BURSTING THE BUBBLE AND BRINGING THE REAL WORLD INTO OUR CLASSROOMS TO INCREASE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

ABSTRACT

This article examines ways in which pathway students on Foundation courses can be given the motivation that will help them to engage more with their studies. Based on research carried out in a post-92 university with both domestic and international students, the paper argues for more of a real-world focus to our teaching. In support of this, ideas are offered on the basis of responses from students themselves. The purpose of this is to give a stronger voice to students in the shaping of pedagogic approaches on pathway courses, hopefully leading to better engagement with studies.

Article word count: 1472 excluding abstract and references
Name of author: Dr Paul Breen
Email address: p.breen@westminster.ac.uk
Postal address: 309 Regent Street, London
Institution of affiliation: University of Westminster
Job title: Senior Lecturer in EAP and Academic Practice

ARTICLE

DURING research conducted as part of my PhD studies, I interviewed teachers of English for Academic Purposes working on Pathway programmes. The purpose of that was to investigate the synergy of technology, pedagogy and content in their work. The desire to do so was shaped by the earlier work of Lee Shulman (1986) in the area of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK), later developed into a Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework by Mishra & Koehler (2006). Within my investigation, a number of interesting findings emerged, as detailed in my subsequent book publication (Breen, 2018) partly narrated in the actual, authentic voices of teachers who had participated in the original research study.

During the study, one of the participants made a succinct observation about the role of technology in the classroom. He asserted that "unless the classroom is a bubble which doesn't really reflect life" then there has to be interaction with "the real world outside of the classroom." Increasingly, that is not just a demand on the part of teachers but something coming from the student voice too. Through teaching on Pathway programmes at a post-92 university, I noticed a number of issues with satisfaction, engagement and retention. I therefore decided to carry out a new research study based around similar principles of finding out how we, as educators, can find better synergy between resources, pedagogy and content.

The shift from an emphasis on technology to resources was not such a radical one. The work of Mishra & Koehler themselves (2006/2009) has already placed emphasis on the fact that technologies range from "textbooks to overhead projectors, from typewriters in English language classrooms to charts of the periodic table on the walls of laboratories" (2006, p. 1023). Within this though, there is still a dominant emphasis on resources and technologies that can be brought into the classroom. Similarly, within Shulman's (1986) writings, knowledge is largely shaped by content that is delivered within the parameters of classroom teaching. Therefore, a further evolution

in this field would be to find synergy with the real world and the classroom. Additionally, since the PCK and TPACK frameworks are concerned with building teacher knowledge and creating more expert teachers, the purpose of bringing the real world into the classroom to a greater extent is to improve pedagogy.

Again, aspects of this are nothing new or radical in themselves. Within English for Academic Purposes, there has been a drive over recent decades to have more of a disciplinary emphasis in teaching and learning. This though has often focused largely on the content of disciplines and has sometimes borne many of the characteristics of Content-Based Second Language Instruction (CBI) as discussed in the work of Brinton, Snow, & Wesche (1989) or Content and Language Integrated Learning, better known as CLIL, (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). There has perhaps been less work on bringing the pedagogies of specific disciplines into our classrooms in EAP or Academic Skills contexts. Within EAP too there sometimes appears to be a tendency to shun real-world activities because they have too many associations with an idea of English Language teaching as a form of entertainment rather than serious study. I found this when speaking to teachers who doubted the benefits of bringing students on visits to sites outside of the university, for example. This is because they thought that such events can sometimes feel more like social trips than educational activities.

Despite the resistance of some teachers, I did sense a growing demand amongst students for activities that increased their engagement with the world outside the classroom not for social reasons but for knowledge building purposes. In order to convince teachers of that though, I needed support from the voices of students. As such I carried out a survey amongst over 300 students on a range of Pathway programmes in the post 92 university where I work. This survey asked participants for their thoughts on real world learning and their ideas for how this might be integrated into their programmes of study for their benefit. Having collected responses, I then analysed the data with the intention of using it for several different purposes. These were to design or re-design courses and improve the student experience; use the acquired information for internal purposes of teacher education and induction; and a reporting of findings to broader communities of practice within this field.

