

Reflections on community engagement for transforming praxis: Lessons from the Learning and Teaching Creatively Project

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Abstract:

The Learning and Teaching Creatively project involved collaboration between the Bundanon Trust, the University of Wollongong's Faculty of Education and Shoalhaven Campus and the Australasian Occupational Science Centre. The aim of the project was provide opportunity for Graduate Diploma of Education (Primary) students at the Shoalhaven Campus to experience the creative process, thereby enabling them to develop ways of facilitating creativity in primary school students. Additionally, the project was designed to initiate a long term partnership between the Shoalhaven Campus and Bundanon, a highly valued internationally renowned 'living arts centre' located in the Shoalhaven. The Knowledge Building Community and occupational science, both of which use community engagement to link theory and practice, provided frameworks for the project. The project was funded by a University of Wollongong Community Engagement Grant and in kind contributions from the partners.

The project demonstrated the efficacy of living as a learner, which is a key component of the Knowledge Building Community. It also reinforced principles that underpin occupational science, such as the critical relationship between what people do and the context in which they do it, and how doing can be transformative. The project outcomes, as revealed by students' diaries and reflections from the project team members include benefits at the personal and community level. Additionally, the project has fostered a climate for educational and creative aspirations which are considered vital for regional development in the shift towards innovation and knowledge-based economies.

Introduction

Learning and Teaching Creatively was a community engagement project involving collaboration between the Bundanon Trust, the University of Wollongong's Faculty of Education and Shoalhaven Campus and the Australasian Occupational Science Centre. The aim of the project was to provide opportunity for Graduate Diploma of Education (Primary) students at the Shoalhaven Campus to experience the creative process, thereby enabling them to develop ways of facilitating creativity in primary school students. Additionally, the project was designed to initiate a long term partnership between the University and Bundanon for future regional development.

The contexts for Learning and Teaching Creatively were the Shoalhaven Campus in Nowra, Arthur Boyd's Bundanon, a large rural property on the Shoalhaven River and primary schools within the Shoalhaven region on the south coast of NSW. The project participants were twenty two students who comprised the 2006 cohort of the Graduate Diploma of Education (Primary) pre-service teacher education program at the Shoalhaven Campus. The project was funded by a University of Wollongong Community Engagement Grant and in kind contributions from the collaborating organisations. It was conducted from August to November 2006.

This paper describes how Learning and Teaching Creatively was integrated into the Shoalhaven Graduate Diploma of Education (GDE) curriculum and shares student comments about their project learning experiences. Included in the paper are reflections from the project team members on creatively teaching about creativity and on how the collaboration will contribute to regional development. The paper begins with a description of the organisations which collaborated in the project and a brief outline of the GDE program at Shoalhaven.

Collaborators in the project

The Bundanon Trust was established in 1993 to develop a 'living arts' centre from the Boyd family's Bundanon property and their art collection, all of which were gifted to the Australian nation by Arthur Boyd. The mission of the Trust is to promote the practice and enjoyment of the arts and to promote education and research in the arts. To this end, the Arthur and Yvonne Boyd Education Centre was established by the Bundanon Trust to facilitate discovery learning and experiential programs to foster creativity as well as an appreciation and enjoyment of the natural and cultural environments (Bundanon Trust, n.d.).

The Graduate Diploma of Education (Primary) program at the University of Wollongong's Shoalhaven Campus was directly involved in the project. This program uses a Knowledge Building Community (KBC) which is a learning environment that supports the continuous social construction of knowledge. The KBC model at Shoalhaven is based on the Four Pillars of Professional Wisdom, which include: taking responsibility for one's own and other KBC members' learning; using the principles of Problem Based Learning to identify and solve professional problems; being a collaborative learner; and becoming a reflective practitioner. Community learning and school-based learning are incorporated into the KBC model at Shoalhaven (Cambourne et al., 2003).

The Shoalhaven Campus was established in Nowra in 2000 as part of a collaborative regional development initiative of the University of Wollongong, Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and Shoalhaven City Council. Not only does Shoalhaven Campus bring university education to the Shoalhaven region, it also plays a role in regional development by fostering innovation and commits itself to inspiring imagination in the Shoalhaven (Collins & Stevenson, 2004).

The Australasian Occupational Science Centre (AOSC) is a unique community education and research centre supported by the Shoalhaven community and the University of Wollongong. It was founded in December 2004 as a community initiative and is located on the Shoalhaven Campus. Occupational science, which provides the AOSC theoretical framework, generates knowledge and understanding about human occupation - the everyday things that people do to occupy their time – and the various influences that shape human occupation (Wicks, 2006). The AOSC program stream that focuses on people's participation in creative occupations was particularly relevant for this project (University of Wollongong, n.d.).

