Reflective Blog

<u>December</u>

In the ever-changing, globalized world in which we live, in a country where almost a third have a higher education qualification (Office for National Statistics, 2023), higher education plays a key instrumental role in shaping future societies and helping equip the future leaders, scientist and working practitioners, with the necessary skills to be able to effectively tackle the challenges, and solve the problems, of the modern world.

Historically, higher education institutions have been stuck in a rigid mindset of disciplinary thinking, which come with their own signature pedagogies (Shulman, 2005) and ways of conducting teaching, learning and research. As someone who came from a disciplinary background in philosophy, this module provided me with the opportunity to critically reflect on the pedagogy of my own discipline (Manathunga et al 2006). Within philosophy, teaching and learning activities generally follow a prescribed format. Students will engage in an asynchronous critical reading of a pre-set philosophy paper or book chapter. They will then attend a lecture, which will usually be non-interactive, either in person, or online. They will attend a seminar, where they will be expected to engage in a philosophical discussion with their peers on the topic and on the reading. Finally, they will be summatively assessed, generally through the form of a pre-set written essay based on one of the topics covered on the module.

As I learned during this month, these 'signature' pedagogies, as Lee Shulman describes them, are essential for understanding the nature of higher education and the development of higher education practitioners. (Shulman, 2005). He distinguishes between three dimensions of signature pedagogies: surface structure, deep structure, and implicit structure, with the surface structure being the observable teaching and learning acts, the deep structure being the underlying assumptions about how knowledge is imparted and the implicit structure relating to the moral dimension of skills and attitudes within the discipline. In my experience of the PGA, and in working in higher education with people from a variety of different disciplines, the variance in relation to implicit structure between disciplines is minimal. However, surface and deep structure do vary considerably between disciplines within higher education. As a philosophy instructor, I have a good degree of comfort in the surface and deep dimensions of the signature pedagogy of philosophy. I prepare lectures and seminars, and do so with the implicit understanding that this approach is effective for the transmission of philosophical knowledge and the development of philosophical skill, which broadly cover the learning outcomes on philosophy modules. For the students, they will also have the comfort in that they generally know what will be expected of them in each module. They will develop their skills in critical reading, essay writing and philosophical argument, and will know that the preparation and learning activities will be the same on each module.

However, this month, through reading, discussions with the PGA community, and teaching in an interdisciplinary context in the Institute of Advanced Teaching and Learning, I have questioned the signature pedagogies of my discipline and made changes to my approach to teaching. For example, after reading Sander *et al*'s paper on the benefits of using student presentations as a method of learning (2002), I utilised this approach as a teaching activity in my teaching on an IATL module, incorporating it with groupwork, as I felt this would be an effective teaching method for the interdisciplinary cohort.

January

In January, my learning journey was heavily influenced by the book chapter Transdisciplinary Approach to Postgraduate Research Education: Challenges and Strategies by Barbara Hawkins (2017). In this chapter, Hawkins identifies a problem in higher education. On the one hand, she sets out a convincing argument that transdisciplinary approaches are the best way to address issues in contemporary society. On the other hand, she critiques university institutions and academia more broadly, for discouraging transdisciplinary research and for maintaining the disciplinary status quo.

Hawkin's chapter has been very influential to my thinking as a teaching practitioner. I have choices to make as part of my teaching practice. In my work in IATL, I have the opportunity to develop the next generation of researchers into an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach to research. These will be the students who drive change both through academia and through society as a whole, and so I began to develop my teaching practice with this motivation in mind.

My pedagogical practice this month has also been influenced by a chapter of a book I read by Paulo Freire (2007), where he looks at education's role in promoting social change, particularly in the face of neoliberal ideologies, and argues for a pedagogy which helps to foster political consciousness and critical thinking. Rather than training students to be effective workers, education should aim at empowering individuals to understand and to challenge oppressive structures. This text particularly struck me as it was such an effective combination of two of my areas of research interest- political philosophy and critical pedagogy.

