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Abstract

The central theme of this paper is about providing opportunities for the participants to discuss sensitive issues in a safe environment with the researcher and group actively listening and making meaning from their creative efforts.

It introduces a creative research method used to provide a medium for adults to discuss a sensitive issue. The participants took part in focus groups and also created craft based models as a means to share their thoughts and feelings. Creating and describing the model provided a safe distance and took pressure off the creators, it also led to rich, deep data as participants were able to share thoughts and emotions without reticence. The sensitive issue used as an example in this paper was mental health as it affected teaching and learning.

The whole process of making the model and the subsequent discussion was recorded. The conversation during the creative process and the reaction of the group to the model were also considered as data and the researcher drew all this together into a narrative which encapsulated the process. Meaning making in such a constructed way can be subject to bias but a reflexive approach and being an outsider researcher for all focus groups reduced these limitations. This approach to data handling added depth and made the creative process accessible whilst unpicking metaphors and making explicit links to relevant theory.

Analysis of the narratives provided themes which related to the thoughts and feelings of the participants about how mental health impacts on teaching and learning. The teacher trainees all considered the stigma still associated with this sensitive topic and commented on the barrier to learning that this could present. The group all acknowledged a lack of awareness and training to deal with this particular barrier and sought awareness raising that was targeted to teacher trainees and the needs of adult learners.

Key words; Creative method, Social science research. Model making, Craft, Narrative

Introduction

This paper looks at the benefits and challenges of using a creative method of data generation in social science research. It shares the findings of the final strand of a research project into the perspectives of Further Education (FE) pre-service teacher trainees in three Universities in England around mental health awareness and how mental health impacts teaching and learning. The data produced is being utilized here as an example of the method used but the over-arching focus of the paper is around employing creativity in research. The research question for teacher trainees preparing to work with adults in English, FE settings was: 'how do mental health issues affect teaching and learning?'

Background to the study

The full project considered the perceptions of staff and students about mental health and the need for mental health awareness-raising for teacher trainees preparing to teach in the lifelong learning sector. The work drew on theory around whole school approaches to mental health (Nind and Weare, (2011), Prever (2006), Rothi et al (2008)) and the work of Bostock, Kitt and Kitt (2014) who looked specifically at teacher trainees and awareness raising. This research added to the field of knowledge by postulating that there are three reasons for mental health awareness for teacher trainees. 1. Students and staff present with diagnosed or undiagnosed mental health conditions in practice. 2. The process of education can create or exacerbate current mental health issues. 3. Staff need to be aware of their own mental health and wellbeing needs especially as they are working in a stressful environment.

The research was designed to firstly test the awareness of staff and trainees on Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) programmes across three Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in England; two in the north west and one in the Midlands and so the initial strand of the research comprised an awareness-testing questionnaire, which was administered online to both staff and students. Following on from this, staff teaching on PGCE programmes were interviewed by the researcher on an individual basis and asked about: their perceptions of teaching students with mental health issues; sending students out on placement when a disclosure had been made and managing own conditions or working with colleagues dealing with mental health issues.

Bostock, Kitt and Kitt (2014) looked at awareness raising for trainees during their PGCE course and this informed the final, student-centred strand of the research, on which this paper is based. Focus group participants were all trainees on a one year PGCE programme and were preparing to teach in the Lifelong Learning sector. The focus groups were given the task of discussing their needs, concerns and awareness of mental health issues and the impact of these on teaching and learning. They were asked to produce craft models, which acted as a vehicle through which these discussions could take place.

