A REFLECTIVE CONVERSATION by the #creativeHE organisers

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This contribution is written in a dialogic form and its content emerged naturally through an asynchronous conversation captured in Google docs as a result of an invitation by the Commissioning Editor to provide a retrospective perspective on #creativeHE to conclude this issue of the magazine.

**Chrissi:** The open course #creativeHE was created in parallel with the running of the Creativity for Learning module which was approved in 2014 and offered since January 2015. It has been a fascinating experience so far and each time it is so different. Some colleagues are coming back regularly and others keep joining us.

In January 2017 we offered #creativeHE as a 5-day block course for colleagues studying towards academic credits at Manchester Metropolitan University in a open cross-institutional collaboration with London Metropolitan University, the University of Northampton, the University of Macedonia, Lifewide Education and the Creative Academic. For me this was an opportunity to break free and connect with a diverse group of individuals from different universities and walks of life and therefore there was the potential to enrich their learning experience. This was the plan...

Sandra from London Metropolitan University and I where the organisers this time round. *I asked Sandra, ‘what made you say yes’?!

**Sandra:** One thing that made me say yes was the belief that you should always say yes to that which scares or unnerves you in some way. And what can be more scary than organising and running a course together with someone who you have not met in person? Scary, no? But also rather cool. Of course it’s not all about me (!) - the real pull was the opportunity to work with Chrissi on her inspirational - and oh so timely - creative project.

People approach the role or place or process of creativity in the UK HE context from different perspectives - from our own #creativeHE community a range of intersecting drives are already emerging. Some want to devise a taxonomy or an ecology of creativity to disseminate, to scaffold understanding and make an academic case for the embedding more formally of creative practice. Some feel that creativity is a fundamental human aspect - related to ‘flow’ and to play - we are all Homo Ludens ([http://art.yale.edu/file_columns/0000/1474/homo_ludens_johan_huizinga_routledge_1949_.pdf](http://art.yale.edu/file_columns/0000/1474/homo_ludens_johan_huizinga_routledge_1949_.pdf)) rather than Homo Sapiens - denied of play we are denied our true humanity.

Some want to breathe new life and energy into university practice to counter top down micromanagement, to devise more vibrant pedagogy than that which emerges from managerialism and a target-driven academia... What I am particularly interested in is creativity as emancipatory practice - as a way of breaking ourselves free of the constraining bonds of traditional schooling. I see creative practice as a way of de-schooling ourselves ([http://thenewobserver.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/deschooling_society.pdf](http://thenewobserver.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/deschooling_society.pdf)) - and I see that creative practices in the classroom set our students free to think, experiment, explore - they become able to express themselves - and to see what they think and feel - and to take that further... I see happier, more confident students emerge from creative classrooms, students with self-efficacy engaging more successfully in active learning - who also then engage more successfully in more traditional academic pursuits: the academic reading, the research and the writing.
**Chrissi:** It’s very interesting what you say about the different perspective you see emerging through our #creativeHE community with a focus on creative practice as empowerment. I can sense this too and it is very interesting and encouraging as I often hear academics saying that they feel that they need permission to use creative approaches in their teaching and are afraid to try different things as they feel that they don’t have that permission. It is very sad, I feel, that many feel that way. I really hope that #creativeHE helps individuals to feel empowered and ready to act. To be brave and experiment with more creative approaches in their practice. I have seen this happening as a result of #creativeHE with colleagues who have joined us since January 2015 who have really embraced a new and perhaps more exciting way of teaching. **Do you feel that colleagues from your institution have also benefitted?** Sandra and if yes, in what way?

**Sandra:** Yes - I do - even if we are spreading slowly at the moment. Last year we ‘embedded’ #creativeHE into our Becoming an Educationalist: reading, writing, inquiry (#becomingeducational) first year undergraduate module - with accompanying face-to-face Play with Paper and Paint ‘workshops’ - we also embedded creative practice into our Peer Mentoring in Practice second year module - which supports the Becoming one.

