Unboxing the Pandora's Box: The Educational Journey From Personal Stories to Inclusive Co-creation

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Abstract

Ethics may not be a core academic component in the University curriculum, although it is universally accepted to be an important aspect of education across different levels. In some institutions it can be incorporated into the common core, or as part of the general education programme, while in some institutions it may take the form of co-curricular activities. In 2021-2022 the presenter obtained research funding from the university to conduct a creative research project entitled *Pandora's Box*, to engage university students in a number of creative activities – including dramatic works, lyrics writing, personal story sharing – which aim to facilitate self-understanding and personal development. Among the research outputs is a multi-media learning kit entitled *Unboxing Pandoras*, which contains nine personal narratives represented both graphically and verbally. The learning kit was the result of the concerted efforts of the project participants and workshop facilitator, in identifying important aspects of personal growth, interviewing individual members of the community, and designing graphic representations of these personal stories which might have extended meanings for other members of the community. The learning kit was disseminated among educational and cultural organisations for educational purposes, and welcome feedback and comments. This paper is a report on the process of the learning kit's creation, with highlights on individual stories, and the educational journey that participants have undertaken in relation to its creation and dissemination. The journey has proved to be creative, meaningful, and thought-provoking for the university participants.

Keywords: Gendered Narratives, Deep Listening, Co-creative Communication, Mutual Learning, Ownership of Personal Stories

Introduction

First of all, I will share some background information about the research project, its aims, the various components, and the creative and reflective journey that all participants have gone through during the year. I work in the School of Education and Languages of Hong Kong Metropolitan University, and the School is currently running three full-time teacher training undergraduate programmes, covering Early Childhood Education, as well as language education at the Primary and Secondary School levels. As we all know, a good teacher is not only competent in facilitating students' learning in terms of academic content, but also in supporting students' personal development in other ways, such as character formation, emotional well-being, and ethics education. It is therefore with this in mind that I applied for funding from the university to support a project that offers a creative learning experience to my students, to equip them with tools to reflect on their own situations as they interact with fellow participants, and moreover to reach out and connect with members of the community as they do so. It is hoped that through this reflective process, they are more in touch with their own thoughts, their interaction with other people, and how social and cultural environments are shaping these interactions and thoughts.

The project, entitled *Pandora's Box: A Multimedia Creative Project on the Gendered Self* was originally planned for full-time female undergraduate students mainly from the teacher-training programmes. The plan was to engage university students in three workshops each with an artistic focus: (i) playback theatre language, (ii) community music and creative writing, and (iii) installation art. After students had been introduced to these artistic expressions and taught to employ them for their own creative expression, they were encouraged to reach out to members of the community, collect their stories and help to share them in various forms. The story-writing and story-telling were remarkable journeys that students went through because they had to utilize the skills they had acquired during the workshops to connect with members of the community, listen to them, and to present their stories in an artistic language of their choice. At the end of the project, the stories were compiled into two main forms, the verbal narratives and the songs and lyrics. Due to the continued pandemic situation (it was the Summer of 2022), instead of hosting an exhibition at the university, a special learning kit was designed and produced containing the nine main stories. One thousand copies were produced and distributed to more than 40 local organizations including bookshops, NGOs which are involved in youth work, secondary schools and tertiary institutions. A couple of workshops were also conducted at selected NGOs to demonstrate how the learning kit could be used.

As stated in the title of this paper, the main focus of this sharing is the journeys of learning that female university students underwent in the course of this project. In order to talk about their learning journey, I would first give a brief description of the student recruitment process and their profile, then explain the design and rationale of the workshops they attended, before sharing the selected stories that the students gathered from members of the community.

Student Recruitment: Getting the Message Across to Students

Our original plan was to recruit a small group of female students (15-20) from the School of Education and Languages. We wanted to work with female students not because of discrimination, but because we would like to focus on gender experiences, and feel that an all-female setting may create a more secure and trusting emotional environment for the participants. I feel that schoolteachers need the skill of deep communication with students so

that they can be the students' support not only in academic learning, but also in character formation, building their confidence through self-understanding, and so on. Before they can nurture those qualities in their students, they themselves should be very aware of their own being, and be able to express themselves in multiple ways. I and my research partner made a number of class visits to explain our project and tell them about the workshops we had planned, as well as the playback theater performance that we had arranged on campus as a kind of introduction to the theatre language that they would learn in the workshops. But after two weeks of class visits, we were quite surprised to see only a couple of students actually came to ask about joining.

