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Facilitating emotionally resilient learning in times of crisis

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Practice-inspired working paper

Abstract

We live in a period of extraordinary instability. International crises include climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical vulnerability in Africa, and the war in Ukraine. In the UK, we are experiencing high levels of poverty and inflation, the cost-of-living emergency, and the impact of Brexit. It is vital for educators to try and make sense of these events, to consider their cause and impact and how they influence and often harm lives.

This paper sets out a pedagogical model which allows students from a wide range of courses to explore the ways in which these momentous societal events affect them on a personal level and equips them to be resilient, skilled, and emotionally intelligent graduates. The model has three complementary elements:

> ➢ Pedagogy underpinned by professional experience and expertise
> ➢ Pedagogy informed by research and scholarly activity
> ➢ Pedagogy inspired by the lived experience

The paper presents an example of how the model can be applied in practice drawing on a submission made to Nottingham Trent University's Vice-Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching (VCAET). The model has a broad, cross-discipline relevance and applicability. It recognises that to understand and to respond to local, national, and international crisis educators and students need to establish a career identity, engage with research, and reflect on lived experience.

Key words: lifelong learning, research-informed teaching, emotional resilience, crisis, employability, lived experience

Introduction

UNESCO (2020) describes higher education as an asset which 'enables personal development and promotes economic, technological and social change'. Research has found that for many students higher education has three distinct purposes: to contribute to society, to achieve personal growth, and to secure meaningful employment (Brooks et al, 2021). Naturally these functions of higher education are impacted by the period of uncertainty and crisis in which we are living.

Rosenthal et al (1989) describe a crisis as when the political establishment identify a threat to the core values of society. More recently the 'creeping crisis' has been identified as turmoil which arrives in full view and yet takes decision-makers and the public by surprise (Boin, 2020, p.116). Key examples are the over-prescription of antibiotics, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, breakdown of traditional media and rise of social media, the European migration crisis, climate change, and the COVID-19 pandemic. The severity of contemporary crises has led to the construction of the 'super wicked problem' characterised as being exigent and relying on the response of authorities who have caused the problem thus producing poor policy responses (Peters and Tarpey, 2019, p219).

The personal development and social change which UNESCO emphasise as key functions of higher education are shaped and complicated by the period of instability in which we are living. Educators must attempt to make sense of (and reflect in their teaching) the 'wicked problems' society faces, to consider their cause and impact, and how they influence and often harm lives. Crucially, educators need to be sensitive to the fact that students themselves are impacted by crisis; a pedagogical path must be navigated which analyses the enormity of contemporary challenges, and at the same time acknowledges the more personal day-to-day impact.

The model described in this paper draws on a submission made to Nottingham Trent University's Vice-Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching (hereafter VCAET) from the BA (Hons) Health and Social Care degree in the School of Social Sciences. It recognises that to understand and to respond to local, national, and international crisis, educators and students need to establish a career identity, engage with research, and reflect on lived experience. The model is influenced by crisis analysis and policy literature, but rather than trying to add to this body of work, it seeks to provide a working template for how momentous societal events can be explored with students with the aim of creating resilient, skilled, and emotionally intelligent graduates. The model has a broad, cross-discipline relevance and applicability.

The model has three complementary elements: pedagogy underpinned by professional experience and expertise; pedagogy informed by research and scholarly activity, and pedagogy inspired by the lived experience. The model and its application in practice relies on the inter-connectedness of these three elements:
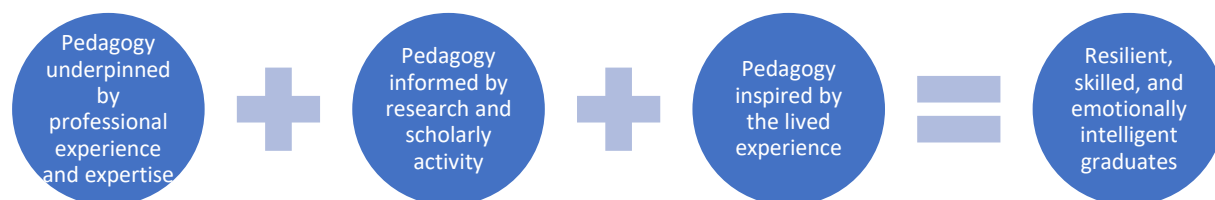
Diagram 1: Creating resilient, skilled and emotionally intelligent graduates pedagogical model.

The remaining sections of the paper look at each of the elements of the model and provide an example of how this has been applied in a teaching session which focused on the causes and consequences of food poverty and was observed for NTU's VCAET. The paper concludes with a consideration of the versatility of the model and possible future development.