What I took from this chapter, was the idea that we need a better critical understanding of the power structures of society, economic and social inequalities and policies. I reflected on conversations I had had in the module about the role of interdisciplinarity in enabling and empowering active citizens through helping them develop the tools of critical thinking and thinking beyond disciplinary boundaries.

As I had the opportunity to co-convene a module in IATL, I decided to utilise my reflections from my learning journey and to build the curriculum in a way in which promotes transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary research, and developing students' critical thinking skills to help cultivate socially conscious and empowered citizens. I did this through incorporating a multidisciplinary and multi-modal reading list, and building the curriculum around the needs of the cohort, encouraging interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary thinking wherever appropriate, as well as incorporating and critically discussing critical pedagogy readings within the module. Following this, as a teaching team, we provided the students with the opportunity to be assessed through the use of Student-Devised Assessments (SDAs), for which I explicitly required students to tackle in a transdisciplinary or interdisciplinary way. Providing the support for the students to be able to do this well was vital, helped students to be able to think as researchers who aren't confined by the boundaries of disciplines, and are thus better equipped for those who want to shape the future of research, meeting some of the challenges set out by Hawkins.

<u>February</u>

I've been developing my interdisciplinary pedagogical knowledge through researching and writing a co-authored paper on interdisciplinary pedagogy to be submitted in the interdisciplinary science journal *Nature*. In the paper we identify the a problem of dehumanisation within higher education practices, caused by a variety of factors including neoliberal discourses within the marketisation of higher education. Given the insights of the readings and discussions in throughout the PGA, an appropriate way of reversing some of this dehumanisation is to rehumanise the curriculum through interdisciplinarity. In the paper we identify IATL's use of Student Devised Assessments as a way of humanising assessment as part of rehumanising higher educational curricula.

The process of writing this paper has had a significant impact on my teaching practice. It has provided a theoretical underpinning for aspects of my assessment practice that I utilise in IATL. For example, having read the literature in interdisciplinary assessment, I understand how the SDA fits in with Boix Minsilla et al assessment framework (2009), which says interdisciplinary work should be assessed on disciplinary grounding, integration and purpose. In addition, the assessment should include opportunities to showcase 'interdisciplinary skills' (Christhop, 2015). As someone with limited experience of teaching and particularly *assessing* in an interdisciplinary context, the academic literature in interdisciplinary pedagogy and discussions in the among peers on the course have been invaluable and allowed me to incorporate elements of the theory into the practice. For example, in helping students to develop their SDAs, I challenge them to develop their critical thinking through, for example challenge their stereotypes about other disciplines (Manathunga et al 2006, p. 374).

Finally, in this month I have been developing a case study based on the some of my interests from the PGA, along with my teaching experience in IATL. I am an interdisciplinary teaching practitioner. However, because of my limited skillset and limited disciplinary background (with its own signature pedagogies), I will always be limited by my own experiences in terms of what I can bring to my teaching practice. This is applicable across all interdisciplinary teaching contexts, but it is less of a problem in disciplinary teaching, where it can be expected that the teaching practitioner is an 'expert' in the disciplinary subject. So given the importance of interdisciplinarity to education and to society, but given the limitations of the teaching practitioners, I have been looking at the use of *collaborative* teaching as an effective method of interdisciplinary teaching. By utilising teaching practitioners from different disciplinary backgrounds, each practitioner's deficits in disciplinary specific knowledge can be somewhat compensated by having someone from another discipline to fill those gaps. Within my own teaching practice, I co-convened the module Reinventing Education with another teaching practitioner, who was an expert in education studies. However, we developed the module, which was about rethinking education from its roots, and involved considerable philosophical work. We were therefore able to successfully develop an interdisciplinary module based on our own disciplinary expertise, while modelling to the students effective interdisciplinary practice.

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