Rationale for Focus Groups

The Pre- service FE teacher trainees had various levels of teaching experience but some students only had their placement teaching to draw upon for experiences of mental health. It was possible that participants, therefore, would not discuss their teaching experience but instead would draw on personal

experience (of mental health issues) or that of family and friends. The topic of the research was acknowledged to be sensitive. The first and second stages of the overall research project had shown the stigma that is still experienced around issues of wellbeing so finding a suitable method through which to question trainees was difficult. Interviews were considered but rejected as being invasive and possibly too intense as the topic could lead to forced disclosures of mental health issues. Instead focus groups were used so that a collaborative and supportive approach could be taken. (Kitzinger 1994) The possibility within the focus group of some voices not being heard or being drowned out by stronger opinions led to the decision to facilitate everyone having an equal time to speak. Zeller (1993) argued that, 'the advantages of a focus group can be maximised through careful attention to research design issues.' (p129) The researcher still faced the difficulty of overcoming stigma and making the participants feel confident enough to speak out about a difficult subject. This was resolved by the use of a creative approach to data collection that involved the making of models from a wide selection of craft materials as a medium through which participants could describe their thoughts and opinions; each taking an equal turn. Participants were given thirty minutes to construct their models and then had to speak for just five minutes each about their creation. The time limits were set so that the research could be fitted into an hour and a half long session which gave everyone time to speak and then for discussions to follow each model. The PGCE curriculum being too full for extra input was reported in the staff interviews and so the focus group sessions needed to be short to fit in to the busy schedule of the participants.

It was considered that there was an additional benefit to using this method of research as student teachers could consider the method as something to be used in their own practice and research. This additional benefit was advertised when seeking participants for the focus groups.

Theoretical Underpinning

The model as data is unconventional and the method of analysis applied to such a visual form of information needed careful consideration. Pillow (2003, p.176) suggests that qualitative researchers need to show that they are: 'making visible, through reflexivity how we do the work of representation.' This type of research fits with work around creativity in the classroom and how this can be built into research methods. It also draws on literature from three separate fields which were used to create a method which allowed the question to be answered as fully as possible. 1) The models made were predominantly a creative form of **visual representation** in research. 2) The second strand of theory represented is the work on **metaphor** as the physical models created were representative of abstract thoughts and feelings. 3) Finally, because of the chosen method of data handling, the paper sits within the field of using **narrative in research**.

1. Visual Representation

Although the use of craft material in teaching is common place there is a gap in the literature regarding use of model making to conduct research. Using models in research therefore links most directly with the production of Lego models, for example, in Nerantzi and Despard's (2014) research into using models to aid reflection on an HE teacher training course. They chose model-making to allow

their Post Graduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP) students to start a professional, reflective, discussion with their tutor at the end of the module. Previously there was a reticence to begin these conversations and students reported feeling under pressure and subject to stress. The Lego models provided a starting point and students reflected that having the model to discuss led to them feeling 'more relaxed.' (p33) Observers noted that students were, 'having fun and some were absorbed in the task.' (p33) The notion of play was seen by the participants using the Lego as a positive and something which could be built into teaching with adults more widely. The research aim was to 'model innovative and contextualised assessment strategies' (p31) and this links with the added benefit to teacher trainees of experimenting with model making during the focus groups. Gauntlett and Horowitz (2006) also used Lego for modelling and postulated that, 'The use of models and narratives encourage experimental forms of expression and analysis that can help participants see and experience familiar situations in a new way.' (p90) McCusker (2014) and Purcell (2018) used Lego Serious Play and participants were encouraged to think of ways to embed this in their practice.

The making of a physical model to represent thoughts, feelings and understanding is summed up by Butler (2008) cited in Eaves (2014 p149) when he considered the benefits of creating a visual representation to 'increase voice and reflexivity and expand the possibilities of multiple, diverse realities and understandings.' The topic under discussion was abstract and complex and therefore the models were suitable vehicles to phenomenologically capture the views of the participants. This drew on the work of Abrahams and Ingram (2013) who used plasticine models made by students to represent their home selves and their student selves to capture the lived experience of students who lived at home whilst at university. Brookfield (2014) suggests that using more than one of your senses during an activity leads to 'depth' and 'complexity' which is not the case if using only one format. He terms this 'multi modal'.

2. Metaphor in research

It was unlikely that participants would feel confident about openly discussing a difficult topic and would be able to articulate their thoughts and feelings easily so the models offered an opportunity to create using speech and the finished product. Hamilton (2016) claims that, 'multimodality offered varied and nuanced ways for participants to represent and share metaphor.' (p.33) In the research reported on here the models were the main vehicle for sharing metaphors but the speech that accompanied the creation and the response of the group increased the richness of the data.

