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Breaking boundaries as writers and researchers, the challenges and rewards of completing an MA as a community of practice.

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Dedicated to Clive Lloyd, Captain of The West Indies Cricket Team, 1974 – 1985, who inspired us in our quest.

Abstract

This paper is a co-written paper by five postgraduate students at the University of Northampton and one lecturer who is also a PhD student at the University of Cambridge. In it we discuss how as a group of students we broke down barriers between ourselves as individuals to create a community of practice rather than a class. All of us are currently engaged in research that involves comparing aspects of education in the UK with another nation. In the case of five of the writers this is with the nation in which we grew up. We deliberately chose areas of study that were intertwined and negotiated our thesis titles with each other to ensure that the research would be mutually supportive. It has been this method of collective writing and of reflective data collection that has been particularly innovative and that we will be presenting in this paper. Although the individual dissertations will be submitted separately, this approach has enabled us to build emotional resilience, and to generate work of a greater depth than would otherwise have been possible. In this way this paper fits with the conference theme 'many paths, same goal'. The paper opens with an extended metaphor linking research to cricket and specifically to the great West Indian cricket captain Clive Lloyd. Metaphors can open up new ways of thinking as this one did for us.

Introduction and a metaphor

We decided to introduce this paper with an opening metaphor when we presented it at the 2015 Kaleidoscope Conference. The metaphor we chose was cricket and we referred specifically to the West Indies cricket team 1974-1985. We obviously do not hope to be one hundredth as great as they were nor is it a metaphor that we will use until it tests the tolerance of any reader. Indeed, our love with the game varies from the obsessive to the rather unfamiliar and so cricket appears in this paragraph alone. However, as an introductory concept we have found it useful. Cricket is unusual in that it is both a team game and an individual one. It is unique in its length and complexity: a loan batsman walks out onto the square as another departs, he may potentially be there for several days, he may be back in minutes and be sitting in the pavilion instead, for days, having very publicly 'failed'. The structure of the game itself makes the building of a team difficult. Competition within a team can be damaging but is always threatening to emerge. There is also a personal style possessed by each player that can threaten to pull a team apart. Whilst the other side of this coin is that in isolation some players can seem merely good but in combination brilliant. Clive Lloyd took a group of great players who had failed to win and led them to ten years of success. We do not know quite how he did it but somehow he created a team, while still allowing individual brilliance, he created a community that still valued the individual and individualism. This is our goal. It is informed by other writers too: Freire, Dewey, Wenger to name but a few but not least by Clive Lloyd.

Who we are and what we have done

In the spring of 2014 the University of Northampton made the decision to set up a full-time masters' in education programme primarily recruiting international students. We already had almost 300 part-time students on roll on various masters' level programmes but a full-time model would be a new innovation for us. Actually a better word could be re-launch, some years earlier and for a short period of time the University of Northampton had run such a course. However, in its new incarnation although the previous programme had been a success we did not want to start with any preconceptions of how it should look. The first cohort was just two students, another two joined one term later and another a term later still. Unusually we run intakes in every term. All but one of these students who designed, piloted and studied on this programme is present at this conference today, presenting this paper. Next year numbers seem likely to triple but this first intake will undoubtedly have shaped this course. One advantage of starting from the beginning was that we were unburdened by preconceptions or conventions. We therefore began with a series of questions and challenges and started a process to work together to see what an MA perhaps should look like. Questions that came to our minds included these:

- what is the function of ‘a lecturer’? Is it primarily a provider of knowledge, of critical thinking and other academic skills, of academic guidance, a provider of pastoral support, or even other roles?
- what is and should be the dynamic between those in a masters’ class in terms of designing and shaping the programme as well as learning on it?
- what is the role of deliberately created and implied competition at masters’ level? And in relation to this, what space is there for cooperation?
- as we are researching education as learners shouldn’t there be a breaking of boundaries between the research and the learning process and what are the boundaries of this?

