Hubris, Revelations and Creative Pedagogy: Transformation, Dialogue and Modelling ‘Professional Love’ with LEGO

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Hubris, Revelations and Creative Pedagogy: Transformation, Dialogue and Modelling ‘Professional Love’ with LEGO

Abstract

The paper demonstrates a successful approach to providing HE Youth & Community Work students with a learning experience that embraces the transformative agenda of their chosen profession. It adds to our understanding of the opportunities and limitations in crafting a learning environment and embedding a discursive pedagogy that draws on the creativity of both the lecturer and students.

Exploring different iterations of reflective sessions, it highlights how creative approaches can help students overcome barriers to their engagement with a particularly complex concept, namely the transformational capacity of ‘professional love’ within Youth and Community Work practice. The evaluation of these sessions generates broadly positive results, suggesting that creative methods are appropriate for addressing complex issues in the HE classroom. However, it also details how this approach proved profoundly upsetting for some participants, suggesting it should not be seen as a one-size-fits-all solution to overcoming barriers in teaching and learning.

Key Words: ‘professional love’, transformation, discourse, creativity, LEGO.

Introduction

As an educator, I have always sought to inspire people to embrace new ideas, challenge received orthodoxies and generate their own understandings of the world around them, thereby helping to empower them to change their world. This
philosophy has underpinned my practice, both as a community educator\(^1\) and as a HE
Lecturer, where I believe in the power of modelling ‘effective’ practice, particularly
in relation to reflection (Taylor & Robinson, 2014).

Two central tenets of my practice – shaped by the professional values of community
development and youth work (LLUK, 2009; IYW, 2013) – characterize education as a
transformational process (Mezirow, 2000; Beck & Purcell, 2010) and as an “act of
love” (Freire, 1970). Furthermore, I have always sought to use creative ways to
introduce learners to new concepts, as this is an effective way to promote effective
engagement in the learning process, especially as in relation to “politically-oriented
pedagogies” such as community education (Clover, 2007).

This paper explores the application of these tenets by critiquing a developmental
project designed to introduce the concept of ‘professional love’ to second year Youth
& Community Work (YCW) students in one Higher Education Institution (HEI) in
the north of England. It expands on the key principles underpinning my approach to
teaching, and clarifies how I hope to encourage students to adopt these in their own
practice. The paper focuses on sessions in which LEGO was used to facilitate
students’ engagement with this concept, seeking to determine: (i) if this creative
approach was effective in its aim to help students engage in discussion about the
subject; and (ii) whether or not this approach facilitated a transformation in their
understanding of the concept.

**Pedagogical Principles**

\(^1\) Community education is used as a ‘catch-all’ term for the related professional processes I have
engaged in throughout my twenty years’ career: community education, informal education,
community work, community development, youth & community work and youth work.
The key principles underpinning my work as a community educator and HE Lecturer are explored here, highlighting important aspects from the literature contributing to effective delivery of teaching and learning in formal, informal and non-formal settings (Jeffs & Smith, 2005; Moreland, 1999). These considerations have been shaped by my own practice in the community education profession, and in supporting the professional development of students on an undergraduate Youth & Community Work programme. These students have very diverse backgrounds, and draw from differing degree of experience in work with young people and communities. This means that it is important to shape learning opportunities to allow for all critical themes to be covered in ways that students with differing degrees of prior knowledge can engage (Shor, 1991; Brookfield, 1986).

**Education as a Transformational Process**

Transformative education results in a “deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions … dramatically and irreversibly alter(ing) our way of being in the world” (O’Connor: 241, 2002). It is a “critical” mode of engagement for community education (Ledwith, 1997), reflecting community development’s aim to “address imbalances in power and bring about change founded on social justice, equality and inclusion” (LLUK, 2009). This pedagogical approach is not limited to changing participants’ world-views or perceptions; instead, it requires change in actions and behaviours, and as such is uniquely relevant to the community education, which seeks to challenge existing power relations to bring about greater social justice and equality (Shaw, 2013; Mayo, 2004).

