case study as it provided the best opportunity to gather and exchange data from across all curriculum areas.

Two discussions were scheduled at the forum. The first was in September 2013, and this picked up on elements of work shared at the research conference held in July arising from an assessment of Graham Gibbs' (2012) work on quality in HE. Our evaluation of his work included recognition that 'quality' was a notion that was not easy to pin down and that our understanding varied from one teaching team to another. It was agreed that shared understandings – or rather lack of them – were something that, as a group, we wished to explore in greater depth. In November, a further discussion was timetabled with a much more targeted set of questions managed in two parallel focus groups. The questions addressed some of the specific issues that arise from teaching, learning and assessment. The questions explored included: "When you ask students 'to write' what do you expect of them?" "Learning outcomes typically expect students 'to analyse' or 'to evaluate' – how are those terms understood?" It was these focus groups that provided the core of the material that is shared here.

One other source of data was the notes made as a result of peer observations, which are part of HE practice at Stockport. Colleagues, usually on a cross-curricula basis, agree on themes or issues that they want to focus on as part of teaching and learning development. The outcomes of these observations may be shared more widely by agreement.

A first draft of this case study was shared with forum members early in 2014 and a number of colleagues provided written comments. Some of those comments have been incorporated here. All-in-all, the views of 15 different colleagues from all of the broad HE curriculum areas taught at Stockport have been collected and used to inform this case study.

Vocationally specific cultures

CBHE is largely vocational. Most tutors in the field are not originally academics and may not view themselves as academics even after some years of teaching. The distinction between CBHE as being essentially about teaching and training, and the key role of universities as centres for research, endures. Most college lecturers came to teaching from an appropriate workplace, bringing with them the culture and practices of that profession. Be they graphic designers, engineers, social workers or photographers, the tutors will consciously, or otherwise, draw on their industrial knowledge and culture when it comes to teaching. However, it should be acknowledged that in addition to socially acquired cultures, different personality and psychological traits may be markedly evident in those working in different professions. It might be that any distinctive character evident in a profession may reflect the dominant personality types of those attracted to it.

These cultural differences may be evident in terms of dress, age and gender balance in the workforce, the physical environment, hierarchies and power relationships, or even in the way in which people address each other. These are interesting areas for investigation in themselves, and what may be readily evident at the surface-level may cover up more profound differences, but here let us try to illustrate how this might play out in a teaching and learning environment rather than an industrial organisational context.

Cultural impact on curriculum design

In designing a programme of study – in getting the 'level' right, in writing module outlines, learning outcomes, assessments and grading criteria – many terms will recur regardless of the curriculum or vocational area. Everyday verbs like 'write', 'explain' or 'justify' will appear in the specifications for any HE programme but can we, as teachers and learners, be clear about how those words are being employed or what exactly is required?

In what follows, we draw extensively on the honest, and often immediate, comments of colleagues from different curriculum areas to illustrate possibilities. We would not presume that their candid

responses, for which we are grateful, are necessarily representative of all that work in that discipline in Stockport, let alone a range of institutions. The words of our colleagues may help us examine in more detail how we work as teachers and what we want from our students.

The verb 'write' should be a simple starting point; everyone in education writes every day. It is not an action or process that should necessarily detain us for long. As a lecturer on an illustration course told us, "When I say 'write' that is what I mean, and I expect my students to understand that." After a brief pause for thought he continued, "I guess that writing could be in a number of ways or styles and in that sense I might be asking for something that is quite vague."

Now, it could be that for someone with a highly developed sense of the visual – and with a refined and sophisticated vocabulary to describe and explain how things *look* – that the business of writing should seem self-evident. Similarly, a highly-regarded engineering professional with a track-record in resolving highly-complex design briefs, sometimes on a huge scale, described writing to us as: "In your own words, compose a series of sentences relating to a specific subject." The presumption appears to be that this task is so straightforward as to require no analysis.

A tutor working with trade union representatives reflected a different approach and understanding, however: "When writing we build student skills over a period, having sessions on note taking, sequencing paragraphs and so on[...] We discuss how to read a question, to identify the subject matter (which tests their knowledge) and to identify the key word/verb (which tests their skill)."

