

“We Shall Not Cease from Exploration”: Anticipating the Journey to Graduation

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ABSTRACT

This ‘on the horizon’ piece outlines a mindful journaling activity which expresses the principles of contemplative pedagogy, making use of the hall which is used for university graduations. The space and time given to reflection was adventitious and unusual but, embedded more deeply in practice, could be a key feature of a compassionate university. The process of organising and leading the activity is described and evaluated.

Keywords: contemplative pedagogy; reflection.

Contemplative pedagogy

The quotation in the title from TS Eliot’s *Little Gidding* recalls his insight into the process of spiritual growth whereby each ‘exploration’ of new experience enlivens and illuminates all that we knew and had taken for granted: “And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time” (Eliot, 1942). The education and growth of the undergraduate can also be seen in spiritual terms as a form of “transformative learning” (Mezirow, 1991) in that perspectives are enlarged and a new sense of self can be allowed to emerge, as well as new understandings being acquired. This inevitable process can be explicitly cultivated and supported by approaches being discussed and shared within the relatively new field of contemplative pedagogy (e.g. Bush & Barbezat, 2016). Drawing upon techniques such as journaling, mindfulness and guided visualisation, contemplative pedagogy resists the depersonalised, instrumental character of much higher education and helps to connect students to their lived, embodied experience of their own learning. But this is not narcissistic: connecting our learning to our own values and sense of meaning in turn enables us to form richer deeper, relationships with our peers, communities and the world around us.

Reflective practice exercise

Most universities organise their graduations to take place in a large, imposing and ceremonial hall which often has a resonant, historical presence of its own. These halls are not often used as teaching spaces and so the only time students may enter them is on graduation day itself. However, visiting the site of graduation with students at an early stage in a programme can be a powerful way of inducing reflection on hopes, dreams and the ‘learning journey’ which lies ahead since the cathedral-like space automatically creates a contemplative atmosphere. On graduation, they will hopefully be “knowing the place for the first time”.

The Great Hall is the jewel in the crown of the London Rd campus of the University of Reading and its cavernous interior gives it a unique atmosphere, ideal for reflective kinds of learning. I was fortunate enough to teach a session there and its dramatic, imposing space was a key pedagogical tool. The session lasted two hours and involved 50 2nd year students training to become primary teachers through the BA Primary Education (QTS) programme. Although the focus of the session was the teaching of religious education in school, it did not involve any teaching about specific religions at all. This is because a key aspect of RE in school is ‘learning from religions’, not about them. In other words, the focus is upon the pupils’ own developing sense of purpose, sense of identity, meaning and belonging. The reflective activity was to help give an experiential understanding of this, making use of the mindful journaling approach used in contemplative pedagogy.

Once the students were seated, I told them a little about the space they were seated in, about when the hall was built and what it is used for. Talking about all the graduation ceremonies which are held here, I expressed the view that, for about 100 years, the hall has been the ‘symbolic heart’ of the university since it is probably the one room in the whole institution which most students, on all UK campuses, have passed through at least once. I told them what happens at graduation and role-played walking in at the back and up to the stage to shake the VC’s hand. I asked them to do a piece of writing for themselves, in silence, stressing the fact that this was not an assessment and would not be handed in. On a handout, the prompts for writing were:

- List all the important events which will happen for you between now and graduation day (e.g. birthdays, holidays etc).
- What are the important things you will need to do between now and graduation day?

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- Are there things which have happened which you already know will become permanent memories of your time at university?
- Which aspects of yourself need to be nurtured and cultivated before graduation?
- Are there any aspects of yourself to which you need to say goodbye before graduation?
- Who will you invite to your graduation?
- What is the link (if any) between these people and the memory you wrote about at the start of the day?
- What would you like to say to these people/person?
- Is there anything particular you want to do today as a result of this writing?

I stressed the fact that students could spend as long or as short a time on the activity as they liked but, if they wished to stop, they should leave the hall and meet up with friends later, rather than disturbing them. There were other activities they could go onto. Inspired by the work of Sellers and Moss (2016), over the previous few weeks the university chaplain and I had been fortunate enough to borrow a canvas labyrinth to use with students. This was set out in the hall. I explained that the centre represented graduation day and they could “take a stone for a walk”, reflecting on the actions and changes that need to happen as they get closer and closer to it. I also had large carpet tiles and baskets of different shaped stones. I explained that, if they wanted, they could extend their reflection by creating a picture out of stones which represented their life at the current time.

