

Once upon a time: Designing a narrative-inspired curriculum for a Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education

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Once upon a time, there was a group of old teachers (well, maybe not so old, thanks very much) whose job it was to help other people learn to teach. They had high satisfaction with their jobs (as everyone in HE seems to have nowadays) and they liked the new teachers they worked with. Most of the new teachers seemed to find the old teachers useful, and they went out into the world with good ideas about how to teach.

But something was troubling the old teachers. Some of the new teachers were finding it difficult to use the reflecting pool to think about their teaching. Some of them were scared to look into the pool afraid of what they might see, while others preferred to copy how teaching was done around them and did not want to use the pool at all.

The old teachers scratched their heads, and had meetings where they argued about different ideas, and eventually they had a solution: they would tell the new teachers lots of stories, about themselves and about teaching, and encourage the new teachers in turn to tell stories. They wrote a big book (well a modest Moodle book called the 'Module Anthology') about teaching, with a chapter devoted to each of the main aspects of teaching, and in each chapter they encouraged the new teachers to use the reflecting pool and to tell their own stories.

Did they live happily ever after? We don't know yet, but we're starting to think that maybe they did...

Prologue

Encouraging reflection and reflective practice on a Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education (PCTHE) that has participants from a range of disciplines has always been a subject of challenge and discussion within the PCTHE team in the Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development and, no doubt, across the sector. In response, the team at Oxford Brookes decided that narrative and storytelling would be an effective means of addressing the challenge as a powerful and universal human feature (Booker, 2004) that also aligns with a constructivist pedagogy (Mott *et al.*, 1999). The plan was to design a PCTHE that used storytelling as a key feature to support reflective practice and, more broadly, the learning on the course. It would also serve to offer an alternative approach to the design of curricula and to pedagogy in higher education more widely.

The PCTHE at Oxford Brookes consists of two modules. The first module, Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (20

credits), is an introduction to teaching in higher education and is delivered in a single semester. The second module, Inquiry and Reflection in Higher Education (40 credits), requires participants to investigate topics of their choosing in more detail and crosses two semesters. The first module is where the PCTHE tutors teach and the second module is largely student-led with group presentations.

Therefore, the PCTHE team focus for delivering a narrative curriculum was through the first module with the hope that this would feed through into the student-led module. As well as content such as teaching and learning, assessment and feedback, course design and inclusive practice, the first module has always aimed to address notions of reflective practice and had tried to build this in as a running thread that started in this module and ran through into the second module.

What is the aim of introducing reflective practice on the PCTHE? What do we want participants to do in terms of reflection? The module learning outcomes say:

'Critically reflect on and evaluate your teaching and learning practice, identifying your own professional development needs.'

The central element is to consider the effectiveness of your own teaching, make adjustments and recognise when further professional development is required. As one of the first tasks on the module, the previous design required participants to reflect on themselves as a learner and how this influenced them as a teacher. This was a short reflective writing task that was submitted to a discussion forum. Participants received formative peer feedback on the content of the writing and against the reflection criteria on the marking scheme for the course.

As with many PCTHEs in the sector, participants are drawn from many different disciplines. For some disciplines, such as nursing, reflective practice is routine and expected but for others, such as biology, it is very much outside disciplinary norms. The particular type of reflective practice used in education is not universal across all disciplines: reflection means different things in different disciplines. For some participants, who struggled with reflective practice, this one opportunity was not sufficient to prepare them for the summative assessment. The peer feedback element and the one-off nature of the task also started to feel more like a summative task, with participants anxious about

what they should write, and how they should do it. This resulted in introducing some teaching of reflection and some in-class exercises where participants reflected. For years the PCTHE team had been grappling with how we encourage, support and explain reflective practice. Rather than continued tweaking around the edges, the tutors were looking for a way of embedding the idea of reflection in a much more subtle but effective way.

The question we asked was: can we achieve this without constricting participants to a certain, and often tick-box, approach to reflecting on their teaching practice? Whilst reflective practice might be a new concept or a difficult idea for some, storytelling is universal (Booker, 2004). It struck us that storytelling can naturally involve reflection in a more familiar and universal form and language. Having decided that the answer was yes and that storytelling was the solution, why could this work and how would this work in practice?