Seeing that our original target audience was not forthcoming, we decided to publicize the project to students of other schools – we liaised with professors of the School of Arts and Social Sciences and made a few visits to classes of creative writing and art and design, hoping that arts students would be more open to opportunities of learning different ways of artistic expression. We did get a number of students this way, but we were hoping to have around 15 students for a start. So we designed and printed some postcards to advertise our project, set up a booth at the lift lobby on the ground floor, and promoted our project by having mini one-on-one playback theatre sessions. With the facilitator holding her guitar, advertising the one-on-one experience, and the nice postcard, we finally managed to gather a group of 14 students, including both male and female students, with very mixed background and academic disciplines. We had modified our gender requirement to include those who feel they could identify with female feelings and thoughts, in order to help with the recruitment number. Although most of the group were conventional full-time undergraduate students, we also had a few mature students who were taking our distance-learning courses joining the group. The oldest participant was a 60-year old retired school teacher who had some experience conducting drama in his school.

From this recruitment exercise, I have a few observations about the students and how they responded to such a learning experience. The most obvious is the time commitment issue. Our original target audience was simply too occupied by school work/teaching practicum to engage in any form of extra-curricular activities, not to say one that extends over a period of months, involving rehearsal and a final performance. Time issue aside, the nature of the activity was also a concern with some potential participants. As gender is not a topic taught in their own disciplines, many of them were a little confused about what the learning experience would be like. When we opened up the activity to recruit male students who could identify with female feelings, we had to spend a lot of time explaining to them about gender qualities perception – they feared that being part of the activity will make them look like a sissy.

Another notable perception about drama and dramatic language is that most students felt that they were coming to learn how to act, whereas our training in Playback Theatre was mainly focusing on communication and connection – with oneself and with the team. This requires a great extent of honesty about oneself, and willingness to trust other members of the team. This kind of intimacy is not usually called for in the students' learning which takes place in the classroom. When I visited the group during their activities in the early phase of the project, I could see that not all of them were ready to present themselves to the rest of the group, especially in terms of sharing their own experiences which sometimes could be embarrassing and might even invite criticisms and judgement from others. I was happy to see that those who stayed with the group (because 5 of the students who signed up did not actually complete the programme) had accepted the challenge to face themselves and to work in honesty with the rest of the group, and with the audience (in the playback theatre session).

Despite the initial difficulty in recruiting students, and the subsequent challenges appearing at different stages of the activity (what with the pandemic and the suspension of face-to-face activities periodically), I believe this is the kind of learning experience and learning content that local students need and will benefit from.

Using the Language of Art: Connecting with Oneself and Reaching Out

The following is a brief summary of the content of the workshops and how they might contribute to our ultimate goal of facilitating students' self-understanding, building their confidence, and establishing the right values through connecting with more people and their life conditions in our society.

There were three workshops series. The first one was called "opening your body", an initiation to the understanding of the physical body, people's perception and hidden social rules about what is permissible and not permissible. This workshop was a preparatory experience for them to undergo the 30-hour core training in Playback Theatre language. After the participants were more familiar with the requirements of openness, honesty, inclusiveness, and trust, they were given the core training of basic level Playback Theatre language. This core training enabled the participants to practice deep listening, be sympathetic and respectful to other people's feelings, and use the standard Playback Theatre language to express those situations and feelings to an audience.

The second workshop series was installation art. An instructor was invited to share the basic concepts of installation art, and to work with students on their own design around the theme of gender. It was hoped that students could be encouraged to use installation art techniques to create their own pieces of work, to reflect on their personal experiences or thoughts relating to the theme of gender. The original plan was to have an open exhibition of their installation work, but because of the pandemic, subsequently, the group came up with the idea of presenting gender as "clothes", and designed different "costumes" for the body to wear to represent the nine personal narratives – that was the learning kit produced from the project.

The third workshop series was community music and lyrics writing. A facilitator was recruited to work with participants so that they learned how to transform ideas and feelings into music and lyrics of songs. Not all the participants successfully turned their interview stories into songs with lyrics, but the training was intended to show them how this artistic expression works and demonstrated to them through actual examples that personal stories can be told in multiple ways, including verbal and non-verbal methods. Subsequently three songs were written and the singing was recorded and put on the website of the project. In this paper, the stories behind these songs and lyrics will be shared to illustrate the kind of learning that participants had gone through.

