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The Patchwork Text: enabling discursive writing and reflective practice on a foundation module in work-based learning

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The Patchwork Text has emerged as one of the most influential assessment innovations in Higher Education in recent years. As an assessment strategy with the potential to engage a wide range of learners, the patchwork has enjoyed a rising profile in the range of teaching, learning and assessment methods developed in the context of the widening participation agenda. The present article reports on the use of the patchwork on a foundation degree programme in work-based education, delivered for professionals with a role in instruction or training but with no formal teaching qualification. The study explores the student experience of working with the Patchwork Text by drawing upon exit interviews, questionnaire responses and sample ‘patches’ from a group of 19 students training for a teaching qualification. Key themes in the student experience of patchwork are identified and recommendations are offered regarding the use of this assessment form with diverse cohorts of students in the expanding Higher Education sector.

Keywords: Patchwork text; foundation degree; reflective practice; assessment innovation; academic writing

Introduction

In a previous paper the authors reported on their experience of using the Patchwork Text as the principal mode of assessment in a foundation degree module in work-based education (Dalrymple and Smith 2007). We discussed how the patchwork proved particularly congenial to the cohort of mature students studying for this teaching qualification, many of whom were returning to formal education after many years’ absence and few of whom were immediately comfortable with the Higher Education setting. We concurred with the growing body of research suggesting that the patchwork offers a valuable form of assessment for learning and outlined our view of the rich potential of the methodology to enable progressive induction into academic discourse by allowing students to explore critical and analytical writing by experimenting with different modes of reflective, narrative and discursive writing.

The precise model of patchworking used with our cohort of professional dance-teachers varied somewhat from the original model outlined by Richard Winter in the dedicated 2003 volume of *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* in which this assessment method was explored at length (Winter 2003). We asked that students complete six out of 11 assignments over their course of study, finally completing an integrating summary at the conclusion of the course and submitting this for assessment together with the six selected ‘patches’ from their portfolio. The specified themes for the ‘patches’ were as follows:

- (1) A recollection of a significant learning episode from the student’s experience.
- (2) A personal action plan for managing learning.

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- (3) An account of Fox's (1983) metaphors of teaching and learning and an application of the model to classroom practice.
- (4) A brief analysis of the student's own teaching style preferences.
- (5) A reflection on the general pedagogic principles that inform the student's own practice.
- (6+7) An exploration of two specific curriculum elements in relation to the student's professional practice.
- (8) An outline for an observed teaching session.
- (9) A personal reflection on the observed teaching session.
- (10) An evaluation of any teaching session the student has delivered.
- (11) An 'open patch' whose subject is determined wholly by the student or in negotiation with tutors if desired.
- (12) An integrating summary identifying the key learning points emerging from a selection of *six* of the preceding patches.

In the assessment of students' work, emphasis was placed upon the need for the series of writing tasks to exhibit a progressive shift from descriptive writing to reflective, discursive and analytic writing – the hallmarks of academic prose (Northedge 2003). Our previous paper relates the generally favourable outcomes of this assessment innovation and its rich potential as a methodology for encouraging acculturation and progressive induction into the discursive practices that characterise Higher Education by means of 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Lave and Wenger 1991). In the present article we focus in depth on the students' perceptions of this assessment innovation as expressed in feedback, semi-structured interviews, and from the 'patches' and integrating summaries themselves. In particular, we aim to review the additional evidence here that an increased capacity for critical and reflective articulation of practice was indeed fostered by engagement with the patchwork pedagogy.

In reviewing this evidence four key themes emerge in the student experience of the Patchwork Text. These are, first, the process of induction into the Higher Education community; second, the flexibility of the patchworking method; thirdly, the opportunity to integrate theory and practice in the light of feedback; and finally, the increased capacity for reflective practice made possible by this methodology.¹

Becoming a member of the Higher Education community

As a central development in the widening participation agenda, foundation degrees are designed to recruit into the Higher Education community students from a diverse range of backgrounds (Pollard et al. 2000). As part-time students based in the workplace rather than the academy, and more conversant with professional than academic knowledge, foundation degree students may well require a longer process of induction and acculturation into academic practice. Our student cohort was in this respect broadly comparable to that reported on in Maisch (2003, 196) where the author considers that 'the needs of these part-time, mature, predominantly female, practical rather than theoretical professional students are not easily met through the current traditional dissertations'. Accordingly, while many of our own foundation students reported initial feelings of apprehension and uncertainty, the patchwork approach appears to have eased the transition into the culture of Higher Education:

