

## Partnership in teacher education: developing creative methods to deepen students' reflections

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In recent years, higher education (HE) has become more aware of the nature of learning. Accordingly, various initiatives, such as the promotion of Higher Education Academy fellowships or the Teaching Excellence Framework, aim at improving teaching. The rhetoric of teaching in HE is now placing more emphasis than ever on the role of students as change agents in taking charge of and being responsible for learning (Dunne and Zandstra, 2011). It is within this context that student-staff partnerships are encouraged where students become active co-creators of their learning (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2014; Healey *et al.*, 2014).

Because of the relative novelty of these particular student-centred approaches to learning and teaching and since what student-staff partnerships should ideally look like has not yet, perhaps, been fully explored, practices vary widely (Bovill and Felten, 2016). Overall, the literature emphasises the relationship and distribution of authority and power between students and HE staff (Bovill, 2014). The nature of student-staff partnerships is described as unsettling but transformative (Bergmark and Westman, 2016), although the personal learning gain among staff is less well reported than that of students (Marquis *et al.*, 2016).

Drawing on a bespoke teacher education programme at UCL Institute of Education, this article presents an example of a partnership between academic staff and students who are trainee teachers. Owing to the focus on delivering and modelling best teaching practices, teacher education has always been at the forefront of engaging students with their own learning. The partnership model employed in this context is therefore one of a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991), where the student voice is as important as that of the staff. Our understanding of a community of practice echoes the description by Healey *et al.* (2014) of a partnership as “*a process of engagement, not a product*” and “*a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself*” (p. 12). Though a less common interpretation of partnership, this must surely be a valid one, as “*student and faculty gain more space and greater access, creating an authentic freedom betwixt and between roles*” (Barrineau *et al.*, 2016, p.82).

This paper opens with a section on the background and context of the course, followed by a brief introduction to reflections; it goes on to outline how feedback from students and work with them led to the development of creative and playful activities to foster their theoretical understanding and practical application of reflections; then it presents the main outcomes, as experienced by staff (Nicole Brown) and students (Aly Jafferani and Vanessa Pattharwala). Finally, the authors explore the lessons learnt and consider the implications of the experiences for future practice, before concluding with thoughts about the nature of student-staff collaborations in the specific educational context presented here.

### Background

Since 2006, the UCL Institute of Education and the Institute of Ismaili Studies have collaboratively delivered a unique Secondary Teacher Education Programme (STEP). Students recruited from Shia Ismaili Muslim communities across the globe are offered fully-funded scholarships to complete the two-year, full-time STEP programme leading to two

UCL degrees: the Master of Teaching or Postgraduate Diploma in Teaching and Reflective Practice and the Master of Art in Education (Muslim Societies and Civilisations). After the successful completion of the STEP programme, students return to their home countries to take up teaching employments in faith-based schools, where they deliver the Ismaili Secondary Curriculum. As the students' educational and professional backgrounds vary considerably at the time of their entry to the programme, STEP not only provides the traditional Masters-level teaching, but also includes: teaching placements (with their accompanying debriefing sessions), connections with the curriculum lessons, teaching and learning support sessions and lesson-planning tutorials. As part of these sessions, students are required to keep reflection journals. However, for many students, reflecting, reflective practice and learning from reflections are new concepts.

### **Reflective practice**

Within the western context of teacher education, reflections and reflective practice have played a pivotal role since the 1980s and many universities have since required reflections as a mandatory element to teacher education (Richardson, 1990). This is because classrooms are complex societies in which many factors have impact upon environment, dynamics and contents – it is therefore believed that trainee teachers benefit from sustained reflective practice to make sense of their experiences in classes. Through reflecting on what they have observed in lessons, trainee teachers are able to focus on specific aspects of their teaching experience. Engaging with particular elements of a focused observation should prevent the feeling of being overwhelmed by the many different factors at play in a classroom. At the same time, reflections help student teachers make the link between the theoretical input from training courses and actual classroom practice. Thus, overall, reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action support the professional development of teachers.

However, reflections are notoriously difficult to teach for several reasons (Rogers, 2001): the wide range of terminology and definitions referring to reflections result in misunderstandings and potentially flawed interpretations of what reflective practice is and means; meaningful reflections require a particular issue or concern that needs to be solved; reflective practice is based upon the premise that a student is open and willing to engage fully in the process of reflecting and learning. Reflective practice is therefore personal, individual and demanding. Reflections could challenge existing experiences and knowledge and require rethinking and revising one's assumptions. Since, with a backdrop like this, it is not unduly surprising that students struggle to engage fully with reflective practice, their tutors foster it, commonly asking them to engage with, apply and internalise models of reflections, so that they develop reflective skills. Yet, in practice, especially at the beginning of teacher education courses, trainee teachers' reflections often lack depth, remaining narrative, descriptive and superficial, because student teachers tend to follow the stages of reflective models mechanically, not fully understanding deep reflection or applying it. Another reason for the shallow nature of their reflections may well be the fact that thoughts, feelings and experiences are often difficult to express in words.