For the purposes of this report, those findings have been greatly condensed. That has been done to highlight the main points and make suggestions based upon these. Firstly, the study supports the long held view within EAP and Academic Literacies that there is a need to have a disciplinary emphasis set against the teaching of academic skills and academic socialisation (Lea & Street, 1998). This though has to be more than just an integration of content with language or study skills. In order to integrate students with the social practices of their disciplines, there is a need for a real world emphasis because in their responses the students themselves showed a greater awareness of linkage to areas such as employability and networking. In practical terms, this involved a greater demand for visits to external sites and to meet people within the professional communities that are part of their disciplines. That was seen across the board in subject areas including Business, Media, Law and Fashion.

Another area that came through very strongly in the student responses was in a demand for more real-world examples in the classroom. This echoes the ideas of respondents in my aforementioned research study on teaching with technologies where there was a recurring suggestion of good teaching requiring that real-world

element in order to engage, motivate and educate students. Interestingly too, within this study, there was a suggestion from some participants that this needs to be integrated into the way of teaching on Pathway programmes so that it is a more consistent feature. Going over the responses, it was apparent that a great deal of satisfaction and engagement depends upon the way that the content itself is taught by individual teachers. It was notable too that students were able to make this connection between the content and the pedagogy and that they had the confidence to express their ideas about how things can be improved.

That confidence came out in other areas too where students were able to come up with ideas that might traditionally be seen as the domain of the teacher. Perhaps it has something to do with the changing nature of today's higher educational environment, but in this study the students appeared more conscious of their own needs. Even where their language proficiency was limited, the students had particular demands. Strikingly too, these were often supported by arguments as to why they wanted this. In the case of expecting real-world examples, one student pointed out that these would provide ideas that could be integrated into their research and the writing of their assignments at a later stage. Notably too, when students were asking for such examples, they did not appear to be asking for any kind of spoon feeding. Generally, most showed an awareness of western or Socratic teaching approaches and a sense of these examples being a spark for further development of writing or research and exploration rather the examples being the end goal in themselves.

Though small scale and only reported in minimal detail here, this study showed me that today's Pathway students are more aware of their needs and demands. Within those demands there is a very strong focus on integrating a real-world aspect. Students do not want the classroom to be a bubble detached from the rest of the world, in the same way as our universities are no longer bubbles detached from broader society. However, the challenge still remains as to how we use these findings to inform our course design. At the post 92 university where this study was carried out, we have introduced a number of initiatives including a *Students As Co-Creators* project. Through this process of consultation and negotiation we have shaped and re-shaped the curriculum and assessment procedures by making courses more relevant to the real-world needs of students, without diluting the quality in any way.

That on the whole seems to be most important after all. Introducing real-world aspects to study is not about bringing in entertainment or dumbing down the curriculum. When managed and integrated properly it is about course enhancement and about introducing students to a stronger awareness of the social practices of their disciplines. Effectively this is an evolution of past approaches such as TPACK and Academic Literacies rather than any kind of radical break with the past. It is about preparing the students of today to be the real world citizens of tomorrow. The challenge though is to prepare all teachers equally for educating students this way.

References:

Breen, P. (2018). *Developing Educators for the Digital Age – a framework for capturing teacher knowledge in action.* Westminster University Press, London.

Brinton, D. M., Snow, M. A., & Wesche, M. B. (1989). *Content-based second language instruction* (p. vii). New York: Newbury House.

Hutchinson, T., & Waters, A. (1987). English for specific purposes. Cambridge University Press.

Koehler, M., & Mishra, P. (2009). What is technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK)?. *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education, 9*(1), 60-70.

Lea, M.R. and Street, B.V. (1998). Student writing in higher education: An academic literacies approach. *Studies in higher education, 23*(2), pp.157-172.

Mishra, P., & Koehler, M. (2006). Technological pedagogical content knowledge: A framework for teacher knowledge. *The Teachers College Record, 108*(6), 1017-1054.

Shulman, L. S. (1986), Those who understand: knowledge growth in teaching. *Educational Researcher*, 15 (24), pp. 4-14.

Shulman, L. S. (1987). Knowledge and teaching: Foundations of the new reform. *Harvard educational review, 57(1),* 1-23.