'Patches' are a good way back into writing for those of us who have not been required to write in this way for years. (Interview One)

I haven't done anything like this since leaving school, so I think giving me essays – I would have run the other way, truthfully. (Interview Two)

Quite apart from the attractions of the patchwork assignments in terms of their brevity and immediacy, part of their appeal lay in their being different from the other, more traditional forms of assessment on the programme:

I think it's been very welcoming, that it's a different form of assessment to the other modules. (Interview One)

Having not studied for so many years, I was afraid to get back to learning in case I wasn't capable and the fact that the 'Patch' is ... flexible, not rigid as opposed to some of the other module assessments ... I think I have actually enjoyed the 'Patches' better. (Interview One)

The cultures of professional dance-instruction and undergraduate study in Higher Education are of course very different, the one concerned principally with movement, coordination and the skills manifested in Bloom's 'psychomotor' domain (Bloom 1956), the other more with critical thinking, conceptual expression and understanding. Our use of the patchwork regime sought to encourage students to perceive greater congruency between these cultures by requiring them to reflect on their own practice, record those reflections and articulate practice in an increasingly critical light:

I think as dance teachers we're not used to writing essays ... We just get on with it ... That's not to say that we don't know what we're doing, but we do it without conscious thought and when we're made to write it down like this, we have to think about how we teach. (Interview Two)

For me it was like climbing a flight of stairs, you started at the beginning with your own experiences and you gradually worked your way through into a deeper type of thought. (Interview Three)

I did find that I was being unknowingly led along an academic path, so that by the time I got to 'Patch' 12 [The Integrating Summary] ... I was very pleased that I produced a piece of work that I wouldn't have produced at the beginning. (Interview One)

This process of reflection on practice was a recurrent theme in the student interviews and integrating summaries and one to which we will return.

Autonomy and flexibility

A second clear theme emerging from the interview responses is that the students valued the fact that they could choose when they completed their writing assignments and which six 'patches' to submit along with the integrating summary. Initially the students were encouraged to complete one or two 'patches' as soon after the module-workshops as possible in order to facilitate their introduction into academic writing. Most did indeed begin writing early on, motivated in part by this element of choice:

...being able to choose which ones to do and not having to do all of them ... I've been able to pick the ones I think I can relate to the most. (Interview Two)

It was good though, they gave you all 12 [Patches] to start with, because people haven't necessarily started with the first ... so some people have done Number 5 before Number 1 ... it was very open... (Interview Four)

It was very good to develop your own areas of interest which we were able to do with the 'patches'. (Interview Four)

From the perspective of assessment, it was less the topic than the style of treatment that was of chief significance: students' first instinct might be to complete a 'patch' which called for a largely descriptive mode of writing. Feedback and guidance would then encourage students to treat the subsequent 'patch' in a more reflective and analytical mode, encouraging the process of progressive induction into critical writing that was the principal assessment focus.

A further consequence of students being able to choose when to complete 'patches' was that having submitted a draft and received initial feedback on it, the student was then free to complete

it when most convenient and to redraft and refine it in the light of further reflections. Interview responses suggest that this opportunity to revisit and revise written assignments was highly valued, enabling students to develop interests as well as refining their ideas:

I prefer this way [of working] ... You send one off for feedback and then you might not do anything with it there and then, but a couple of weeks later you might change it completely... (Interview Two)

Of the 19 students, seven opted to complete Patch 11, the ‘blank patch’ where the theme for discursive treatment was not stipulated. The reason for including such a ‘patch’ was to enable students to introduce their own reflections, to develop ideas of their own or to elaborate ideas encountered elsewhere in the module. One of the students completing this ‘patch’ wrote a discursive piece of over 3000 words including an impressive set of reflections on learning and development throughout life. Submitted by email with an apologetic rider – ‘Sorry it’s so long, but will you mark it?’ – the piece was characterised by the extent to which the student was clearly developing a critical and academic approach to writing, including references to learning theories which she had discovered for herself through independent researches.

The ‘blank patch’ also achieved its intended purpose in allowing students to elaborate upon issues of particular interest to them. In one example, a student related her experience of examining in a school in the Caribbean where limited resources meant that the students had derived their knowledge principally from books without the benefit of practical instruction from a tutor or from access to videos. The pedagogic implications of these resourcing issues, and the initiatives that might be pursued to remediate them, were explored in this open writing task.

