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Document Version
Final published version

Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer

Citation for published version (APA):

Published in:
Library Pedagogies

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Following the yellow brick road

Sam Aston

My story is a tale of shifting slowly from one role to another, while working alongside a group of trusty companions. There are no wizards nor wicked or white witches, but I have to confess to journeying along a yellow brick road since 2012. Back then I used the road to The Emerald City as a metaphor for the journey that a team of librarians took to becoming a dedicated teaching and learning team (Bains, 2013). The mistake that I made when I used this to illustrate our journey was that actually it was just the start of the journey. I now find myself still following that bright yellow road as part of my personal ‘Return to Oz’. Similar to Dorothy I am always accompanied by my trusted colleagues, with many of us having been together for the whole journey, while others have joined us and some have strayed. These trusted colleagues have been, and continue to be hugely influential to my pedagogy and without them it would have been impossible to navigate the seemingly endless yellow brick road.

That being said, I am not going to describe myself as one of the characters from Baum’s Oz but rather how I have found myself occupying different roles to define how I think about my pedagogy, and the values and beliefs that I have developed. I am occasionally the lion or periodically the scarecrow, and from time to time the tin man. In telling you my story I can share with you those values that could be represented by a brain or a heart or courage. My values are less tangible, less visible but nevertheless a part of my personal pedagogy to date.

The values and beliefs that I have developed over time following the road have been informed by a range of factors that I will detail further into the story. I know what I do and how I design teaching, and the elements on which I will not compromise. These are captured here. Recent reflections as a learning developer for my application for Certified Leading Practitioner with the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education led me to the following values. Outlined below, they inform my pedagogy as I endeavour to work with colleagues and learners to provide a learning community for all, raise learner’s voices and acknowledge that learners bring what they know to their learning and nothing less.
V1 Collaborative and community learning opportunities are powerful and they should be encouraged as part of learning design.

V2 Learners do not intrinsically know how to approach learning and institutions should provide learning opportunities and places where practice can occur safely – particularly through transition to higher education.

V3 Learners voices should be amplified in learning settings as they bring their own experiences and knowledge with them.

Influenced by working with learners and colleagues in higher education and through reading and researching, my values have developed during my journey. It is really hard to tell what has directly influenced these values. Were they were reached as a result of me shifting focus, from being a librarian to a learning developer or did my values influence that move?

As I look back I get a sense that I became more interested in cultivating my knowledge about education, learning about how we develop learners. I wanted to know how I could encourage learner’s agency instead of teaching them what buttons to click to find a resource in the library catalogue. So perhaps it was my values that provoked me to soften my professional boundaries, along with a significant level of empathy for learners for whom becoming a part of a higher education institution and a learning community is such a huge step.

Influenced by hooks’ ‘learning community’ for all I am steered towards encouraging ‘belonging’ with learners that I engage with, I feel that I am a representative of the institution and not solely a representative of the library (Hooks, 1994). I have worked for the University for all of my working career and that has given me a sense of pride about working as part of an institution that values its staff as learners. I have undertaken a great deal of professional development and gained all of my qualifications while working for and supported by the Library and so I feel a strong sense of responsibility in putting what I have learnt to good use within the community that I operate. My sense of belonging and representative of the university is strong and despite working within the library I am often placed in different contexts and work with different teams (Whitchurch, 2008). Working in these different contexts quite often shifts the roles that I have as I move from one space to another and the boundaries bend and my identity shifts. All that being said, my values inform and steer the
combined identities and roles that I fulfil on a daily basis that could be referred to as being a translator, a guide and an advocate.

**Translator – Scarecrow**

My experience of active and creative ways of engaging learning has given me a good foundation for working with colleagues to engage with designing collaborative activities to develop learning. Operating as a translator is one that extends my reach across professional boundaries and identify spaces where there are opportunities to work together to support students, sometimes in specific contexts. Often I find myself working in partnership with lecturers where my responsibility is to translate research on learning and together we merge learning science with discipline content on learning to create a learning opportunity. As a translator I put forward research informed strategies that would benefit learners in their discipline and interpret how research in learning can be woven into disciplinary study to benefit the learners. This collaborative work with lecturers reflects the way that collaborative learning plays out for colleagues and provides similar reciprocal benefits for those involved.