The project team consisted of the Bundanon Education & Public Programs Manager, the Co ordinator of the Shoalhaven Graduate Diploma of Education program, the Head of Shoalhaven Campus and the AOSC Director, who was the project leader. The team members were assisted by two Bundanon Education Officers, an artist-in-residence at Bundanon and two Shoalhaven artists, all of whom engaged with the UOW students. Teachers in the Shoalhaven primary schools supervised the students

transforming their project learning experiences into appropriate classroom practice during their final practicum.

The Shoalhaven GDE curriculum

When compared with the traditional approaches to pre-service teacher education, a KBC mode of delivery entails reversing the flow or direction of student learning. For example, rather than attending lectures and tutorials during which theoretical concepts are introduced and explored, students experience situated or contextualised learning in authentic classroom contexts for 2-3 days per week (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991). In the classrooms, the students assume the roles of sophisticated apprentice, supporting classroom teachers in the daily ebb and flow of school life, and novice anthropologist, using the techniques of scientific anthropology to develop grounded theories of how classrooms and schools work (Cambourne et al, 2003).

For the other 2-3 days per week, students and a lecturer, specifically skilled in this form of teaching, meet on Campus as members of a Knowledge Building Community. At these meetings, students are expected to construct their own grounded theories of what they witness and experience in schools and are continually making sense (and re-making sense) of their anthropological data. Students are also expected to use the prescribed information sources, textbooks and papers generated by acknowledged experts in the field, as well as theoretical frameworks for this process of making sense. (Cambourne et al, 2003). The three phases of the project were planned to integrate into this existing GDE program.

Integration of the project into the GDE curriculum

The first two phases of the project were designed to provide the students with opportunities to make connections and find relationships between artists, their own work and their response to their physical and non physical environments. Students were also encouraged to make a link between creative thinking and problem solving, as revealed in creative processes. In phase one, two Shoalhaven artists engaged with students in the Home Room, describing their work and work practices. During these sessions the students also participated in activities of an open-ended nature so they had little preconceived idea about what the task end result should be. For example, students undertook an exercise of drawing on a large scale, blind folded, whilst exposed to different types of music. The students were encouraged to realise their emotive response to each piece, using a charcoal stick in one hand, and an eraser in the other. Using the blindfolds and the music helped the students to become engrossed in the act of expression, without concern for the resulting image or any judgements on the merits of the result. This activity encouraged them to discover and experiment, leading to enjoyment, confidence and learning advancement.

Phase two of the project involved two, two day retreats at the Boyd Education Centre where the students participated in a variety of creative tasks, individually and in groups, using diverse media. Two Bundanon Education Officers and one of the local artists provided the support and guidance during these experiences of personal creativity, and a Bundanon artist-in-residence shared her studio with the students. At the Centre, students worked collaboratively on a large scale artwork, which enabled them to work expressively and explore a large variety of marks, textures and materials, and methods of application.

The students' final school-based practicum was the third phase of the project. In this practicum, they were expected to incorporate their new understanding about creativity into the creative arts programs for primary school students, which they designed, implemented and evaluated.

In order to demonstrate the degree to which they had achieved competency in the 4th Pillar of Wisdom, students were required to keep and share reflective journals throughout their participation in the project. The students also used an electronic chat room to share their emerging thoughts and ideas about how their experience of the creative process would influence their future praxis.

The students' experience of learning creatively

The effectiveness of the project in enabling students to experience the transformative potential of creativity is clearly demonstrated by comments such as "unshackling" and "enlightening", which were recorded after the first retreat. One student stated the retreat provided "an opportunity to let us use our imagination and creative skills we never knew we had". Another student recognised it was "a great experience for beginning teachers. She stated that "we learnt the importance of being free and having fun with art".

The following extract from an electronic chat room discussion provides evidence a student could make sense of the project experience and relate it to the prescribed texts: "But the most important thing was I was doing exactly what Langer (2005) discusses in her book... Not worrying about everyone else, not bringing any expectations, having complete mindfulness. Just enjoying the process and the journey."

A reflective diary extract reveals how one student incorporated her project experience into her school-based practicum.

