Voices from the margins: Narratives of learning development in a digital age

Tom Burns, Sandra Sinfield, Sandra Abegglen[1]
London Metropolitan University

Abstract

This paper explores how to facilitate the 'bedding in' and 'becoming of' undergraduate students who come from non-traditional backgrounds and struggle with what is, for them, the often alien world of academic writing and assessment. To achieve their aims, the authors set up a partnership between the students of a second-year *Peer Mentoring* module and those of a first-year *Becoming an Educationalist* one. By means of this creative partnering, and via reflective blog entries, they worked to harness quasi-academic writing to help such first-year students to become familiar with, and powerful within, the exclusionary practices (in particular, the written conventions of academic essays) of Higher Education. They argue that this innovative 'teaming-up' of second- and first-year students not only models collaborative learning and writing practice, but also facilitates the 'bedding-in' of newcomers. The paper itself models the partnership and creative writing methods used to help students find their 'voice' by being 'co-produced' by the people teaching across the two modules concerned.

Introduction: Disrupting learning landscapes

We, the authors of this paper, are learning developers and educationalists; a significant aspect of our work is to help especially 'non-traditional' students become familiar with, and powerful within, the exclusionary practices of Higher Education. Our students find themselves in an often confusing educational context that is influenced by the often conflicting narratives of assessment, SATs, League Tables, OFSTED, moral panics about plagiarism and also the 'dumbing down' of education (for which they are personally blamed): 'There are Mickey Mouse students for whom Mickey Mouse degrees are quite appropriate.' (Starkey, 2003, cited in Brockes, 2003)*.

A negative take on the practice of Higher Education teachers is that they are expected to re-territorialise their students, requiring them to conform to traditional HE expectations – see also arguments about skills, socialisation and academic literacies (Lea and Street, 1998). As Andrews (2010) states, this is typically accompanied by the notion of a deficit model, in which these students are thought to lack something – usually competence in writing academic English – and therefore that they need continuous, and sometimes intense, support and help to succeed:

> *'Notions of deficit seem to be part of institutional – and some individuals' – thinking. In the cases of institutions, some provision has to be made for those students who do not appear to have the requisite linguistic and compositional skills and capabilities for success in higher education.'*

[1] Tom Burns t.burns@londonmet.ac.uk, Sandra Sinfield s.sinfield@londonmet.ac.uk, Sandra Abegglen s.abegglen@londonmet.ac.uk

In this context, we developed a partnership between the students of two BA Education Studies modules – *Becoming an Educationalist* (Becoming) and *Peer Mentoring in Practice* (PMiP). We hoped that our newly-developed, year-long *Becoming* and semester-long *Peer Mentoring* modules would provide support and opportunities for students not traditionally welcome in the academy. We wanted to create partnerships, spaces and places for students to re-territorialise as educational 'nomads' (Deleuze & Guattari 1987/2005), and 'blogging to learn', where they might develop belonging, self-esteem, voice and personal power.

The context

As our University is made up of almost fifty per cent non-traditional students (Blagburn & Cloutterbuck, 2011), students on the BA Hons Education Studies course come from a wide range of backgrounds and have mixed interests and abilities – and often, arguably, different connections from those of the archetypal middle-class student. Students undertaking the two modules are therefore likely to struggle to achieve authorship (i.e. to write with authority) in the midst of 'jostling voices' (Carter et al, 2009) asking them to 'write and reference properly' and to 'be more academic'. As well as their having issues with academic writing and assessment, it may be said that they typically lack the connections or networks necessary for success in a middle-class world. Hence, they need support, not just in terms of their writing, but also in terms of their 'becoming academic self'. As Dennis et al (2005) state in their study, they need someone to provide help, guidance and emotional support.

The partnered modules

The first module, *Peer Mentoring in Practice*, is a 15-credit module offering second-year (Level 5) Education Studies students an introduction to mentoring, coaching and supervision, together with the opportunity to apply their learning in practice through the support of new students on the partnered module. As such, the mentoring module is a two-fold entity. On the one hand, it allows second-year students to develop their mentoring skills and reflective practice and, on the other, facilitates the transition, engagement and bedding-in of 'newcomers' on the course.

To prepare the second-year students for their mentor role, they are introduced to contrasting theoretical models of mentoring, coaching and supervision and the philosophies underpinning them. They also learn strategies to manage difficult situations in the mentor-mentee relationship and to take account of their, the mentors', impact on individuals, groups and organisations. Importantly, they are also supported in facilitating academic writing strategies that the first-year students might develop – especially via the setting-up and completion of weekly learning blogs. The mentor students are also encouraged to reflect on the ethics of professional practice and the transferability of their mentor skills via discussion and their own (reflective) learning blogs, which they are encouraged to share with their peers as well as with their mentees.