Teaching for transformation challenges participants to assess their value system and worldview, such that they are changed by the experience (Quinnan, 1997). It helps
participants identify “problematic” ideas, beliefs, values and feelings; critically assess their underlying assumptions; test their justification through “rational discourse”; and reach decisions through consensus-building (Mezirow, 2000). A transformative pedagogy is based primarily on dialogue and critical reflection on experiences (and associated feelings), leading to “perspective transformation” (ibid), where the learner’s worldview shifts, drawing on more diverse frames of reference; or “conscientization” (Freire, 1970), where learning is a critical process, aligned with action to address real problems.

Transformation arises from a context-specific form of critical pedagogy, in which the primary function of the educator is emancipatory: they create the conditions for students to “learn skills, knowledge, and modes of inquiry that will allow them to examine critically the role that society has played in their self-formation” (Darder, 1991: xvii). The aim of transformational pedagogy must be to cultivate students’ critical consciousness and to help them recognize themselves as an agent of change (Kincheloe, 2008; Thompson, 1997; hooks, 1994).

Hence, the educator should draw on the perspectives and experiences of people traditionally marginalised and excluded from the classroom, promoting their critical faculties, and facilitating their collective construction of alternative possibilities (Nagda et al, 2003). This form of transformative practice should be about developing “pedagogic imaginations” or helping students to imagine new possibilities by changing their current frames of reference (Jackson, 2015: 6). Students are helped in this way to recognise the inherent value in themselves and each other, and to recognise how dominant discourses act to de-value them (Bernstein, 1996: 170). The
result should be that – through learning – students can “make and remake” themselves and their world (Freire, 2004: 15).

Embracing a transformative pedagogy is not without its challenges, making it difficult to anticipate the impact it may have on participants (Taylor, 2009). Specifically, challenging one’s own underlying thoughts and assumptions can result in feelings of discomfort, disorientation and even grief arising in the students’ mind (Moore, 2005). This can arise from their natural tendency to suppress emotions publicly, as the associated emotional turmoil can be difficult to deal with; something that can be exacerbated in the confines of a classroom setting (ibid). Furthermore, learners run the risk when exposing their deep-held emotional positions to losing the “support and sustenance of intimates and friends” (Brookfield, 1991: 10).

It is vital, therefore, in ensuring one’s practice remains ethical, to be open with learners about the intention to challenge the status quo, and thereby try to avoid setting them up for personal and political damage (ibid: 9). Furthermore, linking transformational pedagogy to professional love, Wink (2005: 167-8) asserts that the educator should use “a caring heart” and “critical eyes” to ensure the welfare of the learner are central in their classroom.

**Dialogic Pedagogy**

Dialogue is central to a transformative pedagogy, and may form the central medium for teaching when learning is perceived as a process shaped by social relations (Burbules & Bruce, 2001). Here, dialogue is how a group constructs knowledge through shared thinking, enabling learners to “share their conceptions, verify or test their understandings, and identify areas of common knowledge or of difference” (ibid:
Using dialogue reflects one of the educational principles underpinning practice in the YCW Subject Benchmark Statement: critical collaborative enquiry (QAA, 2017: 12).

A dialogical pedagogy allows students to interact with one another around a chosen theme, drawing on the interpretations they bring to the discussion to co-construct knowledge, rather than being given the ‘right’ answers (Mufti & Pearce, 2012). Here, argumentation is important in enabling learners to take ownership of their learning, and in particular on the “critical exploration, evaluation and synthesis of meanings that this entails” (ibid: 41).

In HE, dialogic pedagogy requires all participants – including the lecturer – to be open to the possibility of change in their perspectives and understandings, including occasional regression along the road to transformation (Kovbasyuk, 2011). The role of the lecturer remains, nevertheless, to encourage their students to be open to the possibility of change through meaningful engagement in discourse with their peers. Engaging in critical reflection and collaboration in this way enables them to “actively seek, express and negotiate meanings in dialogues” that can foster “value-oriented relationships and appreciation for the diversity of the world” (ibid: 11); both outcomes being consistent with community development values (LLUK, 2009).

The educator should demonstrate awareness of how language can be used to oppress and dominate, and enable students to re-frame their own use of language, so that it can be “claimed as a space of resistance” (hooks 1994: 69). The resulting “true speaking” is thus both an expression of creative power and – most importantly – a courageous act of resistance: a “political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless” (hooks 1989: 8).
Education as an Act of Love

Freire asserts that education occurs only when the teacher stops making “individualistic gestures and risks an act of love” (1970: 35). Characterizing this ability to love as indispensable to the cause of liberation, Freire further posits that love and dialogue are inter-dependent: “dialogue cannot exist in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people” (*ibid*: 77).

