

## A TALE OF TWO WORKSHOPS

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**Abstract:**

Whether dealing with latecomers, the prevalence of mobile devices, or the incidence of learning and language difference, approaches to facilitation can have dramatic effect on the experience and outcomes of education. Two contrasting examples are placed side-by-side in this narrative description of a hypothetical digital workshop. The first person narration takes its reader on a present tense journey through the successes and challenges of teaching a diverse student cohort. Rendered in parallel, positive and negative attitudes to inclusive practice reveal how the tutor enacts his role to greater and lesser effect. This juxtaposition gives rise to a version of best practice that begins with respecting learners and ends with an enhanced experience for tutor and students alike. End notes expand on the scholarly basis for the ideas expressed in the story.

**Keywords:**

Inclusivity, diversity, neurodiversity, SpLD, workshop, software, technician, learning support, facilitation.

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I am a Technical Tutor for moving image and deploy this skill as a central resource, without alignment to any one course. My remit is to deliver a procedural appreciation of editing software. The programme will run for several weeks with a step-by-step approach that will deepen learning at each weekly workshop. The aim is to introduce and demystify new tools so that, over the sessions, students will learn to successfully edit their videos.

There are 20 names on the list; 2nd year undergraduate students who need to make short promotional videos, but will likely have no previous experience as filmmakers.

“Good MORNING’ I say with energy, hoping to convey that something is about to begin.

“QUIET please,” I say loudly and with authority.

We are in an IT suite and 17 students have each claimed a chair and computer. Some have logged in, others still tap at their phones, one wears headphones, and about half have yet to remove their outdoor coats.

I wait for their attention to turn to me. There is a ripple of hush that moves across the room, making the rest of us very aware of the pair whose conversation persists. I move towards them.

It’s my intention not to chastise, but to include.<sup>1</sup>

It’s my intention to affirm my authority.<sup>2</sup>

I don’t know them, and so it’s important to set the right tone from the outset.

I aim to establish an atmosphere of mutual respect, in which we work together to advance learning.<sup>3</sup>

I need to establish discipline in a way that suppresses the chance of further disruption.

It’s possible their conversation is important, that their distraction is legitimate due to reasons of which I’m unaware, or simply that the intensity of their discussion caused them not to hear.

In giving them the benefit of the doubt, I demonstrate respect, whilst letting them know that their attention is now required.

In giving them a warning, I demonstrate that I consider them disrespectful, and won’t tolerate it.

Being respectful will encourage students to contribute when invited.

Being authoritarian will discourage students from contributing unless invited.

They apologize and explain that they were discussing the timetable because they were uncertain about whether they were in the right session. It turns out that one of them is hard of hearing.

I’m grateful for my strategy to respect and include, because it doesn’t require her to declare her difficulty.

She should have declared her difficulty. I can’t be expected to support conditions of which I’m unaware.

I use their question about the timetable as a catalyst to clarify the schedule for the group.

If confusion exists for one it probably exists for others who may be less confident about speaking up and asking for clarification. Establishing a clear horizon, by mapping out the big picture up front, helps everyone to navigate the journey to come.<sup>4</sup>

I’m aware of the importance of managing the expectations of students but to do this I have to first find out what they are.

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I ask the student wearing headphones what he thinks this and the subsequent sessions are about.

It's not my intention to embarrass, but to invite engagement by offering a stake in defining the session. I'm also testing to see if he was listening, or whether the headphones are disruptive.

A little embarrassment lets him know I've noticed and am in control.

It turns out that background music helps with his anxiety.

Knowing this, we have negotiated when it is appropriate to wear the headphones.<sup>5</sup>

He should have declared this. I can't be expected to support conditions of which I'm unaware.<sup>6</sup>

I am aware that a significant number of students will have dyslexia, whether they know it or not, and for many English is a second language.

I ask whether anyone has found the resources, which I uploaded to myUCA in advance of the session.

I don't upload anything in advance because I worry it will deter them from attending.<sup>7</sup>

The option to familiarize themselves with the subject before the session may diminish the potential for language to become a barrier to learning.<sup>8</sup>

It is the students' responsibility to seek support from Student Services. They must rise to the required level.<sup>9</sup>

It's such a small adjustment, but saves me a lot of time in class.

I don't have the time to make adjustments to meet their need.

We move onto the software.

I think it likely that they will be familiar with other programs belonging to the Adobe Creative Suite but to test this assumption I ask if they know to which software suite this package belongs.

I'm only here to teach the editing package, so I tell them where to find it.

I ask if anyone has used this software before to assess the level at which I should work.<sup>10</sup>

I assume that they are all beginners to level the field.<sup>11</sup>

We've all opened the software and are ready to begin. Having checked that they can all see and hear me comfortably, I ask about their experience of filmmaking.

Silence. Shaking heads.