Integrating theory and practice

A third distinct theme emerging from the students’ interview responses was the perceived value of the patchwork regime in promoting integration of theory and practice. This dimension of the students’ experience would appear to be closely keyed to a seminar held early in the programme on the theme of personal conceptions of the pedagogic role. A core text for this seminar was Denis Fox’s 1983 article exploring ‘Personal theories of teaching’ in which the author outlines four prevalent conceptions of teaching as manifested by a sample of Higher Education lecturers: teaching as transference, as shaping, as travelling and as horticulture. The relative informality and qualitative character of this article seemed congenial as an initial reading for students engaging with education theory for the first time. Moreover, since the metaphors for teaching practice tendered by the article are striking and memorable, we considered these could be readily applied to the trainees’ own work situations, thereby promoting the integration of theory and practice. The interview responses suggest that this connection was instinctively made by the students, and that the article promoted that critical reflection which lay at the heart of the module.

At first I thought ‘What’s it all about?’ but then as I read on and read it again and started to really think about it, then it made so much sense. I couldn’t put it down after that. (Interview Three)

I found this [Fox] very interesting ... I feel that there is a part of each theory – transfer, shaping, travelling and growing – in teaching generally, but that my own style definitely moves more towards the growing and travelling [conceptions]. (Participant G, Patch 12)

As with any process of categorisation, inevitably there is spillage across the conceptual categories established and, for the teacher, the consequent need for students to realise these limitations. The point is not whether we use this or that approach, but rather that we are *aware* of doing so and the reasons that underlie our decisions:

As an experienced teacher, I think that I use all of these Fox strategies at some point, but investigating them and identifying them has given me greater insight into my role. (Participant B, Patch 12)

When teaching in the past, I have not considered the methods used in any detail. After considering the ideas put forward by Fox, it is clear that different learners need different teaching methods... (Participant K, Patch 12)

Stepping outside their own practice and reviewing practice in the light of own habitual and unconscious behaviours prompted the students to start questioning themselves.

I now find myself looking at other teachers and asking 'What theory are they using? And why?' (Participant M, Patch 12)

If I were asked to summarise Fox's theories in short, I would say that it is basically a question of whether you talk *at* or *to* your pupils ... I now find myself becoming more critical and reflecting back on classes: what I did and why I did it. (Participant Q, Patch 12)

The process of taking the concepts and insights drawn from theory and using them to illuminate one's practice was clearly promoted by the Fox article and by the students' explorations in related literature on conceptions of teaching in Higher Education.

As a further reflective tool, and with the intention of helping the group to move beyond Fox's ideas and develop their own insights, students were also introduced to Vygotsky's (1978) notion of the 'Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)' where higher learning is conceived as making excursions into the domain of the partially apprehended and the provisionally conceptualised and where the teacher's role is to provide the means – or 'scaffolding' – by which this is achieved. For the majority of students the realisation that in applying and analysing the Fox metaphors they had effectively entered the ZPD and begun to make it their own was immediate, however, the perception that the development of their own conceptions of teaching was both legitimate and natural was accomplished only gradually. Once one or two members of the group began to develop and articulate their own metaphors of the teaching process – teacher as choreographer, teacher as cook and teacher as juggler – the process of realising that conceptual models are no more than provisional tools began to dawn on the students.

It was also clear from the interview responses that the ability to forge connections between theory and practice had been bolstered by the students' completion of observed teaching sessions during the course of the module.

The students reacted positively to the presence of an expert observer and to the issues raised in debriefs where feedback tended to take the form of questions regarding actions taken and alternatives available:

It was a good experience having an outsider come in and observe my class. This brought a different perspective and dimension into my own personal reflections and the feedback from the assessor. (Participant P, Patch 12)

A number of the students referred to the additional reflective lens supplied by the completion of an observed teaching session:

It is so easy when working for oneself to be tunnel-visioned, having no one there to offer advice in the form of appraisal or constructive criticism. (Participant Q, Patch 12)

It will be clear from the foregoing quotations that by the conclusion of their course of study for this module, students were indeed showing an increasing ability to conceptualise their professional and personal development within the discursive modes characteristic of foundation-level study in Higher Education. Accordingly, the fourth and final theme that emerges most strongly from the student exit interviews is the reported increase in the students' understanding of and capacity for reflective practice

