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The importance of affect: enjoyment, responsiveness, and creative teaching

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My research explores pre-service teachers' experience of quality pedagogy and its impact upon their developing understandings of teaching and learning. Grounded in co-inquiry and constructivist understandings of knowledge, this exploration unfolds as part of one of a number of case studies that examine the ways in which outstanding teacher educators engage with their students and engage students in their subject. The affective qualities experienced by participating students within such engagements, as well as throughout the research process itself, are specific sites of inquiry. Research across disciplinary fields highlights the importance of affect in the integration of experience, and this investigation both illuminates and problematises the interrelations posited between academics' experiences of their subject and teaching and students' experiences of learning by recent studies in higher education (HE). The data generated are presented in the form of 'creata' so as to offer a more visceral sense of the qualities experienced in their creation.

Keywords: affect, pedagogy, student experience

Introduction

My research is nested within a broader inquiry into quality pedagogy being undertaken in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at a metropolitan university. It takes the form of a number of case studies of teacher educators recognised as outstanding by both faculty and students. It explores how these teacher educators engage with their students and engage their students in the subject. Pre-service teachers' experience of these encounters and their impact upon their developing pedagogies is a particular site of investigation. The stories that arise from the multiple encounters that constitute the research process and the feelings, ideas, and energies experienced by co-participants within this process are similarly explored. Such explorations are seen as essential to a project that views the affective dimensions of experience as integral to and integrative of learning in line with research and theory across disciplinary fields (Arnold, 2005; Bruner & Watson, 1983; Damasio, 1996, 2003; Goswami, 2004; Massumi, 2002; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Ruffman, Slade, Devitt & Crowe, 2006).

At the same time, it befits a project that, in accordance with post-feminist and constructivist critiques of traditional research ethics (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 1118) views the generation of ethically responsible relations as central to the integrity of the research. The desire to realise such relations is seen as crucial to all research, but especially to that which invites exploration of affective experience and hence opens up the possibility for the generation of vulnerable spaces; where participants' fears, desires, and anxieties are frequently expressed. The tensions and ambivalences that surround the generation and sustenance of ethical relations are neither viewed nor were experienced as unproblematic givens, but rather as specific, context dependent sites for ongoing exploration.

Due to the constraints of space, in this paper, I briefly outline the research context and modes of inquiry, and then present a storying of participating pre-service teachers' experiences of an outstanding teacher educator of creative arts pedagogy. All participants are referred to by their pseudonyms to protect their identities.

The following research questions inform this paper:

1. In what ways do outstanding teachers engage with their students and engage their students in the subject?
2. What feelings do such engagements engender in participating students and how do these affect their experience of learning and their developing pedagogies?
3. What emerges as salient from my experience of the research process and the encounters that constitute it?

Higher education, pedagogy, and quality discourse

The increasing rationalisation of the HE sector has seen a corollary increase in regulatory frameworks. Within these frameworks, quality teaching and learning and, more pointedly, its assurance and continuous improvement, have become a priority (Anderson, 2006, pp. 162–3; Australian Universities Quality Agency, 2004, p. 15; Nelson, 2003). At the same time, the focus of research attention has shifted from teachers and teaching methods to the students' experience of learning and their learning environments (Ashwin, 2006, p. 10–11; Australian Universities Quality Agency, 2004; Robertson, 2002). This focus currently underpins the bulk of the literature on quality in teaching and learning in HE and is articulated through the lens of learner centredness.

Boud (2006, p. 29) critiques the notion of learner-centredness as grounded in “a centre–periphery model” that posits a simple division between teachers and learners which fails to recognise the possibility of many centres and peripheries in continual states of becoming. Such a view both accords with and problematises recent studies in the sector (Prosser, Trigwell, & Waterhouse, 1999; Prosser, Martin, Trigwell, Ramsden, & Lueckenhausen, 2005; Prosser, Martin, Trigwell, & Middleton, 2008) which suggest crucial connections between the different ways in which academics experience their subject, their experiences of teaching, and the learning experiences afforded the learner. Significant correlations emerge between holistic and problematic experiences of the subject, student centred experiences of teaching aimed at challenging existing assumptions, and the promotion of deep approaches to learning in students.