Saban (2004) agreed that metaphors are useful to describe ideas which are might be difficult to deal with using just language. She claims that 'metaphors facilitate the communication of concepts and ideas that are complex.' (p. 617) Mental health issues affecting teaching and learning was a complex and difficult topic for discussion and trainee teachers all created metaphors through their models that allowed them to share their experiences whilst simultaneously achieving an element of safety and distance because they were describing the model rather than directly discussing their thoughts and feelings.

McBain et al (2015) argue that, 'Creative work can also be a useful vehicle for taking a deeper look at ourselves and our practices by engaging with metaphor and symbol.' (p.2) so the use of craft materials and modelling is likely to allow participants to draw on their creativity. In this study it was clear that some practice was underpinned by fear and misconceptions and it seemed likely that the use of the model would allow this to surface as trainee teachers took that 'deeper look'.

Thomson (2016 p504) discusses metaphor as a means of gaining 'insight about attitudes and understanding' and this fitted well with the research aim which was to record the perspectives of teacher trainees around the question of how mental health issues might impact on teaching and learning. It was possible that through the metaphors expressed through the creation of the model that underlying misconceptions and prejudices would be unearthed. Zhao (2009 p 381) suggested that, '...metaphors lead to new forms of conceptual insight'. To reach this insight it was necessary to draw out the meanings of the metaphors created in each model and then to add details from the group response to give a full picture. A narrative was created for each model which was a means of looking at what was said, what the model meant and the group's response.

3.Narrative in research

The creation of narratives drew on the work of Caulley (2008) who called for an approach to writing up qualitative reports which he claimed would allow a more imaginative approach to data to be introduced. His notion was that such an approach allowed the writer to, 'inject him/herself into the narrative.' With the creation of the narratives around each model the researcher sought to create a comprehensive account of the model making focus group data whilst acknowledging that the narrative included the voice of the researcher and could be judged as being constructed. Miller and Paola (2004 p6) considered the possibility of writing 'creative non-fiction through the creation of scenes' and Mann and Warr (2016) drew on the notion of synthesising diverse qualitative data to explain the local worlds of early school leavers. Following on from this research it was thought that the bringing together of what had been said and the reactions of the group created a scene around each model would deepen the richness of the data from the focus group.

The model making technique used in the focus groups mirrored the making of Sandboxes (Mannay, 2016) which was used to aid adult participants to share their thoughts and feelings. The participants in Mannay's research used model characters and artefacts and placed them in a sand box to allow them to describe abstract notions and emotions. The activity created a sense of distance as the participants were describing the scene they had created rather than directly articulating their thoughts and ideas. This sense of distance was very important for this research because it focused on such a sensitive issue although Mannay et al (2017) stress that the rationale for using sand boxes was to draw out more information and that, 'the introduction of creative approaches allowed more time for reflection and engagement, enabled participant-led discussions, shifted the focus of the interviews beyond the perceptions of the research teams, and broadened out the field of inquiry'. (p7)

Methodology

The overall methodology of the research used a phenomenological approach to capture the voices, thoughts and opinions of the participants about their own experiences and those of their learners with regard to mental health.

Positionality

The researcher conducting this study was employed by one of the HEIs but not as a teacher of any of the participants and not part of the department in which the PGCE course is managed. Connections to the other HEIs was through making contact with an interested member of staff, in each one, who then facilitated access to students on the PGCE programmes. Experience in working in mental health hospitals before moving into a career in teaching had sparked an interest and managing the mental health of students and colleagues in a long teaching career led to questions about whether awareness raising was needed and if so whether it could be targeted to trainee teachers to prepare them for practice. Experience in managing disclosures and sign posting help and advice meant that sessions following the focus groups could be offered to ensure that everyone in the focus groups was supported appropriately.