Love is central to ethical practice in community work (Westoby & Dowling, 2013). Humans can actively ‘love’ others in their community by seeking out their stories, and de-centering our concern for our own perspective so as to demonstrate the value we attach to others (Fromm, 1956). By ‘loving’ in this way, individuals can re-discover themselves as belonging to an extensive community, in which we are indebted to and contribute towards shared meanings and communal ties.

Page’s (2011) exploration of ‘professional love’ in early years offers a potential means to explore our practice as community educators. Here, “pedagogical loving” requires “deep motivational displacement and involves developing deep, sustaining, respectful and reciprocal relationships” (*ibid*: 313). Children’s relationships with practitioners need to be based on quality and sensitivity, because other relationships in their lives are inadequate. Practitioners should become “sensitive, skilled, loving, special adults with whom they (can form) a deep and sustaining relationship” (Page, 2014: 123).

Similarly, community educators should model love in their practice by abandoning selfish interests and demonstrating genuine concern about others, recognizing the uniqueness of each individual and responding to their needs. This requires a focus on
the inherent value of each individual as part of their community and on the quality of
the relationship between the worker and learners (Westoby & Dowling, 2013).

In light of concerns about self-preservation in an era where safeguarding is of
increasing concern, some educators can be forgiven for perceiving ‘love’ as an
element of the teacher-student relationship as taboo (hooks, 2013). Nevertheless, it
should be possible for them to demonstrate a “caring heart” by showing that they are
interested in the lives of their students, seeking to understand how students perceive
themselves and their social reality (Kincheloe, 2008). Furthermore, professionally
loving practitioners should embrace “kindness, empathy, intimacy, bonding, sacrifice,
and forgiveness” as part of the pedagogic relationship (Loreman, 2011).

**Creativity in Higher Education**

Echoing de Bono’s assertion (1993: 63) that creativity is “the most important human
resource of all”, both the HEA (2011) and the QAA (2017) stress the importance of
“dynamic” approaches to teaching and learning through creativity and innovation.
HE students require educators to help them understand and develop their creativity,
which “lies at the heart of performing, learning and developing in any contexts”
(Jackson, 2014: 8-9). Being creative is an integral part of each person’s make-up;
hence, HE should take a “lifeworld” approach, encouraging students’ creative
development as an integral part of their learning and development (*ibid*). Prompting
creative cognitive processes in their learning enables students to generate “higher
order” learning: synthesizing existing ideas and information into new and more
complex interpretations, and enhancing the retention and transfer of information
(Miller & Dumford, 2014: 289).
Highlighting the “subversive nature of creativity”, Gibson (2010: 607-8) claims that creative teaching offers advantages over “transmissive pedagogies” (consistent with the “conscientisation” propounded by Freire, 1970) in that it encourages boundary pushing, self-assurance and risk-taking. At the same time, creative approaches to teaching and learning ‘sensitive’ issues afford students the opportunity to devise and discuss more readily their own agendas for social change (Pilcher, 2017: 975).

Deliberate creative processes are likely to be “more amenable to instruction” than intuitive processes (Miller & Dumford, 2014: 288), suggesting that educators should focus on these when promoting creativity in the HE classroom. Using “creative space” can enhance students’ engagement with these more challenging processes, helping students to make sense of complex issues by drawing on their experience of “novelty and surprise” to promote collaboration and interaction (Harper & Quaye, 2009; Jankowska & Atlay, 2008). To capitalize on this, educators should provide the following catalysts for developing creativity in others: setting clear goals; allowing autonomy; providing resources and adequate time; offering help; learning from problems and successes; and allowing ideas to flow (Amabile & Kramer, 2012). We should accept that students are not ‘experts’, and focus instead on creative acts in their everyday contexts, as well as the ways in which they construct personal knowledge and understanding in their particular context (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009).

