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Exploring the epistemological and practical experiences of Arts practitioners engaging with an Educational Development programme

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Teaching Fellowship Award Scheme: Final Report

Exploring the epistemological and practical experiences of Arts practitioners engaging with an Educational Development programme

Project leader: Dr. Jennie Winter, Educational Developer, PedRIO
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Project team: Colin Searls, Faculty of Arts
Dr. Karen Treasure, Research Assistant

Type of project: Case study research

Keywords: Educational development; Arts practitioners; Pedagogy

Aims of project:

The aim of the project was to develop an understanding of the epistemological and practical experiences of Arts practitioners when engaging with an ED programme.

Specifically the aims were threefold:

- To explore the experiences of Arts practitioners engaging with an ED programme
- To assess links between pedagogies and practices in ED and Arts disciplines
- To provide recommendations for further development of ED programmes in ED and Arts disciplines

Background/context to project:

The rationale for this research was derived from recognition that Educational Development (ED) programmes are tasked with developing academics from all disciplines, which poses challenges for in-house expertise given the diversity of disciplines and associated pedagogies in Higher Education. More broadly, there was recognition of the value of Arts as a vehicle for formal, informal and interdisciplinary learning (Seagraves et al. 2008) which is increasingly important in the modern university. Thus, having clear and mutually beneficial links between ED and Arts was considered to have the potential to promote and nurture pedagogic possibilities that are presently under explored. This project therefore sought to investigate the epistemological and practical experiences that Arts practitioners have when engaging with an ED programme, in the hope of developing links and understanding about pedagogies and practices in both ED and the Arts.

Methodology:

The research took place at a post-1992 'new' university in the South West of England.

A literature review was conducted for the project, which focussed on several key areas namely: the epistemological (in)coherence of arts-based and science-based approaches to education; history of educational approaches to arts in higher education; role of criteria and learning outcomes in the arts and differences between

pedagogies (particularly in terms of learning spaces, mediums, group sizes, etc) in the arts compared to other disciplines in higher education. Given the limitations of scholarship concerned with the differences between pedagogies in the arts and other disciplines, the literature search was accompanied by expert testimonies obtained through informal communications with key figures in arts higher education in the UK.

Arts practitioners were recruited in consultation with the Faculty of Arts, who compiled a list of currently employed arts practitioners who had been candidates of LTHE or PGCAP ED programmes at Plymouth University over the past ten years. Identified individuals were approached directly to ask them to participate in this research on a voluntary basis.

The final data set was constituted by eight semi-structured interviews (each up to an hour), conducted between January and April 2015. Interviews were scheduled to focus on how effectively the ED programme had prepared participants for their role as teachers in HE, and how appropriate the programme had been to supporting pedagogic approaches suitable for (and often specific to) the arts. The following are examples of questions used in the interviews:

- Did your experience of the ED programme provide any new tools or approaches for your use in teaching? If yes, could you indicate why, and if no, why not?
- Are the pedagogic principles learnt in the ED programme supportive or contradictory to practice in studio-based education?
- Did the ED programme equip you with any pointers to useful theoretical frameworks to assist your own understanding of educational pedagogies?
- Can you describe occasions when you sought to apply theoretical ideas to practice and the consequences of that for teaching and learning?
- Can you identify areas where your views of education were complementary to those espoused on the course, as well as any tensions?
- Can you describe any changes to your perspectives on teaching and learning as a result of the course?

These interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic content analysis to identify key themes.

Results:

The analysis of interview data identified a number of positive and negative outcomes to ED for arts practitioners. These include significant differences between pedagogic approaches and learning spaces in the arts and those utilised during ED programmes; the modes of assessment utilised in ED - which are often unfamiliar to arts practitioners, as well as the lack of applicability of some approaches focussed on in ED which are largely irrelevant to the delivery of Arts programmes. This said, the interview data also endorses the utility of ED programmes for arts practitioners, by

teaching skills necessary to deliver university courses within accepted frameworks and also by teaching valuable pedagogic approaches which can be utilised across other disciplines (for example, peer assessment, group work and so on).

This analysis contains a series of provisional recommendations for consideration by the PGCAP team as well as suggestions for further research and investigation:

- Lack of engagement of arts practitioners in ED programmes at Plymouth University is largely a result of practical rather than epistemological challenges
- ED programmes should address specific challenges of engagement for arts practitioners, particularly: differences of pedagogic approaches in the arts eg. studio-based educational context; and difficulties with both delivery and modes of assessment in ED, given a general lack of skills in generic academic writing/conventions
- Dedicated arts content may be necessary given the lack of common issues between teaching in classrooms and studios
- Delivery of ED programmes might consider broader incorporation of modes of teaching and learning to develop practitioners as creative professionals, given that creativity is recognised as a broad and holistic process across both ED and HE (Jackson, 2006)
- Modes of assessment should be devised in ED to give arts practitioners an equal basis for assessment when compared to their peers from other disciplinary backgrounds

Recommendations for future research resulting from this project include:

- Review of Arts ED provision, as well as other arts CPD offers, at other UK universities
- Similar studies could be carried out with other disciplines to identify similarities or differences

Dissemination:

A paper based on this research was presented at the VC Teaching and Learning Conference, at Plymouth University in June 2015, entitled 'Exploring the experiences of arts practitioners engaging with Educational Development programmes'.

A paper is also being prepared for submission in December 2015 to a peer-reviewed journal, entitled 'Arts Practitioners, Educational Development and Higher Education: Centralising creative educational discourses and outputs'

Total project expenditure:

I would like to present my findings at the following conference/s:

- Fifth PedRIO Annual Conference: 8th April 2016
- No

- VC's 14th Teaching & Learning Conference: 30th June 2016 No

Are you happy for us to use this project for future marketing purposes? Yes

Reference list:

- Jackson N J (2006). 'Making sense of creativity in higher education' in N J Jackson et al (eds) *Developing Creativity in Higher Education: An imaginative curriculum*. Routledge: Abingdon
- Seagraves, L., Soden, R. and Coutts, G. (2008). *Arts across the curriculum: Enhancing pupil learning the pupil perspective*. British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, Edinburgh

Evidence of ethical approval

28 August 2014

CONFIDENTIAL

Dr Jennie Winter
Educational Developer
PedRIO & Educational Development
Plymouth University
Rm 114, 3 Endsleigh Place

Dear Jennie

Application for Approval by Education Research Ethics Sub-committee

Reference Number: 13/14-68

Application Title: *Exploring the epistemological and practical challenges experienced by Arts practitioners when engaging with an Educational Development programme*

I am pleased to inform you that the Education Research Ethics Sub-committee has granted approval to you to conduct this research.

Please note that this approval is for three years, after which you will be required to seek extension of existing approval.

Please note that should any MAJOR changes to your research design occur which effect the ethics of procedures involved you must inform the Committee. Please contact Claire Butcher on (01752) 585337 or by email claire.butcher@plymouth.ac.uk

Yours sincerely



Professor Linda la Velle

Chair, Education Research Ethics Sub-committee -
Plymouth Institute of Education
Faculty of Arts and Humanities