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Article

Creating a learning space: Using experiential learning and creativity in the teaching and learning of social pedagogy

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Abstract

This reflective account has been co-developed, produced and written by students and the teaching staff on the BA Hons Social Pedagogy, Advocacy, and Participation degree at the University of Central Lancashire. The account focuses on the use of experiential and creative teaching methods utilised on the course and how this enhances the understanding and application of social pedagogy. The article critically analyses the link between how the social pedagogical theories, concepts and methods are taught and the advancement of the student and lecturer understanding of this field of study. In developing this reflective account, the current student cohort and lecturers were given the opportunity to participate in a collaborative reflection across all years of the course. They discussed their own learning journey and how this has shaped development of creativity within their practice. During the discussions around the use of blended, experiential learning and creativity, three key themes emerged: (1) the importance of the environment on creativity and learning; (2) the importance of relationships, creativity and learning; and (3) Haltung, psychological safety and creativity. In the reflections on what they have learned so far, the students and lecturers hope to inspire other education providers to use creative and experiential teaching methods within their courses. The authors feel that the reflective account contains useful information around the learning that has taken place over the last three years of this course being taught.

Keywords: social pedagogy; creativity; learning; experiential; relationships; imagination; teaching; education; space; environment

Social pedagogy

Application of theory to practice is central to social pedagogy and, as an ethical orientation, it also has many connections to the social work tradition and education. Charfe and Gardner (2019) stated that it can be argued that social work sets out the ‘what’ that needs to happen in practice, and social pedagogy helps to focus in more depth on the ‘how’. Due to the applied and relational nature of social pedagogy, experiential learning and application of theory in practice was embedded into the BA Honours Social Pedagogy, Advocacy, and Participation degree. It was seen as essential that as lecturers and educators we were able to use a social pedagogical approach in our teaching. With advice, assistance and utilising the experience from ThemPra in using experiential learning methods, this approach is used in the majority of the taught sessions. The aim of this is to support the understanding of social pedagogical philosophy and theory. It is also an important aspect in aiding the development of an individual’s professional practice; creativity supports the progress of self-efficacy and self-confidence and gives individuals the confidence to try new ways of working or new activities without having to be an expert at them.

Robinson (2001) emphasised the difference between imagination and creativity and states that they are different from one another. On the one hand, he defined imagination as being able to think about what’s not there, being able to step out of the here and now and see things differently. Creativity, on the other hand, involves doing something – actions not thoughts – and so Robinson (2001) stated that creativity is applied imagination.

Experiential learning is also used to assist students in feeling confident about using applied theory and creative tools in their own practice to work in a more relational manner. Storø (2013) wrote that creativity and creative activities are an important place where social pedagogues can support people to learn new skills and knowledge that they can apply to other parts of their lives. This can include learning co-operation and sharing, self-assertion, self-control and being able to take turns, as well as empathy (cited in Storø, 2013).

As the first group of third-year students were undertaking their final modules of study it felt timely to co-reflect on our journey so far and consider what we have learned. We convened three gatherings where we planned to undertake reflective conversations with any of the degree students who wanted to attend. Participatory methods were used in line with social pedagogical principles of working alongside people (Petrie, 2011) but also with regards to the Freire (1996) principles of the co-production of knowledge. Reflective conversations (Reason and Bradbury, 2001) were identified as the most appropriate participatory method as they allow equity among all the authors. The use of mind-map tools (Buzan, 2018) supported radiant and reflective thinking due to the link between an increase in cortical skills to support clarity and the organisation of reflective thinking. The focus was on critical reflection and discussion around learning with the objective of writing a reflective account. The first two meetings were well attended with 12 students from across the three years of the degree programme as well as three lecturers, with a gender mix across the whole group. The final meeting was attended by all the authors who had been given the task to write up the reflective conversations. The use of a mind map and the reflective framework ‘Head, Heart and Hands’ (Charfe and Gardner, 2019) helped to focus the reflective conversations and three key themes emerged from our discussions. These were: (1) the importance of the environment on creativity and learning; (2) the importance of relationships, creativity and learning; and (3) Haltung, psychological safety and creativity.