We are not suggesting that there is a 'right' or 'wrong' approach here, but seek only to identify the priorities of teachers and (by implication) their learners in different study areas. We would ask one question of those who take such care in practising writing skills with their students: should you put the same effort into enhancing their visual literacy?

The work of Marquis and Vajoczki (2012) is interesting and of relevance here. They examined how 'creativity' was taught across a range of curriculum areas and concluded that there may be some 'discipline-specific' aspects to teaching practices. We should not be surprised, therefore, if we reveal further specific interpretations.

What is it 'to evaluate'?

Let us consider one more example of this sort to further illustrate what may be going on below the surface. When asked about how they wrote learning outcomes and developed grading criteria that were appropriate to levels four to seven, many Stockport tutors said that Bloom's (1984) taxonomy remained a trusted starting point. The verb 'evaluate', for example, was consistently seen as appropriate to use as a test of higher level cognitive skills. How do tutors themselves define 'evaluate' when it is applied to assessment tasks?

A group of civil engineers – drawing in part on the work of Churches (2008) – identified three broad, but related, definitions of the word:

- to calculate
- · to place a value on something in a qualitative sense
- · to examine the relative qualities of something.

What is interesting about this understanding is that for them there is a clear view that the process of evaluation should lead to a measurable conclusion that we can have some confidence in. As if to underline this premise, they went on to remind us that in mathematical terms there is an understanding that evaluation is about arriving at a unique placing within a specified range.

By way of comparison, a tutor with a background in early years practice and teaching told us this: "I like to use 'evaluate' because it implies analysis and links to personal practice/experience. I always say it is a set of value statements".

This deliberately subjective understanding of what can be involved in evaluating is distinctly different to the preferred objectivity of the engineers. In a more general discussion, a childhood and youth studies lecturer explained it as follows: "The verbs that shape the learning outcomes can only be properly understood and defined in relation to the assignment requirements." That is to say the words – 'describe', 'justify', 'analyse', 'critically review' – do not have a precise and fixed meaning in themselves. Their meaning can only be properly established in the practice and context of a given task.

Accounting for difference

Let us return to the apparent semantic differences between disciplines. An engineering colleague accounted for this possibility by reference to problem-solving patterns in the following way:

Engineers tend to be 'convergents' who, in order to survive, tend to be 'outcome' driven, that is they might establish a client requirement, a cost or deadline, whereas social workers are likely to be 'divergents', who, in order to be effective, tend to be idealistically driven, that is to say, keen to establish the most favourable, humane outcome to the situation they are confronted with.

This dichotomous way of seeing the world, derived in this case from psychology, is not peculiar to our engineering colleagues, but this sense of 'either/or' sits well with an approach that looks for and requires certainty (and all of us would expect and want that of those engaged in engineering work!) For social workers (and others who see themselves as working with people rather than 'things'), to imagine a range of possible solutions and deciding on a 'best fit' solution, approximation may be acceptable and necessary.

Kelly, Nesbit and Oliver (2012) suggest that professionals from STEM backgrounds may find the transition to SoTL practices and habits less than easy because, in part, their quantitative professional training does not support the more qualitative approach that is typical of reflective education practice. This distinction may go some way towards explaining the differences in perception outlined here.

It is not just social workers that might be described as divergent thinkers in their search for creative solutions. Photographers, designers and illustrators are not constrained by the laws of physics in their bid to produce arresting images that challenge, provoke, seduce or reassure. Let us now look at ways in which these 'divergent' thinkers approach their trade differently.

Developing critical approaches

In the world of undergraduate study, wherever it takes place, it is important that students are provided with opportunities and reasons to develop critical skills – so that their own work and thinking, or the proposals of others, might be closely scrutinised, evaluated and tested. Healey, Jenkins and Lea (2014) argue that this willingness to contest apparent, but provisional, truths and to reach a capacity for self-authorship is what HE is all about.

