

Magic to conjure up academic skills for dissertation support

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Presentation abstract

This project uses magic to explore dissertation skills with students. Students in a session on preparing for the dissertation learnt a magic trick and then used their experience of learning the trick to reflect and to develop narratives around their dissertation topic focussing on the skills of researching and writing. We compared the results of the intervention group to those of a control group (who were given the same session but excluding the magic trick). The teaching sessions integrated skills essential for completing the dissertation such as critical thinking, linking, metacognitive reflection, and conceptualising the process of a long project. Previous research has suggested that using magic can stimulate curiosity, engage and motivate students, and that they will find the session more memorable (see Moss, Irons and Boland, 2017; Wiseman and Watt, 2020; Wiseman, Wiles and Watt, 2021)

The presentation reported the findings from pre- and post-session questionnaires completed by participants to evaluate the use of a magic trick in teaching dissertation skills by:

- Evaluating the effectiveness of using a magic trick to teach dissertation skills.
- Evaluating the use of magic to make skills teaching more memorable.
- Evaluating the use of magic to support motivation and positive emotions around dissertation tasks.
- Evaluating the use of magic to counter some of the negative affects students encounter such as lack of motivation or negative self-efficacy beliefs.

Community response

This work presented is valuable in its exploration of creativity in relation to teaching and in its practical demonstration of how to move away from entrenched modes of delivery. I appreciated that the speakers emphasised that they weren't professional magicians; it isn't so much about the magic itself, as the process of learning the trick and the creative space this opens up for the student.

Within the teaching profession, it is easy to become entrenched in enacting familiar tried and tested modes of delivery. So it was refreshing to see something completely different in this session! What really struck me is how students were able to draw connections between the experience of learning the magic trick and how to approach academic writing. I found it interesting that this approach took away pressures and worries about failing, which then allowed students to look at their work from a new perspective. Fear of failure is closely associated with academic writing, particularly because, when reading, students are being exposed only to the final version of a piece of writing, not the entire process. This can create a false presentation of perfection in published writing, which can translate into students feeling as though they are doing something wrong in the process of drafting, editing, and organising complex thoughts into a written format (Cameron, Nairn and Higgins, 2009; Forster, 2020).

The success of this innovative approach opens up the possibility of other creative approaches to academic writing and to using serious play to help students develop other academic skills. For a session to be memorable, we should strive to fully engage our audience by being original or unexpected. Some subjects by their nature can be perceived as 'dry', but that's not to say that we have to fulfil this expectation. The room loved the trick and the valid discussions that the research provoked and this made working magic into Learning Development seem a much more manageable prospect. It has also made me think about other ways that creative activities could be used to engage students about approaching the dissertation process and to question how this might be developed further for different topics/skills beyond the dissertation example demonstrated. Given the time and resource constraints LD-ers often face it can be difficult to incorporate new teaching methods. However, the presenters demonstrated that incorporating creative approaches into teaching is feasible. A practical understanding of how to use this approach is therefore

valuable in giving LD-ers the tools and confidence needed to weave some magic into their teaching practice.

The discussion around the research not going to plan illustrated the fact that problems will undoubtedly emerge in the course of research, and this was useful to hear because sometimes people do not admit this. It is rare for a conference presentation to focus on what didn't work even though there is a great deal of learning to be had from any failure. Transparency around problems and lessons learned like this helps to create realistic expectations for other members of the LD community; it is empowering to talk about how not everything will be perfect and to know that there are ways around such challenges. Discussing potential solutions to such problems helps other Learning Developers who might seek to implement similar strategies in their own teaching.

Next steps and additional questions

The popularity of this session and the community responses reveal a real thirst for innovative and memorable teaching techniques amongst the LD profession. How might we adapt the techniques demonstrated in this session beyond the examples used here and why is it important for us to deliver memorable, innovative teaching that also supports learners with the skills they need to navigate the landscape of HE? Also, let's look at the power and importance of sharing our experiences with one another when things don't go to plan; it is so useful to recognise that we (as a sector) need space to fail in order to be creative, just like our learners. Is this a luxury we often deny ourselves?

Authors' reflection

Preparing to present our work to the Learning Development community was a useful process. Responses in the first part of the study were positive, indicating that students found using magic as a method for thinking through their dissertations fun and motivating, and that learning and performing the trick provided a useful metaphor for conceptualising the dissertation process and crystallising some key learning points. However, we encountered the challenge that one aspect of the research did not go entirely as expected: we had hoped to use data from focus groups with participants alongside our qualitative

questionnaires but timing and recruitment issues meant that this was not possible. Despite this change to our original plans, the rich qualitative data we gathered from the questionnaires gave us a lot to work with. The conference prompted us to reflect on how best to communicate the significant findings of our research while also soliciting ideas for development from experienced peers that we can use in the next round of data collection. We found it encouraging that the audience engaged so enthusiastically with the session, and particularly that they 'got' what we were trying to achieve.

Beyond the engaging surface of the magic trick, we wanted to show the importance of playful learning experiences and how these link to the literature on creating learning spaces that liberate students from negative affects and the fear of failure around academic skills. Colleagues applied these ideas more widely in their comments and questions, with an understanding that it was not just about motivating students with magic but also about opening up the process of learning, exploring the connections made, and uncovering the learning potential behind a creative space.

The audience reaction was very validating for us; it gave us confidence that the LD community felt this project was worthwhile. We were pleased that colleagues saw the benefits and that our presentation sparked discussion and creative thought on where we could go next. It reinforced for us that we are doing something innovative that is also grounded in LD principles and useful for a wider audience. We will work with the suggestions on incorporating magic into a wider range of contexts and will look forward to sharing further results.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to all the contributors who shared their reflections and enriched our insight into this conference presentation and its impact on the audience. Special thanks go to Emily Webb from the University of Leeds and Dr Victoria Yuskaitis from the University of Southampton.

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