Experiential learning and social pedagogy

Before discussing the key themes that emerged from the reflective conversations, it is worthwhile to set out a brief explanation of what we mean by experiential learning and the link to creativity. Creativity is at the heart of experiential learning, which is often defined as the process of learning through experience and is sometimes called ‘hands-on learning’ (Smith, 2010). It is different and distinct from rote or didactic learning, in which the learner plays a comparatively passive role and learns by repetition of the information being given out by the teacher. Experiential learning considers the individual learning process and is concerned with making theory and learning more concrete and related to the students and their social context (Storø, 2013). In his book *Out of our minds: Learning to be creative*, Robinson (2001)

set out the importance of recognising that everybody learns in different ways, that education should be about holistic learning, and that education should be creative so that it engages people in being curious. The more curious we are the more we learn [Robinson \(2001\)](#) argued and this is not done by sitting people in classrooms and just 'lecturing' them.

Supporting students to develop and utilise critical thinking, questioning, reflection and curiosity, as well as developing creative practice, links to the 'Head, Heart and Hands' theory set out by Pestalozzi ([Charfe and Gardner, 2019](#)). Pestalozzi understood the need for a holistic approach to education and to develop a 'child's heart, mind and body in harmonious unity' ([Eichsteller et al., 2014](#), p. 34). Setting an environment where the position of a lecturer being the expert is removed and the students are encouraged to think about their own knowledge is fundamental to an experiential learning approach. The students 'own' their learning and are able to access knowledge that will help them apply learning to practice.

Creative teaching is underpinned by [Freire's \(1996\)](#) discourse around education not being about the 'transfer knowledge but to create the possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge' (p. 30). So creating an environment where students are able to be curious and experimental, and moves away from right or wrong answers, is an important part of experiential learning. As an ethical orientation to practice, it is equally important that social pedagogy underpins the approach to how the subject is taught and that students experience it in every aspect of their learning environment. Reflective space is also central to supporting understanding and the knowledge being gained by both the students and lecturers ([Charfe and Gardner, 2019](#)). The co-production and writing of this reflective account have been part of this process and have given students and lecturers an opportunity to explore the importance of creativity in supporting their understanding of social pedagogy. Creativity is also linked to a humanistic value base and, as [Jackson and Burgess \(2005\)](#) suggested, creativity comes through the use of self, genuine warmth and empathy in practice, which clearly connects with the definition of social pedagogy ([ThemPra, 2017](#)).

The importance of environment on creativity and learning

When exploring the responses regarding students' and lecturers' views on the differences between creative learning and traditional teaching methods, several themes were identified that were consistent throughout everyone's replies. The first of these themes was the impact that creative learning has on the learning environment and vice versa. Students and lecturers felt that creative learning levelled the playing field, creating an atmosphere that democratised the relationships between students and lecturers, which in turn encouraged dialogue and made people feel more relaxed. The environment cultivated when using creativity as part of the teaching led to some people feeling able to bring creative learning into different environments, such as their practice and also into their personal lives. In traditional learning environments students felt they were supposed to take a passive role and to listen in silence, whereas in this new environment they felt they were actively engaging.

The next recurring topic was the positive impact that creative learning had on the development of relationships within the learning environment. Students and lecturers shared how creative learning tapped into feelings more than traditional learning and cultivated a sense of trust. In turn, this led to students considering themselves to be more able to open up and talk to others about their feelings and develop positive relationships. This mirrors the relational aspect of social pedagogical practice and the importance of being able to build and maintain supportive and caring relationships which are also genuine, meaningful and have a clear purpose ([Charfe and Gardner, 2019](#)). These reflections linked to the heart aspect of Pestalozzi's 'Head, Heart and Hands' theory can also be made ([Eichsteller et al., 2014](#), p. 35).