At the same time, one of the tutors was conducting narrative research and some of the other tutors were also interested in various story-based activities, such as role-playing games and game-based learning. This convergence of personal and professional interests was engaging to us as a team and seemed like it might address the challenges we faced around reflection:

'Sometimes reality is too complex. Stories give it form.'
(Jean Luc Godard)

Narrative can be considered as the way that humans make meaningful sense of the world and our actions (Bruner, 1991). Our narratives are not a facsimile of our experiences but are symbolic (Hendry, 2010) 'representations' of experiences in story form (Squire, 2008). Additionally, narratives are socially constructed, they are positioned in relation to an audience in order to engage and convince that audience of the veracity of our experiences (Riessman, 2008). As a result, we constantly reconstruct our stories so they are rarely exactly the same on each telling (Squire, 2008). In short, the nature of narrative means stories are highly constructed and necessarily reflective. We make decisions on what to keep and what to leave out. We make decisions on what to emphasise and what to de-emphasise. In those decisions reflection is occurring – sometimes explicitly and sometimes not.

The storyboard

This course design therefore took narrative principles and ideas and used them to rework existing activities. The module had two well-established assessments (of which more below) which we did not wish to change, a key set of topics and theories, and a range of activities to draw upon in the existing course. The challenge, then, was in how to redesign the journey taken by the course participants through this material, so that they travelled through the landscape of story, as well as of pedagogy.

We set the scene from the beginning of the module by breaking our module content down into 'chapters' in our virtual learning environment. Each chapter lasts two weeks, and explores a particular topic within teaching and learning, with some reading for participants in the 'Module Anthology'. The anthology gathers together all the tutor-created input for the whole module, chapter by chapter; it introduces each topic, points course participants to relevant further reading and major theorists on each topic. Each chapter includes one or more stories, poems, or other fictional elements, and the chapter activity pages include small black and white illustrations, suggestive of the kind of woodcut which sometimes illustrates fairy tales. We used these metaphorical cues to signal from the beginning that we were doing something slightly different with the design of the course.

We designed each chapter with an identical structure, to help participants orient themselves despite a somewhat unconventional approach: each begins with a reading from the module anthology, then progresses through a webinar, an annotated bibliography activity, an online discussion activity, a podcast, a face-to-face session, and concludes with a reflective writing activity (Table 1, below).

Using narrative ideas in tasks

In our first session, we met our participants in a webinar, and introduced the idea of our narrative design, with this slide:

About the Course Design

- Based on a dialogic and a narrative approach to learning.
- Based on the idea of 'regular time on task'.
- There will be:
 - Discussions (we learn through dialogue)
 - Serious Games (we learn through activity and play)
 - Stories, including your own (we make sense of our experiences by constructing narratives)

Dates	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
Chapter 2: Learning (and teaching)							
Week 1: 2-8 Oct	12-1pm: Webinar				Deadline: annotated bibliography part 1		
Week 2: 9-15 Oct	Podcast deadline: • annotated bibliography part 2		1-3pm: Live session				Deadlines: • reflective writing • online discussion activity

Table 1 Typical chapter timetable

This first chapter is about induction, and simultaneously covers induction to the course for course participants, and student induction as an element of teaching. We talked in the webinar about the deliberate decision to use the words ‘chapter’ and ‘anthology’ in our VLE site, and pointed participants to the reading for the chapter in the module anthology, which includes a non-fiction story. This activity, drawing on Neil Currant’s currently unpublished research with Black and Minority Ethnic students, is a piece of creative non-fiction about a student’s experience of university induction, and it aims to help participants think themselves into their students’ shoes as they begin the course. This ‘stepping into your students’ shoes’ aspect of the course is in a sense a role-playing exercise, in that one of the key aims of the course is for new lecturers to experience being in the student role, so that they can take that experience back to their teaching. Emphasising this role-playing aspect is a development for a future run of the course.