Early discussions and reflections revealed a series of themes and although they are quite impressionistic, being based on the conversations of this small group, were to us of interest as we began to design this programme. These were as follows:

- despite a discourse especially in the West that teaching is a discursive process and not merely about the provision of knowledge to students, this is not reflected in many lecture room scenarios;
- that even when more dialogic forms of teaching are employed there is considerable power distance within the post graduate classroom (dia Lima, 2013);
- that lecturers are present in fixed blocks of time that do not relate to the times when students are ‘stuck’;
- that co-writing is still a problematic concept;
- that an MA is often a journey towards an academic world where co-writing is a familiar part of the process yet fears of plagiarism, desire for better grades and simply time can mean that it remains a marginal aspect of much masters’ level study.

These thoughts presented above are not meant to suggest that these can all be easily solved. Students may get ‘stuck’ at midnight, and lecturers deserve to have a work life balance. Equally delivering ideas and material from the front may at times be vital in order to ensure crucial concepts underpinning students’ later research are understood. However, this process of personal reflection on our expectations and desires for the programme accompanied by further discussion regarding our perceptions on our role as students and lecturers led to an innovative design inspired by the texts that we were reading as we studied. These included the me-searching process of arts based research, the dialogic and equalising ways of teaching of Freire (1970), and also by concepts framed within a discourse of becoming a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Thus as the design of this programme was reflected upon, developed and re-fashioned the processes of teaching, learning and researching became increasingly and deliberately blurred. In every case reflection upon our own learning experience on the MA informed the research for the thesis that each student is or was producing. Some aspects of the MA which we designed together as students and teachers which are particularly significant are as follows:

All the thesis titles that were chosen were designed with others in mind as well as ourselves. Certain key themes recur and these were discussed on many occasions, these ideas overlap and interconnect so that one person's reading became many people's reading. Among these common themes are: communities of practice (Wenger 1998), distributing leadership, dialogue, reducing power distance and reflecting on identity. We are all also co-readers as well as co-writers and in fact these two concepts cannot be dis-entwined. Through reading each other's work our writing progressively developed. One obvious response to this of course would be to ask - 'why is this different to merely being nice and supportive?'

It is in response to trying to answer this simple question that we discovered that the lecturer does have a role and in fact in time we discovered they had four specific and valuable roles. These four lecturer roles that we decided it was important for the lecturer to retain were as follows. Firstly, to provide access to ideas to later explore, in fact in the era of modern internet communication we found this to be more important than ever. We discovered that a lecturer who could present and say 'this matters' was still important in terms of setting ourselves upon the right path. It might even be that the specific idea suggested by the lecturer would be rejected but it would still enable students to start on a path of academic enquiry. Secondly, the lecturer was also important in modelling good academic practice, by which we mean the lecturer still had a role in saying - 'why don't you look here?' 'you could shape this like this?'. Thirdly, the lecturer has a vital role in terms of being an audience for work, one who could provide meaningful praise and criticism but also give a sense that - that thing that I have written has been read. And finally and very significantly they could facilitate this community and we come to this in the final paragraph below.

Our timetable that we devised is unique. In each term there will be eight two hour sessions but on top of this for three hours every week, including those remaining weeks when there are no other sessions, we simply work together sharing the space. There are short holidays at certain times but these are much shorter than usual academic conventions. People need privacy of course as well so we have decided three hours is enough. Of course many other universities have self-generated writing groups but this is more than that. This is a culture of lessons where lecturers and students work together, sometimes in companionable silence but equally often generating ideas and discussing issues. It has turned writing into a social and iterative process and has broken down the boundaries of power distance in the classroom. Below in the second part of this paper are our own personal stories related to the course that we designed.

Doris Adamu's story

I came to the UK on the 2nd May 2014 after gaining admission into the new MA education course. It has been a worthwhile journey, mostly exciting and always opening up my eyes to new knowledge, challenges and teaching methods. It was different in many ways from the study that I was used to, having done my undergraduate and a postgraduate diploma in

Nigeria before coming to Northampton. One way in which it was different was that I was given guidelines and skills rather than information. I had keen tutors who set high standards for us and were kind and exceptionally supportive but who encouraged me to study for myself. Looking back my first assignment seems rather weak and naive because I wasn't used to academic writing. For me at this stage: my references, structure and use of the right academic language was quite a challenge. However, with the support of my tutors, who we worked closely with and who never gave up on me, I developed a far more sophisticated writing style. I look back on this with pride because I was really challenged to work hard but most importantly I see the progress I have made so far.