Sample groups

Each focus group consisted of 6 members who had self-selected to participate following the initial survey. The groups were predominantly (30/36) made up of female participants which is representative of the lifelong learning sector. Ages ranged from 24 to 56 and experience in teaching was very varied. The whole model making process was recorded and the words of the creator of each model were transcribed. Comments from other group members were also analysed as their reaction to the model was considered as important data. No analysis was carried out in terms of the demographics of the sample. All participants were given pseudonyms and no identifying features of the HEIs were used. All data were stored securely. Ethical approval was sought and granted from the University of Sheffield's ethics committee. Participants were included on the basis of informed consent and were able to withdraw at any point.

Why Model Making

The model making strand discussed here was purely qualitative and the method for data generation was specifically chosen to meet the needs of the participants and to protect them from any negative effects whilst encouraging discussion around an emotive issue. Innovative, arts based creative methods in focus group methodology have been identified by Kara (2015) as helpful in such circumstances. Mannay et al (2017) considered that 'Creative forms of data can engender a more nuanced understanding' (p 15) and this was a benefit of this form of data generation.

When the groups came together rules were set up and participants all had to agree that any disclosures made would be treated with empathy and in confidence and that all opinions stated would be accepted as equal. Materials were available highlighting resources for support and, as discussed in the positionality statement

one to one discussions were timetabled for any participant needing additional input.

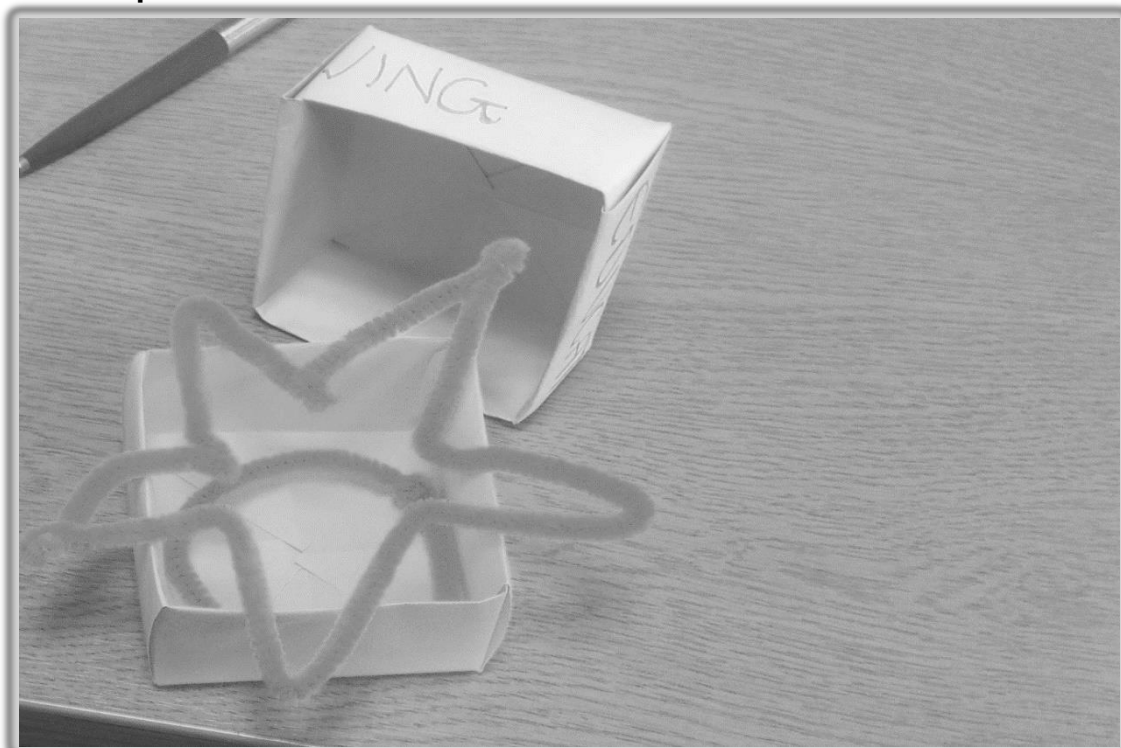
Most participants were excited and keen to start making models but when faced with the craft materials, and the agreed, thirty-minute, deadline they became less sure of their ability. There were some participants who worried about their level of creative talent and felt under pressure when faced with an alternative method of expression. Examples of past models were shared and everyone was reminded that there was no assessment or judgement being made Harvey and Harvey (2012) looked at creative teaching in lifelong learning and considered that environmental conditions needed to be met to be successful in integrating creativity. One of their conditions was the 'capacity to live with uncertainty' (p2). This was a consideration for the research method chosen as the participants were faced with the uncertainty around what was expected and how they could share their views and opinions through a craft based model.