The first task that the participants actively engage in is the annotated bibliography. This activity repeats in each chapter, with a different focus each time; in the first chapter, the task asks participants for a fictional representation of teaching that has been resonant for them, further continuing the narrative theme, and easing them into the format of the activity, before the more demanding requirement for scholarly literature in future chapters.

In several of the chapters, the online discussion activities ask participants to engage with fictional narratives about teaching: to answer problem page letters about teaching, or to suggest next steps in response to a story about teaching that has gone wrong in some way. Several of the face-to-face sessions involve narrative-inspired activities; one uses objects to tell a story about the teacher’s identity, such as this one, from Elizabeth Lovegrove:

‘The octopus symbolises having many fingers in many pies, and the ways that different parts of my identity and my life contribute to my teaching. As well as a teacher, I’m a PhD researcher, a learning technologist, a role-playing game designer, and a writer and editor, and all of those things feed into each other.’ (Figure 1)

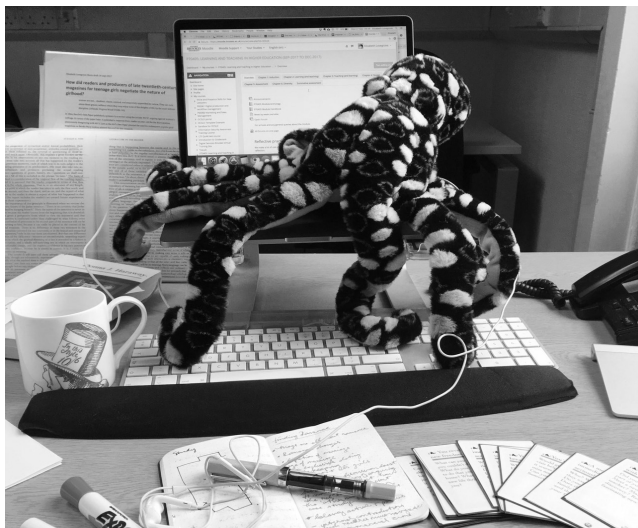


Figure 1 The Octopus

The face-to-face session for the chapter on ‘teaching (and learning)’ is a game called ‘Teachers of 6016’ (Lovegrove, 2017), which asks participants to put themselves in the position of far-future teachers, and uses this as a distancing tactic to tell stories about current HE practice, and contrast them with a utopian far future, to help participants see beyond assumptions we make about teaching, and challenge preconceptions about our present-day classrooms.

In the face-to-face session for the chapter on assessment, we use a much more close-to-home role-playing activity, which puts participants in the role of assessors for the module, providing summative grades and feedback for each other, and moderating each other’s grades and feedback, in a high stakes peer assessment activity. This type of activity is not commonly framed as either narrative or role-playing, but that is nevertheless what it is, especially for this group of teachers, some of whom will be very new to this practice. One of its roles is to enable them to inhabit the role of teacher, and to incorporate this practice into the stories they tell about their own teaching identities. A similar function is performed by the face-to-face activity in the chapter on design, which is a ten-minute micro-teach; in some cases this may be the first time course participants (many of them PhD students who assist their supervisors in teaching) will have designed their own teaching session.

In some ways, the most important activity, however, is the reflective writing task which concludes each chapter (Figure 2). This repetition, where every chapter ends with the prompt to ‘tell us a story about [some aspect of your teaching practice]’ is intended to gently guide participants into reflecting on their own teaching. Labov and Waletzky (1967) noted that when we tell stories there is usually an evaluative element which moves the storyteller beyond merely describing the events of the story. The prompts offer guidance to help this evaluative process, and help participants move into ‘so what?’ and ‘what next?’ type questions.