**Play with Paper and Paint** got busier over the year - especially in our July Staff Development Festival where we had a room full of people happily making and painting and playing... and where of course we tried to raise the profile of #creativeHE - and get more people to sign up this year. **Becoming** was our first year academic skills/HE Orientation type course - designed at the module spec stage with reading, writing and reflecting in mind - and with much emphasis placed on plagiarism. An ‘okay’ brief - but a bit unambitious - and a bit negative: “Hello new students - well you’re all a bit rubbish aren’t you, we’ll have to fix you - and what’s more - we think you’re all about to cheat like crazy!” Assignments = three learning logs - one research project - one essay. Well - we looked at that and thought: “You’re a bit rubbish aren’t you? Our students are capable of MUCH MORE than that.” So we built in simulations and roles plays - and playing, painting and making - and textmapping - and freewriting - with music - and real research - lots of multimodality and digital stuff - culminating in student performances. Assessment = three PROJECTS, real research - essay... AND...

We told the students we were wrapping *Becoming* around #creativeHE to see what happened when you did something like that. We also pointed out that one of the texts that we were using for textmapping ([http://www.textmapping.org/scrolls.html](http://www.textmapping.org/scrolls.html)) and notemaking was Norman Jackson’s *Creativity in HE* paper - quietly making the links between theory and theorised practice and what we were actually doing in our classroom. The students loved the textmapping and the play that this approach to reading embodied. If you watch the first couple of minutes of the video on this site: [http://learning.londonmet.ac.uk/epacks/posters-digital2/](http://learning.londonmet.ac.uk/epacks/posters-digital2/) - you will see reading undertaken like community quiltmaking: discursive, engaged, dialogic and fun. Students are making collages, cutting out illustrative pictures, colouring in key points - and talking and laughing as they engage with a complex academic text. When we told Norman what they had done with his work - he sent a message back to the class - wishing he’d been with them - and congratulating them on their achievements. We thought that that was a great way to bring learning and academia itself truly alive for our students...

Next steps: Together the three (of us) tutors involved in those modules are now writing about those experiences of playful teaching and learning. Students from the *Becoming* module are involved with a University Teaching Fellowship project - developing inspirational resources for our staff and students. As for spreading the influence of #creativeHE ever wider, I am drawing it to the attention of various Groups at the University that are investigating Improving Student Outcomes, urging them to offer it as CPD for staff. Within my own Unit: Centre for Professional and Educational Development, I am arguing that #creativeHE could seed the Negotiated Study Module on our MALTHE (MA in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education).

**Chrissi,** I am wondering how is #creativeHE impacting on real practice at MMU? **Have you any concrete examples of fresh classroom practice developed as a result of #creativeHE - or that has fed into #creativeHE?**
Chrissi: Many of the colleagues who have participated in #creativeHE are also registered as formal students on a range of modules linked to our Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching or the Masters in Higher Education. Part of their assessment is to reflect on their practice and identify opportunities for the implementation of more creative approaches but with a purpose. In some cases, colleagues are asked to implement an innovation. They have a range of examples in #creativeHE, combined with the assessment linked to a specific module, and this leads to specific changes in practice. It is always an amazing experience to explore colleagues’ portfolios. You can really see and feel their creative development and how they are becoming more confident innovators, taking more risks.

When I developed the Creativity for Learning module and opened it up for it to become #creativeHE, I wanted to lay the foundations for a community to form where colleagues would be free to explore and play with new and novel to them ideas and concepts around learning and teaching. When I developed the course, I had no idea that it would work or how. But I am pleased that the playful approach paid off and that the Playground model, this is how I call what we do in #creativeHE, really provides for many the space for exploration and discovery and actually try things they would never dream of doing before. Just yesterday, I met one of my current colleagues on a module who also participates in #creativeHE and she told me that the storymaking activity really opened her eyes to new possibilities for engaging students in reading academic articles. I have struggled with this before and have tried a wide range of approaches but I can see how this media-rich story-making approach could actually work with students, undergraduate and postgraduate.