Data from the model-making focus groups were twofold. The models created were the first consideration and the words surrounding these models during the presentations added to the understanding of the visual phenomenon. The presentations were transcribed from the video footage but it was felt that this left out some depth of explanation which had been shared during the model making process and the response to the model which added a richer understanding of the thoughts and feelings of the participants. To analyse the data from the models in full therefore a narrative was constructed for each one which allowed for reflection and revisiting of the video footage and the models themselves to be sure that the meaning was captured as accurately as possible. The narratives were, of course, a construction of the researcher and were open to criticism for not accurately representing the voice of the student teacher. Construction of a narrative was considered, however, to provide a richer source of data than just the description of the model as often participants made disclosures and discussed best practice as they were creating. Caulley (2008) suggested that a narrative approach is one way to make qualitative reports, 'less boring' and he suggests using fiction techniques to write non-fiction' (p.424)

Data from the model making groups were deep and diverse; participants described the physical model that they had made and this always led to more data around feelings and perceptions. James and Brookfield (2014) suggest that the benefit of using imagination and being creative in teaching and learning is that students are using different senses when they use different modalities and that this always leads to 'depth and complexity' (p4)

The data produced in the form of these narratives was then fed into NVIVO to allow for a closer analysis of the thematic basis of the models. To elucidate the usefulness of this approach on the following page there is a sample of a model made and the accompanying narrative.

An example of a narrative



The chosen example reports on a very simple model which showed a small, cardboard box with a fitting lid with the words, 'learning environment' printed around the outside edge. The box was open and lying on top of the box and not fitting in was a twisted, pipe cleaner 'learner'.

Imogen's Narrative

The box is a simple representation of learning. The box represents education and the tangle of pipe cleaners represents a learner with complexities which are not all visible on the surface. If you are a learner, without any difficulties, you can fit perfectly into the box but this learner has mental health issues which are represented by the jumbled nature of the model and the teacher can try to force the learner to fit in but it is clearly impossible. Imogen (a pseudonym) describes the people who fit perfectly as 'happy' and their learning journey is 'easy' and 'smooth'. The learner depicted here however can only access parts of learning which come into contact with the surface area inside the box. The bits sticking out at the side represent missed opportunities and because of the spiral curriculum, once missed some of this information can never be revisited, and the gaps are there permanently. This easy model makes many points simultaneously and visually. The need to make learners conform is the first point being made as we try to make all learners fit one size of box. This links to a medical model of disability (Barnes, Mercer and Shakespeare, 1999) because the focus is on trying to 'fix' the

learner and seeing the disability / difference as an issue/ problem for the learner. If the mental health issue was approached using a social model of disability the focus would be on offering a range of learning environments to meet the needs of individuals. In this version the teacher is unable to repackage the learning into a container that fits the learner and this is what personalised learning would look like. There is also a time element here as the learner is wedged into the box to make contact with whatever learning is possible but the bits missed are not made available in any other form. The box concept links with theory from Assessment For Learning (Black and Wiliam 2004) who described the 'Black Box' of the classroom as being somewhere that assessments take place in a pressurised and monitored environment. It can be seen from the model that this learner is not going to do well in assessments because they haven't had all the input that they need. The fact that the learner does not fit is obvious to everyone and this must increase their feelings of being 'other' and their discomfort. It is also more obvious to their peers that there is something different about this person and this can make forming relationships more difficult. If the 'box' was more accommodating, then the learner could fit alongside their peers and learn from them too. The peers might be empathetic as the difference is now amongst them rather than at a distance. This could link to the notion of exclusion and segregation of learners with difference and the box represents, at present, a medical model of disability as it is rigid and the learner does not fit. If the box was altered, then it could represent the social model where the learning has been adapted to meet the needs of the learner.

