

How risky is transformative learning? Evaluating Pedagogy of the Heart assessment in a first year topic through a lens of risk

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Abstract

Learning that engages the soul as well as the intellect can be 'transformative'. Our innovative Pedagogy of the Heart approach, using evocative arts-based assessment, seeks not only to direct first year students to integrate evidence-based knowledge with the critical and practical, but also to enter into the lived experience of others to understand how these forms of knowledge shape their own human selves. This pedagogy invites students on an unfamiliar, unpredictable learning journey, asking them to engage with their deeper selves, with various layers of risk for both students and tutors. Although initially unlikely to be appreciated by students, awareness of these risks often becomes acute at the moment of assessment, as emotional responses inherent in being assessed and assessing others' transformation come into sharp relief. This presentation uses the lens of risk theory to re-evaluate recent research into the novel evocative arts-based assessment used in this pedagogical approach.

A risky choice? Pedagogy of the heart in a first year health science topic

Our curriculum takes a 'sociology of health' approach to teaching health policy, and its sociological dimensions to first year undergraduate students in a generic health science award that provides foundational studies for nurses, physiotherapists, paramedics, occupational therapists, doctors, and dieticians. The topic focuses on population groups potentially encountered in the future professional practice such as the elderly, those with a mental illness or disability and Indigenous Australians. These groups are at risk of institutionalisation or have been victims of failures in de-institutionalisation. Student exposure to these groups and understanding of the consequences of being part of these may be limited and in many cases based on their own personal experiences. The pedagogical underpinning of the topic offers a balance between exploring the structured principles of evidence-based practice and the impact of health policy, and encouraging an 'education of the heart' (Willis & Leiman, 2013) or evocative knowledge to elicit an understanding of the 'lived experience' of these clients. Our pedagogy takes as its fundamental premise that education includes the heart as well as critical and cognitive faculties. Mezirow (2000) referred to this form of education as 'transformative', but others have given it alternative names- imaginal, mythopoetic, and experiential knowing (Bradbeer, 1998). Learning is made meaningful when it engages the individual at every level of their being. The pedagogical method bridges the positivist, the critical, and the practical with the imaginal, through using art (painting, sculpture), drama, story, film and other creative activities as a method of instruction and assessment, with the inclusion of a written reflection providing theoretical support to the creative work. Such arts-based approaches allow knowledge to be organised so that the ontological questions are raised for consideration.

This 'education of the heart' approach was evaluated by conducting focus groups with students and tutors in 2011/2012. Both groups enjoyed the approach, with students reporting gaining a greater understanding of the lived experience of population groups; development of new knowledge, awareness and compassion; and a clearer perception of future professional practice. Tutors viewed the pedagogy as a means of positively and dynamically engaging students in an evocative portrayal of lived experiences of various health population groups, and as a means to incorporate theory and policy with practical implications. However, the focus group responses raised a number of challenges and concerns in relation to the evocative arts-based assignment (Willis, Abery and Leiman, 2013). This has led us to re-evaluate the pedagogy from a risk perspective, and explore further the relationship between emotion and risk in assessment. We have identified a need for greater consideration as to how the benefits of assessing such transformative learning can be balanced and the risks managed.

Risk, Responsibility and Young People

In *Risk Society*, Ulrich Beck (1992) argues that as society moves to increase its wealth through industrialisation, science and technology, it also generates new and increased risks. Endeavours to deal with these risks, through further advances in science and technology invariably produce unpredicted risky outcomes. This is the very cycle of science and technology. The solutions to the new dilemmas science create themselves generate new risks, with once private issues becoming major social risks (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). For Beck (1991) and Giddens (1991), this new knowledge of the fallibility of science results in a deep distrust of experts - and we can no longer assume discipline academics or researchers are trusted in the same way as in previous generations. Risk is democratic in its consequences, with its impact not confined to one socio-economic or ethnic group (Beck, 1992), but permeating all classes. It is risk, whether technological or social, that transforms society and the individual. Our relationship to risk and uncertainty produces a new politics of the social, as well as a politics of the self. Beck's notion of individualism replaces past norms with new social expectations: we are now more deeply caught up in the economy, the welfare state, and the labour market because our fate within these social institutions is now fully our own responsibility. We have a precarious freedom—free to make our own way as individuals in a world unrestricted by community pressures linked to class or gender norms, but simultaneously more dependent on the market and the economy (Beck, 1992; Beck & Gernshim-Beck, 1995).

For France (2009) and Spencer (2013), navigating these risks is the new transitional ritual for young people, replacing once shared rituals of pre and early industrial society. These new risks include achieving a career in the labour market, but also extend to navigating decisions around personal practices (e.g. smoking, drug taking, safe sex, eating, exercise and maintaining health) (Austin 2009). Regulating an approach to these issues is part of a young person's management of risk and the ritual of becoming an adult: responsibility requires constant self-monitoring. Young people at university have already begun this journey; acquiring the necessary academic grades to gain a place, maybe in the course of their choice or aspiring to it, then balancing work, study and social life as they forge their identity. Jeopardising this can be seen as irresponsible risk taking. Cebulla (2009, p.39) argues young people are expected to be 'deliberative decision-takers who opt, decide and revise their actions repeatedly in the light of newly emerging evidence', arising firstly from their need to transition from school to university, adolescence to adulthood and from student to career, and secondly from the very risks built into modernity. These include the transitions from

industrial to post-industrial society that include the new social risks emerging in the labour market: flexible working hours, the rise in female labour participation, reduced unionisation and increased casualization. Despite these new opportunities, young people are now regarded as personally more responsible for achieving their own positive outcomes, even as socio-economic uncertainties undermine young people's ability to construct and predict their lives purposefully, intentionally and, most importantly, reliably (Cebulla, 2009, p.52). Forging a career through university is one way of dealing with this risk. This is emotional work.