I asked students to complete an evaluation form before they left: these were completed individually and extended the reflective activity further. One of the things I wanted to know was whether students felt that this kind of exercise was legitimate and worthwhile on a degree-level programme. All fifty students agreed unanimously that it is “a good thing for universities to have space on their courses for students to reflect on their aims and values in life”. One student acknowledged that “there are courses/societies where you can reflect but it is hard to allow/give yourself time to go to them. This is why it is very good to incorporate it into lectures”. One student commented that “we need this time to just be calm and think without things like technology getting in the way”. Another said that “being a student is daunting because you are working for your future while trying to fit in. Reflection helps with mental state [sic] and could prevent students from getting bogged down”.

I was also curious whether students would have preferred to clarify values and shares their goals in group discussion, rather than in solitary writing. Although seven students would have preferred this, the vast majority agreed that the silent reflection exercise was better in this regard. One student commented:

I think the quality/depth of my reflection has been much better by writing it as (1) it is harder to come up with words on the spot in conversation to describe things and (2) I feel I can express more when I know only I am going to be reading it.

Six students felt that both solitary and group work could complement each other and this remark was typical:

I feel if reflecting with others they may help to remind you of events you may have put to the back of your mind but on the other hand silence was very nice to just sit and reflect.

Overall, the comments from the students were overwhelmingly positive. These are some examples:

- “It has allowed me to stop and think about where I am in my life and where I want to go.”
- “I very much enjoyed the reflective session. It has benefitted me in many ways by putting my personal and university practices into perspective.”
- “It made it clear to me how important family are in your life.”
- “I was able to let all my feelings out on paper that I wouldn’t normally feel comfortable doing”.
- “I have become more aware of my personal goals and who/where I want to be at the time of my graduation.”
- “I found it really useful to think about what aspects of myself I want to change/develop before graduation day.”
- “The Great Hall reflective writing experience was one of the most beneficial activities I’ve ever done in a lecture.”
- “Today has made me think about my life in lots of ways – emotional but helpful.”
- “I almost feel uplifted after reflecting upon myself and others.”
- “I hadn’t realised how many good memories I had from only one year of uni.”
- “Slowing down today has had a huge positive affect.”
- “The first thing I’m going to do when I leave is call my family and thank them for supporting me on my journey through university.”
- “Very helpful in understanding where my head is at mentally and grounding as I was able to list the most important things that matter to me.”

Evaluation

I was very impressed at the way the students co-operated in switching off their phones and working in silence for up to 40 minutes. A potential pitfall which I anticipated was the fact that students would understandably finish the task earlier than others and would be likely to stay in the hall and disturb the atmosphere. I therefore gave permission to everyone at the outset that they could take as long



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as they wanted: the only rule was that if they finished they needed to wait for their friends outside. This could have meant a mass exodus to the café but, as it turned out, only five or six students opted for the bare minimum. The most disappointing result was that no one at all used the labyrinth and this is probably due to the fact that an individual student would probably feel self-conscious using it with his/her peers nearby. In future, I think the ‘journey’ metaphor could be better demonstrated if I walked from the back of the hall (joining the University) to the stage (receiving the degree).

Conclusion

The activity is now going to be used with first year students as part of a ‘professional studies’ module within a BA Education Studies. The important point to remember will be the need to prepare the students ahead of time for the activity. In the one described above, the context was provided by religious education and the values of spirituality and contemplation. In the forthcoming activity, the visit to the Great Hall will be prefaced by an introduction to reflective practice and the values of self-awareness and introspection: students are then acclimatised by the time they arrive.

Time and space for reflection would seem to be an important consideration in any compassionate pedagogy, allowing students to take ownership of their learning process. This exercise brought home to me how valuable the scale and atmosphere of the Great Hall can be as a resource in promoting a deep level of reflection and that most universities will have prestigious campus buildings but will rarely use them for teaching purposes, let alone this kind of exercise. It would be interesting to see what positive effects may arise if it were to be employed more strategically and broadly, for example as part of freshers or ‘welcome week’ activities.

Biographies

Geoff Taggart is a lecturer in education at the University of Reading and an ordained interfaith minister.

References

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