

Hi there, I'm Sarah Lightfoot. And I'm an Associate Lecturer tutoring on Early Childhood modules.

My Praxis scholarship research is called 'The thinking for myself' project and the research arose from a professional concern. So my AL colleagues and I recognised that a number of our students found presenting and discussing module content in their own words really challenging and I know it takes time and practice to develop your academic writing voice, but I was still very interested in finding a way of facilitating this process for our students – a new way.

So what struck me was this seem to be a bit of a gap between students and engaging with course content and then demonstrating their understanding in their assignments and I wondered whether the students would benefit from an opportunity to think aloud, to rehearse their ideas, to realize that their reflections are important and part of that whole process about becoming an academic writer and thinker. So I reasoned that the development of and the quality of their academic voice depends on the range and quality of opportunities for thinking that our students have and crucially with each other. I've been very influenced by Nancy Klein's work and her ideas about the types of attention we can give to each other and the way we can create environments that enable independent thinking.

So for my project, I went about adapting this approach to develop an online environment for a group of E109 students, giving them some protected time and space for thinking, and although the project was actually developmental, it was guided by two overarching research questions. So, how can we create and develop an online thinking environment for undergraduate students? And how does engaging in this online environment impact students' capacity to think for themselves?

So, apart from myself, the project involved a group of six student participants and although the project was initiated and led by me, I set out with the idea that those participating would be co-creators in the process. And I think the positive outcomes of the project directly depended on and related to the collaborative approach that we took. So early on I realised that establishing a thinking environment really depended on those student participants' willingness to volunteer, to turn up every time to each of the workshops, to be active and to be present in order to nurture their own thinking and that of their peers.

But equally I was taking a risk perhaps. I was leading workshop sessions that were very different from the usual tutorial style. There was little that was didactic about

my role. I was trying out a new pedagogical approach, using it online, and I was very honest with this about this with the participants. So I think the way that we all developed and understood that notion of equity and our willingness to be vulnerable, of taking the opportunity to try something new and sharing our thoughts about its effectiveness along the way was absolutely key.

So by undertaking the project, I found out that a face-to-face approach, which usually involves developing certain behaviours and conditions to support independent thinking, is absolutely adaptable and possible to create online. I found that co-creation of the approach is possible and exciting, that students wanted to be involved in the process and felt very positive about creating and trying out something new. I realised that students really valued an Associate Lecturer who modelled risk-taking, who made mistakes and thought it was part of the process and they appreciated knowing that I was really interested in their opinions and their reflections and how that could be fed into the project development.

I found that students embraced the opportunity to be part of a community, the thinking environment community and they found it effective for developing their thinking not just as a student but in their daily personal and professional lives. It had quite a profound effect upon them and the feedback and the discussion from the workshops themselves and from interviews with individuals really illustrated the impact of participation on those students – on their academic identity, they reported an increased capacity to reflect on their own learning and evaluate it. They said that they were even more motivated and happy to take responsibility for their own learning. They developed new strategies for academic learning and particularly greater confidence and improved academic voice they said in their TMAs in the tutorials and tutor group forums. But it also seems to have really positively impacted their well-being. So, not only the development of those positive personal attributes – so reflexivity self-awareness self-confidence – but they also said that they had a real sense of being valued and listened to.

So, beyond the positive outcomes for individuals, I think that the research demonstrates wider impact and potential for the types of project and opportunities that can amplify student voice, the co-creation of content and pedagogy and support student wellbeing at university level, particularly as the students indicated that their participation really impacted their relationship with the university – an enhanced sense of belonging to the organisation. They all noted increased levels of participation and active engagement in tutorials and forums and particularly the national forum. And they all said it how helped them recommit, find a real purpose in their study and wanting to progress.

So what next? Well, I'm now hoping to capitalise on the interest shown by the module leaders about how the project might relate to module content and developing the tuition process and experience for students. But I think too there's an opportunity for my findings to feed into opportunities for professional development for my peers for other Associate Lecturers. I think it'll be really worthwhile introducing the thinking environment approach to my AL colleagues, to help broaden their own teaching repertoire, but also give them the opportunity and for their own thinking to be ignited about the AL identity and role.

So I have made tremendous gains personally and professionally from leading the project. It's always really refreshing to try something new. I perhaps took a bit of a gamble doing this type of research, but I was so thrilled that a number of students willingly came forward to participate. I made myself vulnerable but I know this was appreciated by the participants and it gave me an opportunity to connect with students in a different way, on a different footing from being their AL.

The approach to creating and using a thinking environment really reminded me of Early Childhood pedagogy. And so the project helped me refine and develop a similarly responsive approach for adult learners. And I know that students found that modelling interesting and useful. And from a research point of view. I really enjoy collaborative developmental approaches to scholarship, so it was a fantastic opportunity to be able to lead an AL practice projects of that nature.