Risk, Emotion, Learning and Assessment

Despite the failure of some theorists to accord emotion a place in the management of risk, (e.g. Barbalet, 2009) others increasingly do recognise the role of affect in the way individuals manage risk and that fear, anxiety and danger arising from past experience or the anticipation of future misfortune impact on decision making (Taylor-Gooby & Zinn, 2006). They argue risk is managed through the logic of argument, the available evidence and past experience, all contextual factors tinged by feelings and experience.

Whilst it is not entirely clear just how emotion affects learning, there is no serious dispute that it is a factor (Falchikov & Boud, 2007, p.145). Arguably '[e]motional responses are part of everyone's experiences of being assessed' (Broadfoot, 2007, p.123). Accounts of negative experiences often outweigh the positive, (Falchikov & Boud, 2007) yet not all emotional experiences of assessment are negative (Krapp, as cited in Falchikov & Boud, p.147), and 'good performance ... may be a consequence of a person's particular response to stress' (Hay, Bochner & Dungey, 2006, p.292). For students, all assessment is a risk; allowing their work to be viewed and critiqued by someone else; whether their knowledge or skill will meet externally imposed criteria; whether their performance will meet required levels of competency. Taking such risks makes students vulnerable, even though this risk is often regarded as a necessary and expected part of the learning experience (University of Nottingham, undated). For teachers, decisions about assessment design are influenced and constrained by numerous factors including expected learning outcomes, efficiency of marking, accuracy, time, class sizes, technological limitations, and prescribed curriculum. Many of these factors can be characterised as elements of risk management – factors designed to ensure objectivity and consistency in assessment across student cohorts, or to justify validity and reliability of assessment methods to students, institutions or external professional bodies.

As assessors, teachers too are vulnerable – are their grades justified, will they be accepted by students, is the feedback provided useful? Will the student evaluations impact on promotion? Emotional responses to risk are played out in the context of assessment, impacting on teachers and students differently; with both acutely aware of assessment as a gateway to future success. Although emotional effects of assessment can be long lasting, Falchikov and Boud (2007, p.147) note warnings against seeking to remove all negative emotions from the learning process because 'some negative emotions can be beneficial... some degree of anxiety is necessary for learning'. Ramsden's (2003, pp.204–205) *Rules for Better Assessment* include 'Do everything in your power to lessen the anxiety raised by assessments' and 'Be suspicious of the objectivity and accuracy of all measures of student ability and conscious that human judgement is the most important element in every indicator of achievement.' These and similar pedagogical principles can be characterised as seeking to minimise risk in assessment.

Using Risk as a Tool for Re-evaluating Pedagogy and Assessment

Our core first year Health Science topic hosts a diverse student cohort from various degree programs. Each year, approximately a third of these students will not have been accepted into their degree of choice, and are seeking alternative pathways into their course through attaining a high Grade Point Average (GPA). Our research with student focus groups identified for many the importance of, and anxieties associated with, achieving high grades, with heightened risks attached to assessment. Student responses showed they perceived standard assessment (academic writing, exams) as more acceptable, having more value, providing more structure and predictability than the novel evocative arts-based assignment. Although the arts-based assessment was widely enjoyed and recognised as encouraging deeper and personally transformative learning, it created anxiety, appeared risky, and was assumed to favour those with creative talent despite also requiring a 750 word written reflection providing theoretical support to the creative piece. Students raised concerns that the assessor would not share or understand the message they were attempting to portray. While they enjoyed the opportunity of being able to express their own emotions, they worried the tutor would not interpret their work as they intended, with a consequential negative impact on assessment grade.

Tutors embraced the pedagogy overall, reporting that it gave them a unique opportunity to engage with students at a deep level. However, they indicated anxiety in marking the evocative arts-based assignment, concerned their interpretation could be influenced by their own experiences. They were very conscious of student anxiety regarding grades. Several commented on the difficulty of not being seduced by the immediate artistic standard of the work submitted, often extremely high, to focussing on whether the written work adequately described relevant theoretical concepts. Several admitted experiencing difficulty removing their own values and beliefs when assessing emotional and evocative content. The need to focus on assessment criteria while accepting students' potential naivety of sociological concepts was a challenge. The range and standard of artwork caused concerns about uniformity and justifiability. As students were often exploring sensitive issues (e.g. mental health) tutors felt challenged by the need to determine whether a student was portraying an image of the issue, or in fact making self-disclosures about their own situation. The care and responsibility for students who did self-disclose was seen as both a risk and responsibility beyond that usually attached to assessment. One tutor noted difficulty in marking a piece of work that was not of a high standard but which did disclose personal mental health issues, fearing that a negative grade might further adversely impact on the student - a serious risk indeed. Awareness of risks in any learning journey becomes acute at the moment of assessment, as emotional responses inherent in being assessed and assessing others' transformation comes into sharp relief. This appears to be even more so when adopting a 'pedagogy of the heart' approach using evocative arts-based assessment. Despite clear evidence of the very positive benefits of this pedagogical approach for students in making space for transformative learning, greater consideration needs to be given to how the benefits of assessing such transformation can be balanced and the risks appropriately managed.

Questions for discussion:

- Are some types of assessment simply too risky?
- How can we better balance the benefits and risks of assessment?

- How can we better equip students, teachers and assessors to respond to those risks?

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