Pedagogy underpinned by professional experience and expertise

The first element of the pedagogical model described in this paper centres on the importance of the professional experience of the teacher and their expertise and how these aspects enhance learning and the student experience. It recognises that to equip students with the skills needed in contemporary society, educators must convey a sense of authority coupled with integrity; this is linked to professional values and ethical behaviour (Wright, 2015). This requires reflecting on the professional journey, the experiences and people that have shaped you, the ethical dilemmas that you have faced, the achievements which you are proud of, the situations where you have fallen short, and the areas where there is a need for further development and improvement.

The educator-student dynamic is galvanised when teaching is underpinned with these critical professional reflections. It can allow students to see a more human, sometimes fallible, side to a lecturer. It demonstrates that developing a career identity is an ongoing process and fosters stimulating discussion points. Professional knowledge and pedagogy are inextricably linked, Loughran (2019, p532) effectively summarises this process for teachers, but it applies equally in Higher Education: 'It is the pedagogical reasoning underpinning their practice that shows the richness of what they know, how they have come to know it, and why it works in practice in *their* context.' Similarly, Banks et al (2005) emphasise the importance of subject knowledge within the curriculum, rating this as highly as the processes of teaching; Lunenberg and Korthagen (2009) argue that curriculum development should embrace experience, theory, and practical wisdom.

Pedagogy which draws on professional practice is a crucial element in helping students to critically consider the instability created by contemporary crisis, relate this to their own experiences and to develop the skills needed in the workplace. When preparing a teaching session, a useful starting point can be to think about how one's own professional experience can be incorporated into the teaching, and the ways in which this will interest and challenge students. Reflecting on my own professional experience (working in the voluntary sector and local government) has opened up a wide range of important conversations with students. Issues which are commonly discussed include managing conflict, coping under pressure, conflicts of interest, policy and campaigning work, line management, confidentiality, partnership work, communication skills, and equality and diversity. Some of the key teaching methods employed to explore these issues are role plays, problem-based learning case studies, structured debate, Q and As, expert panels, and mock interviews. The use of guest lecturers 'from the field' can enhance this type of learning and complement modules which prepare or support student for work-based placements. The use of social media, podcasts and expert blogs can help to make links between theoretical concepts and professional competences. A wide range of assessments can be employed to assess learning of this nature including presentation, group work, and portfolios.

I used my professional expertise in relation to food poverty for the submission to the VCAET. Food poverty emerged as an increasing problem during my final years working in local government. When discussing the causes and consequences of food poverty, it helped to be able to share my experience of working directly with service users as well as responding on a policy and operational basis. Important themes around stigma, and language were discussed, alongside my experiences of groups in society who are susceptible to food poverty. I could share my experience of the complications and dilemmas in establishing referral mechanisms for food banks, and ethical concerns around their long-term use and sustainability. Anonymised case-studies were a particular useful way of sharing the lived experience of food insecurity and linking more theoretical concepts to practical realities. It was a useful way of discussing the importance of accurate case-recording and statistical monitoring. Interesting debate was initiated through sharing my experience of meetings with local councillors and evidence which I have submitted to parliamentary enquires. For many students this gave a first insight into campaigning work, the political dynamics which underpin this, and the need to make clear and compelling arguments.

Pedagogy informed by research and scholarly activity

My research and scholarly activity seeks to make sense of the uncertain world in which we live and how policy can alleviate and/or exacerbate crisis. There is a risk that students are overwhelmed by this or view it as an abstract and alienated notion. The second part of the model presented here, pedagogy informed by research and scholarly activity, has two main aims. First, to join the dots between complex ideas and the real-world, and second to create enquiring and critical minds. As both students and future professionals it is vital to understand not all knowledge is already known; the workplace demands that you engage in evaluation, both of your own practice and the environment which you work in.

Brew (2006, p31) urges academics to see themselves as 'knowledge builders' and recognise that the distinction between teaching and research is false and limiting. Healey (2005, p183) suggests that there can be challenges around the conceptualisation of 'research' in a teaching environment. He argues that research is most meaningful when students are actively involved, describing this as 'inquiry-based learning'. This is the approach that my colleagues and I employ on the NTU Health and Social Care degree and it reflects the research-informed principles set out by Advance HE (2017):

- Research-led: students are taught discipline specific research findings
- Research-oriented: students are taught research methodologies
- Research-tutored: student learn through discussion and debate
- Research-based learning: students learn through active research

Naturally, teaching and learning about research will often use a mixed methods approach, combining elements of the above principles in a series of activities. Examples from the Health and Social Care team include the recruitment of undergraduate students as teaching interns who research and deliver teaching on agreed topics, and the co-production of research with students exploring transitions between levels of undergraduate study.

In this model being 'research active' has a specific meaning which clearly links to the professional expertise and experience described in the previous section. It can be described as research which is grounded in professional experience with the aim of informing practice. This type of research is often co-produced with practitioners giving it professional accountability and validation. It relies on the analytical skills of academics aligned with the frontline-knowledge of practitioners to produce recommendations to influence policy. Examples of research I have generated in this way include the development of a toolkit for professionals who advocate for mental health service users, policy recommendations to improve the administration of Personal Indepdence Payment, and policy briefs on Brexit, Universal Credit, and the Homes for Ukraine scheme. A range of research outputs are produced including publication in professional/trade publications and presentation at practitioner events, as well as the more traditional academic conferences and journal publications. Academic rigour and standards are upheld, but research outputs must be accessible and of value to professionals in the field.