The second module, *Becoming an Educationalist*, is an intensive 30-credit module designed to orientate first-year students into successful university life, where, in the 'fourth hour'[2], the *Becoming* students are partnered with the mentor students to ease the transition via the support of 'blogging to learn'. *Becoming* in this module embodies the praxis that learning is multi-modal and multi-faceted. For some, this learning and teaching approach might be said to facilitate 'whole-brain learning' (Herrmann, 1989) that allows the whole learner to enter the learning process; for others, it could be said to embody Freire's (1997) concept of education for critical and engaged *action*; for us, it is also an attempt to re-territorialise tricky educational space (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987/2005).

The partnership in practice

This year, the *Becoming* students were timetabled to meet with their partner-mentors, the second-year *PMiP* students, on a weekly basis. Mentors and mentees met in ICT labs that we pre-booked for them (12.00-13.00 every Wednesday, weeks 2-15, of the first semester). Mentees had access to individual computers (and mentors could work alongside them to help), as well as having the facility to showcase work on the central AV system. These weekly sessions focused on building student *Communities of Practice*, where together they narrated their academic selves through writing. In this process, a reciprocal relationship (Kossak, 2011) between mentor and mentees (in a ratio of 1:3) was fostered: mentors and mentees were encouraged to support each other, working towards academic and social success and shaping their lives in positive ways.

In this context, mentors were encouraged to use writing both as tool to facilitate learning and as a way to reflect on their own learning. The mentees (more tentative with their learning identities that are in the process of becoming) were encouraged to use the blog writing as part of playing with and owning their own learning; to create the stories they told themselves as they actively construct their emerging academic selves.

Wenger-Trayner (2014) argues that learning involves negotiating identity in a complex dance in complex landscapes of practice and meaning. It is identity-construction at a time of super-complexity: it is a learning relationship between the social world and the personal. This means: learning is not engaging with a corpus of knowledge – nor even the *process* of engaging with a corpus of knowledge – but *how* we negotiate a range of processes of becoming that oscillate between the individual and the group (Wenger-Trayner 2014).

We wanted our partnered modules to model this process of learning as *becoming*: a re-alignment of competence and experience; socially defined, but personally experienced. In addition, we wanted a space where students had something to say and where that would be heard. As Quinn (2004, p.71) has formulated:

> 'Current policy discourse appears to position working-class students as inherently flawed, with drop-out as the inevitable consequence of their 'spoilt identity' … Instead young working-class people must be seen in serious search of meaningful lives …'

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[2] Currently, the Faculty of Social Science and Humanities operates a 'fourth hour' policy for all first year courses. Each module is supposed to use this hour to develop student success strategies in some way.

Partnered learning: The power of the blog

Both modules, *Becoming* and *PMiP*, used writing both for learning and as a means to teach and to assess; in both, students were asked to maintain a learning blog. Throughout the modules, we presented the reflective blog to the students as quasi-academic and semi-public space, and we modelled this in our own module blogs. We wanted to invite ownership with the blogging (implying, '*This writing matters.*'), because students had something valuable to say. It was a space to present one's self in action as it became academic, and to do so more holistically than would be the norm in an academic essay. In the blog, students could be playful (Winnicott 1971), and it is play that we need to tackle the threat implicit in transitional spaces – those becoming spaces (Wenger-Trayner, 2014, Deleuze & Guattari, 1987/2005) – and it is in play that we are wholly fiercely alive and fiercely ourselves. We, like Bowstead (2011), noted that all that passion, energy and power in and of our students would be deemed invalid in the academic essay: there, their impassioned, vital and potent expression of self becomes transgressive in and of itself. We hoped that the blogs permitted both the passion and the play and that each of our students would make use of these 'lines of flight' (Deleuze & Guattari 1987/2005) to narrate a more powerful self.

What's wrong with the essay?

Arguably, the academic essay as a genre exemplifies academic writing per se: it is non-polemical – yet invites certainty of argumentation. It is 'your' argument, whilst excluding the personal, the emphatic, the confused, the flippant and the humorous of 'you'. In many ways, it can be seen as a metonym for the academic world our students have entered: implacable, reified, middle-class, exclusionary and individual. It is the space where they particularly most feel like 'fish out of water'. Crème (2003) makes a case for the 'creativity of everyday life' within the literacy practices of the academy. She argues not against the essay, but against its 'monolithic domination of university life' and posits that its power constrains students and wastes their energies as they worry not about the problematic nature of knowledge and learning but rather about: What will they think of me? How will I be received? Am I doing it right? (Crème, 2003).

In stark contrast to the formality of the academic essay, narratives, more personal writing and multi-modal blogs especially can constitute the cracks, the boundaries, the borders, the space… for disruption, irruptions and eruptions: the places of collision and encounter. In this informal writing, repressive academic conventions and expectations can be overturned, experienced differently. Composition emerges not from a negative wrestling with a tricksome genre, but from a moment of, and for, transformation – for recognition of the self: the blog as a space for 'becoming' – in an academic and personal sense.

