



Creative practices: thinking and thriving together

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In this concise paper, the authors provide a forum for thinking about creative and collaborative inquiry in research-informed practice. Higher educators may benefit from creative academic and professional development, beyond traditional programs in contemporary, technology-enhanced learning. Creative practice may take many forms. An educational developer and an educational technologist reflect on their practice through the forms of vignette and poetry, to exemplify how narrative can reveal insights that may otherwise have remained hidden. In telling our stories, we encourage other academics and professionals to use creative and collaborative ways to reconnect and thrive. Further research on creative practice may lead to more fictional, interdisciplinary ways of connecting and continuing professional development.

Keywords: academic development; professional development; creative inquiry; collaboration

Introduction

How to best develop innovative teaching and learning practice, technology-supported or otherwise, is a perennial question. Academic development varies depending on context, time, and place (Gibbs, 2013). Increasingly, higher education institutions value technology-enhanced, contemporary learning, and twenty-first century skills such as critical thinking, creativity and data or digital literacy (to name a few). Such skills are core capabilities for society (and hence for educators and students alike), and are urgently needed to solve the wicked problems of our time (Vallis & Redmond, 2021).

Accordingly, much effort is invested in designing programs to upskill academics and professionals in contemporary, technology-enhanced teaching and learning approaches. For decades, higher education institutions have created strategic initiatives and frameworks as guides and quality assurance to work towards such goals (Fraser, 2004; Newland & Handley, 2016). One example is the Higher Education Academy Fellowship, which assesses professional development by a reflective account of practice against a set of rigorous criteria (*UK Professional Standards Framework (PSF)*, 2011). Many websites and resources have been developed to help improve teaching practice with technology, based on a multitude of evidence-based professional learning outcomes and frameworks. Teaching in higher education necessarily draws on such institutional support and professional development to encourage collaborative, experiential learning (Mantai & Huber, 2021). Educational technology is often perceived as a catalyst for educational change and development in these contexts (Matzen & Edmunds, 2007). However, professional development in educational technology risks being perceived as procedural instruction in using software, a Learning Management Systems (LMS), and learning resources as a way of digitising rather than fundamentally changing traditional pedagogies (Cowling et al., 2022).

In this paper we step away from such formal training programs. Instead, we draw on our experiences as educational developer and educational technologist to present another approach: creative and collaborative inquiry as academic and professional development. Creative practice may be defined more broadly than individual artistry or aesthetic artistic practice, as many understand the term historically (Pope, 2005). Creativity is about thinking differently and shines light on ambiguous, unclear situations. We build on Budge and Clarke's assertion that academic development is an inherently creative act (2012). Educators may use collaborative and creative inquiry as a practice to further develop reflexive and cognitive skills through joint sense-making (Skains, 2018). For example, critical digital literacies and pedagogical skills may be learned through playing and participating in online, creative communities (Honeychurch & Taleo, 2021).

In narrative forms, educators can creatively probe their practice, their commonalities, and differences in a deeper way (Langer, 2016). By telling stories, academics might reflect on their teaching and attitudes to

educational technology (Cousins & Bissar, 2012). The process of creating a shared account of work encourages creativity, but also collegiality and community (Vallis & Lopomo Beteto, in press). Drafting and feedback is central to creative writing. In creating narratives together, in whichever form we choose, we take a risk to express ourselves in a personal way and trust others to accept our experimental works. Now, more than ever, educators can benefit from engaging creatively and critically with each other, and with educational technology, for professional development.

Below the authors discuss how this collaborative research informed our own creative practice, to think and thrive together in higher education. We present two brief examples of creative inquiry, vignette, and poetry, where writing is used to explore, understand and represent challenging human experiences. In the conclusion, the authors collaboratively integrate these creative reflections for further insights.

Stories from the field

Technology-enhanced teaching and learning may draw upon creative practices in less academic modes. Creative, collaborative processes help educators think across traditional divides and open new paths to explore (Taleo & Vallis, in press). Educators face complex and ill-defined challenges in teaching, and a creative approach may break through fixed conceptions to a new understanding. Such educational design and development may develop in unexpected ways and is less constrained by past structures (Golding, 2014). An emphasis on praxis, both individual and in communities and networks, experimenting: these help teaching and learning with technology, now ubiquitous (Jordan, 2020).