Choosing my dissertation topic was another challenging task. Based on my experiences in Nigeria, I expected the supervisors to provide the topics for us but that wasn't the case, instead we were given the liberty to come up with our own research topic and after submitting a proposal which had to do with inclusive education in Nigeria, I decided to change topic and finally decided to write about teachers' perceptions regarding effective leadership styles. I particularly took interest in this topic after stumbling across a quote by the famous writer Chinua Achebe (1984). He said that, "there is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else...but leadership" (p.1) he added that the problem with Nigeria is simply the failure of leadership. So I wanted to explore this further. Starting this process was difficult, nevertheless, amidst the sleepless nights, long hours of research study, getting stuck and unstuck throughout this MA course, this is one experience I won't forget in a long time. I look back at our small MA group and I remember all those times we would come together and share ideas, providing support and encouragement for each other when it seemed impossible to meet a deadline; discussing our course work and trying to come up with new and innovative ways to present our work; practicing our presentations to ourselves and timing each other. We worked together to make sure no one was left out. We scrutinised each other's work and made sure everyone was writing at their best. We were interdependent on each other. One person's achievement was everyone's achievement and vice versa. I can't think of a better community of practice than the one we had in our small MA education class. I was also involved in the design process for the next stage of the full time masters' at Northampton.

On top of this the process of learning informed and underpinned the research process. My thesis explored how Nigerian teachers would perceive a leadership model based on shared responsibility. This was reflected amongst ourselves as we studied. This gave me greater insight into the challenges and rewards of distributing responsibility.

To Viet Huong's story

To begin my story, I may say that applying for this MA Education course was one of the best decisions I have ever made. This course really brought precious experiences to my studying process.

It was difficult at first because I had to face a lot of new challenges such as: a new language, culture and even teaching and learning style. Being part of a multinational community was a new experience to me. When I first started this course I was really nervous: asking myself thousands of questions. I wondered whether I could understand the lecture while English was not my native language; and I was worried that I could not catch up with other students in the class. Eventually, all these worries faded away when I was provided with opportunities to work with excellent tutors and colleagues.

First of all, I would mention the role of the lecturer: in my personal mind-set and based on my previous experience the teacher or tutor was primarily a provider of knowledge and of academic guidance. Nevertheless, after several months, I realized that my tutors did help me more than they would have if they had been simply knowledge providers. They understood what I was afraid of, hence, gradually, they became my "live-library". I received not only advice or suggestions in terms of learning, but also about my student life. They really encouraged me a lot, and I recognise how I have developed. I sincerely appreciate my tutors' support.

In addition, the cooperation between colleagues was another element that contributed to my precious experience on this masters' course. Although we were interested in different areas in education, we still found places for cooperation. A simple example was helping each other with the assignments. I remember when I completed my very first conference poster for a presentation on this course, I felt deeply thankful because I had such kind colleagues. After we prepared our own presentation, we did a trial talk because we believed that a mistake which could not be found by ourselves, might be detected by our fellow students. Thus, from then on we helped each other to proofread almost all assignments, and we all agreed that the role of collaboration in learning is undeniable (Dewey, 1987). Additionally, in my own opinion, implied competition continued to exist along with the cooperation mentioned above. However, it now occurred in a very positive way. It became a form of encouragement that I received. Because of that competition, I knew that I needed to keep on trying, even harder to develop my research and writing skills. It had a positive influence on me.

Generally, I really enjoyed being a part of this small community which is very diverse and also very friendly. My own research into communicative teaching methods was informed by this learning process.

Chuhuai Ke's story

It has been a valuable experience, working with my colleagues and tutor in my masters' year. I had spent one year studying at the University of Northampton beforehand. Due to this year studying at the University of Northampton, I had the chance to get to know what the MA Education lessons looked like before I started my own masters' year. I became very interested in and admired the way that they were working together, and this is one of the reasons that I chose to stay and study for my MA Education in the University of Northampton.

