What are we doing this for? Engaging in Pedagogy Through the use of Exit Slips

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ABSTRACT---*This study reveals the use of action research to inform pedagogy, within a Maltese post-secondary institution. This exercise was conducted using exit slips with three first year Systems of Knowledge classes. Content analysis confirmed that students used exit slips to convey what they learned, problems, anxieties, and the use of technology in the classroom. The results of the exit slips also informed the author on changes that needed to be done within the context of these, as well as, other classes. This reflective element was perceived as being vital in the process of action research. Although this study is a primary investigation in the use of exit slips, it demonstrates their usefulness and addresses their limitations.*

INTRODUCTION

The aims of the paper may be succinctly expressed as to deepen understanding of the complexities of learning, and identify, implement, and evaluate strategies for the improvement of learning opportunities in the Maltese Further Education (FE) context, by the use of exit slips in a Maltese post-secondary institution (PSI). There is an urgent need for an engaging debate surrounding the nature of pedagogy in FE.

This problem, perceived at the local level, may be viewed as a reflection of educational discourse found elsewhere, especially in the U.K. and the U.S.A. Coffield [1], expresses it brilliantly,

In all the plans to put learners first, to invest in learning, to widen participation, to set targets, to develop skills, to open access, to raise standards, and to develop a national framework of qualifications, there is no mention of a theory (or theories) of learning to drive the whole project. It is as though there existed in the UK such a widespread understanding of, and agreement about, the processes of learning and teaching that comment was thought superfluous. The omission is serious and, if not corrected, could prove fatal to the enterprise.

Improving the quality of lecturers requires professional development to be personalised, and tailored to individual needs, so that it is made meaningful. It should encompass all aspects of self-improvement activity, such as reading research papers and blogs, watching colleagues teach, working with a coach and engaging in lesson study, not just attending a generic formal training course. Furthermore, it should start with the self.

It is in this spirit that I, in this paper, have sought to deepen my understanding of pedagogical processes, as opposed to didactic processes, in the classroom. As a Systems of Knowledge (SOK) lecturer for the last 25 years, I have witnessed several policy initiatives affecting FE, by numerous Maltese governments. While insulating oneself

from policy change(s) might seem a worthwhile coping strategy, close examination demonstrates the ineffectiveness of such an attitude. This is one of the main reasons that I resorted to action research as an approach to the above mentioned problem.

Systems of Knowledge is a compulsory course of study that 'A' level students need to enter the University of Malta. It is an interdisciplinary course of study designed to [2]:

1. Develop a body of knowledge within a Euro-Mediterranean context;
2. Instil an awareness and application of values within particular contexts (e.g. historical);
3. Develop an interdisciplinary perspective of problems facing humanity;
4. Develop skills to transform knowledge into practice;
5. Acquire critical and creative thinking;
6. Develop sensitivity and sensibility towards different political and social contexts.

This paper starts off with a literature review aimed at teasing out the different strands of thought surrounding action research, and pedagogy in FE. A brief methods section explicates the main paradigm behind the use of exit slips, followed by the results and discussion sections. Some tentative recommendations are encompassed in the conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Action research

Action research [3] (AR), can be defined as a process whereby, in a given problem area, research is carried out to:

- specify the problem;
- identify a plan of action;
- monitor the effectiveness of the action, and
- identify what has been learned and how this should be communicated.

AR involves "key actors", a commitment to action and change, the development of skills and processes, high levels of performance, innovation, and an original contribution to knowledge. AR requires meaningful action that brings forth changes within organizational and individual behaviours, based on systematic data collection and analysis. Besides, AR shifts the centre of attention from the researcher to the problem being addressed. In AR the role of practitioner and researcher overlap.

Historically, educational AR is the brainchild of Collier [4] and Lewin [5], and was advocated as a means of emancipatory change within schools, and at the same time ensuring the involvement of students, teachers, and parents.

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Such change can take many forms. For example, Dick [6] reflects on the dialectical relationship between teaching about action research and engaging in action research within education, noting how monitoring and reflection led to better classroom practice. AR also includes reflection, leading to a possible paradigm shift in the way researchers look at themselves, society, and their place within it.

AR may therefore be perceived as generating knowledge that is both valid and vital to the welfare of individuals, communities, and for the advancement of larger-scale democratic social change. As such AR is based on socially constructed knowledge and therefore challenges the value-free and objective positivistic tradition. This may seem as a challenge to the dominant 'scholarly gaze' in FE lecturers where academic practice and research focuses on objectivity [7].