Beyond the changes to teaching practice, I have also seen colleagues from my institution, adopting a more scholarly approach to learning and teaching and sharing their work more widely through conference contributions and academic publications. Many of them have actually contributed to the Creative Academic Magazine encouraged by me and Prof. Norman Jackson who leads the Creative Academic network and it has been a wonderful opportunity for them to develop their academic writing skills and find a creative outlet for their work. Also, some colleagues have presented their work around creativity through our internal learning and teaching conferences and in-house publications.

In a recent webinar with colleagues from my institution who are working towards FLEX [Creativity for learning] credits, a colleague asked me if my feedback on their work would be done in a creative way too... I smiled. I guess I need to think about this and come up with something that would make my colleagues smile as well ;) I have used audio and video in the past, but I think, there is now an opportunity to explore more novel ideas.

Mmm...

Sandra: I am wondering what you are taking away from our January #creativeHE iteration and what we could try next time, in May?

Sandra: I take many valuable things away from the January iteration... One thing is that you, Chrissi, are a very generous course collaborator with a real desire to share the ‘power’. It was unnerving to be asked to have real input into something that was already so perfectly formed - but liberating - so thank you. It reminds me that we can bring Freire and Illich alive in our own practice - they are not dry theory - commentators off to the side - urging utopian but unobtainable practice: #creativeHE and creative practice can act as midwife to de-schooling and co-learning. Perhaps this is something to think about for the May iteration; we might want to suggest that whilst people are absolutely welcome to participate singly - we gently urge them to find a study partner at
their institution with whom to discuss the activities and compare notes. A second thought is that we seed the idea that participants organise a F2F workshop whilst #creativeHE runs, along the lines of our Play with Paper and Paint perhaps.

Key takeaways for me include the variety of induction activities that were shared. I loved the waterbottle one - and of course Paul Kleiman’s tale of charabancs to the seaside - installation building and recording - and the setting up of an instant Exhibition. Well that was just breathtaking. I thought the boxes exercise stunning - the creativity exhibited dazzled - what explosions of colour and ideas! Like you I was really impressed with the StoryBirding (https://storybird.com/) of the reading. Participants produced some wonderful work - and it is already something that I want to embed into my own practice. It was so good, I do not want to take it away - but I would (also?) like to get our participants making textscrolls (http://www.textmapping.org/scrolls.html) and experimenting with different ways of using them with their students. A possible Maker activity to include could be to collect a bunch of clean recyclables - water bottles, coffee lids, jars - plus sugar paper and paper clips, felt tips and old magazines... and either a) select from them to make a revision game for your students or b) offer them to your students and set them the challenge of making a revision game for your own course? And finally - as for offering feedback to your students in a more creative way: read their work and produce a reflective collage on an A5 index card - they have to analyse that to determine your opinion and grade!

Chrissi: I like dreaming.... How did you know Sandra? :) It was wonderful to read your ideas, literally, about the next iteration especially as some of them echo things I have been thinking about and dreaming about. Isn’t this strange?

Also, recently I shared a short survey with past #creativeHE participants and I think, one of them mentioned that they would like participants to lead more, so maybe this could be something to consider also for the next iteration. It is, linked to your ideas around co-learning I feel and what you suggest around finding a buddy perhaps and organising something locally? Maybe we could, instead of us coming up with the daily activities, to find two past participants who would like to work with us in shaping the week? Do you think this could work? I am looking forward to discussing this with you.

I have really enjoyed seeing this community growing and individuals coming back to participate again. Each time it is of course different and I think the nature of the activities but also what participants bring create unique learning instances for all of us.

It was a pleasure to work with you Sandra and I know how hard it is to do this on top of a busy day. Clear and frequent communication has helped us coordinate activities together with the team of facilitators that also were part of the team Norman, Nikos and Ale. We thank them for their valuable contributions during the week.

Image credits
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