Another theme linked to the environment and creativity was how creative learning made it more possible for different learning styles to be accommodated, as it was more adaptable and organic than traditional learning styles. This led to people feeling their learning had been enhanced. Creative learning and activities used on the course, such as drama, music, dance, crafts and poetry, had also given people more resources that they were able to apply to their practice. On the other hand, people who found traditional learning styles more favourable considered creative learning to be an uncomfortable experience. It was recognised that the social pedagogical creative approach to teaching would not suit everybody but that due to the relationships and the ability to use 'challenge by choice', people were able to stay within

their learning zone (Senninger, 2000, cited in Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2017; Charfe and Gardner, 2019). This is an important point that will be discussed later in the article with regards to psychological safety.

The next identified theme was that people felt more engaged in creative learning as opposed to traditional teaching. This increased engagement led to learning becoming more purposeful and meaningful. In traditional teaching, some students felt that the experience was more like witnessing the teaching as they were encouraged to be passive by sitting quietly and listening instead of engaging in the teaching experience. This passivity led to many students feeling that they would just 'switch off' within traditional teaching. Passivity within people's experiences of traditional education can be linked to Freire's (1996) banking concept, whereby students are viewed as empty vessels without knowledge that depend on a knowledgeable educator to fill them with information of that educator's choosing. The students were able to link this to their own practice and understanding of the importance of recognising the inherent potential within all human beings to develop self-efficacy (Eichsteller et al., 2014). This ties in to the key focus of social pedagogical practice being about working alongside people (Petrie, 2011) and not becoming a professional who uses the power of their professional status to do things 'to' people (Simpson, 2019).

There was a general consensus that the environment and spaces used as part of the teaching played an important part in increasing understanding and creativity. By using spaces within and outside the university creatively, such as outdoor space and visits to a local museum, participants were helped to put into perspective the theories and concepts, and gained a sense of 'living' the experience. The environment that appears to have had the most profound effect on this learning process has been the week-long residential held at various outdoor activity centres. The most recent was held at the Waddecar Scout Activity Centre in the Forest of Bowland on the River Brock. The residential is the setting for the teaching of the communication module for the first- and second-year students, with the third-years having the option to attend if they wish.

This year, for the first time, all three years of social pedagogy students were brought together, some of whom had only met a couple of times prior to this. The students and lecturers viewed it as a great opportunity to experience inhabiting a shared living space, communal facilities and learning about the importance of communication and interpersonal skills. Each year group took responsibility for cooking an evening meal for everybody, creating opportunities for conversation, reflection and the strengthening of relationships. You could be excused for thinking this does not sound like the ideal setting for a positive learning experience but it provided a reflective opportunity to consider things such as how young people or older adults might feel entering a residential setting.

The creative use of outdoor spaces on the residential enabled communication theories to make sense, rather than the traditional 'death by PowerPoint'. For example, the activity of Shepherd and Sheep, in which a student has to guide a group of blindfolded sheep (students!) into a pen, takes communication to whole different level. Students were able to reflect on communication skills such as messages passed from one person to another through touch, gesture and expressions, as well as words (Petrie, 2011). These activities also supported reflection on the fact that communication requires a great deal of thought, consideration and creativity. This is especially so when considering many different variables, such as disabilities, the environment and our relationships with one another, all of which may affect how a person communicates. How do you safely herd blindfolded sheep that are spread across a field into a pen? As it turns out you give them numbers and clear, direct instructions. A PowerPoint presentation can give you the theories, but not the physical experience and responsibility of having to think for yourself, while implementing your ideas under pressure in an environment that may not be ideal. Creativity and hands-on experience were identified as being invaluable to the learning process when working with people; you wouldn't expect engineers, architects, joiners, nurses or doctors to learn from lectures and seminars alone.

Relationships and creative learning

Eichsteller and Holthoff (2011) described relationships as being at the heart of social pedagogical practice. Authentic, personal relationships are fundamental in social pedagogy as they support the development of human potential by allowing a pedagogue to understand an individual's needs, and work alongside them in a way that works for them. The relationship-based approach of social pedagogy allows

a pedagogue to be a whole person, not just a pair of hands (Charfe and Gardner, 2019; Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2011). When analysing responses from the students and staff members on the degree, the importance of the positive relationships that have formed and grown organically were identified as an important theme. People talked about how these relationships have played such a key role in creating a positive experience from studying the degree. One student commented that they 'feel so lucky to have met such a fantastic group of likeminded people, who I work so well with and have genuine relationships with'.