Inasmuch as AR has grown considerably over the past few decades [8], problems may arise in its adoption. For example, [9] suggested that teachers "were attracted to research that was relevant and enabled them to do their tasks more effectively and/or more efficiently", meaning that practical research seems to be preferred over other types of research, such as gender, racial, and religious discrimination [10]. In addition, AR as a basis of professional development [11], whilst becoming more popular, has also been criticized, as a means of managerial hegemony and top-down institutional change [12].

Pedagogy

Two dominant pedagogical paradigms have defined FE in England and elsewhere [13]: one cognitivist, one constructionist. The first concentrates on learning in vocational education and training (VET) as an induction model of skill socialisation and acquisition favoured by traditional educators. This discourse operates as a restricted code, bound up in a 'banking' model of learning [13] where the goal is to prepare trainees 'ready-made' for the workplace. This is the 'doxa' of FE pedagogy – the taken-for-granted relations of order that link the real world and the thought world, and so must be adhered to [14]. Official accounts – especially in prescriptive national training standards, and audit/inspection regimes – promote this view, and emphasise technical aspects of teaching.

Drawing on data gathered over a number of years in FE, it may be argued that learning consists of cognitive, practical, and communicative aspects [15]. Working within tourism courses, the authors state that, 'when students see literacy practices to be associated with their sense of who they are or who they want to become, they participate in them wholeheartedly.' [16]. This may be one way whereby student engagement may be enhanced.

SOK may be conceptualized as a form of liberal study, which encourages critical thinking. This rests well with Bernstein's conception of singular and regional modes of pedagogic discourse [17]. These forms of discourse are described as vertical, and are sites where knowledge may be created. However, the inclusion of certain skills and attitudes is akin to generic pedagogic discourse and is similar to the description of Key Skills in the UK [18].

METHODS

An exit slip is a question or prompt given by the lecturer to the student and is required for the student to complete before moving on to the next lesson. A side benefit is it incorporates writing into all the content areas being learnt in class. One of the ways to use an exit ticket is to align the question on your exit slip to your learning objectives for the day. By doing that I got a quick formative assessment and whether or not your lesson and learning objectives were successful. I then used that data to drive instruction in the next lesson. Additionally, I provided a prompt for students to ask questions after the lesson was over. In this way students became responsible for their own learning and asked review questions about what they didn't understand. The results were then shared in class. This provided a summary of the day's lesson and gave students confidence that their voice mattered.

In order to implement the task successfully, students were anonymously asked to complete exit slips by answering the following questions:

1. State three things you learnt during this lesson;
2. State one thing you didn't understand during this lesson;
3. Did the use of whiteboard/slides aid in learning?

Exit slips were collected immediately after each class. The lessons covered two specific topics, 'What is art?' and 'What are the purposes of art?' covering the following sub-topics:

1. Art as objects, self-expression, and developmental process;
2. Art creates beauty;
3. Art enhances the environment;
4. Art expresses religious beliefs;
5. Art reveals the truth about humanity;
6. Art may express chaos and harmony;
7. Art reflects social and cultural contexts;
8. Art may express fantasy.

I reacted to student exit cards in several ways. At times it was essential that I provided a thorough answer to certain questions, especially if it concerned fundamental concepts, such as the difference(s) between fine and applied art. Few problems involved definitions of words. In this case, the author encouraged students to use their mobile devices to search for different definitions. Some of these definitions were then written on the whiteboard and used as starting point for a brief classroom discussion. It also became apparent that students were giving descriptive rather than explanatory feedback. This problem was tackled by revising the exit slip to include only one item that was learnt, but to write a number of sentences in its regard.

Data collected (c. 3600 words) was analysed qualitatively using NVivo11, following the method outlined by Auerbach and Silverstein [19]. I familiarised myself with the data, building different codes as the different sets of data were collected. These codes were then sorted and unified resulting in different themes. In this fashion I distinguished between two major types of feedback associated with what

was learnt in the course of the lesson: descriptive and explanatory. Descriptive feedback stated items which were explicated in class, while explanatory feedback was more detailed and explained concepts revealed during the lesson.