Our student voices said

We argue – and student feedback supports this view – that the creative partnering of the two modules fostered confidence in both mentors and mentees. Collaboration between the students and the staff teaching on the two modules, together with the 'blogging to learn' writing practice, allowed both mentors and mentees actively to construct their emerging academic selves. Student evaluation showed that first- and second-year students found

their voices through the blogs and gained in confidence when tackling formal academic writing.

At the end of the module, mentors stated:

> 'Peer mentoring has helped me to develop my communication skills and also my organisational skills.'

> 'This class has reinforced my decision to be a counsellor for kids it is not the same as being a mentor but the feelings I get when I know I have helped the mentees is so rewarding to me.'

> 'Overall the module was both practical and informative which allowed me to put theory into practice, using what I have learnt to benefit others and myself.'

Mentees said:

> 'I thought the weekly sessions were beneficial … they would [help] as much as they could.'

> 'It has … increased my confidence.'

> 'Insightful, productive, enlightening.'

And in the blogs:

mcbell79 (2013):

> 'Week 9 was all about my nightmare….drawing!

> 'My drawings always mock me:

> ' "Ha! I have defeated you! You may have many words, but give you a pencil, and watch the intelligence disappear! That's not how you wanted it to look, is it? Is that a person or a tree? Dumbo!''

> 'In a class of five-year-old children, I am quite happy to display my ridiculous sketches. I explain to the children that drawing is not my strong point, and they assure me that I have done a very good job of representing the characters, props and scenery in the storyboard. However, if someone were to come in, they would be quite convinced that the children had drawn the pictures – and not the most artistically gifted children, either!

> 'At the moment, I feel afraid of failure, but I have to remember that I have been here before. In 2011, I graduated with merit at the Barbican, from a Foundation Degree in Education: Primary Pathway. So I need to keep three things in mind:
>
> - Keep taking risks!
> - It will be worth all the hard work!
> - There are people to help me on my journey!'

Mo (2013):

> 'In this week's lecture, we were subjected to a 10 minute free writing exercise. If we stopped writing, then we were to write the reason why we did so on a separate piece of paper. Seemed easy enough, but the question given was very ambiguous to us: *Winnicott (1971) argued that play is necessary to counteract the implicit threat of transitional...*
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> "What?" I asked myself. "Who is Winnicott? What does he mean by play? Implicit threat?" I started writing, even though I had no idea what the question was asking. It took three attempts to get my writing flowing.'

Sameera (2014):

> 'Today has been so proactive that I hardly had the time to take down any academic notes and just kept on listening. There was a guest speaker today, Chris O'Reilly, who spoke to us about the presentation and making of a short 3-minute film and what kind of research and methods go into making and preparing for it. I was so intrigued and fascinated throughout the whole piece that it just had given me so many ideas. I was bursting to how these ideas could relate to my research project Report.'

Conclusion

We partnered the students of a second-year accredited module *Peer Mentoring in Practice* with those of a first-year *Becoming an Educationalist* module and encouraged them to write reflective online blogs to engage with each other and their material: to write to learn and to struggle with narratives of the self in times of transition. We were interested in facilitating partnerships between students – within and across modules – and using quasi-academic writing that harnessed 'play' (Winnicott 1971) and Deleuzian 'lines of flight' writing techniques to allow students as a consequence to narrate more powerful and engaged learning selves.

The partnered modules took peer support seriously and treated writing heuristically as part of the active learning processes designed to improve the quality of the learning and of the writing. *PMiP* and *Becoming* were designed to re-territorialise tricky and exclusionary academic space; to smooth away the reductionist striations of regimes of testing and inspection of our current neo-liberal agenda. They were designed to foster nomads engaged in lines of flight, narrating powerful, multi-modal academic selves.

Our hopes for the mentoring process were, as Freire (1997) stated:

> 'The fundamental task of the mentor is a liberatory task. It is not to encourage the mentor's goals and aspirations and dreams to be reproduced in the mentees, the students, but to give rise to the possibility that the students become the owners of their own history. This is how I understand the need that teachers have to transcend their merely instructive task and to assume the ethical posture of a mentor who truly believes in the total autonomy, freedom, and development of those he or she mentors.'

Our hopes for the *Becoming* students were that their engagement with both mentors and this celebratory and emancipatory academic writing moved them from feeling like 'fish out of water', struggling to survive in an alien environment – to a sense of worthwhile purpose in their quest for meaning and self in the academic world. Feedback and the evidence from the blogs themselves indicate that blogs do have this potential – especially when students work together to set up their own blogs and collaborate with the blogs of others. Once blogging to learn was embraced and enjoyed, unpredictable, joyous things happened.

Our experience demonstrates the efficacy of student partnership between modules and, as Warren (2002) argues, what works for non-traditional students works for all students; hence we heartily recommend that all practitioners consider the use of spirited and personalised blogging to enable students to find their academic voices and selves in new and unexpected ways.

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