The challenge for teacher educators therefore was to find ways of deepening reflections and creating reflective opportunities, so that students/trainee teachers would be practically forced to engage with deeper meanings and in meaning-making activities.

### A new pedagogical approach

At the same time, some students identified issues with their teaching practice. Their curriculum required them to teach their pupils by incorporating reflective elements in their lessons. Since the trainee teachers themselves were struggling with fully applying the depth and breadth required for meaningful reflections, they inevitably found the task of *teaching* reflective approaches particularly challenging. In consequence, they asked for the modelling of activities and practices that would enable them to teach reflective practice more efficiently.

This is how the partnership started to emerge. The student teachers were very conscious of their personal difficulties and also well aware that their reflections were focused on intensive writing activities, which their pupils often found uninteresting and dispiriting. Because the trainees were teaching in a situation where pupil attendance was voluntary, they feared that onerous writing tasks would put pupils off, with a resulting fall in attendance. We therefore explored playful and creative methods as possible means of developing new pedagogical approaches to reflections, both for the trainee teachers and for their pupils. Our main aim was to create conditions that would encourage reflections with a deeper focus on thoughts, feelings and experiences and to foster a playful and enjoyable atmosphere. A wide range of reading on playfulness, creativity and embodied human understanding followed our initial discussions.

This explorative phase led to the development of a creative activity: 'the river of learning'. For this reflective activity, students were shown a pictorial representation of a river with natural and man-made features from source to mouth. Students were put into groups of four or five and were asked to draw their learning journey in the form of one such river. The river features they could think of were then used to represent challenges, successes and feelings. Stepping stones, rapids, bridges and side-streams all became meaningful aspects of their general and overall learning experiences. Practical implementation of this approach in their own course meant that the student trainees were able to experience appropriately reflective approaches before trying them out with their own pupils. Additionally, the students' reflections and feedback helped in the adjustment and fine-tuning of this strategy for the subsequent cohort of student teachers.

In the next iteration of the course, a model-making activity was added. Instead of drawing a river, students were asked to create a LEGO® model of their learning journey. For this task students were provided with simple LEGO® bricks, some arches, windows, doors and a selection of LEGO® people. Whilst the main aspect of the task – the joint reflections in groups – remained the same, LEGO® unlocked potential that the river drawing activity could not: these students obviously felt liberated because they – unlike the previous trainees who, missing the main point of the exercise, had erroneously assumed that they should devote attention to accuracy and beauty in their representation of a river as a piece of art – could concentrate more on reflection. At the same time, they associated LEGO® with play and could readily see that the generation of a lively, playful atmosphere would be very appropriate indeed to their own teaching in the voluntary secondary classrooms. However, adoption of a LEGO® activity proved to be practically challenging: the trainee teachers found that to buy enough pieces for making meaningful models was prohibitively expensive and they were very concerned about losing what they did buy.

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Their feedback led to a reconsideration of the reflective practice and resulted in metaphorical representations using objects for the next iteration of the course. For their reflective work, students were able to experiment with the river-drawing activity and the LEGO® model-building, but they were also asked to find an object to represent their answers to specific questions. For example, students were asked to consider the question: “Who are you as a teacher?”, but instead of providing a written reflection, students had to find an object. This object was then used as the basis for further exploration in class.

All three creative activities were based on the concept of playful engagement and the practical application of the “*paradox of intentionality*” (Statler *et al.*, 2011), the idea that something serious can result from a fun activity. Also, these activities tapped into humans’ natural ability to use metaphors: human language is metaphorical and human experience is embodied in such a way that metaphors are the basis of our human understanding (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003). Combining this natural, embodied, metaphorical understanding with the process of reflection allowed students to reflect by using alternatives to words and text-based models. Simultaneously, all activities required students to stop and think about their experiences as a whole, narrow them down to a specific element in order to represent that element and then, in the subsequent verbalisation, elaborate on that element in such a way that their understanding of their own experiences deepened. The reflective process thereby became a cycle of condensing, “*going to the thing itself*” (Husserl, 1970) and elaborating.

### Evaluation of the work with creative reflective methods

#### **Vanessa’s view:**

*“Coming from an Indian background I was never taught how to reflect. Our education system expects us to remember what we learn without critically analysing it. The only thing I used to think was that ‘today my class went well’ and ‘the other day it did not go as great’, but I never really went into great detail as to what, why and how were the reasons because of which my class went well. I remember some of the activities we did in class that played a significant role in my journey to become a reflective practitioner. The first activity was to design the flow of a river. Initially, I was confused as to what was I supposed to draw as I was not good at drawing, however, our tutor emphasized on the meaning of the drawing and not the aesthetics. This motivated me to participate freely. Once I started to draw and write its meaning, I realized that things were coming to my mind organically without disturbance.*”

*“The most important thing was that each individual was given a chance to explain their meaning of that object. I remember a classmate bringing a basket in the class. It was interesting to see how others were trying to make meaning of that object and how different her meaning was for that basket.*”