RESULTS

Table 1 displays descriptive and explanatory feedback related to what was learnt. Most of the feedback was descriptive in nature (69.5%), and is reflected in all categories with the exception of 'art reflects social and cultural contexts'. The largest categories in terms of feedback were 'art as objects, self-expression, and

developmental process' (17.2%), and 'art may express harmony and chaos' (20.5%).

Descriptive feedback ranged between '*art associated with different forms*', '*art is a form of self-expression*', '*art enhances our environment*', and '*fantasy can be expressed through art*'. This contrasts with explanatory feedback: '*art can be expressed by a group of people*', '*the fact that there isn't one specific definition of art*', '*art reveals the truth through a lie – this was touching and true*', and '*I learnt that art is a popular medium where artists can challenge social norms and ideas that we presumed as conventional. I think this provocation to the norm is a great example for discussion*'.

	Descriptive	%	Explanatory	%	Total	%
Art as objects, self-expression, and developmental process	36	88	5	12	41	**17.2**
Art creates beauty	18	86	3	14	21	**8.8**
Art enhances the environment	14	56	11	44	25	**10.5**
Art expresses religious beliefs	15	71	6	29	21	**8.8**
Art reveals the truth	16	67	8	33	24	**10**
Art may express harmony and chaos	35	71	14	29	49	**20.5**
Art reflects social and cultural contexts	12	33	24	67	36	**15**
Art expresses fantasy	20	91	2	9	22	**9.2**
Total	**166**	**69.5**	**73**	**30.5**	**239**	**100**

Table 1: Students' descriptive and explanatory feedback in relation to what was learnt in class

Table 2 outlines students' feedback related to problems encountered during lesson time. The lack of response in this area should not be taken as a confirmation of understanding by students. Problems included, '*didn't understand how art creates chaos. Not sure if it means the work displays confusion, or whether the message is*

controversial' (concepts), '*what is the meaning of Warhol's Campbell's Soup Cans?*' (works of art), '*who was Wilfred Owen?*' (people), and '*what does the word bias mean as related to art?*' (words). However, the most interesting problems recorded by students concentrated on anxiety.

	Number	%
Anxiety	14	12.5
Concepts	81	72.3
People	3	2.7
Words	14	12.5
Total	**112**	**100**

Table 2: Students' feedback related to problems

Students took advantage of anonymity by exhibiting their outlook towards the SOK syllabus, the educational system, their fellow students, or whatever was bothering them at that specific time. Feedback included '*do we need to know the examples in detail for the exam?*', '*I did not understand the importance of this topic*', (SOK syllabus), '*this lesson is way too early for me*' (educational system), '*why is [name of student] so sick? ☹*' (their fellow students), and '*we're in second place ☹*' (referring to the football results the previous weekend).

DISCUSSION

The results make evident the general resemblance to other studies involving exit cards [20]. Most students did not elucidate what was meant by certain terms. For example, an exit card stating '*the purpose of art*' did not indicate whether the student actually learnt what the purpose of art is. It could be that the use of exit cards became tedious and wearisome [21]. The only category where students offered decisive explanatory feedback was 'Art reflects social and cultural contexts'. In certain cases the explanations offered confirmed that students became more aware of particular art forms, for example, '*I never realised that films could protest against injustice. I would like to watch such films*'. However, there is a clear restriction on the practicality as to whether exit slips actually display what students learn in class. This limitation was lessened by redesigning exit slips which required which requires just one item that was learned, but asked for more detail. Furthermore, future use of exit slips could clearly ask students to define or relate a concept learned to understand better what students actually learnt in the classroom.

Student exit slip answers show an interest in being heard and seen. Lecturers might have to adapt the exit slip to meet students' needs. Learners asked various questions, and experienced different reactions to works of art and concepts. Some comments were amusing and included emoticons. Others were more thoughtful, and tried to link SOK with other subjects they study.

A limitation of this study was that it focused on just three first year classes in the same context. Another limitation was that anonymity made it impossible to compare responses to demographic data and summative assessments. Furthermore, it may be more beneficial to use other types of pedagogical research in conjunction with AR.

CONCLUSION

The study delineated is an example of instructional innovation in a Maltese PSI and reveals the incorporation of AR principles within the ambit of pedagogical practice. They also exhibit the prospects and trials in this work towards participatory, educational methods based on systematic student feedback. Furthermore, changes in traditional didactic teaching need to be strengthened by wider educational reform in areas such as teaching methodologies, content reorientation, and in assessment.

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