"Who has used a phone camera, webcam, Snapchat, Facebook, WhatsApp and a host of other video creation tools?" I ask, reminding them that they could probably all consider themselves filmmakers, at least on some level.

I take the silence for an answer and the opportunity to move quickly on.

I hope this small perceptive shift will encourage them to think of themselves as not entirely new to this. Sowing that seed now should help their confidence and support them to develop the skill.

At least this way my status as expert is confirmed relative to their inexperience.

By now, they've all removed their outdoor coats.

"Is it still cold in here?" I ask, because several of them seem to have sunk further into their jackets.

Someone scuttles in late.

I encourage the group to relay to the latecomer what has been resolved about the purpose of the session. This is an opportunity to check what has been understood so far, and for its repetition to further consolidate this learning for all.

I tell the latecomer that she will have to wait until a break for me to catch her up.

It turns out that she has dyspraxia and planning her attendance had been stressful.

I am grateful not to have unnecessarily compounded the stress she was under.

Education is stressful, as is industry, and she will need to develop strategies to cope.

I'd like to think that in education we can be progressive agents of change, not models of poor industry practices.

We are educating for employment, so must replicate even the bad practices found in the world of work.

I ask them what we mean by 'sequence'.

I tell them what 'sequence' means.

The latecomer volunteers an answer and, with a little prompting, a few others build on the idea.

One asks how to spell it. They've all taken out note pads and begin feverishly to scribble.

Receiving a glossary of new terms in advance has helped several of them get ahead of the curve. It's clear that this is useful regardless of dyslexia and English proficiency.<sup>12</sup>

This doesn't require any writing, they just need to listen and follow what I do. I realize that I may need to reduce the ambition of the session.

A sequence is a set of related events that follow each other in a particular order. It is the goal of an edit. I use straightforward language to describe it because there is no need to make it any more complicated. I am aware that I sometimes drift into using jargon and don't always remember to check whether students understand. I am making a conscious effort to make this session accessible to all students irrespective of their level of literacy.

Some of them are searching for a definition on their phones. I encourage this when appropriate because there is no need to fight the technologies with which they are familiar and from which they are accustomed to learning.<sup>13</sup>

I remind them that this definition is in the notes I loaded pre-session onto myUCA and encourage them to compare this with the definitions they located.

I instruct them all to turn their phones off and put them away, it is very draining to have to compete with handheld devices for student attention.

I can see that a visual aid might help. The use of video will helpfully break up the talking and shift gear to maintain interest.<sup>14</sup>

I ask someone to tell me the last film they saw.

I try to think of an example.

When using examples, I try to ensure relevance to the student experience, and to maintain their stake in the proceedings.<sup>15</sup>

I am aware that several of the students are International, but Western cinema is fairly pervasive.<sup>16</sup>

It's time for a break. Regular breaks can aid concentration during the session. Even a short break can be reviving, just moving around is helpful. Those who need to take medication or eat at regular intervals can do so. Visits to the toilet for whatever reason can be discreet; not known to all.

I suggest that they use the break to discuss films they've seen recently and ask them to select an example to watch on return.

I am gasping for a coffee, but have to catch up the latecomer and find an example to show after the break.

After the break there is renewed energy and I can tell that their investment in the session is growing.

After the break, my energy is low and I am already watching the clock for the end of the session.

We watch an example of an Indian film with which I'm not familiar, but the students seem enthused and I'm learning from them.

I show a clip from my favourite film, which cheers me up a bit, but the students remain impassive.

After the screening and discussing some examples, we proceed to engage with the software.<sup>17</sup>

One of the students is packing away his things and getting ready to go.

He gestures his thanks on his way out the door. I am grateful that I always make myself available ahead of the session, and that we had the opportunity to discuss his need to leave early.

I tell him pointedly, and in front of the whole class, that the session is yet to conclude.

He should have declared his need to leave, I'm not a mind reader.

As the workshop develops, the students follow my example to create their own edits.

I ask them to buddy up so that they can help each other out if necessary. I find that by working in pairs (or small groups if appropriate) they can often problem solve without needing to ask me. This frees me up to work equally across the group without leaving lots of students waiting for my attention.<sup>18</sup>

I ask them to work in silence because I can't be heard over chatter and need to shout to get attention.

If I need to intervene for the group, I raise my hand, and the silence is infectious.

If they have a problem, they can raise their hand.

Just asking "are there any questions?" often results in silence or questions from a few with the rest already packing their bags. I have learned not to do this anymore.

I always end 10 minutes early to allow for a closing discussion and have ample time to resolve any outstanding concerns, whilst making links to the next session.

I tell them I'll see them next time, while some are already sloping off. No one asks anything so I can assume all is understood.

I ask them lots of questions at the end of the session as a way of re-capping the key points. This way I can assess what they have learnt as well as evaluate the effectiveness of my session. The answers have the dual benefit of informing those who didn't know, and confirming for those who did.

