

Mrs Mop, Mechanic and/or Miracle Worker: metaphors of study support

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Abstract

It is important to document and reflect on the work we do, to share knowledge and practices and to build up a series of case studies around our work. As study support tutors we are part of the academy, not separate from it, and we need to reflect on our own relationships within our own community and the institution we work in. As members of the ALDinHE we are a specific academic discourse community who create themselves through talk, formal and informal; through shared use of metaphor as well as practices (Blythman & Orr 2006). In this paper we explore our own roles within the university, how we see ourselves and how we are perceived by others. Increasingly we see our role as one of not only supporting students when writing or talking about their work but also helping to provide some of the expected cultural capital (Bourdieu 1997) which large numbers of students may not have the same access to as traditional students. Through sharing our own perceptions in a workshop at the last ALDinHE conference we encouraged debate and reflection around metaphors to describe the work we do. We are interested to continue this discussion with more staff in our future exploration of metaphors of study support to develop a sharper, more refined perspective on the work we do with the students and staff across the various institutions we work in.

Keywords: learning development, study support, art & design

Introduction

This paper explores the role of the study support or learning development tutor in Higher Education. It uses metaphors to reflect on what we do and is based on a workshop, delivered at the ALDinHE Conference in Bradford in March 2008. As three study support tutors from an art & design university we feel that using metaphors as a medium to encourage debate and deep reflection around how we are seen and how we see ourselves is of key importance. Thus we start to articulate our separate realities and differing positions.

It is divided into four main sections. The introduction sets the context and outlines the main theorists who have influenced our thinking. Section one documents the initial discussion that took place within the workshop. Our three case studies are presented in section two. Each is a personalised account of the work we do, focusing on a different aspect of study support. Finally, we share the positive metaphors that emerged from our workshop plenary.

More students with a greater cultural, social and linguistic diversity are studying in our institutions. This is following the implementation of widening access and life-long learning agendas. Up until recently most widening participation interventions have mainly focused on outreach and access to the academy with school and college activities and pre-course/summer schools. Although these developments are important, the focus is now shifting to student experiences on course. It is important not only to expect students to understand and change to fit in with academy practices, but to change the practices within the institution itself. As study support tutors we need to be part of that change.

Higher Education is still constituted as maintaining present hierarchies that exclude 'the other'. Satterthwaite et al (2003 p.31) observed that:

'Rather than viewing the students as the problem, assumptions about what is defined as rational neutral knowledge within the academy, needs to be problematised'.

Bowl (2007) also highlights this view, declaring that as academics we need to be at the forefront of changing educational practices.

To encourage debate we chose three contested metaphors; Mrs Mop, Mechanic and Miracle Worker that are often used to describe perceptions of what practitioners do when supporting students' academic writing and research (Orr and Blythman 2006). These metaphors reflect the idea of literacy as a unitary concept and a set of cognitive skills that can be taught and used unproblematically. This view fits with the banking model of education, which Freire (1972) discusses in his critique of education when he advocates a move to a more critical pedagogy that is based within students' lived experiences.

The academic literacies approach advocated by Lea (2004) and Street (2005) also challenges the skills-based paradigm and sees literacies as cultural and social practices that vary according to the context in which you are in.

Mitchell in Lea & Stierer (2000) in her work on writing in the disciplines expresses a desire for subject specific tutors where support is integrated within the students' disciplinary study. Working and studying in Law and History is very different from working in Dance or Art.

Lillis (2001, p.53) talks about how essayist literacy is a privileged literacy practice in western society that constitutes considerable cultural/linguistic capital:

'It is a socially valued and valuable practice conferring prestige on its users.'

She advocates the use of talk back not feedback with students and to move towards a more dialogic addressivity to writing - where you work with students on the construction of meaning. This includes a shift away from a dominant monologic type of addressivity where there is just one answer and it must conform within certain parameters and includes a denial of the actual participants. Lillis (2001, p.10) declares:

'Collaborative talk between student-writer and tutors can facilitate greater individual control over meaning making'.

Our role needs to be further strengthened by increasing our links to mainstream course activities through staff development and embedded support. Gorard (2007 p.106) also supports this view:

'Better collaboration between support and academic staff is needed to prevent students from slipping through the net.'