This example shows some of the benefits of the approach. All models made were recorded in this way and this enabled a full range of reactions and responses to be gathered. The data from the focus groups was detailed and rich and it can be seen from the example that there were opportunities for participants to link their thoughts to theory that they had covered in modules on their Initial Teacher Training course. The discussion around a medical model of disability came from reaction to the model and was thus only shared because of the construction of the narrative. These data were probably the most likely to have an impact on practice as everyone in the group saw that including the 'learner' was only possible if the 'learning environment' changed and this visual representation was challenging and thought provoking for all.

Findings and Discussion

The model making was successful as a means to generate data and all participants reported feelings of pride and achievement when discussing their models and the response of the group to their creations. The models allowed focus group participants to discuss their feelings and thoughts through the medium of describing the model and they described this as having a 'safety net' and 'not feeling judged' for their input.

The topic for the models was mental health and teaching and learning and the most common response was the mention of stigma and fear. This was the case even when a desire to help was stated. The research involved the fields of both health and education. This multidisciplinary aspect was problematic and the model making provided a vehicle to allow discussion from both perspectives. Eaves (2014) considered that arts production 'blurs discipline boundaries.' (p149) and thus a creative approach was therefore ideal for these focus group participants. Looking at the models made as data links with research into the use of metaphor in educational research (Hamilton 2016). In the findings models represented

mental health in the form of barriers, muddled and complex creatures/ creations. The models used colour and shade to discuss dark and isolated states of minds and the colourful happy state to which everyone aspired. The materials used expressed the 'hard edges' of stress and difficulties and how teachers could soften those edges and provide comfort, safety and support. The focus group data fits with work on the power of metaphor as the model stands as a representation of what needs to be explained. (McBain 2015) Using a creative medium to make a model and then participants adding a commentary to discuss their creation allowed for additional depth and detail (Mannay et al 2017). This focus on reflection is wholly appropriate to the models made in the focus group which needed participants to reflect on their practice and / or experiences outside the classroom with mental health issues. Thomson (2016) draws on the work of Leary (2007) who considers that metaphors allow us to understand thoughts and preconceptions and they provide some insight into attitudes and understanding. Awareness raising is about dispelling myths and misconceptions and the need to eradicate stigma was at the heart of the model making process. The metaphors enabled participants to talk about fear and uncertainty through the model and this meant that they were not judged for any negative response.

In every group there were some fearful reactions and often teacher trainees spoke of concern that they would make things worse. These models were often based on the notion of permanent barriers and insurmountable obstacles to the teacher/ student relationship. Some models showed the range of mental health issues presenting in class and there was discussion around the fact that anyone can be affected. One creation looked at how the need to maintain positive wellbeing for teachers is often negatively affected by trying to deal with the many issues that learners needed help with. (McCallum et al 2017) This particular model was based on the teaching of a group of students seeking asylum who had specific needs. The group reaction to this was to remind the creator that her needs were also important and that she needed a work life balance. In every group the notion of breaking down barriers by building positive relationships, treating learners with positive regard and having empathy and understanding were built into models. There were many who used the metaphor of 'before and after' showing dark places where students felt alone and the light and colourful classroom when a positive relationship had been built. Many models showed the complexity of thoughts/ understanding around mental health. Individual students were portrayed as having jumbled, negative thought processes and teacher trainees portrayed themselves as separate and not able to help.

An important element of this research was the consideration of 'Freedom' (McBain2015) which the participants felt in discussing their models and which added a feeling of safety and distance which were essential in not causing distress and possibly even a stigmatised response. This makes model making a positive choice of data generation method around many topics (Mannay 2016). All participants were able to create a model although some said that it was, 'difficult' and one wondered if creativity could be learned as he felt unsure about his abilities. This was also a factor in Purcell's (2018) research. Most models were simple but effective and reassurance was given at every stage of the process that there was no judgment or assessment being made of the model itself and that the group members just wanted to share the thoughts and feelings of the creator. A very useful, additional product of using model making in research was that it gave an opportunity to introduce the notion to teacher trainees who could then, in turn,

use it with their own learners in a variety of ways. The researcher has used models following this research in modules teaching: reflective practice and other abstract concepts, such as happiness, equality, inclusion and education.