A trade union course tutor argued, for example:

The issue of the development of critical skills is one of the key areas for union reps[...] We work with students to demonstrate the importance of critically reviewing their own performance[...] Our aim is that it becomes second nature for them and that this is seen as a good thing to do.

This sense of the need to develop critical habits and practices is underlined by an early years lecturer: "If you consider the professional world then being truly reflective and self-critical needs to be underpinned with theoretical and often uncomfortable considerations. My feeling is that this practice may fade reasonably

quickly once the student has left college and been at work for a while"

Some lecturers sense a resistance to developing critical and reflective approaches in the first place. In the world of work, students may perceive that what they really need is competence in the 'hard' skills and proven technical knowledge and efficiency. Investing in expensive higher education warrants demonstrable and tangible results.

A lecturer in design put it to us this way:

We have this debate with our students on an almost daily basis. They demand more hard skills – access to and skilled use of software, print technologies and so on. Often they miss the opportunity, which extended periods of time without the pressure of industry gives them, to experiment and grow as practitioners.

As an established and respected design professional has written elsewhere:

For the cash-strapped student, mindful of future tax obligations, time becomes an enemy rather than a friend. The space to speculate, to daydream, to get things wonderfully wrong has to be carefully budgeted, since it comes at a price (Rigley, 2011).

If we are to insist on practising good, critical habits, how might this be done in CBHE? We began by looking at a social work environment and, by contrast, at a photography degree course.

Reflection and intuition

The following commentary is based on a series of interviews and observations conducted with peers and their students. We are grateful to them for their openness and support. The practical world of the social worker, away from the desk-based tasks associated with report-writing, is often an immediate one – situations are met, frequently unannounced, demanding responses that are, in part, intuitive and, in other respects, the result of worked-out theorising. This theory may be developed privately by the social worker or may be part of a professional consensus. Either way, there might be little time for calculation or correction; mistakes will be inevitable, but part of what makes an effective social worker is recognising the mistake as early as possible and dealing with it honestly and promptly.

A social worker's decision-making may be challenged and scrutinised by clients, managers, colleagues, other associated professionals and, crucially, by themselves. All those people will bring differing perspectives and critical faculties to bear on the decision-making process and, in practice, some considerable distance is established between the time and place of the original decision – to which there may have been just two witnesses – and the critical review. This whole series of events, which might become part of a case conference and, as such, is 'fixed', is necessarily subjective in many ways; and there is nothing wrong with that as long as that is understood and respected by those party to the process.

The world of the photographer can be much more managed, controlled and calculated, however (although it is to be recognised that photojournalism might more closely match the social work environment described above). For some photographic projects, a period of intensive preparation may precede any shoot. An idea or concept may emerge out of long reflection on other work completed by different photographers; this reflection may prompt consideration of a location. Should the shoot be indoors or out? If the shoot is indoors, should a studio be used or a more 'natural' environment?

Considerations on the time of day or year may be important when it comes to lighting conditions. If models are to be used, then it may take a lot of time to find the 'right' person who is sympathetic to the project and open to it – who may be suitably collaborative in

spirit – or, if preferred, a more passive model. The photos themselves can, of course, be managed technically pre- and post-shoot. In short, a good deal of planning and reflection has taken place long before the final image – or series of images – is ready for public consideration. All of this can be rehearsed in the classroom.

The real world of the social worker cannot be replicated truly authentically in class. Common scenarios might be used to test out and evaluate a range of possible responses. It may be that what is learned from intensive and shared exploration in class and in groups is of use to the practitioner in the real world, but that prior experience can only ever be an approximation to each new and subsequent encounter.

Connecting with industrial practice

What we observed in both the photography and the social work courses had at least one key aspect in common: the students were working together to review their practice. The potentially harsh world of the 'crit' is well-established in the world of art and design and may be justified, in part, because it can help develop the kind of mental toughness that is necessary to survive in the highly competitive marketplace, where there will be more disappointments than successes for most designers.