It is the nature of this collaboration that will be further discussed within this paper.

Section One: Workshop Discussion - exploring metaphors

The conference workshop opened with the participants discussing in small groups what the three contested metaphors often used to describe study support or learning development tutors meant to them. Below are the responses.

Mrs Mop

- Mopping up worries and fears
- Performing an essential role
- Being seen as having low status
- Clearing up the mess
- Dealing with the individual mess of students
- Feeding on demand
- Being invisible
- Having a gendered, caring role
- Acting as disinfectant for academic failure

This metaphor is a very negative one where practitioners are perceived as marginalised, gendered, of low status and not often seen, although essential. Many people in the group identified with this metaphor as a description of their work as

perceived by other academics in their institutions and at times how they saw themselves.

Mechanic

- Fixing things that are broken
- Doing jobs as they arrive, remedial
- Oiling the cogs
- Tweaking things to make them work better
- Making an efficient machine
- Being stuck in a rut /one dimensional
- Finding it difficult to get involved in dynamic initiatives
- Performing a dirty job: someone has to do it

Reflections on this metaphor have richer, more positive connotations. Practitioners are recognised as 'skilled' workers who know how to repair or fix individual students. However they are only consulted when things start to break down and apart from yearly service or MOT (induction/initial assessments) they are forgotten. They are recognised as essential parts of the university but only in a reactive way. Out of the cupboard and into the garage.

Miracle Worker

- Laying on of hands
- Implying the person you are working with is passive
- Being linked to power relations
- Carving out space and students and staff feel as if a miracle has taken place
- Being introduced to students as the miracle worker

This metaphor is an interesting one as practitioners receive more positive regard from staff although their role may not be understood. Practitioners perform amazing acts with students in laying hands on them and 'curing' them. The students have no active role to play.

Section Two: Case Studies - three different perspectives of practice

This section includes an account by each of the three authors of their recent experiences within one institution, made up of separate, but federated Colleges within one university. These three different approaches to supporting students in one HE Institution are described using more powerful and pro-active metaphors as part of the re-positioning of the work within the wider context of the academy.

Case study one: Embedded Academic Study Support

Having worked in Further Education as a Learning Support Co-ordinator for a number of years I recently took up a post at one of the traditional art colleges within the University. Moving into an equivalent position I quickly realised that there were significant differences between my role in HE compared to that in FE. In FE, where additional learning support is well established, support tutors are regarded as learning experts working with students, tutors and course teams to ensure the academic success of all. In addition to teaching qualifications the learning support tutors have specialist qualifications and staff training expertise. The provision of support is well developed with a range of models deployed to suit both the delivery of the course and the needs of the students.

Florence Nightingale

Once in post at the University, I realised that academic support for students was regarded as separate from mainstream provision and principally focused on disability. I had expected to be at the heart of the curriculum but I found myself at the edge of it in a reactive rather than proactive role. I felt like Florence Nightingale tending the wounded while the tutors got on with the serious business of delivering the course/fighting the war. Like Florence I did feel very valued, venerated even, for doing what the tutors found time-consuming and difficult, but I was working within a role that had limitations. I knew that for academic support to be successful it had to be delivered close to the course with the support tutor fully aware of the curriculum and the expectations of the tutors. I also knew that many students who needed

support did not get it. As Florence I was at the sidelines patiently awaiting the wounded. I could treat some of those who made it to me but for a few it was too late. It was clear to me that I had to get onto the front line.

Arctic Fox

The model of embedded support is widely used in FE colleges. Course teams and support tutors develop programmes of learning that are jointly planned and, in some cases, jointly delivered. For example, at the beginning of a teaching session the support tutor might give some input to the whole group on relevant vocabulary to prepare the students for the subject - specific content that followed. This embedded support allows tutors to develop a culture of inclusiveness within their classrooms and counters the notion of support as being remedial and separate. An additional benefit of this model is that the support tutor is recognised as having, on the one hand, equal status with the mainstream tutors but is also seen as being separate from the assessment process. Students can approach support with confidence and without fear of exposure. Furthermore those students with real need who are reluctant to seek support can be captured and worked with in situ. Like an arctic fox the support tutor moves among students and staff adapting to the needs of individuals and curriculum.