Boud's (2006) critique and Prosser et al.'s (1999; 2005) work point to the importance of exploring the complex terrain of classroom life wherein relations between persons, subject knowledge, and the experience of learning itself are engendered and unfold. Yet, Prosser et al. (1999; 2005; 2008) render this relation in terms which preclude thinking about the anxieties, attractions, incitements; indeed the whole gamut of affective forces that transpire in and traverse learning encounters between embodied persons and their import. This makes exceptionally neat and tidy the shifting, context-dependent, and affectively laden landscape of teaching and learning. That such tidy categories can be put to work to serve the ongoing search for quantifiable and prescribable means to improve the quality of student learning is equally problematic (Peseta, 2006, pp. 99–108). This is not to argue that improving student learning should not be a central concern of universities but rather to raise the question of how student learning is made thinkable (Peseta, 2006, p. 172) and its quality interpreted.

Education and higher education

Peseta (2006, p. 202) sees the dangers of such models as residing in their unproblematic uptake in diverse disciplinary contexts “in ways that continue a homogenous reproduction of the student learning experience itself.” This renders the uniqueness, diversity, and unpredictability immanent in any pedagogic encounter unthinkable, and the specificity of the context irrelevant. Lee (2005) views the lack of institutional and disciplinary connections between the fields of education and higher education as contributing to the dearth of more sophisticated accounts of pedagogy and curricula in HE. In this regard, pedagogic models developed in the school sector across states in Australia (Department of Education & Training (DET) NSW, 2003; DET Vic 2003) which afford conceptually nuanced ways of interpreting quality pedagogy might enrich development approaches in the tertiary sector.

Context of the research

As part of a recent initiative in quality teaching (Anderson, Gibson, & Ewing, 2007), a number of teacher educators at a metropolitan university teamed up to explore each others' teaching in terms of select indicators of quality pedagogy (Table 1), as identified in the DET pedagogic model (DET NSW, 2003). The resonances between my investigation and this initiative saw my research embedded therein. In keeping with the larger inquiry, I drew on the DET model to explore any explicit or implied connections with identified elements and co-participants' reflections on their felt experiences of the participating teacher educator and her class. In this model, the elements of quality pedagogy are operationalised in terms of the presence of particular student behaviours and curriculum characteristics. This provides a means for connecting bodily manifestations as identified on class video-tapes to co-participants' reflections on their felt experiences of the class.

Table 1: The dimensions and elements of the NSW Quality Teaching Model

Intellectual quality	Quality learning environment	Significance
Deep knowledge	Explicit quality criteria	Background knowledge
Deep understanding	Engagement	Cultural knowledge
Problematic knowledge	High expectations	Knowledge integration
Higher order thinking	Social support	Inclusivity
Metalanguage	Students' self-regulation	Connectedness
Substantive communication	Student direction	Narrative

Methodology

The research is underpinned by a constructivist view of knowledge, learning, and meaning making (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Knowledge is seen as socially constructed, locally situated, and traversed by complex constellations of both power and desire (Foucault, 1972, 1994; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). In line with work in neuroscience (Damasio, 1996, 2003; Goswami, 2004), creativity (Miell & Littleton, 2004), and education (Gardner, 1999), learning is seen as a complex and dynamic, multi-sensory and embodied, yet transpersonal process. Such a view brings to the fore not only the social and inter-subjective dimensions of significant learning experiences but equally their emergent and co-creative nature.

Modes of inquiry and research methods

The research presented here takes the form of a case study of a teacher recognised as outstanding on the basis of peer evaluations, the receipt of teaching excellence awards, and consistently outstanding student evaluations. Data gathering methods included observation and video-taping of classes, focus group discussions, and interviews with the participating teacher. While the focus group discussions were informed by guiding questions, which were emailed to participants prior to the meeting, I took an emergent approach; letting the discussions unfold and co-participants respond to each others' experiences as they arose. My contributions were limited to those occasions when I had something genuine to add or ask. This approach was taken as it felt right and made possible the emergence of authentic dialogue, through allowing what arose as significant for co-participants to guide the discussion and, in doing so, afforded opportunities for the generation of “participant synergy” (Kamborelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 902).

