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The Creative Debut: privileging student voice

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Abstract

'The Critical Practitioner: Writing for the Media' is a final year unit in the recently revalidated BA (Hons) Contemporary Media Cultures. This unit comprises the curation of a digital portfolio of media writing, including a reflective essay centred on the writing process. This year (2015-16), the students published a collection titled 'The Creative Debut'. This case study reflects on the rationale for the students' self publishing project and on the success of adopting Freirean pedagogy to facilitate this; of privileging students' own personal narratives so that writing can be a transformative experience. It seeks to illustrate how privileging students' own life narratives is a vital form of critical multiculturalism.

Keywords

writing, cultural studies, pedagogical practice, Freire, critical multiculturalism

When a word is deprived of its dimension of action, reflection automatically suffers as well; and the word is changed into idle chatter, into verbalism, into an alienated and alienating "blah". It becomes an empty word, one which cannot denounce the world, for denunciation is impossible without a commitment to transform, and there is no transformation without action. (Freire, 2000, p.87)

'The Critical Practitioner: Writing for the Media' is a final year unit on the recently revalidated BA (Hons) Contemporary Media Cultures (London College of Communication) that brings together critical and creative practice. Academic reflection is combined with many forms of on-line writing; blogs, reviews, travel writing, manifestos. Students create a digital portfolio with a chosen theme, including a range of pieces and a reflective essay on their creative process. This case study examines the pedagogical necessity of privileging students' unique voices and lived experiences.

Kieron Devlin's article in the previous issue of *Spark* (2016) asks whether the academic essay is becoming a fossil through lack of authorial voice.

This question about how students can use "my opinion" is repeated each year with every fresh cohort. It depends on how they understand "opinion", so I usually shift the emphasis towards the word "argument". But the response still knocks the shine off their egos. (Devlin, 2016, p.35)

Devlin has touched on an important point; the academic voice is limited in scope without personal reflection. Personal narratives are devalued by the constraints of the traditional academic essay as the academic tone which has been traditionally advocated in universities

switches the active verb to the passive; taking the 'I' out of academic writing. The 'Writing for the Media' unit challenges the academic 'I' and requires students to reflect on their own narratives, their writing journey and the juxtaposition of this with the academic framework. Asking students to be academic, reflexive and personal, this unit engages with what Freire calls 'praxis' (2000). This praxis is both reflection and action directed at the structure to be transformed - in this case, education and the authority of the academic voice.

Within the unit, students are required to submit three pieces of critical media writing with a shared theme. A further essay is intended to ground the portfolio in critical analysis and reflection. This essay is written in the first person and requires students to engage in critical reflexive practice, questioning the assumptions around their chosen area, their inspirations and their motivations. The idea is to tether creative work to solid analytic practice, so as to enable students to recognise that their personal narrative and what they offer as practitioners, are valid and valuable. Cultural studies, as a subject area, is always necessarily 'outward-looking' and one of the intended outcomes of this unit is to enable students to develop confidence in their cultural position. In this way, we engage in critical multiculturalism. The field of cultural studies recognises that the production of representations of the social constitutes a virtual monopoly of the intellectual (Bourdieu, 1993, p.37). Because the academic voice is so entrenched in ascribed knowledge and invested in education as an institution, and because the perspectives of dominant groups permeate cultural and institutional norms, students have to reclaim their power as valid authors by recognising the value of their life narratives. By encouraging students to self-direct through a variety of topics and formats they are supported and allowed to become critical practitioners.

Consumerism, migration, racial and national identity, sexuality and music were just some of the topics covered in this final unit. These topics were explored through reviews, poetry, stories, blogs and letters to editors in which students began to acknowledge the importance of their personal cultural influences and take pride in their unique critical stance. Critical self-awareness was enhanced as they began to find their own question. Students learned that, as Devlin writes, 'not only does removing the "I" from a piece of writing not guarantee objectivity, neither does it make for better prose' (2016, p.36). They also came to understand that personal narratives have a place in academic writing, especially when reflection on the process is part of the brief. Students began to reflect on the link between lived experiences and the politics of culture by analysing the complex ways in which the authority of the academic 'objective' passive has become standardised, engaging in a highly reflexive questioning of assumptions around education, authorial voice and the value of subjective opinion. The assumptions implicit to cultural and institutional norms were unpacked during this process, as students assessed the dissonance between academic knowledge and their diverse cultural backgrounds. They recognised that having confidence and self-efficacy involves developing self-belief in order to be able to respond positively to the unique challenges faced when working in the creative industries, particularly within the rapidly developing field of media writing.

In the latter stages of the unit, after several taught sessions and practical writing workshops, students began to engage in the process of submitting reviews, articles and letters to publications. Emotions were stirred when some were accepted and others declined. The students formed a unique writing community that was mutually supportive and encouraging. This process became a matter of intense scrutiny among students, encouraging lively debates around the value of publishing and the judgement inherent in the selection process. The students recognised that publishing is tethered to a form of cultural capital and that their

own work should be valued and appreciated, as it articulates unique life experiences and unique subject positions, validating their personal narratives through cultural expression. Recognising this as a significant aspect of student-empowerment – what Freire might call the essence of education as the practice of freedom (2000) – the course team suggested that the students produce and print their own publication, comprising a selection of pieces from their portfolios and encouraged them to self-manage this as a practical project. The wider Media and Cultural Studies teaching team, recognises the diverse forms of cultural capital and need to engage with what Freire terms ‘dialogic action’ (2000) and duly provided the financial support required to print *The Creative Debut* in-house. Seeing this as an opportunity for students not just to see their work in print, but to reclaim some of the authority from the academic institutional realm for themselves (as legitimate authors), the course leader recognised this as an important pedagogical issue. Contributions were welcomed in any of the formats used for portfolio submissions. Students self-selected an editor, a submission manager and a launch co-ordinator. The collection included a selection of essays, blogs, letters, manifestos and pieces of creative fiction, written by ten authors, covering topics including race, religion, urban youth culture, homelessness and immigration. The resulting publication was a multifaceted collection that examines the myriad experiences, hopes and concerns of contemporary life from non-academic and non-normative perspectives.

The case study presented by *The Creative Debut* project, illustrates how cultural studies as a field of enquiry is uniquely placed to engage in critical multiculturalism; to create what Freire termed dialogical learning and in some way, address unequal power relations within education through the articulation of unique and varied life narratives. Encouraging students to self-publish in this way enabled them to be truly critical practitioners.

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Biography

Dr Susan Flynn is an associate lecturer in Media Communications and Contemporary Media Cultures at London College of Communication, specialising in screen studies, cultural surveillance, diversity and critical multiculturalism. She received her MA and PhD from University College Dublin where she taught at the Equality Studies Centre. Susan is co-editor of the upcoming *Spaces of Surveillance, States and Selves* (Palgrave Macmillan 2017) and leads the ongoing ‘Other Voices’ project, which is involved in critical pedagogy and multiculturalism.