Now in HE I decided to set up embedded support on the Art Foundation course. With some 400 students it attracts those with a wide range of individual learning needs. Each subject area within the course is assigned an academic support tutor who works for one day a week within the studios alongside the art tutors. Each support tutor is both a practising artist and a qualified teacher. For example the academic support tutor working in the design group is a costume designer for film and television but also has a keen interest in learning development. The support tutors regard themselves as teachers first and foremost; however their additional roles as artists give them status with both staff and students and first hand knowledge of the context in which they are giving support.

Embedded support contributes to improved retention and achievement and enables all students to achieve their full potential. In the end of year evaluation the following comments were received:

'The subtlety in the language [of art and design] is supported and also the student is encouraged to think about art and design rather than focusing on being in a supported situation that separates written work from overall process.'

Pathway leader, Communication.

'It has allowed me to write more freely because I knew that help was available.'

Student, Product/Spatial pathway.

Animals such as the arctic fox or chameleon come to mind when trying to think of a metaphor for the embedded support tutor. Their ability to blend with their surroundings and move with ease amongst everyone is non-threatening and productive. However, within this college, the support tutor is more like the glue that holds things together or the line that joins up the dots – altogether much more artistic metaphors.

Case study two: one-to-one support with students

I work as a study support lecturer, providing 'drop-in' sessions in the study room that is attached to the library for a wide range of students from FE/ HE and Post Graduate courses. These sessions are on average 15-minute slots over the lunchtime in the library. The students who attend the sessions are drawn from across the college and either choose to attend or are recommended to attend by their tutors.

Trojan horse

When I now reflect on this, the students appear to follow the mechanic metaphor of quick fix, easy to solve, miracle-giving sessions! However during the very short

sessions they often share their fears and concerns, such as feeling unclear about what 'academic writing' should look like, what the project brief is about and how to start the reading. I work with them, questioning them about their ideas, discussing their own thoughts, getting them to consider their own identity and lived experience within their work. I start from a position of curiosity and engagement.

My position as a study support tutor is itself a marginalised one within the overall organisation and in the first three years in this role this was aggravated by being part-time. However this space within one-to-one support provides a safe place for a student that is very powerful in terms of reflecting on practices and discussing fears in a non-threatening environment. It can at times appear to be subversive as it gives time and space to students to reflect and critique the university processes and bringing their emotions into the process, often with some implicit support from the tutor. For this reason I regard the metaphor the Trojan horse as a key one to describe my work.

The study support tutor may appear to be one thing, a gift, a token, that may soothe difficult times but actually the role is a strategic role and political one within the organisation. I regard myself as an active change agent and encourage students to be the same. Examples of this are discussing strategies for planning work (using mind maps) and reading (active reading-questioning) and ways to discuss things with tutors and other students, encouraging students to question. I also encourage more of a dialogue around their work so that they have the choice about which words to use and order to plan work. So although it may appear that the work they do in a short period of time is skills-based and just focused on the language or task presented it is hopefully more transformative and more participatory. Another key role is encouragement and positive comments on the students' work as our role is not only to 'sort out their problems' but also to enable them to feel confident in their own abilities to complete their work. The space is also therefore an exploration of their emotional responses to their work; often there are few places within the academy for students to explore this.

Case study three: Working with subject staff

I manage study support in the largest college in the university and have worked hard to establish and strengthen links with subject staff over the eleven years of our existence. In dealing with subject staff and students, study support practitioners have to become chameleon-like and present themselves in a range of ways, depending on the particular set of circumstances. Here are three further metaphors that can be associated with working with subject staff.

Intelligence gatherer

During my one-to-one sessions with students in 'safe' spaces on the margins away from the delivery of their courses I often glean intelligence as students recount their experiences and perceptions of what might be termed unsupportive practices. Unfortunately there is a tradition of a robust, 'macho' approach to critiquing work, whether written or practical, in Art and Design. Those giving feedback sometimes do not recognise its affective consequences on students. Study support tutors are in a unique position to relay this to subject staff as we are often the people that students see most regularly on a one to one basis and are able to build a relationship of trust, which other teachers do not have the opportunity to develop.