In tandem with the approach outlined above, participating pre-service teachers were invited to reflect on their discussions, offer metaphors and create stories or other forms of expression to give voice to their changing experiences of themselves, each other, their pedagogies, and the research process. Co-participants were also emailed the storying (Kamler, 2001, pp. 176–178) that follows so as to ensure not only a fitness of expression but also a continuing relation grounded in interpersonal responsibility. All four participants have expressed feelings of resonance between my rendering of their experiences of Natasha and her classes, as well as our group encounters and the “*totally exploratory*” (Meeting 8, March 7, 2009) experience of the research process.

Participant recruitment and selection

Participating teacher educators were selected on recommendations from senior faculty staff. Natasha, the teacher educator in the case study presented here, teaches creative arts pedagogy. Participating pre-service teachers were recruited on a voluntary basis. Emails were sent to students enrolled in the second semester of the Masters of Teaching programme and a focus group was formed from the four interested respondents. Participants met once a week for a period of approximately one hour for four weeks, with two follow up meetings occurring at the end of participants' practicums, and a final meeting held in March 2009. All meetings were recorded and transcribed. Notes were kept with respect to my experience of the group and their encounters.

Data analysis and interpretation

Initially the transcripts were explored and interpreted in terms of co-participants' experiences of particular classroom encounters and engagements and any explicit or implicit links to elements identified in the DET NSW (2003) pedagogic model. While participants were familiar with this document and frequently referred to elements cited in the framework to interpret their experiences, they were not then aware of its use as a guiding interpretative framework. Transcripts were then reviewed in light of my experience of the group and the qualities that I sensed they were experiencing as their discussions unfolded. I noted moments and episodes that gave rise to instances of intense or shifting affect, as manifest in modulations of tone and pitch, and the gathering momentum of response. These included moments of spontaneous enthusiasm, instances of vigorous disagreement, and unexpected expressions of intense emotion.

These moments are woven through the storying (Kamler, 2001, pp. 176–178) that follows. They take the form of participants' quotes extracted from their original dialogues and threaded together in a way that resonates with my embodied experience of the group and what emerges as salient across co-participants' experiences of Natasha and her classes. These are interwoven with provocations that represent a blurring of concerns raised by co-participants, the critiques of other scholars, and the concerns that inform my journey to this research; a journey that shapes this story but which is not told here due to the constraints of space. Suffice to say that a particularly harsh work culture where numbers of all kinds counted more than people took a bodily toll.

Kamler (2001, p. 167), highlights that a story, as distinct from the notion of a voice, allows for the relocation of personal writing within social, cultural, and political domains. It signals a textual rather than personal orientation, foregrounding its crafting in a way that asks the reader to engage with it differently. If, as Eisner (2002, p. 382)) highlights, that excellence in teaching cannot be secured through recourse to the right theory, nor even the consideration of practical problems within a teaching community, but rather ultimately involves artistry; the cultivation of sensibility and imagination; sensing when to lead and when to bow out, when to change tack and tell that joke, all of which “follow no rule...but need to be felt”, then research which attempts to bring such artistry and its resonances to life might better become similarly artful. Peseta (2006, p. 154) deploys the term *creata* to trouble the traditional boundaries constructed between science and art in an attempt to “not strip away” the complex and embodied experience of her research and her desire to render it sensible in her texts; a desire that informs my own storying. The notion of *creata* also usefully reminds that data are not given in the world but are “already interpreted”, being informed by theory and positioned within particular “networks of meaning”.

Meet the participants

The participating students, Clara, Sasha, Emma, and Antony, appear as a somewhat homogenous group, ranging in age from late twenties to early forties. In some ways this is true. All have followed careers in other fields, before undertaking the Masters of teaching. A finely honed capacity to articulate their perspectives and reflect on their experiences is evident in their discussions. All are familiar with and able to relate the established indicators of quality pedagogy to their experiences of Natasha's classes. Yet differences in perspectives emerge around the meanings ingrained in ordinary words.