We're out of time and I am kept late by those who stay behind, not confident of speaking up in front of others.

My desired outcomes were that learners would be able to:

- Identify Adobe Premiere Pro and describe its purpose
- Import video in order to begin an edit
- Navigate the workspace and use the tools
- Create a basic sequence

I have every confidence that these outcomes have been successfully met.

I have little confidence that these outcomes have been met.

This is a great group of students.

This is a difficult group of students.

I'm delighted to see so much engagement; they're a really enthusiastic group. I tell them so and that I am looking forward to working with them again next week.

I receive several emails seeking clarifications in the following days. The first twenty minutes of the following session are spent recapping what had not been understood in the previous session.

I don't have time to upload notes in advance, even if I wanted to.

Mike Rymer, *Technical Tutor*

## Notes:

1. Cooper (2009:72) suggests that: 'feeling able to make mistakes is ... part of valuing diversity and a key element of an inclusive learning environment'.
2. Blair (2011:169) cautions that if a teacher is established as authoritarian, this may inhibit student contributions.
3. Emerging in the writings of Humanistic Psychologist Carl Rogers in the 1950s, 'unconditional positive regard' describes the unqualified acceptance of inherent value in an individual, which cannot be impoverished by imperfections of behaviour. Approaching the student-teacher relationship from a place of unconditional positive regard, accepting students as imperfect (Cowan, 1998, cited in Pollak, 2009:276) will serve inclusivity and reduce anxiety that can inhibit learning.
4. 'Without an overview or purpose to the learning activity, learners focus on trying to work it out for themselves, reducing their ability to retain strings of verbal information' (Cooper, 2009: 74)
5. For Pollak (2009:279) a learning community is enriched when supported to become more diverse in its learning styles.
6. For Cooper (2009:71) 'the more inclusive the learning environment, the fewer additional support strategies are necessary'.
7. Cronin cites the Director of MIT Media Lab: 'I don't think education is about centralized instruction anymore; rather, it is the process [of] establishing oneself as a node in a broad network of distributed creativity (Ito, J., 2011 cited in Cronin 2014:405).
8. Cooper (2009:64) proposes that dyslexia is a social construct, resulting from assumptions that favour those perceived as neurotypical.
9. In line with a social model of disability, many commentators have suggested that disadvantage comes not from individual difference but from the inability of institutions to recognise achievement in different ways (see Cooper, 2009).
10. In the tradition of constructivism, Patricia Murphy notes that 'in order to teach one must first establish what students know' (2008:31). Murphy cites Von Glasersfeld as party to this consensus: 'the teacher's goal is to gain understanding of the students' understanding' (ibid:32)
11. Dating back at least to the cognitive psychology of Piaget (c1950), Constructivism suggests that learners construct knowledge by building on prior experience (Biggs & Tang, 2007). Viewed through this lens, it cannot be assumed that different people learn the same thing from the same information, because new understandings are constructed in relation to prior experience. 'We need to be aware that we are rarely if ever 'writing on a blank slate' (Fry, Ketteridge and Marshall, 2009:10).
12. Pollak (2009:277) echoes many commentators when asserting that 'accessible approaches for neurodiversity often amount to no more than good learning, teaching, and assessment practice'.
13. Cronin (2014:407) notes that 'Students and educators come to higher education learning spaces as networked individuals' owing to 'a broader shift in information and communication ecologies' (acknowledging the work of Rainie and Wellman (2012) in formulating the language of 'networked individualism'.). The advent of global and democratised communication infrastructure has given rise to greater connectivity between individuals than ever before, with far reaching implications for educational paradigms. As educators, using networked technologies allows us to 'leverage' the familiarity that our students already have with these spaces as a part of their digitally dependent and independent identities (Couros, 2006 cited in Cronin, 2014:408); identities in tension between individualization and reliance on others (Ryberg & Larsen, 2008 cited in Cronin, 2014).
14. For Cooper (2009: 76) using 'multiple perceptual pathways strengthens memory' while 'avoiding perceptual barriers to learning' and allowing the making of 'meaning either sequentially or holistically'.
15. Bhagat and O'Neill (2011:224) caution that art and design curricular is Western in bias, to the exclusion of those from alternative national backgrounds.
16. Pollak (2009:278) evokes the position of Cottrell (2001) in contending that: 'too many lecturers address the students whom they wish were in the room (ie. people resembling themselves), rather than those who are actually present'.
17. Fry, Ketteridge and Marshall (2009: 354) applaud the 'deconstruction of artefacts' as one way to ease the acquisition of skills.
18. Fry, Ketteridge and Marshall (2009:21) contend that 'there are often balanced judgements needed about tapering support so as to avoid spoon feeding and to promote the ability to think independently' (whilst highlighting the contribution of Lev Vygotsky to this principle of 'scaffolding').

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