Reflective practice

In designing the work-based education module, the authors recognised the centrality of reflection as a principle in contemporary teacher-education and a range of influential literature on reflective practice underpinned the module (Brookfield 1991; Moon 1999; Schön 1983, 1987). As suggested above, the Patchwork Text approach was designed to move students progressively from a descriptive to an analytical stance with regard to their own professional practice, in short, to become critically reflective. Early ‘patches’ drew on their experiences as teachers and learners. Subsequent ‘patches’ focused on the design and implementation of teaching prior to observation and later ‘patches’ required students to review and critically analyse the experience of being observed and to evaluate an episode of teaching. The integrative summaries submitted at the conclusion of the module were assessed largely in terms of the degree of assimilation and application of the principles of critical reflection as articulated by Kolb (1984) and Brookfield (1991). In most cases, the summaries and the exit-interview responses showed keen understanding of the benefits of standing back and reconsidering practice:

... for some 30 years I have taught and done it and I had not actually worked out what we were doing. It made me more aware of *how* I was teaching... (Interview One)

I found myself ... reflecting on things that otherwise I've always done for years without thinking about them and this course, especially this module, has made me analyse what I do. (Interview One)

I think sometimes you do something, you teach something, but you don't even realise what you do so I think in some of the ‘patches’ it was good to actually sit down and think about it. (Interview Two)

The benefits of being able to ‘stand back’ from practice, along with the opportunities the module afforded the students to discuss their ideas with each other, enabled them to reconsider approaches and change practices, broadly effecting a shift towards more learner-centred approaches and responsive pedagogies.

The analysis of my own teaching style in Patch 4 proved equally valuable and enlightening. My own teaching style tends to border on the flamboyant which works with certain personalities, but not with everyone. (Participant R, Patch 12)

From observing pupils in a dance class, I am continuously monitoring the lesson and can quickly see if the unexpected arises and there is a need to deviate from the plan and rethink the lesson or teaching strategy. (Participant N, Patch 12)

I found for me that it's really altered my methods of teaching and also my view of the actual pupils that I teach. (Interview Three)

I know that I can learn for the rest of my life and, as a teacher, I can learn from my students, as long as I am prepared to listen. Having had the recent experience of being a student on the course, I can put myself in my students' place and feel what it is like to be taught. (Participant H, Patch 12)

Reflections and conclusions

It would appear that the Patchwork Text approach adopted for use in this module successfully achieved its goals of encouraging students to reflect increasingly critically on their own practice, to foster their sense of inclusion in the Higher Education community and to enable them to begin to use relevant theory to illuminate and inform their professional practice.² Of the 19 students on the module, all completed successfully both module and programme, seven of them progressing on to further courses of study.

Whilst the module can claim some success in implementing the Patchwork approach, the central limitation of implementing this assessment regime on a course of this kind is clearly the extensive amount of formative feedback that must be supplied by course tutors. Given the concerns of some of the students about their ability to cope with study in Higher Education, it was of course

essential that they received detailed feedback on submitted ‘patches’, or drafts, as quickly as possible and every effort was made to ensure that students received feedback within two or three days following receipt of a draft. Whilst onerous, this action sent a powerful message of support and encouragement to the participants. Students not only appreciated promptness of feedback in responding to their ‘patches’, but also perceived the advantages of the cumulative and progressive nature of the ‘patch’ process:

They’re continual assessment as opposed to an end-of-module assessment, so that has given us room to improve over a period of time. (Interview Four)

One of the results, however, of taking this course of action was that the burden of providing feedback was extensive. In future students will still be encouraged to complete and submit drafts, but limits will be placed on the number of drafts being submitted. As the module proceeds, so the number of drafts students are able to submit will be progressively reduced.

In assessing how far the Patchwork has indeed enabled discursive writing and reflective practice on this foundation degree, we leave the final words to the students themselves. Expressed at the close of an interview, one particular student reflection on the Patchwork Text serves to epitomise the responses we received and conveys the rich potential of this assessment innovation:

I’m an embroideress, that’s my pastime and I had the most wonderful picture in my head of what ‘patches’ mean to me. It’s almost like patching a quilt, well almost, and I could tell you the colours that they are and the shapes that came immediately – because that’s something that I associate with pleasure; this is something I do. (Interview Four)

It would seem that the beginnings of a successful fusion of professional and academic knowledge can indeed be claimed when a student regards an assessment methodology not as an external imposition but identifies with it and claims ownership of it as ‘something I do’.

Notes

1. In the case of quotations from the students’ ‘patches’ and the integrating summaries, individual students have been identified by letter. Semi-structured group interviews were conducted by a colleague who did not know the students personally and had not taught them. Quotations drawn from interviews identify only which interview that quotation came from.
2. In a further development, Crowe, Smith, and Jones (2005) report on the use of the patchwork model to promote the development of *inter*-professional knowledge.

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