Communicating Gender: Listening to and Composing Nine Personal Narratives

Using the techniques they have learned in the workshops, the HKMU participants interviewed nine members from the community, to learn about their life experiences and their emotional journey as they transversed through these positive and negative life encounters. In these communications, very intimate personal stories were shared, feelings flowed and were captured, and were ultimately translated into verbal and non-verbal languages and presented in the form of written stories, songs and lyrics. All of these stories are accessible on the project website: https://pandorasboxplaybac.wixsite.com/unboxing-pandoras under "Stories".

For each of the personal story, a picture was created to represent the protagonist of the story. The project team had chosen "if I wear you" to reflect the changeable nature of gender qualities: gender as costumes to be put on and taken off at will. Interestingly, the Chinese version of the heading reads [是她也是你和我], which actually means "it's her but it's also you and me". Together, the English and Chinese titles of this section convey the meaning of gender as costumes, and that applies to everyone including you and me. We are reminded that very often these costumes are what people see and what people respond to, although they may not be a true or complete picture of the person wearing the costume. Sometimes, unfortunately, people are not even paying attention, and simply interact from habits and conventions. The arranged interviews were to create an environment where deep and sympathetic listening could be practiced, giving the university participants a chance for more understanding and reflection when they interacted with community members.

The nine story-tellers from the community have very different backgrounds and stories:

1. Chun Chun [珍珍] is a 63-year old kidney patient who had to do hemodialysis every day, and who subsequently lost most of her sight after the long-awaited kidney transplant.
2. Violet [紫蘭] is a 35-year old woman who felt trapped, living in the same small room with her parents until she was 30 years old. She was verbally abused by her father.
3. Bei Bei [被被] is a 23-year old woman who left home as a teenager and suddenly appeared in front of her mother again with a new born baby.
4. Vicky GS03 is a (self-identified) 28-year old transgender person who lived through a difficult time in a secondary boys' school and who found a new life when online shopping became popular.
5. Sister Flower [花姐] is a 68-year old woman who returned to Hong Kong after spending her early years in Africa, and after having very different experiences during various stages of work and life.
6. Pai Big Star [派大星] is a 28-year old woman who had to shoulder her parents' debts, and who had been so desperate that she tried to commit suicide by overdose.
7. Ah Yu [阿宇] is a 36-year old mother who experienced the magical moments of being a mother.
8. Kristin is a 23-year old woman who was born in the Mainland but was forced to move to Hong Kong with the family when her younger sister was born.
9. Love [呀愛] is a 32-year old woman who was diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 29.

The university participants were each paired up with one storyteller. They conducted the interview, asked questions that they felt could let them know the person better, and afterwards produced a narrative from what they learned of the person's story. A writing instructor worked with the participants to help them get the story into shape, and afterwards some of the stories were chosen as materials for writing the song and the lyrics. It should be noted that students came from different academic disciplines, and writing personal narratives was not part of their academic training. This learning experience focused on the skills of deep and sympathetic listening rather than skills of creative writing, although attention was drawn to the "authentic" representation of these personal stories. That was why besides the words, pictures were also used, and a costume was designed to match with each of these personal experiences. In the following I will share three of these stories which had been turned into songs with lyrics.

Rebirth [重生]: Chun Chun's Story

The song title is Rebirth, or "live again" if directly translated from Chinese. The protagonist Chun Chun is a 63-year old kidney patient who had to do hemodialysis every day, and who subsequently lost most of her sight after kidney transplant. Looking back, her life was full of unexpected tragedies – her illness prevented her from following the typical path of most young women, getting married and having a family, it also prevented her from having a regular job and supporting herself. Life was lived not only with the discomfort of the illness, but also with regrets and sorrow because she felt useless among family members. Complications of her illness resulted in a major life-threatening situation when she was 44 years old. Finally she received kidney transplant, but the medication also caused her to lose most of her sight – and she became a visually impaired person.