Considering construction as a specific form of creativity, the HEA acknowledges that students learn best when they construct something (e.g. from LEGO), helping them to connect with each other (James, 2015). Creative approaches help students to value both the output and the newly created knowledge embodied therein, while metaphors help students structure conceptual systems through creating expressive imagery (ibid).
Modelling allows participants to free up and use different neural pathways than they might otherwise if using purely didactic or discursive approaches (Nerantzi & Despard, 2014). Ideal for generating divergent responses and ideas, when used in a democratic and non-hierarchical manner, models such as LEGO can help overcome domination of classroom discussion by dominant speakers (*ibid*). Working with metaphor, symbolism and association, the process breaks down barriers and opens up possibilities; participants own the meaning in their models; and the ideas associated with their creations remain memorable (McCusker, 2014).

Linked to this, encouraging students to tell stories based on their own creativity can help them to explore different points of view and approach dilemmas from alternative perspectives, thereby generating new understandings (Kroth & Cranton, 2014). This approach can allow students to be more authentic and (self-)critical in their discussions, and to feel more comfortable in displaying their own subjectivity (Skeggs, 2002: 973). Furthermore, while story-telling helps students to reflect on and transform their understanding of themselves, it also enhances their confidence through the sharing of these new understandings, thereby strengthening their sense of belonging to the group (Stanley, 1992).

How much the educator is able to integrate creativity into their classroom-based practice is likely to be constrained by the culture of the HE institution within which they practice. Asserting that HEIs *should* provide “academic and social environments that favour the creativity of the human potential”, Mansouri (2015) argues that organizational culture often inhibits the creativity of staff. As well as appointing educators with creative characteristics (curiosity, energy, and intellectual honesty, good rapport, etc.), what is required in order for creativity to flourish in
HEIs are mechanisms promoting new ideas, a culture of cooperation and collaboration and open appreciation and acknowledgement of creative educators’ practice (*ibid*).

**Conclusion**

As demonstrated in this brief engagement with the literature, there is a clear synergy between effective community education practice and the role of the critical, transformative HE educator. In both cases, the educator seeks to facilitate a transformation in understanding and action on the part of the learner. Dialogue is a critical part of transformational pedagogy, and it is the educator’s responsibility to ensure discussions empower learners to generate deeper understandings of the issues under consideration. This is particularly important when tackling complex concepts such as ‘professional love’, which present the practitioner – both in the community and the HE classroom – with profound challenges, as they occupy the affective realm (and are, therefore, difficult to talk about) and are open to myriad interpretations, making their translation into practice problematic (*Sipsos, et al.*, 2008). The rest of this paper tries to make sense of how embracing learners’ creativity can help open up these discussions and bring about transformation.

**Experimental Sessions Design Considerations**

Throughout my HE teaching career, I have sought to include discussions with my students about professionally loving practice as a part of the taught YCW curriculum. I regularly refer to Freire’s assertions about education being an act of love, illustrating discussions with examples of what I consider to be loving forms of practice in my own work (*Author, 2018*). However, these conversations are often stilted and one-
sided, as students feel uncomfortable exposing themselves to potential ridicule or misunderstandings by their peers, possibly reflecting the fact that expression of love for humanity is generally discouraged in modern western society (Henricks, 2016).

To overcome this obstacle, I wanted to develop an approach that would enable students to better engage in difficult dialogues about this ‘wicked’ issue (Landis, 2008). My aim was to help transform their understanding of ‘professional love’, so that their clients might benefit from the resulting change in their practice. I planned to discuss this concept with second year (level five) students, acknowledging two dynamics I have observed in the attitudes of these students in different cohorts over the seven years I have been teaching Youth & Community Work. Firstly, they express increasingly sympathetic interpretations of the causes of exclusion, and see the people with whom they will work in future as deserving of their respect, understanding and (maybe) even love, more than is usually the case in their first year. Furthermore, students have usually developed a more sophisticated understanding of their own practice by the second year, are open to challenge and exposure to different ways of working with people, and seem capable of engaging in more challenging discussions about the nature of their interventions in other people’s lives.

Planning an experimental session in the taught curriculum dedicated solely to a discussion about professionally loving practice, I sought to re-visit students’ motivations for securing professional status to practice as Youth & Community Workers, focusing in particular on how their personal values reflect those of the profession for which they are training (e.g. NYA, 2004; LLUK, 2009; IYW, 2013). I saw an opportunity for the conversation to flow naturally from discussions on
translating values in practice to their perceptions of themselves as practitioners and
the importance of love as an integral element of their practice.