*“All these activities probed me to value the importance of reflection and its power to connect with an individual and to articulate your thoughts. I think these activities motivate a teacher to continuously think, question, inquire about what happens in the class and aid improvement.”*

### **Aly's thoughts:**

*“Although I was familiar with the term reflection, I did not in any way appreciate the complexities and the intricacies of the nature of reflection. Reflection for me at that time meant a mere retelling of the events that had occurred, hence, a passive activity. As I began exploring the process of reflection, a major challenge, which I had to encounter was that although I was able to engage with this process in my mind, I was not able to give language to those thoughts. Playing with the LEGO® pieces had the potential of us getting distracted from the task at hand and losing our focus. However, it had the opposite effect. Since we were excited to jump in and build our structures, we were extremely conscious of the meanings we were associating with those pieces. The meaning assigning process went to such a degree that many of us started giving the meaning to the colours of those pieces, the dress that particular people wore and the expressions on their faces. We were able to construct our meanings physically. Suddenly, those abstract reflections in our head seemed to come alive in that moment.*

*“It was an individual activity so all of us had to participate in that. In the process, we reflected on our own reflections and tried to find a suitable object, which would relate to those reflections.*

*“All three activities not only helped me in articulating my thoughts giving it a language but subconsciously went a step further and helped me to reflect on my own reflections. The process of reflection, which many of us (including me) initially found a boring activity now spoke to us in unique ways and inspired me to continuing the process of reflection.”*

### **Nicole's reflections on lessons learnt:**

*“A project like this requires commitment and openness of all stakeholders in equal measures. As a staff member, I cannot impose new methods on my students without having their commitment to ‘giving them a go’ to see if they potentially do work. At the same time, I needed to be open to criticisms and the potential failure of a method. Indeed, as the previous section shows, I may not, initially, have best handled some of the aspects of debriefing. It is this collective learning and exchange of thought processes that allows staff to glean an insight into the student experience and, in return, the students to understand how staff work on improving their own practice (Jensen and Bennett, 2016).”*

### **Lessons learnt from the employment of creative methods for reflections and implications for future practice**

Through ‘playing’ with objects and children’s toys and through drawing, students were able to make connections that they would otherwise not have been able to make. Students clearly identified the basic principles of phenomenology, of “going to the thing itself” (Husserl, 1970). On a practical level, structured debriefing sessions were necessary, in order to allow students to elaborate on their models and objects, but also to provide them with

opportunities to make further sense of their own experiences. It should also be noted that, as reflections are very personal and not all students want to share their feelings, the debriefing sessions should take account of that, too. Overall, however, students internalised the concept of phenomenology through the playful, creative methods to such an extent that their reflective work with word- and text-based reflective models also improved.

Given the practical outcomes of students' being able to understand 'essences of phenomena' within the concept of reflections, the major implication for future practice is to allow for non-verbal, non-textual reflections on learning. At the moment, since playing with LEGO®, for example, is not equated with academic depth, there is a level of resistance to these methods. We therefore need to incorporate these alternatives into the teaching of H.E. courses, so they may become as commonplace as reflective practices are now within teacher education.

In fact, the concept of reflective journals in education needs to be redefined. Through the inclusion of photographic, musical or video entries in journals and learning logs, the reflective process does not become tedious. Instead, students are able to find value in this process and engage with reflections by choice.

### **Final thoughts on student-staff collaborations**

This final section of the article returns to the more general aspects of student-staff collaborations as emerging from the joint development of creative methods for reflections.

It is worth noting that, in the context of teacher education on the STEP programme, staff members have always fostered a community of practice, which included the students from the outset. Within the context of our teaching practice as teacher educators and trainee teachers, we emphasise the importance of communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and regular reflections on action and in action (Schön, 1987). These two elements are drivers for relevant changes and improvements to personal teaching practices, which in themselves are seen as organic evolutions of many minor changes. Student-staff partnerships have therefore emerged and evolved naturally and have never needed to be formalised in a research relationship. And yet, the community of practice features the characteristics of the partnership as described in literature: it is simultaneously unsettling, worrying and transformative and it evens out the power differential between staff and students, as everyone is considered a learner. Staff and students are truly equal partners and co-constructors of the education of both students and staff.

Superficially, therefore, this case study may not appear to fit the now commonly-understood concepts of student-staff partnerships. However, in reality, it needed the community of practice between trainee teachers and tutors to develop the teaching methods described here. The regular contact and consistent interaction between students and staff led to all of us within that community of practice learning from one another. Students and staff view this kind of partnership as a cyclical process of experimentation and evaluation phases and "*a way of doing things*" (Healey *et al.*, 2014, p. 12).

Ultimately, therefore, the student-staff partnership described here is not so much a formal engagement, but a relationship of trust that builds on constructive communication within our

learning community and on tolerance and acceptance, as we are learning together and as not all will go perfectly well all the time.

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