In the second meeting, Emma says that in order to make it to postgraduate study, you need to be competitive. This provokes intense response. There are outtakes of air from Sasha, Antony, & Clara. Different attachments clearly operate around that word. Emma says not competitive in a bad way, but in a way that you can deal with the system and “get through it” (Meeting 2, August 5, 2008). Sasha and Clara remain unconvinced. Competitive signals bad. Self-motivated fits better. When words become charged with the feelings that infuse different understandings of experience, new resonances and dissonances promptly ensue.

Emergent themes: energy, fun, inclusiveness

Energy emerges as a major theme in our first meeting and a crucial dimension of everyone's teaching experience. First there is the constant energy that good teaching requires. There is the energy required to “*energise the students*” (Meeting 1 notes, July 29, 2008). Everyone knows how students' energies fluctuate in tune with the energy of the teacher. There is the energy that goes into being stimulated and thinking all the time; at the newsagents, at an art gallery, even at a friend's dinner party, about how you could work something you've just thought of into a class. Mandy comments on the energy needed to listen and “really hear” what the students are saying (Meeting 1 notes, July 29, 2008). Then there is the energy needed to help each child learn, to give them what they need, right when they need it. There is a lot of discussion around the importance of the qualities in that energy. Antony says that he gives himself an “emotional enema” before class to flush out any negative baggage he might be carrying. He says kids really tap into this; how the teacher is feeling (Meeting 1 notes, July 29, 2008).

Fun is another theme. Sasha and Antony have worked in private ELT colleges, where curriculum is prescribed and oriented to exams. They note the lack of a sense of fun in these classes and how “when they do get a chance to have some fun, [students] go mad” (Meeting 1 notes, July 29, 2008). There is a military feel to such places, a brisk business-likeness that won't brook much laughter. Discussion ensues around the forces at work in the systematic defunning of learning; market driven education and governments, parents, and prospective employers wanting easily digestible results. It is interesting how numbers are seen as easily understood. You wouldn't think that a number would actually tell you that much about your child's learning but it turns out people are crazy for them.

Conroy & Davis (2002) put this down to “the *seriousness* with which we confront education”. They see such seriousness as linked to obsessions with “numerical descriptions” of not only who we are, but also about whatever it is that we think we should be doing. Such an obsession, and the central arithmetic metaphor that it feeds is seen as emerging out of the collapse of continuity and purpose that marks the failure of the enlightenment project and “the loss of a sustainable and sustaining meta-narrative” (Lyotard, 1984). But governments and other stakeholders are not much interested in philosophy. Too esoteric and just plain confusing. You can always be sure that $2+2=4$.

Frequent themes: movement, engagement, inclusiveness, support

There is a startling contrast between such arithmetic assumptions and the behaviourist approaches to curriculum that they tend to produce (Myhill & Warren, 2005) and the participants' experience of Natasha's classes. Woven through their discussions are references to the laughter, enjoyment, movement, and surprise invoked by the diverse, multi-sensory and frequently energetic encounters with the subject that Natasha sets up for them in lectures and workshops. The first lecture opens with a brainstorming in groups, then another. Selected scribes struggle to catch the volley of responses to “What is art?” and “What is art education?” Clara starts off the discussion thus: “It was fantastic cause she actually got people to come up the front and participate, which normally doesn't happen in lectures, normally you can just switch off”.

Emma adds:

“Normally it’s something you think about without any depth, but when we actually explored what is art, I found that really enlightening, and when she asked us to talk in small groups...and share an art experience with the rest of the room and I talked about this doll I had embroidered in year five and how my little two year old is now using it as a toy and I had never considered that art...but it is a creative output and so it embodies all sorts of historic skills and concepts, so I think that sewing, sewing is art as well” (Meeting 2, August 5, 2008).

In the first workshop, there is a Pictionary game. Each person gets a letter from the alphabet from which to conjure and draw the qualities of a great visual arts teacher. Natasha has on her fake zebra skin boots. Someone draws a Z and a bra and the room erupts with laughter. As Sasha puts it:

“Just the involvement of everybody and being able to have loads of fun as a student ... but then looking at it from a teacher’s perspective...like it was thrilling to see everyone engaged like from a teacher’s perspective” (Meeting 2, August 5, 2008).