Several students highlighted a theme of feeling connected and equal with students and lecturers alike. One commented on how 'our relationships are about us all learning from each other not just students learning from lecturers. There is an equality that leads to more confidence and less anxiety.' Meanwhile, another student reported that 'people have commented on entering our lectures that they were unable to distinguish students from lecturers.' This was seen as an important feature.

Lecturers described how they had never before taught on a course where they feel so connected with the students and how important creative teaching methods have been in forming relationships. It allows them to bring their whole self to work and for people to get to know them as a person, which is a clear relational aspect of social pedagogical practice (Charfe and Gardner, 2019). Another comment from lecturers was 'At first I was the "teacher" with loads of knowledge and practice experience that I had to pass on to students. Now my role is to create an environment for learning where we all learn alongside each other and I bring in my knowledge when it's appropriate.' Students described how lecturers being involved in activities alongside them has been beneficial in creating an equal environment with no power dynamic and has helped to form positive relationships with the lecturers. One student commented 'I like how there's next to no power imbalance between students and lecturers, and I genuinely see my lecturers like friends more than lecturers! This is so helpful for me, because I can approach lecturers and be comfortable to be completely open and honest about questions and concerns.' These comments highlight the importance of participation as a core part of social pedagogy and the importance of understanding how the issue of power and the need to balance this works between the students and lecturers (Simpson, 2019).

Many of the responses from lecturers and students indicate how there has been a positive correlation between these beneficial relationships and creativity. A student stated how, before starting the course, some group members felt uncomfortable at the thought of being creative. However, once these genuine friendships began to form and people felt more comfortable in each other's company, these anxieties began to fade. Senninger (2000, cited in Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2017) described the Learning Zone Model, a concept used in social pedagogy to describe the ideal frame of mind for learning. There are three sections in the Learning Zone Model (see also Charfe and Gardner, 2019). The Comfort Zone is where an individual feels safe in a familiar situation. Individuals are unlikely to learn anything new in this zone; however, it is important because it provides a space to return to and be able to reflect on learning. The next section of the model is the Learning Zone, the ideal zone in which to learn, where an individual can push boundaries and feel able to discover new experiences and develop themselves. The final zone on the model is the Panic Zone. Someone who is in this zone will not be able to learn anything new due to high levels of fear (Charfe and Gardner, 2019). It is important to realise that all individuals are different, so the boundaries between the zones are different for everyone, and can differ from day to day. When starting the course, some individuals in the group may have entered the Panic Zone when asked to be creative. However, it has been noted in the responses that the creative nature of social pedagogy has been fundamental in forming the organic bond between everybody on the course, as it has made it easier to open up and express ourselves to members of the group. One person commented: 'I feel like I'm in a safe space to be as creative as I like. Doesn't matter if it's good or bad, nobody will judge.' This suggests that these positive relationships have helped people to venture into the Learning Zone (Senninger, 2000, cited in Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2017) and try creative activities that they would not have attempted otherwise. Developing an understanding of the emotional stability required to do something new or challenging directly links to social pedagogy in practice. The pedagogue must be tuned in to the boundaries of a person's Learning Zone for positive change to be possible.

One student mentioned when describing how these relationships make it easier to be creative that 'It's not about how pretty the picture is but the relationships we were forming and the teachings we are

learning at the same time that are important.’ Meanwhile, another added ‘the creative methods we use often require us to move outside of our Comfort Zone and take risks. It is daring to take the risks that deepens the relationship as the sense of community and support grows.’ [Rothuizen and Harbo \(2017\)](#) described the importance of meaningful belonging, which stems from the beliefs of philosophers John Locke (1632–1704) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–79), who suggested that every individual has unique potential and that predetermining their options and trying to shape them through institutions can prevent them from meeting their potential. Throughout studying the Social Pedagogy degree, the lectures have been very person-centred and students have been provided with the space to use in whichever way works for them in order to meet their potential. This space that has been granted has allowed relationships to form naturally through working together. One student mentioned that relationships on the course are open and very understanding. They went on to describe the relationships on the course as ‘feeling like a family’. This demonstrates the level of comfort and safety there is in the space that is provided on the course.