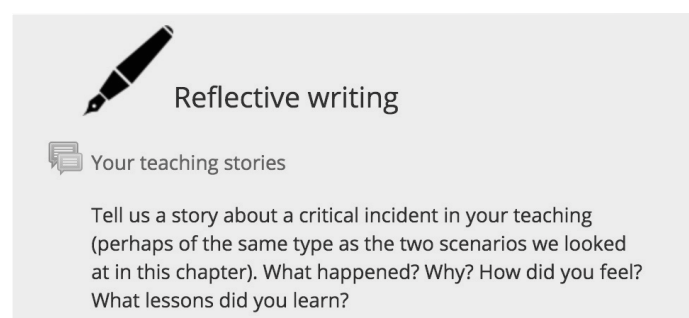


Figure 2 The reflective writing task

The final reflective story, in the chapter on diversity, leads directly into the final course assignment, a reflective essay exploring a critical incident around diversity. We hope that after writing and reading reflective accounts over the preceding weeks, participants will find reflection less of an alien practice than they might previously have done.

Happily ever after?

We are currently engaged in a cross-disciplinary project looking at how narrative can be used in teaching and curricula in higher education more widely, as well as

tweaking the module for its second run. We don't yet have detailed evaluation data, but early indications are that course participants have responded well to the storytelling aspects. The real test, however, will come with the marking of their final assignment, a reflective essay.

Our experience after the first run of the module suggests that this approach is fun for both tutors and participants, can be adapted to fit into an existing module without dramatic changes, and has the potential to make reflective practice more accessible to those from disciplines which don't usually practise it.

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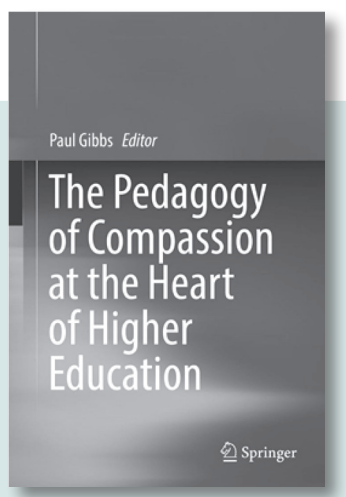
Book Review

The Pedagogy of Compassion at the Heart of Higher Education

Edited by Paul Gibbs

Springer, 2017

ISBN 978-3-319-57782-1



Consideration of the importance of compassion in higher education is increasing, as this international collection makes abundantly clear. I was particularly interested to read it as compassion is one of the key values of my own institution (the University of Winchester). I am also part of a contemplative pedagogy group at the University keen to pursue our own ventures to develop compassionate practices in HE and so it seemed like an ideal choice.

The book describes itself as offering a moral and philosophical perspective on education and is written from many angles and in many voices. Its content is rich, thought-provoking and multifaceted, with both repeat motifs running through it (defining compassion and how it differs from empathy or pity, mindfulness and

meditation, the need for humanity, equity and social justice in the academy) and specific foci e.g. as represented through topics and models. It posits the need for increased compassion in higher education as a counter-attack to the pressures to make our sector instrumentalist, measurement-led, corporatised and market-focused. Many contributors in the book make impassioned arguments as to how these factors are destroying the identity and values of the university and unbalancing the relationships and structures that have existed hitherto.

Across its content it contains many interesting perspectives on ethics, morality and philosophy which open the eyes of the lay reader to new theories and interpretations. I think the book has many valuable elements which make it a wide-

ranging stimulus for all kinds of questions relating to compassion and the nature of life at university today. Some of the observations which stood out for me were about the nature of compassionate practice. The language and terminology of compassion across the different contributions offer food for thought in terms of basic understanding of the concepts, as well as potential variance in positions on them. Aspects of these are well outlined and explored, such as White's consideration (p. 41) of the tensions and complications between helping behaviour and ethical behaviour or the relationship between compassionate empathy and standards of ethical judgement.

Other observations have a much broader reach. In particular Bresciani Ludvik's words, on how certain kinds of leadership create a paralysing culture of fear, and 'why nothing innovative will be attempted now [is] because everyone is just *too afraid or too tired*', spoke to me (p. 157). The clash between a measurement-led instrumental culture and one which respects the humanity of individuals is one that takes many forms and concerns academic and professional staff across the sector.

While it sets out on its cover its particular interest in the moral and philosophical, I was less clear as to its intended audience. I imagine therefore that readers will have varying interests and degrees of familiarity with its