As a practitioner a lot of what I build my practice upon is rooted in the day to day experiences that build up over time and by sharing what I learn from one relationship to another. While that makes this idea of collaboration sound almost incestuous, it is the openness that comes with sharing and repurposing of collaborative content that elaborates my role as a translator. My work can take me from physics to religion and theology to midwifery, and yet often I identify learner’s needs as being similar, despite the subject matter being very different. My ability to translate materials and content from one discipline to another, repurposing content and reinterpreting it for a new audience adds value as together we remake new learning opportunities.

As I work collaboratively with colleagues and learners across my institution I have been able to translate learner needs back to lecturers and to amplify learners’ voices in a more directive way. As I interact with learners they often share their experiences with me and I can loop those feelings and experiences back into the support that I design and the wider institution when necessary. So my role as a translator often means that I have to pivot round from working with one group to translate that information to another group. This responsibility is vital and speaks to my sense of belonging to the learning community and the institution and is a growing role.
Guide- Tin Man

A guide is not an unusual role for any member of library staff to inhabit. Librarians and library staff are usually well trained and positioned to guide those that they interact with towards and through the information landscape. Librarians have long been recognised for this role and when they cannot help they commit to finding someone who can. Despite my role as a guide taking a subtly new shape, I have evolved from librarian into learning developer, the guiding role is still key for me and directly represents my values. Guiding both learners, colleagues and lecturers towards delivering the most effective and pedagogically sound opportunities. Most visibly the role of the guide is evident within the learning that I design and deliver to increase the agency of learners that I interact with and guide lecturers to embedding skills throughout their curriculum in a pedagogically sound way.

What has become apparent over time is that within my role as a guide it is important to have a heart, much like the tin man had all along. What I mean by that is to show kindness within the role by listening and empathising with learners. It is clear to me that this has always been important to me to show care and kindness for the learning community that I work with. To make efforts to see the institution and learning from their perspectives and to provide a gentle sense of belonging to the institution (Clegg & Rowland, 2010). My attention to kindness has developed over time as my experiences of supporting learners who are anxious and are in need of professional support, some who need the support of being in a class with others to talk to and some who are trying to find their feet in a new environment has increased. As a guide I can show compassion and humanity. Sometimes this simply looks like striking up a conversation that follows Robinson’s Socratic questioning method, taking the approach of building up rapport by asking simple questions that gives the learner easy to recall answers and feel comfortable with speaking with you and using their voice in the classroom (Robinson, 2017). Offering support and signposting to adjacent university services that can provide different expertise has meant that knowing about other services is crucial to supporting kindness within my pedagogy. So sharing of knowledge and collaboration are central to my work.

When I think about how my role as a guide intersects with my values I am committed to guiding both the colleagues and the learners that I work with to make the most of collaborative learning. Partnership working with others is a fundamental part of my role and I often take a guiding role in
the planning of a class or a resource. Like other teaching librarians I spend a lot of time working with lecturers to design classes and resources to provide learners with opportunities to develop the skills that they need to succeed at university. In my experience of working with partners to design learning, it is important to establish a strong relationship of trust through informal chats as much through sharing of documentation and formal meetings.

The conversations draw out the discipline and knowledge responsibility of the academic expert and my expertise as a learning developer and I can then guide the design of the class and the accompanying online materials to merge them into coherent lesson plans. Making this guiding role with colleagues very similar to the way that work with colleagues and partners.

A result of genuine boredom with repeatedly teaching by demonstration, as my predecessors had I believed that an active learning approach with learners taking an active role in learning activities, sometimes working alone and sometimes as a group. Active learning had attracted my attention. Having learners get up move around, throw things and draw pictures. In adopting active learning it meant that I had to shift gear and really move into that space of a guide role in my classes whereby I would be present for the learners but that would not necessarily be at the front of the classroom, I could be at the back, at the side and I could be listening to students tell me what to do. But then I learnt more about the benefits of collaborative and peer learning as this fit with how the team were developing a new approach to information literacy workshops.