Hence, I aimed to devise a session in which I could demonstrate to students the power
of a transformative approach to teaching and learning, reflecting my perception of
them as change agents. Furthermore, I hoped to be able to demonstrate my
commitment to support their own transformation so that they could similarly support
change in others, using the educative process as a voyage of discovery for both the
educator and the student. The session sought to explore Freire’s call to “humanise”
the educative process (1970), and how we might translate into practice his and Page’s
(2011) notion of ‘professional love’. As some of the techniques I used were new to
the students, I hoped they might also learn some new practical methods that they
could apply in their own practice.

First Iteration

Design & Implementation

The first iteration of the session was based around modeling with LEGO, starting with
a discussion around creativity in learning, and the use of metaphors as an aide to
communicating / understanding complex ideas. A diverse group of twenty students
attended the session (a third were under twenty years of age, the rest were aged up to
forty five; the cohort was ethnically diverse, and included students with different
sexual orientation; however, there were only three males\(^2\)). Students were not
involved in the design of this first iteration, as I felt the subject matter might prove an

\(^2\) This reflects trends in recruitment to YCW programmes, as the profession has become increasingly
‘feminised’ over the past decade.
obstacle to discussions about the content. However, I involved them in evaluating the session, to help refine and improve its delivery in subsequent years.

Students were provided with a LEGO Serious Play kit (comprising 129 disparate pieces), and invited to engage in basic modeling (with some constraints) of a bridge (unlimited pieces / 7 minutes), and an animal (15 bricks / 7 minutes); which they were asked subsequently to modify, to represent an element of their personality. These activities were included to familiarize students with the modeling process, and to open up new ways of thinking. Subsequent tasks incorporated more complex concepts: the students were required to represent themselves / their professional philosophy [8 minutes], and then ‘professional love’ in their practice (8 minutes). On completion of each challenge, I invited each student to explain their model to the group, and probed how it represented the concepts. In between the introductory and more advanced activities, I shared resources relating to the practice of informal education as an act of love (including images, music and printed sheets with quotes from the authors cited above), and led a discussion on these.

**Stories & Metaphors**

The students told a host of stories when discussing their models, each one reflecting the personality and experiences of the individual. Tasks 1 and 2 were effective in engaging students in discussions about their models: they demonstrated enthusiasm, a breadth of imagination and humour in these discussions. They found the constraints both helpful and frustrating, with some students saying that limiting the number of bricks on the second task had made it more challenging, and therefore rewarding. It was the not knowing what the challenge was going to be that students seemed to find most frustrating: “I want to know what I have to do, so I can pick pieces to suit” being
one typical complaint. The animal exercise became particularly interesting when students started to reveal elements of themselves in their models. For most students, this activity focused on some physical attribute (e.g. being tall, “overweight”, wearing black clothes), but some were able to extend the metaphor to use pieces as a prompt for discussion about their personality.

When the constraint of number of pieces was removed, students’ ideas seemed to flow more freely, and this is where the metaphors came to the fore. For example, several students used a single piece (bag, case or box) to represent a “toolkit” of activities that they could use to engage young people and members of the communities in which they worked. Similarly, others constructed piles of pieces to represent a range of different “tools”, and were able to discuss how each one could be used in their work with young people and communities. A small proportion of the students suspended the metaphor at this level: relating individual pieces to specific artefacts they might use in their practice. However, several students incorporated a more philosophical dimension to their discussions, using pieces to stimulate a discussion of their approach to their work. For example, one student used pieces to highlight the values underpinning his practice, specifically: a flag (“starting where young people are at and cheering them on”); a few “royals” (“they’re the young people, who demand my respect”); a big hand (“for lending to young people”); and a small piece of fence (“managing my professional boundaries with young people … but I don’t want it too high, or we’ll never make connections”).

Fencing featured in several models, representing “protection”, “safeguarding” and “promoting young people’s wellbeing and safety”, rather than boundary management. These themes recurred, using pieces including a bridge (“I want to help build a safe
way for young people’s transition to adulthood”) and a tree (“I can hold this over the young person’s head to protect them from whatever is falling down on them”).

