

THEMATIC PAPER: APPRENTICESHIP

A case in support of creative vocational education and training teachers: Innovative teaching practices and the impact on engagement for learners on a senior leader apprenticeship program

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the use of innovative teaching practices and their impact on learner engagement using feedback from learners enrolled in a Senior Leader Apprenticeship program at a United Kingdom (UK) higher education institutions. Through outlining practice and analyzing learner feedback, this paper seeks to unleash and support the creative potential of vocational education and training teachers in engaging diverse learners. First, the paper explores the link between innovation and engagement in the classroom. Second, we introduce Photovoice, an innovative and creative pedagogical tool, and examine its impact on learner engagement and outcomes.

Key words: apprenticeships, pedagogy, creativity, innovation

INTRODUCTION

Innovation, defined as "the successful introduction of a new thing or method" (Brewer & Tierney, 2012, p. 15), involves two key components: a novel idea or object introduced to an individual or group and the change that results from its adoption (Evans, 1970). In education, innovations are implemented to enhance teaching and learning, ultimately improving student outcomes.

A critical area of focus for educational innovation is learner engagement. Engagement refers to a learner's active involvement in an activity, driven by motivation and participation in the learning process (Appleton *et al.*, 2006). According to Sinatra *et al.* (2015), engagement operates on two levels: micro-level engagement, which occurs in the moment during specific tasks or lessons,

and macro-level engagement, which extends over time and across different learning contexts, including pre- and post-learning activities. Various factors influence engagement, including challenge, enjoyment, meaningfulness, goal clarity and feedback (Carroll *et al.*, 2019). When these elements are thoughtfully integrated into pedagogical approaches, they can create more stimulating and effective learning experiences, fostering deeper student involvement and ultimately enhancing academic performance.


Innovation in curriculum design and delivery to enhance learner engagement has been a key topic of debate within vocational education and training (VET; Horackova *et al.*, 2024; Hughes & Saieva, 2019; Welbourn *et al.*, 2019). In the United Kingdom (UK), the involvement of higher education institutions (HEIs) in

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apprenticeship delivery has raised questions about the underpinning pedagogical frameworks (Horackova *et al.*, 2024; Qew-Jones, 2022). A key challenge is how HEIs successfully engage non-traditional learners in work-integrated learning that bridges theory and practice. Existing literature highlights key principles of effective VET pedagogy, such as valid and appropriate assessment methods, learner-centric teaching strategies, reflective writing and genuine employer collaboration (Chadwick *et al.*, 2024; Lillis & Bravenboer, 2020; Lucas, 2010). However, discussions about the contribution of creative teaching practices remain limited (Fischer & Barabasch, 2023). Thus, although creative techniques have long been recognized for their potential to enhance learning (Skiba *et al.*, 2010), their application within VET has received little attention in research (Fischer & Barabasch, 2023).

This study responds to this gap by examining how the use of creative pedagogical approaches in VET influences learners' understanding and application of academic concepts in workplace settings. To investigate this, we used Photovoice as a creative pedagogical tool to engage learners in exploring the concept of organizational culture and their role as leaders. Photovoice is a versatile engagement method that integrates participant-led photography with facilitated reflective conversations (Castleden *et al.*, 2008; Huber *et al.*, 2023). Although originally employed as a participatory action research approach (Etmanski *et al.*, 2022), Photovoice has emerged as a valuable arts-informed educational tool that offers students opportunities to critically analyze complex topics and develop a deeper understanding of theoretical concepts through visual representation (Randall *et al.*, 2023). Studies have demonstrated its effectiveness across disciplines, including biology, healthcare, social work and psychology (Randall *et al.*, 2023). However, there is limited research within the VET context. By bridging the gap between theoretical learning and lived experience, and encouraging students to engage in critical thinking and reflective practice, Photovoice has the potential to enhance VET student engagement and foster a deeper connection with course content.

METHODS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

We embedded Photovoice in an exploration of organizational culture on a Senior Leader Apprenticeship delivered by a UK-based HEIs. The Senior Leader Apprenticeship is a nationally recognized post-graduate level qualification that is funded by the Apprenticeship Levy in the UK. It is completed by people employed in management roles in any sector whilst they are working. The teaching approach was divided into 4 stages spanning 6 weeks (8 hours in total). First, learners were

introduced to the knowledge content (*i.e.*, organizational culture) and received training on the use of photographs as visual narratives. Second, learners were tasked to use photography to capture facets of their workplace culture. Third, learners shared their narratives and discussed their role as senior leaders in their organizations and developed a written reflection of their learning journey. In the final stage, learners showcased their photography and learning in an exhibition. Data was collected from 38 apprentices, who ranged in age from 30 to 58 (under 36 years, $N = 7$; 36-45 years, $N = 18$; 46-55 years, $N = 12$; 56+ years, $N = 1$). Roles included Leader/Director ($N = 5$), Manager ($N = 28$), and Practitioner/Coordinator ($N = 5$), across public ($N = 31$), private ($N = 2$) and third sector ($N = 5$) organizations. Following the exhibition, participants completed a short qualitative survey to share their perceptions of the learning process and the impact of this creative approach on their learning experience.

RESULTS

Thematic analysis of the qualitative survey responses revealed five areas of impact on participants' learning experience.

Creativity

The creative aspect of Photovoice gave participants the freedom to think outside the box and challenge their own assumptions about themselves and their organization. The creative process made the learning experience both engaging and refreshing as an alternative to more "traditional" teaching and learning.

Reflection and understanding

Through the reflective aspect of Photovoice participants gained a deep insight into the academic concept of organizational culture and its components. In making connections between theory and practice they were better able to understand their roles and their potential impact within their organization.

Engagement

Participants found value in discussing their photographs with peers and exploring different interpretations of the images. The combination of visual, written and spoken activities created opportunities for high quality supportive interactions, which further enhanced engagement.

Motivation and confidence

The experience increased participants' motivation and confidence to apply their learning in practice. Through bringing Photovoice to the classroom, learners felt empowered to take a more active role in shaping their organization's environment.

Resilience

The struggle to align photography with themes and the difficulty in thinking creatively was expressed by some learners. However, overcoming these obstacles contributed to their overall learning experience and personal growth and made it ultimately a rewarding exercise.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Photovoice as a creative pedagogical tool offers substantial benefits for both apprenticeship learners and VET teachers. The insights gained from the student learning experience highlight its value, and the process itself is adaptable across various subject disciplines for engaging in critical reflection about the application of knowledge within a workplace context. The research results demonstrate that for VET teachers, Photovoice encourages creative thinking and promotes reflection and understanding of academic concepts and how they can be applied within workplace contexts. Furthermore, the Photovoice process fosters high quality interactions within the classroom and offers benefits for learner cohesion and motivation. As this was a UK-based case study, further research could explore the integration of Photovoice within a range of VET courses offered within different countries. As a participant-led approach, Photovoice fosters a deeper connection between knowledge and practice, empowering learners to take an active role in their educational journey, building their confidence to apply their knowledge in the workplace.

DECLARATIONS

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Author contributions

Stenberg N, German H: Conceptualization, Data curation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing—Original draft, Writing—Review and Editing. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Ethical approval

The School of Business, Education and Law Research Ethics and Integrity Committee at the University of Huddersfield gave approval for this research (approval: BELETHICS2324009) on January 15th, 2024.

Informed consent

Written informed consent was obtained from the

participants for publication. The participants were informed that the interview data were only used for research purposes, and their information would be anonymized when presenting the research result.

Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Data availability statement

No additional data.

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