As Siedell (2009) has argued, teaching about artistic production and the use of studio spaces has a part to play in demystifying the process and restoring it to its widest social purpose. His insistence that the artist should not be seen as someone beyond and outside ordinary human relationships, but as a practitioner within (and commenting on) society finds support in the practice observed at Stockport. Groups of students, through discussions about the decision-making process, investigate the impact their work has on the audience that will see it and explore more fully the view of the world that their work offers. What they produce are not merely images; they have an ethical responsibility for how they choose, frame and present those images. This was demonstrated, for example, by one final-year undergraduate who was completing a project on images of transgender individuals. She had a series of portraits and had to reflect on the ethical issues associated with the public presentation of them. The subjects had consented to be photographed, but what responsibility did the photographer have when it came to displaying the images? She had to recognise that some viewers would bring prejudices to the exhibition and she had to consider whether the work would challenge or confirm prejudices. Would the exhibition risk further harm to a community group already subject to hate crime?

A lack of industrial reality was bemoaned by an early years tutor:

Photographers get to go to New York and take photos, engineers complete computer-assisted design projects, TV production students do outside broadcasts – but early years students spend little time with children. It is almost as though that would undermine the academic integrity of the course.

This apparent requirement for academic rigour and authenticity means that, unlike their counterparts in photography, students on childhood and youth studies programmes complete their final year projects as 'independent studies'; much like the traditional dissertation or research project. Something which, while it has some recognition as a 'gold standard', does not suit the needs or aspirations of all students. This particularly applies to students taking vocational and professional courses, common in the CBHE sector (Healey, Jenkins, & Lea, 2014, p. 32). The collective and public 'crit' is absent – lest, it seems, it opens up the project to worries about plagiarism. This is an understandable concern but in terms of professional and vocational relevance it seems odd.

Those who build careers and a working life in the care and education of children and young people will almost always be working as part of a team. Their understanding of the lives of those

young people will be constructed in collaboration with others – the young people themselves, parents, carers, other family members and a range of professionals also involved in care and education. Attempting to complete an independent study can only be justified in terms of academic requirements that may only be appropriate to very different sorts of disciplines.

How and why to be critical

We, as teachers, may have different strategies available to us when it comes to developing critical skills and faculties, but do we also have different purposes and rationales?

According to a graphics lecturer: "We might, for example, look at an advertisement design and deconstruct the images/words in search for the literal and 'connotated' meanings."

A colleague working on business programmes said: "Critical means looking at all angles – regarding our readings it means taking account of the dates of publication, the relevance to our own work, its validity and the possible bias."

Finally, from this broad perspective, an early years tutor told us: "Critical means going beyond the obvious[...] We talk about different lenses and viewing through those lenses. It is about encouraging students to see and to think laterally or differently".

What is apparent in each of these statements is a sense that the world can be read in different ways and that, whilst we may have a preferred reading, we need also to recognise the strengths in alternative accounts. There is, again, a recognition and acceptance of subjectivity in this version of critical practice.

Implications and conclusion

This work began as something of a 'hunch'. In recent years, the CBHE curriculum teams at Stockport have shared their practices in a more systematic and consistent fashion – through an HE practitioner forum, an annual research conference, the publication of a research journal and peer observations. One consequence of all this work was

a growing sense that, whilst we often used the same language, we did not always mean quite the same thing.

This initial set of investigations seems to confirm this sense of what Marquis and Vajoczki (2012) term "discipline specific" practices. There are several questions that we now aim to pursue alongside our Stockport colleagues. The root of specific understandings and uses, be that language or concepts, may lie in the personal psychologies of the teacher and/or in the cultural worlds of the profession. Teasing out these roots more completely will be interesting.

Beyond that, it will be important to try and establish the degree to which any discipline specificity is inevitable, or can the distinctions be blurred as practices are better shared and merged? Finally – and this may be the most important issue – what has this to do with the worlds of work that our students in CBHE are training for? How can what we understand about the 'what' and the 'how' we teach be translated into strengthening the career prospects of our graduates and producing a skilled graduate workforce that is flexible and ethically motivated?

By identifying and sharing these questions we invite comment, feedback and collaboration.

Biographies

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