One student included keys in their model, suggesting they were “a kind of gatekeeper: I don’t have all the answers young people want, but I can open doors to help them explore”. Similar explanations were given for pieces used to represent a signpost and a set of traffic lights. One student described his tableau as “a kind of boat, where everybody on board (including me, the young person and other professionals) has a role to play in steering this ship to harbour, whatever that means for each different young person”.

I used prompts during the conversations with each student to explore the extent to which ‘transformation’ featured in their perception of the YCW role. For many students, this was implicit (e.g. the boat “journey” or the “bridge” crossing representing some kind of practitioner-facilitated change). Only three students highlighted transformation explicitly as part of their purpose as a practitioner. All three had difficulty representing this in their model, but each one stressed the importance of working with young people to raise their awareness of “how fucked up the world is”, and what they could do to “make things better for themselves and other screwed people”. Although not usually disposed to using profanities in class, students’ use of these in their discussions may have reflected two dynamics: the passion they feel about the need for transformational change at a societal level; or/and the ‘changed’ modes of thinking stimulated by the mechanical activity behind the conversations.

Discussing ‘professional love’ in metaphors proved challenging for the majority of students. There was much discussion during this exercise, as students explored what
it might mean in practice, and searched out specific pieces to add to their models, several crafting hearts out of random pieces. It wasn’t just the task of representing ‘love’ in their models that proved challenging; students became less fluid in their discussion about this concept than previously. The key focus in these brief and stuttering discussions was on the challenge of bringing ‘love’ into professional relationships with young people, while managing appropriate boundaries between practitioners and young people.

Nevertheless, one student used two identical pink blocks, saying they didn’t represent anything specific; what was more important to her was the fact that they were the same: “I wanted to show I could empathise with the young person, to show that I kind of know where they’re coming from, and help them cope”.

**Second Iteration**

*Design & Implementation*

Scheduled exactly one year after the first session, and with the next year’s cohort of YCW students, creativity remained central to the design of the second iteration of the session. This group was slightly smaller (seventeen participated), though its members exhibited a similarly diverse range of characteristics to the first cohort. As detailed below, the design incorporated changes to reflect the evaluation of the first session and to incorporate findings from my ongoing research into the concept of ‘professional love’ in work with children and young people. A week before the session, students were provided with a copy of my forthcoming paper on the topic (Author, 2018), and were encouraged to read / critique the ideas it explored as part of their preparation for the session. The initial construction activities were less structured, allowing students to simply play with their stache of LEGO pieces to
allow each individual to develop a ‘relationship’ with their materials, and to free up
their thought processes at their own speed. Other creative materials (including paper,
felt pens, crayons, modelling clay, pipe cleaners, etc.) were made available to
participants, to allow individuals who were uncomfortable using LEGO to access
other media for the creative process.

The rest of the session proceeded in much the same way as it had with the previous
group, with students creating models and discussing with their peers the meanings
they conveyed and the ideas they represented. My role was to facilitate dialogue, and
to prompt / probe students when they struggled to articulate their ideas. I also
captured images of their work and transcribed key elements of the dialogue. The
discussion around the concept of ‘professional love’ was much more focused in the
second iteration, as students had engaged in the reading and were able to reflect on
how the ideas conveyed in the article related to their own practice. At the end of the
second session, students were asked to complete a pro forma, containing a series of
questions asking them to reflect more on what they thought about the concept and
how it might be translated into practice in their work with children and young people.

Stories & Metaphors

As with the first session, the design and facilitation of this exploration of their views
on themselves as individuals and practitioners was remarkably freeing for the
students. As well as allowing space for all to contribute, the design of the session
allowed students to ‘be’ and give of themselves to a much greater degree than I had
witnessed in class over the preceding eighteen months during which I had facilitated
and taught sessions with them.
Descriptions of their models of themselves were often self-declaratory: “There’s a flower on my head, coz I’m a bit of a plant pot”; “I’m reserved but a bit weird”; and “There’s a pineapple on my head coz I’m mad as a box of frogs” were typical of the self-analysis on display during these discussions. Perhaps more significantly, another student felt able to share something of herself that she had not previously shared with her peers: “I’m a Princess with Jesus on my shoulders” (emphasis added). These revelations opened up space for individuals to quiz one another on deeply rooted convictions and aspirations, conversations these groups had not previously pursued, and which helped strengthen bonds of mutual support and understanding.