Beyond educational technology, educators generally agree that teacher-student and peer relationships are important to learning. Relationships matter in learning and teaching, and we can apply a similar ethos in professional or academic development, whether technology-enhanced or otherwise. Critical conversations and reflecting collaboratively on teaching practices with colleagues can also lead to unexpected insights and transformative learning (Budge & Clarke, 2012; Zeivots et al., 2021). Professional development workshops and self-help resources, no matter how well-designed, may lack this collaborative aspect of learning.

Vignette

The vignette below illustrates an educational developer's perspective on the often challenging nature of such relationships that are not readily quantifiable or aligned to a professional development framework.

Adrenalin. Breathlessness. At the meeting, it finally dawns on me. The feedback from design workshops I've facilitated, the draft design diagram and learning design plan that we agreed upon—none of these will be used in the subject's curriculum development. The head teacher says they like some of the online activities suggested. They are grateful for my technical support, and they'll be in touch soon. My throat is dry.

Yet this is ridiculous. No actual disaster has occurred. On the contrary, the team are friendly and warming to change. I speak slowly, deliberately, saying something like, 'We'll need a bit more lead-time to design and develop for really good online experiences. Maybe we could include some of the workshop feedback into our design.' My body says otherwise. It wants change now! I calm myself by typing notes. We just have different schedules and priorities. I ask after other deadlines. Maybe I could anticipate pain points and blockers in the design process where I could offer support and value. We agree to meet again soon and regroup. In the meantime, I will prototype some examples to show, rather than tell.

This is an unfinished story. Writing about this incident obliged me to reflect in a personal and professional way on the need for greater collaboration between educators and negotiation around project processes and outcomes. It foregrounds the relational aspects of team project work that may not surface in traditional professional development programs or research agendas around educational technology. I could speculate on what might have happened if I had invited the head teacher to tell a story about this meeting and educational development. With story, perhaps, we could think together and unpack the puzzle of this misunderstanding and move forward on the "curious axis of human connection" (Costello, 2022).

Poetical inquiry

Poetry is another way to understand more clearly the thinking of the writer (Lapum, 2010). This can reveal questions and highlight processes in the work of the professional. The poetic format can vary and be used as a tool to follow the poet's thinking at the time of creating, akin to a creative diary. The following extract of a poem describes working in the educational technology field (Taleo, 2022).

Through writing this poem I am sharing my learning and reflecting on aspects of change. In this poem I reflect on educational design and my role in that process of both making and deconstructing. I acknowledge the unknown journey that comes out of these practices.

I am a change driver
 I pick up the screwdriver
 fitting it into the screw
 work
 work
 Work
 sharing my learnings
 connecting with others
 moving their journey
 along
 along
 along a path
 of building or repairing
 deconstructing or making
 think
 think
 think of a future
 we push towards the unknown...

Perhaps the unknown is the outcome of change. This poem continues to resonate throughout the author's year of changing roles in the education field. Creative practice can assist in making sense of the entanglement of pedagogy and technology and need not be approached in a linear or discrete way (Fawns, 2022).

Teaching and learning are highly relational, and "attending to relationships with care" is no less important in academic development (Budge & Clarke, 2012, p. 62). Thinking and working together makes sense for a postdigital world where we are constantly connected (Jordan, 2020). Expressing different perspectives in different forms can help practitioners move forward in their work. It is reaching for an ideal that works around and across the binaries: art and science, education, and technology, off campus and on campus. Neither is privileged.

Conclusion

Collaborating in creative ways builds relationships and helps us think together. Creating and telling stories, using poetic inquiry, writing vignettes; these processes help clarify ideas, designs, and the path ahead. These paths tangle technology and pedagogy, in ways different to many academic research projects and professional development programs. Such collaboration necessarily jumps the boundaries and power dynamics of traditional roles and responsibilities, disciplines, and faculties.

In this paper we make visible the results of one collaboration and co-creation process between an educational technologist and an educational developer, while acknowledging that there are many other possibilities. Writing vignette and poetry allowed us to experiment with the possibilities and pitfalls of teaching and learning that is interwoven with technology. Educators may find many other creative forms, adapting them for their own educational context to further develop practice and research.

Through writing this paper the authors demonstrated how creative engagement with academic development and education technology foregrounded the importance of relationships. We thrived by sharing creative skills while discussing ideas, co-writing in a shared document space, and editing each other's work. Despite sickness, disruption through travel, and other work pressures, we cared for the writing and thinking processes which helped our practice flourish during fractured times. The authors share these stories to encourage a future where more space is created for reflective, creative research and practice.

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