Participants from this research and others who have attended model making workshops at PGCE conferences have reported finding multiple uses for models in their own teaching. Some have used models to help learners to express themselves and explain difficult ideas and have found that model making meets the needs of learners who prefer a hands on approach. Some teacher trainees have reported using the technique with learners on the autistic spectrum to encourage communication.

Conclusion

This paper adds to the fields of: creativity in research (James and Brookfield 2014, Kara 2015); mental health awareness raising (Nind and Weare, Weare, Rothi et al, Prever) and work on Play and using Model Making (Mannay 2016, Mannay et al 2017 Hinthorne and Schneider 2012).

The bringing together of the idea of model making for data construction and work on creating narratives in research adds a dimension which sets this work apart and allows the researcher to capture the lived experience of the participants and to share meaning making from their creative efforts alongside reactions from the group and the essence of discussions during the model making process. This thorough approach leads to rich data which enhanced the overall project and could be used in other fields.

This paper set out to consider the challenges and benefits of using creative data gathering techniques in research. Practical challenges were around space and resources and one participant worried about not being creative enough to make a model. Craft based models can be made using a range of specialist and every day materials which can be relatively inexpensive to acquire. The model making approach does call for space in which to create and sufficient time to create and discuss which needs to be timetabled effectively so that participants are able to produce an artefact with which they are pleased.

There were clear benefits to a creative approach, in that participants, through making the models, were then able to discuss abstract issues and emotions without becoming distressed. Purcell (2018 p 10) recorded that one participant felt that 'The Lego broke down some barriers in discussion and communication.' The models created a sense of safety and distance between the creator and the focus group which led to honest reflection and disclosures safe in the knowledge that there was no judgement being made (Mannay et al 2017). This was the rationale for choosing the method and it is open to various applications. In this instance as mental health issues affecting teaching and learning was the topic there were disclosures about conditions and feelings which might have made the participants feel reluctant to share or vulnerable but the models diverted attention from the speaker and open disclosures and discussions were possible.

Reflective practice was enhanced through the use of the models in line with the findings of Nerantzi and Despard (2014). Participants used their creations to reflect on critical incidents or just their emotional responses to their own /or their students' mental health issues.

The narratives created allowed for the synthesis of diverse qualitative data (Man and Warr 2016). If this synthesis had not happened, then data would have been

lost. The discussions happening whilst the models were being made and the response of the others in the focus group to the models was pertinent and the narratives allowed all of that to be succinctly encapsulated into a document which accompanied the model and explained it in the fullest terms possible.

Looking at model making as a research method allows suggestions for wider uses to be made. This technique could enhance learning across many curriculum areas. This was a very useful, additional by-product of using model making in research and it gave an opportunity to introduce the notion to teacher trainees who could then, in turn, use it with their own learners in a variety of ways. If a topic under discussion is abstract and complex, models are a suitable vehicle to phenomenologically capture the views of the participants. Butler (2008) discussed this creative approach as a means of dealing with diverse realities and understandings.

The findings of the full research project, of which this creative method was one strand, advocated mental health awareness-raising for pre-service and existing teachers which could help to provide information, resources and strategies for improving the wellbeing of learners and teachers.

The overwhelming contribution from the model making narratives to the research project was that trainee teachers needed awareness raising around mental health and some/ more strategies to help them to break down barriers to learning. All participants demonstrated a willingness to learn more and to be able to support learners with a range of diverse needs. The stigma which was mentioned in every focus group can only be eradicated by understanding and dispelling misconceptions. This creative method of data collection had very few challenges and many benefits which were evident during the sessions and have been making a positive impact on practice since because participants have used the method in their teaching across a wide range of curriculum areas and with students who have a variety of needs.

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