I took a whole session Art lesson today...I had it all planned out, starting with talking about the differences between pencil and charcoal, then showing various pictures of mine and others' artworks, then having the kids experiment themselves. First of all, I had the students draw a picture with pencil. We were interrupted half-way through by a blimp in the sky. I allowed the students to go out and have a look, because they had never seen one before. When they came in, I suggested to some who hadn't started yet that they might want to draw the blimp they'd just seen. After drawing something with pencil, I had the class use charcoal on a fresh sheet of paper. They were to draw the exact same thing they'd just drawn, to experience first hand the differences between charcoal and pencil.

Such comments were enthusiastically received by the project team as they revealed how the students were translating the theory and their experiences into practice.

Reflections on teaching creatively

Marcel de Roo, one of the local artists working with the students, believes the facilities, environment, history and seclusion of the Boyd Education Centre could not be underestimated with regards to supporting the delivery of the program and its

lasting effect on the students. He found the students were willing to explore ideas, concepts, materials and mediums. He also observed the students fully immersing themselves in the creative sessions without distraction and appreciating the physical environment in which they exist and how that can have an affect on their creative responses. De Roo maintains the intensive group experiences maximised their learning advancement, specifically their understanding of creative processes (personal communication, April 2007).

Brian Cambourne, the GDE program co-ordinator, evaluated how effectively the learning creatively experience “spilled” over into each student’s conceptual thinking, as revealed in the assessment tasks they negotiated and completed, and in the lessons they delivered in the classrooms during their final practicum. In comparison with the 2005 GDE cohort, which did not have the Bundanon experience, Cambourne reports the 2006 students showed a higher level of confidence in their approach to teaching the creative and performing arts syllabus (personal communication, April 2007). On reflection, it seems the synergy between philosophies underpinning the KBC and the Boyd Education Centre was an important influence on the project’s success.

A Bundanon staff member described the project as “unique” and “inspirational” and having a strong impression on student concepts and aesthetic development. She stated that “watching the students realise their own artistic potential was fantastic. The students really came out of their shells and pushed the boundaries with their art.” (Criddle, 2006). Simone de Haan, the Bundanon programs manager, observed the students bond through the experience, on human and professional levels and believes key factors were the influence of the special location as well as a learning environment in which nurturing of effective communication was seen to be primary (personal communication, October, 2006).

Alison Wicks, AOSC Director, believes that a key factor in the successful outcomes of the project was the transformative potential of participating in occupations that are purposeful and meaningful in an environment that is both relevant, supportive and culturally sensitive (Whiteford & Wright St Clair, 2005). From an occupational perspective, the project reinforced research identifying creativity as a process-oriented experience that can be self actualizing (Blanche, 2007) and that community is an important support for doing creative occupations, which can be a significant source of meaning (Dickie, 2004).

Reflections on community engagement for regional development

Head of Shoalhaven Campus, Robbie Collins, views the project as a vehicle for promoting regional development. First, creativity has been identified as “the main internal driver in the knowledge economy” in the regional development process (Garlick & Pryor, 2002, p. 13). And second, the nascent relationship with Bundanon will create a ‘knowde’ in the knowledge economy which will support future community engagement and foster further regional development (Collins & Stevenson, 2004). Furthermore, Collins believes not only have the students benefited from the insights gained from their project experiences, but that they carry these forward into the region as they work in schools and then potentially link their students with both Bundanon and the Campus. In so doing, they will be inspiring educational and creative aspiration in Shoalhaven. As well, collaboration between Bundanon and the Campus has already fostered conversations about further shared initiatives, such as sharing Bundanon’s artists-in-residence program with the Campus community who attend guest speaker nights and film nights (Collins, personal communication, April 2007).

Conclusion

The Learning and Teaching Creatively project produced positive outcomes at the individual, community and regional levels and was successful from learning, teaching and occupational perspectives. The 2006 students' knowledge and understanding of creativity was enhanced by doing creativity, and by doing it in a supportive context, outside of the traditional classroom setting. Now, as qualified teachers, they can implement improved creative arts programs within Shoalhaven schools. Key aspects of the project have been incorporated into the Shoalhaven GDE program for future cohorts. In fact, based on the project outcomes, the Faculty of Education has approved two retreats at Bundanon and sessional teaching by local artists for the 2007 cohort. The project has also increased public awareness and utilisation of the Bundanon Education Centre, which, although world renowned, has been relatively unknown in the local area. In addition, the Bundanon-Shoalhaven Campus relationship has strengthened as a result of the project and others ways of collaborating are being explored.

Through its community engagement, the Learning and Teaching Creatively project has contributed to cultivation of a rich climate of creativity within the Shoalhaven community. Such a climate is critical for regional development given that creativity is considered vital in the shift to innovation and knowledge-based economies (Australia Council, 2005; PMSEIC, 20005).

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