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SAKE: Student-led, skills-based workshops to support inclusivity within the creative curriculum

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Abstract

Prompted by questions surrounding inclusive education in the UK and attainment gaps between degree classifications for home Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) and home White students in higher education (HE), this article seeks to explore student-led, skills-based workshops as inclusive educational provision for art and design students. Focus group data from student participants in the workshops – entitled SAKE (Skills and Knowledge Exchange) – is discussed here and considered in the light of theories around culture, education, race and identity, including the work of Stuart Hall, Carl Rogers, Dennis Atkinson, David Gillborn.

Keywords

inclusivity; student-led workshop; creative curriculum; institutional change

Introduction

‘Inclusivity: The fact or policy of not excluding members or participants on the grounds of gender, race, class, disability.’

(Collins English Dictionary, 2017)

The dictionary definition at the start of this commentary hints at the fact that the complexities of defining ‘inclusivity’, lie in the fact that ‘inclusivity’ is often described according to what it is not.

The Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) aims to advance and champion equality and diversity for students and staff in British Higher Education Institutions. Findings by the ECU in 2012/13 highlighted attainment gaps for First and 2:1 degree classifications between home Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) and home White students. The ECU found that 57.1% of UK-domiciled BAME students received a top degree compared with 73.2% of White British students – a gap of 16.1%. Having observed similar divides, and in support of its strategic aims, UAL endorsed a programme of research that looked to institutional change and curriculum development in order to attempt to close the attainment gap. In support of the research, I began investigating established studio practice. Much of the data in this article emanates from the resultant, unpublished, report (Wild, 2013).

Priority is given in this article to the description and discussion of student-led SAKE (Skills and Knowledge Exchange) workshops, where students teach each other low-tech practical skills and enjoy cultural exchange and discussion.

Background to SAKE

As Academic Lead on the heavily subscribed Fashion and Textile subject area of the Foundation Diploma at Chelsea College of Arts, and later Chelsea, Camberwell and Wimbledon Colleges of Art (CCW), I had initially co-constructed a range of student-led SAKE workshops with students, as a way of coping with increasing student-to-staff ratios. A Foundation Diploma is an intense and often transformative period of learning, usually taking place over 8 to 9 months and requiring students to

embrace a wide range of both visual and conceptual experimentation. Ordinarily there is a diagnostic element to Foundation, enabling students to make informed degree choices. Within this encouraging and potent climate of experimentation and transformation, SAKE workshops aimed to simultaneously harness existing student skills and respond to intermittent student requests for more practical, skills-based learning.

The SAKE workshops were originally developed and examined between 2010 and 2011 via a PgCert Academic Practice action research project (Lewin, 1944 in McNiff, 2001) posing the question 'Can simple skills-based learning be better implemented through and facilitated by student-led workshops within communities of practice?' (Wild, 2011). The project was underpinned by educational theories including by Ronald Barnett (2007), Etienne Wenger (1998) and Carl Rogers (in Smith 1997/2004). Data revealed the student-led workshops to be an effective and enjoyable way for students to learn low-tech practical skills and get to know each other.

I wanted to explore whether the student-led SAKE workshops might support inclusivity in the creative curriculum when researched through the lens of race and education.

Literature review

In writings and essays such as 'Who needs identity' (1996), theorist Stuart Hall scrutinises how identities and stereotypes are formed within frameworks of power. As David Gillborn observes, Hall's theories impact on education too. Reporting on racism in compulsory education, Gillborn calls for teachers to 'empower' pupils and not impede student progress by teaching a detrimental 'hidden curriculum' that reinforces stereotypes (1992). Gillborn states that unless greater steps are taken to contest stereotypes 'schools will continue to teach very clear lessons about the second-class citizenship of ethnic minorities in the United Kingdom' (ibid, p.69). Considering Hall's insights, Gillborn's warning and the data on attainment gaps between home BAME and home White students supplied by the ECU some 20 years after Gillborn's statement, as educators we must not let our gaze veer from providing students with an inclusive educational experience that focusses on and celebrates the individual learner.

Student-led activities give authority and freedom to students as individuals, answering Gillborn's call to 'empower' not impede. Hall's theories are pertinent as SAKE workshops are co-created between tutors and students, interactions among students direct, develop and explore the creative curriculum thus shifting positionalities of power both in curriculum construction and delivery.

Aligning with education theories, aspects of the co-creation of - and ongoing co-creation within - SAKE workshops illustrate the importance of 'trust' discussed by Carl Rogers. The tutor, as facilitator of learning, 'trusts' the students' generosity of spirit to offer and teach skills, and 'values' their skill-set (Rogers, 1967 cited in Smith, 1997/2004). 'Trust' also relates to ideas by Ronald Barnett, as the facilitator also trusts in students' 'will' to teach skills (2007). The action of trust and belief in the student makes the fact that the tutor 'values' the student more apparent, again 'empowering' students (Gillborn, 1992). Through this act of trust, the student becomes valued for their individual skill-sets.

Further, the opportunity to challenge stereotypes is presented within the workshops (Gillborn, 1992). Peer learning takes place within the sessions, trust is present, as too is a collective will to learn (Wenger, 1998) because the students and facilitator have a mutual goal. Commenting on art education and multiculturalism, Dennis Atkinson places emphasis on teaching that is 'grounded in the encounter of learning' (2011, p.114) rather than representation. In SAKE workshops, the exchanges between students reflect the 'encounters' encouraged by Atkinson and an immediate, animate, cross referencing creative curriculum emerges. Through interaction, students present themselves and become known to each other as individuals, thus promoting an inclusive learning environment with equality at its core (Hall, 1996; Gillborn, 1992). Students are in essence, part of a fluid, creative

curriculum of their own making. The relaxed arena of the workshops offers the opportunity of discussion and cultural exchange between participants, all of which the tutor-facilitator may observe and reflect upon.