Specifically, it transpired that there are three members of the group for whom their Christian faith is a primary motivation behind their decision to pursue a career in supporting young people: they have subsequently organized regular get-togethers with other similarly-motivated students from other years and courses.

The use of modelling and application of metaphors allowed students to demonstrate their profound awareness and understanding of the purpose of youth and community work, in particular reflecting the interplay between their own personal values and those of their chosen profession. One student’s words capture this particularly well:

“Youth Work is about good strong foundations and values – your own and those you help the young people to build to turn into “good young adults”

… look at the contrast in the model: one has good foundations; one doesn’t”

As the conversation progressed, and more voices and metaphors were heard, it seemed that each new revelation opened up broader discussions about a host of challenges and opportunities faced by all the students. It was evident, too, that
students were able to engage in greater depth in their discourse about their professional practice. Ladders were again a repeating metaphor: “One step at a time … don’t rush them … let them go at their own pace and a window of opportunity will open up in the end”; “I’m at the bottom of the ladder, holding it up for the two young people: encouraging and empowering them to reach their goals”; and “I don’t think I have a clue: I take it a step at a time: sometimes you go up; sometimes you go back down until you get to the top. Then you start again to try to inspire one more person”. One student discussed an absent item to extend his boat metaphor: “Here it’s different and safe … though there is no lifejacket, meaning they can take risks”. Another discussed two aspects of one piece of LEGO to emphasise different aspects of her approach to working with young people: “My head’s in a bubble, coz you don’t always understand young people’s troubles. It’s clear, to represent an open mind”. The modelling and conversation around ‘professional love’ also reached greater depth, as students (all of whom completed the session) seemed more comfortable than their predecessors in tweaking their models to reflect the concept and in discussing it. For example, one student explained her view that ‘love’ is an inevitable outcome of the process of working with young people, asserting: “Once you’ve gone through “this” with the young people there is some ‘professional love’ at the top of the stairs”. Another argued that “Passing on your own building blocks to help young people build their own foundations is itself an act of love”, clarifying further:

“The light bulb represents all the ideas you need to share. The love heart shows that love should be in your work always; and the person represents a person-centred approach – you need to treat them as human. The light-bulb, love heart and person all need to be linked”. 

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During their discussion, two further students drew the following comments out of each other: “There’s always love there for everybody”; “Yeah … love is the basis of everything”. Helping her to articulate the difficulty she had in locating ‘professional love’ in her model of her own practice, another student reflected what it transpired others were feeling: “Love made my ladder fall down”!

**Evaluation**

This discussion draws from my observations made during the sessions, along with student feedback provided at the sessions’ end and in subsequent conversations. At the end of the first session, I used a simple evaluation sheet to elicit students’ views on: what learning they took for themselves; whether / how this approach enabled them to engage more easily in dialogue about challenging themes; and the extent to which they might use a similar approach in their own practice. The feedback sheet for the second session allowed for students to provide their views on two elements of the session: the potential value of LEGO as a transformational tool in their practice, based on their experience of using it in my session; and the impact of using LEGO to help in deepening their understanding of the application of ‘professional love’ in their practice.

Overall, the techniques appeared successful, particularly in helping students to articulate their thoughts about their practice in a more engaged manner than in traditional sessions. The majority of students engaged enthusiastically in the activities, and appeared to enjoy participating in the session. Having said this, of the twenty who started the first session, two left at the interval (one out of “boredom”, the other because of an “emergency”); three more found the process “uncomfortable” (more about this follows).
Students said they liked the fact the sessions were interactive, providing them with thinking time and covering a range of relevant topics. One student found their session “a little laborious at times, but well worth it”; another said their session was “fun and enjoyable, and was an awesome way of learning”; while yet another said the “different way of teaching got us to think about things more deeply”. This suggests using LEGO helped stimulate reflection; the following comments from different students suggest it was useful in facilitating students’ engagement in the dialogue:

“I said things I probably would not of (sic) said if we were just sat in a circle”

“The LEGO broke down some barriers in discussion and communication”

“The process helped me to open up easily”

“The session was intriguing … it would be great for kinaesthetic learners”

All students who enjoyed the sessions said they could see the potential for using LEGO in their own work with young people. For one, the session was “relevant to youth work” because it made them “think on your feet and go with the flow”; it enabled her to “make links without knowing”, and to “connect feelings”. Another thought it was helpful in challenging her to “think about why and how we work with young people”. Yet another thought this would be a “good tool to open up discussions”, as it was “young people friendly”.