The loss of physical sight was in fact the turning point of her life, despite the additional suffering and the seemingly more restrictive condition of not being able to see properly. She had to learn how to go about her daily life again – using her other senses to compensate for the loss of sight. She also joined a theatre group for members who are physically challenged, and started a very different life. From then on, her world was bigger, and she was able to "see" more because of her engagement with theatre and in turn with more people. In these interactions with different people, some of whom were also physically challenged, she had the chance to listen to more stories, to learn how other people grow through these stories. The last sentences of the written narrative go like this: "In these interactions, you learned how to understand and tolerate, how to be with different people. It is like a realization that the rainbow consists of not only seven colours, but even the green has different shades. Everyone is unique. Now you "see" with much more details, and with much more depth."
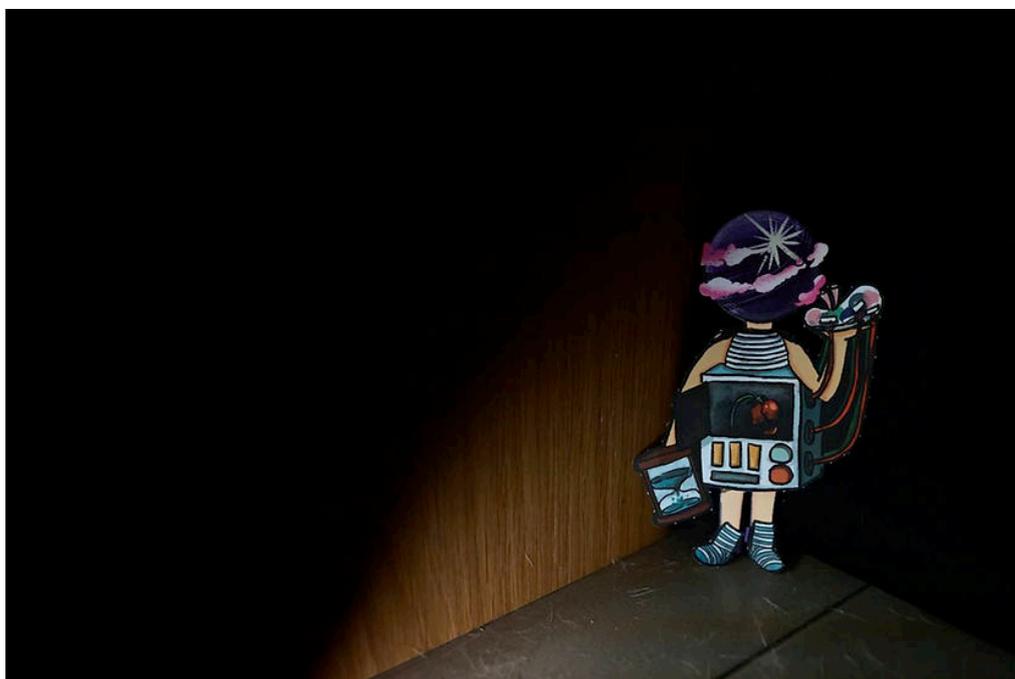
Figure 1: Chun Chun's costume.

Breakthrough [破繭]: Vicky's Story

Vicky is a (self-identified) 28-year old transgender person who lived through a difficult time in a secondary boys' school. The first time she had some freedom was during the early 1990s when she lived in the university's student residence. There she had the space to try out the female outfits secretly, just looking at herself in the mirror. Vicky discovered the mismatch between her physical body and her feelings about herself since secondary school, but she also understood that there was no way for her to express this identity openly either at home or at the school. One of the biggest taboos/fears in the boys' school was to be identified/perceived as a "transvestite", or simply being a "sissy". At home, the living space was so confined that it was impossible for her to have private space where she could hide and be herself amongst her family. Therefore, in order to live an easier life, she behaved in the way expected of a young man – dating girls, playing football and video games – despite knowing that this was not what she really wanted and that she was actually leading a false life.