Clearly dealings with subject staff have to be finely tempered. Tact and understanding of their situation have to be deployed.

Diplomat

The position of study support, its status and the respect and understanding within which it is held has to be built up over years. However this is fragile - reputation and respect can be damaged, indeed destroyed, overnight. In talking to subject colleagues, particularly after having gleaned intelligence from students, I have to use all the diplomacy I can muster. To maintain relationships and respect I have to choose my strategies and words carefully.

I have to be aware of issues of management of change although I am not the manager of subject colleagues and the changes I may advocate may meet with resistance. 'Slowly, slowly catchee monkey' is often more appropriate than radical change and direct confrontation and like a diplomat I must sometimes be content with small steps.

Intelligence gathered needs to be checked and used and alliances formed. Subject colleagues will often understand (un)consciously the role I play in retaining their students and helping their progression although the evidence for this is often anecdotal. Study support professionals therefore need to gather as much intelligence as they can in the form of student evaluation and feedback. As well as collecting statistics they also need to employ a strategic approach and make alliances where they can.

As a diplomat and the representative of study support it is important to be visible – walk the corridors, be seen, eat in the staff canteen; do not hide away in your safe marginal space.

Another task of the diplomat is to attend meetings, so go to the Board of Studies, College Academic Committee and cross-institution groups. Volunteer for things as it facilitates networking. You will be seen as capable of representing the institution. Finally use any other of your talents if possible to contribute to staff development, support research and so on.

The diplomat is also called upon to attend social occasions. In my case these are often the shows of students' work. Go to these; make sure you are seen by the right people. Work the room/gallery. This is undoubtedly one of the most pleasurable parts of the job. In study support I often see students when they are struggling with their written tasks. However, they often excel in their practical work and being able to see this work is illuminating and often a surprise. The show is frequently a good situation in which to network with all levels of subject staff from top managers to part-time staff and both staff and students appreciate the fact that I have bothered to attend.

Partner/Donor

The third set of metaphors stems from the use of collaboration between study support and subject staff. Where possible joint projects should be planned and bid for. Clearly there may not always be funds available and colleagues may be glad to co-operate without them, but money talks and strong relationships have been built up with colleagues and courses with whom I had little prior contact.

This sort of collaboration can bring concrete results. Relations with subject staff, some of whom are part-time and previously unaware of the existence of study support, have been strengthened resulting in a better understanding of what we do. Referrals particularly for help with third-year dissertations, have increased, with both staff suggesting that students could benefit and students, who have met the study support professional during the project, self-referring.

Equally importantly projects such as these get study support professionals out of the safe margins and into the subject teaching space and widen our knowledge and understanding of specific subject areas. Collaboration tends to be seen as positive by the institution. More staff and students can see the benefits of study support.

Successful collaboration encourages further project bids with other subject colleagues and, octopus-like, study support can extend its influence into further curriculum areas to the benefit of all concerned: students, subject staff and study support professionals.

Section Three: Workshop feedback - Towards new and more powerful metaphors

After sharing the three different perspectives with the participants they were asked in small groups to consider any other positive metaphors they felt could inform the discussion. These metaphors were then fed back to the whole group and included:

- Tightrope walker
- Sink plunger
- Gardener

- Wonder Woman
- Guide across the mountain- (Sherpa /donkey/horse)
- Comedian
- Window cleaner
- “Tiramisu” (pick me up)
- Agony aunt

The workshop was very successful and produced some lively debate. The activity of articulating our roles by creating positive metaphors was empowering and energising for both the workshop participants and leaders. This model of talking about our ideas in a workshop is one used by Freire (1992, p.43) who believes in the importance of talking about ideas to clarify and enrich emerging concepts.

‘Speaking of ideas before writing about them, in conversations with friends, in seminars, in talks was also a way not only of testing them but re-creating them, of giving them second birth.’

Metaphors can be helpful in reflecting on the work and explaining it to others, whether staff or students, or the outside world. Indeed, metaphors are often used within education and are particularly appropriate in the visual field the authors work in. As the work of study support expands in HE and becomes better understood and more widely acknowledged it is to be hoped that any metaphors employed reflect a more positive attitude to the field.

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