The observed session for the VCAET drew on research informed teaching as set out here. Undergraduate students were asked to reflect on how knowledge around food poverty is generated, who the authors of key research are, and what alternative views might be considered. An exercise was completed reflecting on images of food poverty in the media and the language commonly used. This was used to consider how our understanding of an issue is developed and the ways in which language affects how we work with service users (linked to pedagogy influenced by professional experience) and how this can be internalised (linked to pedagogy influenced by the lived experience).

Research that I conducted with a member of parliament was used as a case-study to explore differing political interpretations of food poverty (Machin, 2016). The session aimed to demystify key elements of the research process. An exercise was completed where students generated their own research data in relation to food consumption and cost. The group was asked to produce a meme which could be used to raise awareness of food poverty, thus asking students to reflect on how knowledge and images can be used to persuade others. The principles of constructive alignment (Biggs, 1996) were important in the development of this session as part of the overall module. For the summative assessment students could choose to write a research-informed essay on food poverty considering different viewpoints which had been debated in class and developed through independent study.

Pedagogy inspired by the lived experience

The third element of this model emphasises the importance of the lived experience. Pedagogy inspired by the lived experience is important on a number of levels. We can only understand the impact of the turbulent times that we are living in when we recognise the experience of those who are socially excluded. Social science is concerned with individuals and relationships in society, and yet there is a risk that both teaching and research can overlook, or certainly not focus sharply enough, on human experience. For students on campus the lived experience often provides the link between theory and practice; issues such as discrimination, safeguarding, or mental health only have true meaning if they are explored with reference to real lives. This takes on an extra level of importance as students bring their own lived experience to the learning environment; it adds a richness to the pedagogy but also demands sensitivity and careful planning. Nottingham Trent University recognises interpersonal learning and reflective practice as two important components in developing graduate skills; this can only be achieved by respecting the lived experience. Finally, the lived experience is critical in developing resilient and compassionate professionals. Valuing the lived experience in a professional context enhances each interaction with a service user, influences the culture within organisations, and can positively influence the way in which services are developed and delivered.

The lived experience element of this model has been influenced by the values of social work and social policy that emerged in the latter stages of the twentieth century. The International Federation of Social Workers state that the overarching principles of the profession are ‘respect for the inherent worth and dignity of human beings, doing no harm, respect for diversity and upholding human rights and social justice.’ The service user movement has called on the social policy community to reject an adherence to scientific objectivity and a focus on individual deficit. Instead, we should see service users as ‘as the best experts in their own lives, identities and experience’ (Beresford, 2016, p 216).

This element of the model sees students as local and global citizens and values their lived experience as an integral part of understanding change and crisis in the world. It necessitates an understanding of our position in society and students must be given the space to reflect on their values. This can be a powerful process and allow students to understand how they, and others, are affected by emerging events. Case-studies and role play are particularly effective methods to explore these issues. For example, skills, knowledge, and resilience are developed by considering how we can effectively work with a Ukrainian refugee, or an older person with dementia, or someone who is homeless.

The submission for the VCAET relied on a clear appreciation of the lived experience. The testimonies of local constituents were central to the food poverty research that I conducted with an MP; this research was explored in detail with students and formed the basis of a structured debate. The session aimed to be a catalyst for change for students encouraging reflection on food poverty campaigning, and volunteering. An exercise exploring how much students spend on food and the impact of the cost-of-living emergency personalised the broader themes which were being discussed.

Applicability and next steps

This paper has set out a pedagogical model which draws on professional experience and expertise, research-informed teaching, and the lived experience as a way of working with students during times of crisis with the aim of equipping them to be resilient, critical, and emotionally intelligent graduates.

Although the model has been conceptualised with three distinct elements, in practice there is considerable crossover between the individual components, which are intended to be complementary. The model rests on teaching being informed by practice and research and empowers students to become skilled and compassionate practitioners. The aspiration is that the model creates ‘a ripple in the pond’. It starts with educators utilising their professional expertise and networks to act as a catalyst for change. This creates a safe but challenging environment for students to reflect on their own position in society and the lived experience of service users. The endpoint is that students graduate into the workplace and insert a positive influence on professional practice; their interactions with citizens are enhanced and even in times of austerity and crisis they can affect a culture change in organisations where professionals are sensitive, inquisitive, and solution focused.

Although this model has been developed through professional and academic experience in social welfare and social work it can be applied in a wide variety of learning environments. The overarching aim of the model is to try and make sense of contemporary events and to equip our students to face the challenges that they present. These are challenges faced by educators in all disciplines and I look forward to refining the ideas presented here through feedback from colleagues and students.

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