To develop my knowledge of collaborative learning I initially observed others teaching in this way that this became a core value for me. Watching how learners engaged with materials and each other showed me how I wanted learners to behave with me as their guide. But this was really just the lead up to that full threshold moment. What followed was me replicating what I had seen and assisting in the guidance role before I moved into being the sole guide. As the guide I then began to see the benefits to teaching this way and wanting to know more I went off to do some reading about learner centred teaching and collaborative learning that grounded my understanding of what I was doing and its intended benefits.

Designing learning opportunities that encourage participation and collaboration and practice has meant that my position in the learning space is very different to where it might have been prior to that, having taken steps to moving from the ‘knowledgeable librarian’ who has answers to being the guide who is there to engage and guide learners to building their own skills, understanding and agency. My role is providing the structure
that the learners can engage with and be guided through and the expectations on the learners and how they will practice together. Over time I have learnt that it is helpful for the learners to understand that this is the aim and that there will inevitably more work for them to do. This often results in my explaining my role as a guide when I am explaining the practicalities of the learning that is about to occur. Managing learner’s expectations, building community, encouraging participation through authenticity, shared goals and kindness are all part of the guiding role as part of my pedagogy.

The voices of learners are critical in how we design learning. One of the models that has influenced the way that I design many of my learning opportunities is using Fisher and Frey’s release of responsibility model (2013). Most importantly the structure enables learners to practice skills to prepare to put them into practice independently. Applying the model creates opportunities with the class for learners to discuss and share their own experiences revealing the students to be the most important people in the classroom (sometimes to their surprise) for them. This has helped me in maintaining my role of the guide so I do not slip back into the librarian answering the question role

**Advocate - Lion**

None of my job is done in isolation. There are lots of relationships to tend and nurture and this is attended to through all of the roles. However the role of advocate is a one that needs more attention and has grown more powerful over time. Like the Lion in Oz, advocacy demands courage.

Collaborating with lecturers to deliver information literacy sessions on taught programmes is a core part of my job and for much of my early professional life I advocated for the inclusion of an active and collaborative approach to learning. Much of my thinking about this was thinking about transforming often quite dry content and making it engaging. Designing practical activities where learners could practice skills so that they would feel empowered to perform the activity independently. Influenced by Andrew Walsh, Rosie Jones and many others I was able to occasionally incorporate activities into some of the teaching that I designed. In part where advocacy was not necessary as lecturers trusted me to deliver what was required and where there was very little connection to the true content of the course.
It is important to say that initially these conversations were challenging. My colleagues and I had travelled along the yellow brick road and moved to a functional teaching team. Personally I had not had much experience of designing and delivering teaching that incorporated a collaborative pedagogy and so in some respects I was having to convince myself that this approach would work, despite the convincing amount of research that showed the pedagogy in a positive light. As I have outlined I had had some experience of active learning. But there was something that I was missing. Upon reflection there were a few elements that made the time challenging. I did not have good and documented examples of teaching that I could share with lecturers that would provide them with a vision of how what I was describing had worked well. Additionally and as a result of my little experience and understanding of collaborative learning I felt that I was not empowered to advocate for what I believed in and that I was supporting the lecturer and at their ‘command’. This was further exacerbated by the intention to teach new content in a new way. Finally with regard to research it was difficult to simultaneously deliver the teaching that we were committed to as a university service and undertake the scholarly reading to gain a deeper understanding to enable us to communicate confidently with partners about what we were doing and why.

What was needed that I didn’t know at the time was a slowed down pace of travel on the ongoing yellow brick road to build up my confidence to trust in the values that I had been practising myself and to feel empowered to advocate for my beliefs and for what I believe contributes to a successful pedagogy. What also supported my development was undertaking a postgraduate certificate in higher education and then receiving senior fellowship of the higher education academy these both gave me confidence to have those conversations with lecturers and to be seen as a credible equal that I previously had struggled with. I am now much more confident in pointing to research to back up my claims on how collaborative learning has multiple benefits. Furthermore building up a both a personal and team repertoire of experience, good examples of lesson plans and materials has made advocacy for collaborative learning much easier.