I was confused about how to manage my own studies in the masters' year at the beginning, especially, as I am an international student studying in the UK. There were many issues connected to working with a new style of learning and many differences compared to education in my country. For example, there was a massive amount of reading for each module. It was impossible for me to read a lot of books in a week within a second language. However, the innovative and cooperative teaching and learning style was helpful in terms of my studies. We separated all the reading work between us. A week later, we shared our ideas with each other in our lecture. Then, we chose something we had found very interesting and exchanged the books that we would read. Another example was that during the lessons our tutor usually afforded some free time for us to discuss issues without him. After our discussion, he joined us to listen to our final results, and to lead us towards a deeper understanding of the issues we were discussing.

For me this was a social learning process. My thesis is on the coping strategies of Chinese students who are studying in UK universities. Therefore my research and learning intertwined as a lived process with my own experiences as a student informing my writing.

Xuan Zhou's story

One piece of writing that I produced was a critical evaluation of the implementation of Freire's educational philosophy (1970) in the music classroom in China. I chose this topic because my undergraduate degree was music education in China. I had some experience teaching in the music classroom in a primary school. I also very much liked my job when I worked in a school. I found that I had been using democratic and freedom based processes as a method in the music classroom before I had even read Freire's philosophy. Reading it sharpened my understanding of how democratic processes could inform music education. That is why I chose this topic.

We have five classmates as a group. In fact, I want to include my tutors as we often work together. We seem like a learning family. Each member is quite friendly and excited to help others. We normally stay in a library to discuss our assignments and presentations. We discuss together, and then our work reflects the opinions of the others. Finally, we chose together the best way to start our research. I have a deep memory of how at the beginning of

studying, I made some mistakes regarding how to write a perfect essay. I am an international student so I did not know academic conventions in the UK. However, our group members were very friendly, supported and helped me. After I finished this topic, we worked together to discuss our topic. Each member offered different opinions to help me to fix the essay. Finally, I finished this topic and it was a much stronger piece of work, still mine, still unique but this advice had helped.

Overall, all of us work together as a community. We talk, discuss and make decisions together. Each participant enables other members to shape and solve problems with their research topic. This way of working is very much related to that espoused by Freire (1970) and thus the way of studying informed my research.

Doan Hong Trang's story

My name is Doan Hong Trang. I am from Vietnam and here is my story. Firstly, I was raised and grew up in a traditional Vietnamese pedagogical environment. Although there are many problems with our educational system, I have a great respect for my teachers. I believe that a teacher's mission is to lead his or her students to true knowledge and correct answers. And for eighteen years of my life, I had never doubted that a fundamental role of a teacher is to teach. However, during this master's programme, my tutor reveals ideas then he gives us time to read then raises questions about related content then provides us with a potential reading list. I was also initially perturbed that my tutor would not give me an absolute answer. Secondly, I initially felt that this method seemed unfocused. I spent time listening to my classmates' problems about their essays, dissertations and also listening to invited researchers whose subjects sometimes did not directly related to my subject. I spent hours and hours in the library researching. Changing and modifying became a long iterative process and I wanted more guidance to reach an exact topic quickly.

But after three months, I gradually found interesting aspects to the design of this programme. As my teacher did not provide me with absolute answers, I sought support from my classmates who have the same issues. They supported me, sharing their experiences and their own problems. And now I know that is a part of being in a community of practice. Wenger (1998) mentions that: "in pursuing their interests and by engaging in a series of activities such as: collaboration, discussion and information sharing tasks, members of a such a community: help each other, exchange experiences, develop ways of addressing and solving problems and build relationships. The interplay between social competence (shared in the community) and personal experience (individual's own ways of knowing) results in learning and the further development of a shared competence". By listening to different researchers and critiquing them I understand that the lesson I have learnt is not from their subject but from their approach to others and their methodology.

I now appreciate my tutor who at this stage has moved to become a “facilitator for a learning community” and I have a strong belief in the design of my programme which allows me to meet “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger, 1998).

Concluding remarks

This paper was made publicly available online at the same time as it was presented in the conference and other than the correction of a few typographical errors, this version is identical to the one presented. The design of this MA and the overlapping, iterative relationship between research and learning will no doubt continue to develop. The stories above are the stories of the first five students to study on the University of Northampton full-time MA Education programme. This paper was and still is intended to provoke discussion and we would welcome comments and dialogue with anyone who may wish to contact us.

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