Once again, the residential and the communication module were highlighted as being significant. Occupying a shared space with a group of people, many of whom don’t know each other, can be really daunting for some. However, many comments and thoughts given by the group demonstrate how this experience has made the group feel closer, and one student described how it made them feel ‘more comfortable’. To conclude the last residential, everyone in the group stood in a circle and took it in turns to reflect on the relationships that had been built and the learning that had taken place throughout the time away. Once someone finished talking, they threw a ball of string to members across the circle while still holding onto the string themselves, so it ultimately a web was made once everyone had spoken. This enabled a visualisation of all the connections and relationships in the group on the last day of the residential. A student commented:

It was such a powerful exercise in closing the residential and reflecting on the relationships that had been built and the learning that had taken place. Letting go of the string was also very powerful as it was rolled up into one piece, symbolising an established tight-knit community. The exercise enabled people to be very honest and also focused on the diamond model and seeing the positive assets that people bring to a group.

Haltung, psychological safety and creativity

Imagination is about having the ability to see things differently and creativity is the dynamic energy that translates those ideas into action ([Robinson, 2001](#)). Interventions in people’s lives should be focused on positive change for the future, which requires both imagination and creativity. The social pedagogue must understand their own Haltung, imagination and creativity to effectively work alongside people ([Charfe and Gardner, 2019](#)). Many comments confirmed that an effective way to develop that understanding is to be immersed in creative learning methods.

A final theme to emerge from the reflective conversations with students was that of the importance of psychological safety and the importance of developing this to support learning. A technique used on the course to help foster this was by capturing the initial feelings of students and lecturers at the beginning of some modules through ‘Hopes and Fears’ activities. These begin using anonymised responses and as the sessions progress individuals have the opportunity to ‘own’ and reflect as they choose. This information supports the group’s awareness of aspirations and anxieties in the learning space and so supports the safety of the space. It also provides a valuable emotional baseline to frame a reflective evaluation of the learning experience at the end of the module. The module entitled ‘Imagination and the Common Third’ is focused on experiential creative activities, including drama, music, sound walks, singing, dance, knitting and sculpture. The most commonly shared fear was ‘I don’t want to look stupid’. This will trigger open discussion about individual perceptions of their own creativity, which is linked closely to people’s creative identity. People are quick to share how they are not creative and this is followed by their inability to draw, dance and so on. Some students embrace their creative identity and they have the challenge of reinterpreting the purpose and impact of creativity as it relates to social pedagogy in practice. The module

aims to break down this narrow view of creativity and to support students to experience and experiment in a safe learning environment.

It was important, therefore, to consider how individuals could be supported to feel safe in their learning environment. Edmondson (1999) suggested a clear link between psychological safety and creativity. In his research, he found that individuals are motivated to innovate when the interpersonal atmosphere is safe for risk endeavours. Gong et al. (2012) referred to the term *participative safety*, which highlights the importance of information sharing and trust. Attending to these preconditions is a key part of the induction period of the degree for students but is also important for the teaching team. The formation of ground rules is common practice in many university programmes as students and lecturers strive to negotiate notions of choice and responsibility in an adult learning environment. From a social pedagogical perspective, however, in which the use of self is central to practice, the bonds of those occupying the learning space has to be more genuine and meaningful.

Alongside the induction, the residential provides another valuable opportunity to enhance the psychological safety of students and lecturers. At this point the students meet different cohorts and work and share the same space for a few days. The students have experience of lecturers joining in all the learning activities as equals on the residential and throughout the course. Reflections come from every person, regardless of role, and this helps to establish a genuine, non-hierarchical learning partnership. This demonstrates how the course design, from day one, aims to reflect a social pedagogical approach. It reinforces the learning opportunities as the content is subject-relevant, but also the learning methodology mirrors the social pedagogue in practice (Simpson, 2019). For this to be achieved, the lecturers have to be genuine and openly share their values with the group. As mentioned, this can lead to the learning space feeling so safe that at times students can find it a challenge to maintain their personal boundaries. The 3Ps concept (Jappe, 2010) is key to supporting students to work out the appropriate boundaries when this occurs and can provide another learning opportunity. It is vital that the group have shared boundaries and that the lecturer has the skills to maintain an emotionally safe and appropriate learning environment. The following case example helps demonstrate this.