SAKE workshop design

An overview of SAKE workshop stages is presented here:

1. **The idea of the student-led workshops is introduced to students by the tutor.** Students are asked what sort of skills they might like to teach ('demonstrate' may be a less intimidating word to use with students) and what they might like to learn from their peers. Experience of facilitating the workshops indicates that initially, simple, low-tech skills are most suitable. Materials need to be easily portable, tools and equipment uncomplicated. Examples of past workshops include: fruit carving, line drawing, spontaneous making, knitting, crochet, breathing techniques for stress relief and mono-printing.
2. **A skill-set list is generated** from the discussion.
3. Workshops based on skills from the list (and any later suggestions) are considered and **scheduled for appropriate times** during the academic year. The timing of workshops is important, taking into account whether there are particular skills that might be beneficial to students during specific projects. For example, at the beginning of the academic year the tutor might aim to build a sense of community amongst the new cohort. Alternatively, the relaxed atmosphere of the workshops is appreciated by students after assessments in order to unwind and share experiences.
4. **Discuss timings / organise the workshops.** The dates, times and equipment lists for the skill-sets taught in each session are ideally announced at least a week in advance, to allow students time to gather any necessary materials. Numbers of workshops, attendees and time allowances for each workshop is dependent on student offers, room availability etc. Ordinarily, I facilitated 3 or 4 workshops running simultaneously in the same room in a morning or afternoon session. Numbers of attendees to each workshop may vary and it is important to keep numbers manageable for the student demonstrators. The ideal is 1 demonstrator to 5 or 6 learners. I have also used the same smaller group numbers to facilitate the teaching of a single skill across a large group of 30-40 students.
5. During the workshop, the **tutor acts as facilitator and observer** – checking in with students, keeping time and enabling students (both learners and demonstrators) to move around the work stations.

Discussion

Focus group data collected illuminates the positive and inclusive learning aspects of SAKE (Skills and Knowledge Exchange) student-led workshops.

The benefits of being taught a skill by a peer were highlighted in one focus group, with students stating that they could use and develop their 'own personal skills' (Wild, 2013) by learning from each other, and that they could use 'student language' (ibid) to explain ways of working. Students are enabled to use 'student language', thus answering Gillborn's call to 'empower' (1992).

Atkinson's support of a curriculum that is 'grounded in the encounter of learning' rather than 'representation' (2011, p.114) was reflected when one student focus group contained much discussion of the positive effects of peer group learning, outlining that peer learning brought people together, developed a sense of community and built 'positive communications' (Wild, 2013). Another

student focus group acknowledged and appreciated the relaxed atmosphere of the workshops during the intensity of the Foundation course (Wild, 2013).

As students are teaching each other, SAKE workshops reflect a creative curriculum where the individual and therefore the diversity of the whole cohort is paid attention to, thus addressing Hall's concerns around identity. Student-led workshops are sustainable as each academic year brings another set of individuals full of opinions, skills and ideas. SAKE workshops were identified in a student focus group as part of the diversity within the creative curriculum (Wild, 2013).

SAKE workshops were co-created with students as a way of including and sharing existing student skills in the creative curriculum, promoting autonomy for students and supporting reflective time for tutors. One student focus group confirmed that SAKE had indeed made practical skills more accessible.

Closing reflections

Gen Doy writes that she 'does not accept that there is any significant scientific proof of a division of human beings into groups called races' (2003, p.201). Concern about the complexities of a White researcher investigating inequality in education is acknowledged in this commentary. As a tutor, I am not comfortable using terms such as 'BAME' or 'White' to describe students who I see as individuals, opposed to categories. Such terms are wanting. Concerns emanate from an understanding of language that has been formed through and used within frameworks of power, as discussed by Hall (1996, 2003). A student focus group participant supported this position, with the comment, 'be your inside self' (Wild, 2013). Data in this article suggests that SAKE workshops enable students to be and be seen as their 'inside selves'.

Developed whilst an Academic Lead on the Chelsea College of Arts Foundation Diploma (now the CCW Foundation Diploma), I acknowledge that not all teachers may be afforded the same level of autonomy and curriculum ownership. However, the nature of the SAKE workshops - relaxed, attainable, sustainable and requiring very little expense or access to institution owned equipment means that they are particularly adaptive and accessible. It must also be noted that SAKE student-led workshops are not intended to replace staff expertise but act as an addition to the creative curriculum, at strategic and appropriate times during the academic calendar.

In researching race and education, suppositions can be made about what the curriculum may or may not bring to students. Remaining aware of research into race and education, I observe that many reports understandably focus on problematic outcomes, as opposed to exploring positive developments. Under the focus of race and education, this article has explored an aspect of educational provision and used theoretical frameworks to explore how these student-led, skills-based workshops can support inclusivity within the creative curriculum.

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Biography

Michelle Wild has taught at many of the UK's leading creative institutions including UAL and RCA and is currently Weave tutor at Middlesex University. Michelle has supplied textiles to an international list of clients including Eva Jiricna Architects (UK), Jack Lenor Larsen (New York), Barneys (Japan), Takashimaya (New York) and Neisha Crosland (UK).