The personal space at the university residence on the one hand satisfied her desire to "be herself" but on the other hand it became a private cocoon that separated her from the real world. She seemed to be existing in another planet during those moments of authenticity. The era of online shopping opened a completely new life for Vicky, for she no longer needed to face discriminating gazes when she shopped for herself, and the popularity of online dating also enabled her to connect with people who accepted her as she was. The conveniences enabled by the online world (even learning how to do make-up from YouTube) created new possibilities for her in terms of her identity, and in terms of meeting like-minded people. It was a breakthrough, or as suggested by the Chinese title of the song: "breaking through the cocoon", the new person Vicky emerged as new from the cocoon and welcomed the new life.
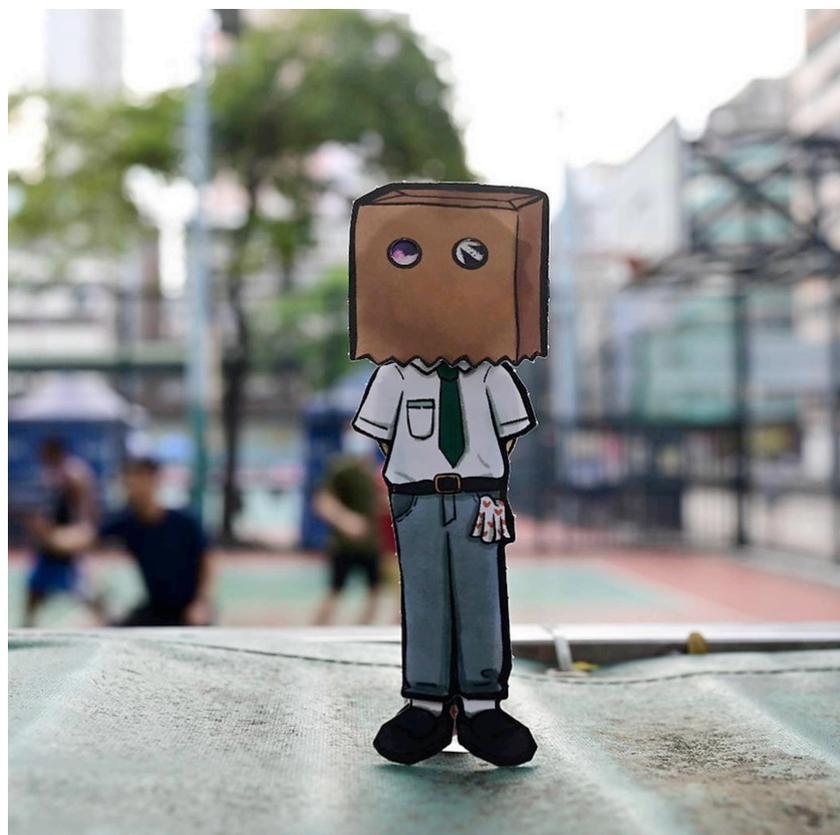
Figure 2: Vicky's costume.

Wild: Kristin's Story

Kristin is a 23-year old woman who was born in the Mainland but was forced to move to Hong Kong with her mother and her younger sister when she was young. In her story, she expressed the pain of not being able to understand why she was forced to give up her life in the Mainland, only to live in a very small flat in Hong Kong. The "sudden" appearance of the younger sister also took her by surprise and almost uprooted her identity – she had problems getting used to her new role, and her new relationship with her mother. Although five years had passed already since her arrival in Hong Kong, and she had tried to establish a relationship with the younger sister whose sudden appearance was somehow connected to her forced migration, she still could not get out of the memory of bitterness and incomprehension. Her mind was still full of burning questions about the sudden uproot, and as a result, the inability to get close to her mother again despite her previous reliance on her.

The lyrics of the song is full of questions by the narrator – the dominant emotion is incomprehension and frustration. It was the feelings of a young person who had relied on the adult for direction, orientation and support, but who felt betrayed when intimate communication was not forthcoming. The "new life" in Hong Kong that was imposed on the narrator had only resulted in repression of anger and strong emotions, and a desperate hope to re-establish a loving and supportive bonding with her family. This desire to establish the bonding did not appear to be fulfilled, as the song is essentially a monologue. The narrator is still asking questions and hoping for answers that have not shown themselves.

Figure 3: Kristin's costume.

Conclusion: Unboxing the Pandora's Box as a Journey of Understanding and Hope

Pandora's Box has always been the symbol of trouble – unexpected, messy and something to be avoided. In our multi-media creative project, we equipped Hong Kong university students with the languages of art, and put them in touch with a range of personal stories out there in

the community. Through this learning process, student participants of the project have acquired the technique of artistic expressions, and sympathetic deep listening when communicating with their fellow learners and community members. Their learning has led them into reflection of their own lives as their horizons are widened by contact with the personal stories of these nine community members. In a way similar to the original Pandora's Box, a range of painful experiences, negative emotions, and unrecoverable losses were unleashed in this artistic encounter, but as we unbox this group of gender experiences, what comes out is a series of intimate communications that can be used for building personal connections, or deployed for educational purposes. For the university participants, the Pandora's Box experience is a journey through the darker sides of our existence but also an empowering process that enables us to transform trouble into nutrients for further development.

Acknowledgements

References

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