Case example: Movement and dance lecture

Ruth Spencer, a lecturer from the BA (Hons) Dance Performance and Teaching course, joined the module to facilitate a half-day session focused on movement and dance. The session was scheduled to take place in the usual classroom, which was a narrow, small room with no windows and not much floor space. The room seemed inappropriate and there was discussion about trying to find a bigger space. It wasn't possible and on the day Ruth arrived, the group had to move the tables out of the way. Ruth began by chatting to everyone and gently moved into an activity where we all sat on chairs in a circle and passed a small bean bag around. This silent activity powerfully demonstrated the information we gained from each transaction. Some passed the bag with great care as if it was fragile; others threw it carelessly. Next we walked around the room with character and purpose and discussed what we understood about each other's style of movement. The power of visual observation and the information we process about people's movement was already becoming very clear.

Ruth skilfully moved from sitting and chatting to standing and moving. The notion of feeling stupid did not appear to be present. By the end of the morning we were body sculpting using props and costumes to create images and emotions. This involved us making physical contact and giving and taking weight with one another. Ruth had adeptly guided us through the morning to achieve creativity in movement we had not imagined. She gradually enabled closer but always safe touch between individuals who would not have felt comfortable at the beginning of the session. The room we had thought would be cramped in fact supported the session as it was familiar and had no windows. On reflection the students commented they had feared going into a large dance studio with a wall of mirrors.

The reflections following this session were insightful and individuals described feeling liberated and connecting with childhood play. The process of building trust and taking things gradually to build confidence was seen as being parallel to the process of a social pedagogue beginning to work alongside an individual or a family. The structure of the session was facilitated by Ruth, while the response, creativity

and learning were the responsibilities of each person in the room. If we talk about it now, each person remembers what happened and how they felt.

Conclusion

From a lecturer's point of view there are many benefits to using creativity and experiential learning, which have been highlighted throughout the article in the reflections and comments from both students and the teaching team. There also needs to be an honest acknowledgment that this teaching method is time-consuming and takes a lot of planning and sometimes resources. You are unable to just turn up to a lecture and rely on PowerPoint presentations. It also takes a great deal of emotional resilience and confidence. There is a level of emotional connectedness, set out within the boundaries of the 3Ps (Jappe, 2010) that lecturers have to truly understand and be prepared to undertake with their students. This again takes energy and emotional resilience and support from other members of the teaching team is very important. It also takes confidence to step out of the standard way of teaching and answer to the colleagues around you who might question and not understand this method of teaching. But in saying all of this, it has been our experience that the benefits by far outweigh the negatives and that the student experience is much more positive. There has not been sufficient space to explore in greater detail the importance of creative teaching methods and activities in developing professional skills for practice. This could be the focus of a future article in its own right. However, it has been our experience that the creative approaches taken have helped enhance the students' skills, knowledge and aptitude for professional practice. We have seen students gaining higher grades for similar topics covered in other courses, and there is a deeper level of understanding and better feedback from students. Lessons are creative, engaging and fun! Using creativity and experiential learning also helps participants to develop their confidence, which translates into improved teaching practice. One of the most interesting points is that this approach to teaching is much more freeing as a lecturer; you don't have to be the expert all the time. It is much more about creating a safe environment for exploration of a topic or theory and sharing knowledge. Again, there has not been space in the article to expand on how important this is in supporting students to learn about conflict and tensions within groups, all of which has occurred even with the strong bonds identified by the students. The safe environment supports them to develop the ability to work as an effective member of a team while also dealing with tension, conflict and difference of opinions – all key skills needed for effective professional practice. We also acknowledge that this approach is not suited to everybody; some students need the structure and rigidity of lecture-based lessons, as do some lecturers. So before taking on this approach you need to question how you view creativity and if this fits with your Haltung; can you actually give up power and operate on a more equal footing with your students and colleagues? If so, then enjoy the exploration and journey you are about to start.

Declarations and conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work.

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