After the second lecture on the stages and principles that underlie children’s drawing, Antony laughingly admits that all his birds “have a human face” and Emma to “putting all of her suns in one corner” (Meeting 3, August 12, 2008). What strikes me during these conversations is the enjoyment and precision with which things are recalled, as well as the level of understanding revealed. While engagement, inclusiveness, and higher order thinking are all explicitly named by participants as significant dimensions of their experience across our meetings, they come through in a myriad of minute and embodied ways. It is not just the detail with which the encounters are recalled that is telling, but the energy and enthusiasm generated in the retelling, and the way that this moves their explorations.

There is explicit reference to the varieties of movement experienced in Natasha’s classes. The constant movement of people from group to group, the movement of ideas, and the movement involved in physically sculpting a partner into an element of a painting, which the group has to guess. Then there is the movement of Natasha herself, the way she “moves in and out” (Meeting 2, August 5, 2008). This contributes greatly to the feelings of inclusiveness and engagement experienced in lectures and the support experienced in workshops. As Sasha remarks, with regard to the latter: “it’s like she’s always there when you need her, but she’s not visible, you know, she doesn’t take up too much space” (Meeting 2, August 5, 2008).

While a variety of feelings and sensations are experienced during different engagements, what is most telling is the almost consistent cycles of movement from feelings of nervousness about art, drawing, and teaching to feelings of increasing confidence and willingness to, as Antony says: “give it a shot” (Meeting 3, August 12, 2008). This change is put down to the explicit and inclusive way that Natasha addresses their fears, right from the beginning. Antony recalls that:

*“She was talking about how everyone has some skill in art and people have just lost confidence and I was thinking **that’s me**...and then she identified other people and people shared their stories and... that was a big change for me” (Meeting 2, August 5, 2008).*

Sasha agrees that Natasha “makes you feel comfortable” and “acknowledges our feelings” which is “so important ... in any sort of relationship” (Meeting 3, August 12, 2008). She adds that “she made it okay...she made it okay to say like, I’ve had a shit experience of art, [and] this is what happened” (Meeting 2, August 5, 2008).

Sasha’s words evoke another quality that characterises Natasha and her classes; her non-judgemental acceptance of students’ experiences and viewpoints, and the sense of equality this creates. In the second lecture on the stages of children’s drawing development, just as eyebrows begin to furrow and students automatically peg themselves in relation to the stages identified, Emma remarks that she said “it’s not your fault that whoever was teaching you at that time” should have helped you. She cites the very different drawings by two seven year olds and “the difference that comes from a teacher...taking a child and helping them learn the skills”. This is linked to Natasha’s support in the portrait workshop “when she divided the page into quarters, and this is where your ears sit and your nose and eyebrows” and how this “got us all doing stuff” (Meeting 4, August 19, 2008). While Natasha clearly has expert knowledge, which she uses to support her students, when they need it, what Sasha really likes is that still “there’s no distinction between her and us, it’s all very much collaborative” (Meeting 4, August 19, 2008).

In the fourth meeting, a discussion ensues around those lectures where information is ‘*delivered*’ and the lecturer speaks from a bullet point list. Emma offers a comparison with Natasha’s classes:

“What you’ve got is the difference between a lecturer who wants to give you as much as they can and engage you with the material, as opposed to somebody who wants to tell you about how they would do the material”. She adds with some force, referring to the latter, *“there’s no experience in that for any of us”* (Meeting 4, August 19, 2008).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have sought to render a sense of the visceral qualities and flows of energy and ideas that were generated within co-participants’ explorations of their experience of quality pedagogy. Significant convergences emerge in these discussions which connect with elements identified in DET pedagogic model (DET NSW, 2003). Salient among these convergences are experiences of inclusiveness, engagement, support, and higher order thinking. At the same time, the qualities experienced in their engagements with Natasha help to feed the movement of energy and ideas within the group itself. Although Emma’s insight into the differences between lecturers who give students an experience as opposed to giving them a telling supports the work of Prosser et al. (1999, 2005, 2008), the embodied experience of learning and the affective qualities that are generated among people in particular engagements emerge as crucial dimensions of this experience. Through the storying of our discussions, I have sought to make palpable the felt experiences of participants, as this dimension is largely absent from the HE research.

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