My role as a developer working with lecturers now places me in a strong position to discuss what learners might need based upon my experiences and research. Advocating for the slow and deliberate development of skills for when learners arrive at university and in particular addressing the dialogue and vocabulary that surrounds learners transitioning into
university. Many years of working with lecturers in which I have heard them talk about learners in terms of what they expect them to know and where they might be lacking in skills really highlights that the deficit model of education is still present. However I am actively changing that conversation, when I work with lecturers I underline the necessity for learners to slowly learn the skills that they need to learn especially for students that are transitioning into higher education as it is not intrinsic knowledge and not something that learners have necessarily previously been taught. Endorsing my value is a small research project that I carried out to make initial enquiries into the skills that students would have found the most helpful during this time. The outputs of the project are still being used as there is clearly a need for this material, indeed some are only discovering it now 3 years later (Aston, 2017). I have often wondered if my interest in this area exists because I was the first in family to attend university and a mature and part time learner however, it is not that drives me where students are concerned, there is more of an impulse to offer that kindness and compassion that I spoke of previously. That sense of responsibility and care that Denial (2019) speaks of, and that hooks asks us to recognise, as we teach other humans and individuals that deserve our attention, our respect for being present and our best selves. Learners are individuals who bring knowledge and experiences with them that we may never know or understand and we are best placed to encourage them to gain that sense of belonging to the community that we are already a part of.

A key part of that community and one of the greatest influences on my pedagogy has been the role of the University of Manchester Library Student Team. Working alongside current students as part of the team has placed me in a position where I can advocate for the vital role that working with students plays in our institution. I value and trust students as collaborators developing learning, indeed without students being involved in my pedagogy it would look and feel very different.

With a substantial history of working with students, working with the student team felt like an easy space to fall into when I moved to the Learning Development Team. From the beginning I recognised how mutually vital the role would be and the professional relationships that would emerge from working with students (Blake, Aston, & Grayson, 2020). However, working collaboratively takes effort in terms of time and communication and building relationships and I had been working with others in a different way so there was some acclimatising to be done. I was comfortable with working students and making them feel like they were a
part of the team. So mainly this centred upon ‘attending’ to work that I was involved in and seeing when and where students could have input and then allowing those tasks to flourish by giving students space to take work in a direction of their own in creating and producing resources that they knew would be useful in formats that would be inclusive for the wider learning community (Grayson, Blake, & Stock, 2018).

Listening to current learners and what they suggest from their own current lived experiences as leaners within our own institution by working alongside them overcomes the need to think about the institution from a learner’s perspective. They are there working beside me. Working on developing content and supporting their peers. Which is why amplifying learner’s voices is a core value and one that I get to advocate for when working in partnership with colleagues within my learning community. This now goes beyond co-creating resources with students and being led by students into what they need I advocate the use of student created resources to sit alongside my own, promoting peer to peer learning and the development of a real community. In modelling this approach the lecturers that I work with can see what happens when student’s voices are amplified so that they can be heard. I further advocate for the student voice to be heard when questions are raised about how to approach a particular challenge or approach, recommending that engagement with students could benefit the outcomes.

It is this role where I see there being extended growth into the future – working for students and with students to improve how we can learn together. But I am pretty sure that will be another story.

**Beyond Oz**

At the beginning of the chapter I outlined my values that inform how I go about my day to day job and while they are securely fixed they are enacted and evidenced in a multitude of different ways through the differing roles that I play out within my pedagogy. I have described how I can be the Scarecrow, Tin Man and the Lion and how I shift between those roles to meet the needs of the communities that I work with, especially where I can be led by the learners to design what they need and I particularly welcome that as an enactment of raising student’s voices.

My journey has been long and as I return to thinking about the journey that I am taking I am reminded of what Dorothy said:
“If we walk far enough,” says Dorothy, “we shall sometime come
to someplace”

L. Frank Baum, The Wonderful Wizard of Oz

This journey that I am on does not have defined end – no shiny city, palace or emperor. But I can look back and see how far I have come and who has journeyed with me and what values I have upheld. I can look back and see who and what has influenced my journey.

I feel very privileged to do the job that I do and to have the opportunity to contribute to and work in the learning community as I do. The roles that I have outlined here position me in a space that will allow me to explore further and as I look towards the future there are particular areas of interest where I would like to explore. How can I better guide learners as they transition into higher education and engage with feedback within their first year and how can my roles as an advocate and a translator better prepare learners to engage with their feedback as they move from school/college to higher education?

Reference list


