



THINKING INSIDE THE BOX: A PEDAGOGICAL JOURNEY

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Thinking Inside the Box, otherwise known as TITB, is a co-curricular project which connects students with Latin American archives. Even more so, it is a radical pedagogical concept and an experiment into student-led learning. The goal of TITB is deliberately undefined lending itself to more innovative free-form thinking, as students are allowed the freedom to transform it in any way they decide.

IF IN 5 YEARS I DIDNT RECOGNISE [TITB] THAT WOULD BE A REALLY STRONG OUTCOME -S2

It challenges students to take their learning into their own hands and reclaim autonomy of their education. TITB offers an alternative to the institutionalised and hegemonic practices of modern higher education and suggests the benefits of dismantling the traditional hierarchal structure of the teacher/student relationship.

AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

The aim for my research was to conduct interviews on the students, staff and stakeholders involved in TITB for the purpose of evaluating the impact of the project on students' learning development and skills acquisition.

'Friendship as method' (Tillman-Healy, 2003) was adopted for the student interviews, creating a more conversational and informal setting and encouraging experiential narrative learning (Clark & Rossiter, 2008). Eight students were paired up and took turns asking each other a set of 10 questions. These were all open ended to encourage in-depth answers.

Originally the staff interviews were structured and implemented similar questions to the student interviews. However, this method was discarded as I realised that staff involvement in the project was incredibly varied so the same questions would not apply to everyone. Therefore, I decided to change to a semi-structured approach where I would ask both set and unplanned questions, allowing for more personal and relevant responses.

FINDINGS

'I THINK JUST PICKING YOUR OWN [FORM OF ASSESSMENT] GIVES YOU THE OPPORTUNITY TO DO SOMETHING THAT YOU ARE INTERESTED IN - 2A

The students consistently praised the student-led nature of the project. Many of them said that, because they could decide the outcome of the project, they felt more motivated and invested in it.

Traditional educational systems operate within a hierarchical framework, with educators seen as superior and students as inferior. This dynamic fosters dependency on academic authority figures and hinders the development of critical thinking skills. In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire argues that treating students as passive recipients of knowledge is oppressive as it denies them autonomy of their education. The absence of active participation suppresses critical thinking and reinforces the hierarchy where students refrain from 'talking back' - challenging authority.

'I FELT LIKE I GAVE IT MY INTERPRETATION, MY MEANING OF THINGS AND LIKE I ALSO RELATED TO MY EXPERIENCES OR MY COUNTRY'S EXPERIENCES OF DICTATORSHIP' - 8A

This student explores how TITB inspired them to think critically and from a personal level. Alongside 8A, other students both deliberately and inadvertently suggested that TITB had helped them to develop their independent, critical thinking.

'I CAME TO THE CONCLUSION THAT...!' - 2B

Specifically, TITB's students evidenced a development in their critical consciousness, as defined by Paulo Freire. It involves reflective and critical thinking about the world, society, and personal experiences, questioning power dynamics and structural inequalities. TITB promotes critical consciousness by empowering them to come as individuals with their own lived experiences and skills which can help them to contextualise their learning and develop a deeper understanding.

'YOU HAVE NO IDEA WHAT'S IN THAT BOX, AND YOU'RE GOING THROUGH, AND THEN SUDDENLY YOU'VE GOT A NOTEPAD AND A PEN NEXT TO YOU AND YOU'RE MAKING IDEAS BECAUSE YOU'RE THINKING ABOUT MONTHS IN THE FUTURE AND WHAT YOU WANT TO DO WITH THIS SPECIFIC THING' - 4A

The student encounter with the archive was describes as TITB's 'genesis moment' and was often cited as the most transformative experience by students. Many students had never ventured into an archive or engaged with primary sources prior to TITB's visit to the archives in London. Students were drawn in by the real and authentic nature of these sources

'YOU'RE DEALING WITH THE MATERIALS FIRST-HAND AND IT ALMOST MAKES YOU FEEL LIKE IN A WAY YOU'RE THERE' - 3A

Interacting with primary materials Seemed to awaken a deeper level of critical consciousness, as they were able to contextualise the history from their own personal experiences and view the sources from alternative perspectives.

Furthermore, TITB facilitated connections between students and Latin American communities, particularly those who endured dictatorships. These interactions helped students form a connection to the history.

'IT'S VERY HUMANISING. SOMETIMES HISTORY CAN BE FILTERED THROUGH MANY DIFFERENT PEOPLE AND EXCLUDES A LOT OF CONTENT FROM WHAT ORIGINALLY HAPPENED. - 3B

The students were particularly inspired by Antonio Kadima and his political posters which he used as to protest Pinochet's dictatorship of Chile when the military had control of the media. His work inspired the students to host a political poster workshop. This workshop not only engaged the public, but the posters made an exhibition of their own and arguably surpassed the impact of a traditional exhibition.

'THAT SHARED LEARNING, THAT SHARED CREATION WAS FOR ME THE MOST JOYOUS PART, RATHER THAN , YOU KNOW, THE FINAL PIECE AT THE END IN THE UNION - 4A

Students valued this collaborative and authentic learning experience over formal assessments, reflecting the benefits of authentic assessment in allowing students to showcase their skills and knowledge in a meaningful context. TITB's feedback highlights that proposed assessments tend to be less impactful, as students feel more ownership and fulfilment when they have control over the outcomes of their work. Many students also noted that the enjoyment of the project would have diminished had it been graded.

References

- Clark, M. Carolyn and Rossiter, Marsha; Narrative Learning in Adulthood
- Freire, Paulo; Pedagogy of the Oppressed
- Freire Paulo; Education for Critical Consciousness
- Hooks, Bell; Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black
- Tillman-Healy, Lisa M; Friendship as a Method