Two students (both in the first session) struggled to complete the tasks. Having selected pieces, they were unable to connect them in the way they were asked, saying
they were unable to visualize fitting them together to make a representation of their thoughts. However, they both managed to engage in discussions about how they perceived themselves / their practice, and were able to use individual pieces to stimulate their input to these discussions.

Another student in the first session was unable to complete any of the tasks, and could not to engage in discussions about how she perceived herself in her professional role. She broke down in tears afterwards when discussing her experience with me, saying: “I feel the session was great for others, but not for me. I don’t feel I am imaginative enough to work with LEGO … I also found it difficult to discuss my practice and feelings through the LEGO as I struggled to use my imagination”. As we discussed her experience, it became apparent that this student had never played with any construction toys as a child, and found the whole process alien. I had not anticipated that anybody could find this form of playful activity stressful or alienating; in hindsight, I should have prepared other activities for students to complete in the event of their being uncomfortable with LEGO.

As they concentrated on the exercises, some students revealed previously ‘hidden’ and disturbing sides of their personality to their unsuspecting peers (particularly in session 2, which was a much more light-hearted affair); possibly reflecting claims about the opening up of new neural pathways. One usually mild-mannered student swore throughout the session: “the fucking legs keep breaking” was just one of many expletive-riddled outbursts she shared during the session. Claiming that she never normally swears, this student demonstrated how her self-awareness had grown during

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3 This was the reason I made more / different materials available for students participating in the second session. I wanted to be able to offer all students a creative means of engaging in the process, one that they could choose if LEGO didn’t work for them. It is possibly because of these changes that none of the second cohort of students left their session, or failed to engage.
the session, including “a potty for my bad language” in the model of herself as a practitioner. Her exclamation about the modelling collapsing generated the unsympathetic response: “I love it when people fail” from another student. Usually the most caring member of the cohort, the other participants cheered her hubris soon after, however, as her own model collapsed.

Conclusions & Recommendations

In detailing and critiquing these sessions, I have demonstrated the potential beneficial impact of using LEGO as a teaching tool, and in particular as an aid to engendering transformational learning when addressing ‘wicked’ issues (such as ‘professional love’) with some HE students. I have shown that by modelling and discussing their creations and the ideas they encapsulate, these students are empowered to articulate their ideas more effectively than with purely tutor-led discursive approaches. Furthermore, as well as transforming students’ understanding of the concept under consideration, this approach can also empower them to reflect purposively on the extent to which their own practice facilitates transformation. Even for students who may find LEGO alienating, the way in which sessions framed around the modeling activity free up their peers’ discussion of the subject allows for their views to emerge more fully-formed than might otherwise be the case.

This work has shown that the discussions arising from creative modeling activities can be more profound than those using traditional discursive pedagogy alone.

Whether or not this is because of psychological effects (such as the opening up of different neural pathways) is a matter for further scientific research; however, it is clear – in some cases at least – that this approach can encourage radical changes in students’ behaviour and language. If nothing else, students can appreciate that such
creative approaches to HE teaching transcend the limited transactional relationships characterizing the “banking” system of education, denounced as counter to the goal of transformation by Freire (1970).

The developmental work addressed in this paper has highlighted areas requiring further investigation. Of particular concern, having demonstrated that creativity is anathema to a minority of students, further work is required to identify ways to enable them to engage in whole-class discussions prompted by creative activities. Follow-up work is needed to explore the extent to which transformations elicited by these sessions are sustained in students’ practice on placement (something that can be investigated in their reflective recordings, for example). I also hope to develop further iterations of the teaching practice detailed here, to undertake further evaluations that will help me to refine my teaching practice, and to produce further findings and resources than might be beneficial to other community educators working in HE.

References


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