Scholar Report

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Thinking Inside the Box reflective report

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Introduction

Thinking Inside the Box is a project that utilises archival sources on the political resistance and struggle in Latin America in the 1970s to provide students with an alternative perspective on historical events and the learning experience more broadly. The project is based on the theoretical framework developed by Paulo Freire, published in his well-known work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) and is based on the premise that learners and educators are on a spectrum between oppressor (reinforcing dominant cultural values) and the oppressed (embracing liberation through dialogue and self-reflection). In these terms, conventional teaching practices can be seen as 'oppressive', in that they treat students as passive recipients of information rather than active participants of their learning. This project challenged that concept by aiming to place students at a midpoint of the spectrum, allowing individuals to take on the roles of teacher and student simultaneously when guiding their own learning.

Thinking inside the Box research

My Role

My involvement in the research was to evaluate this pedagogical framework to understand its impact on staff, students and other external stakeholders that participated in the project. Specifically, I took responsibility designing the data collection method, for which I decided to draw on a technique known as "friendship as a method," or paired interviews (Quinney et al., 2016). In this capacity, I facilitated discussions between project-involved peers, capturing their perspectives and assessing any commonalities or divergences in their responses. The importance of

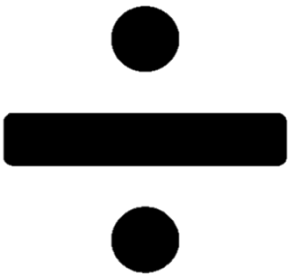
this method was that it mobilised the existing relationships and shared experiences, mitigating against the power dynamics of interviewer-interviewee. During these sessions, students interviewed each other using guided questions that explored various elements of their experiences of *Thinking Inside the Box*, such as the independence they gained, how they felt the project compared to traditional university teaching and assessments, their transformational experiences and their engagement with the wider community. After conducting eight of these peered interviews and transcribing them, I then contributed to analysing the data with Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This consisted of finding common themes and patterns that came up repeatedly across the student interviews.

Research findings and their importance

The findings of this research hold significant importance, as they highlight some of the prevailing concerns linked to neoliberal teaching. The data collected therefore provides us with evidence-based incentives to advocate for transformative change within educational institutions in the UK today. My findings pointed to how a decolonial and transformative experience like *Thinking Inside the Box* has the potential to address issues regarding disengagement, student-staff relationships and community, and the limitations of traditional assessments that fail to be inclusive and accessible. Moreover, the successes observed through the alternative teaching approaches of the project offers valuable insights, providing practical and workable approaches that could be implemented into pre-existing modules and courses to reduce some of the problems that educational institutions are currently facing.

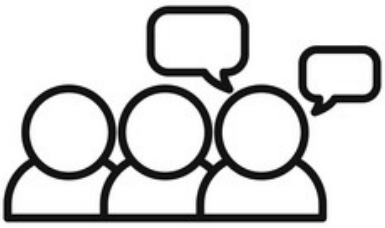
Currently in the UK, there is a debate on the quality of education provided at universities and whether it is proportionate to the amount of money students are spending (*Crackdown on Rip-off University Degrees*, 2023). Unfortunately, during our interviews, numerous students mentioned lack of engagement and satisfaction from their university modules due to no variation in the delivery of content. Contrasting this, students cited that the project was very engaging throughout due to it being ‘led by them’, opportunities for their ‘own interpretation’ of content and ‘having choice’ in where they want to take their research. The project provided individuals with more opportunities to collectively interpret the learning content, rather than just regurgitating someone else's interpretation, rendering them active participants in their learning and attaching meaning to the content. The interviews clearly showed that this made students enthusiastic and motivated, rather than acting on instruction, they were instead driven by passion. Utilising more student-centred methods would not only increase student engagement physically and mentally, but also empower them.

The interviews also highlighted how relationships between student and lecturer can influence the efficacy of their learning. Individuals on the project emphasised the 'informality' between students and staff members as a positive aspect, and felt it created a friendly environment. Many suggested the frequent conversational interactions humanised their perception of academics that were initially seen as intimidating or superior. A horizontal relationship grew between staff and students throughout the project where everyone felt equal and that they were working without hierarchy. This opposed prior experiences where students have said to have felt distant from their teachers and that they couldn't ask for help. However, this co-created learning environment was successful in building relationships through the project. The collective nature of interpretation was also relevant: knowledge and information was exchanged and collaboratively produced, rather than simply being imparted on students by lecturers, which risks forcing individuals into one way of thinking. The achievement of *Thinking Inside the Box* could be critical in reducing the divide and bridging the gap between teacher and student.



My findings also brought to light the importance of group work and social interactions. Many individuals expressed how participation in the project allowed connections to be formed, removing the feeling of isolation they felt on their courses. Usually, courses and lecture halls are extremely populated, and yet opportunities for group work and discussions are rare, leaving feelings of loneliness or exclusion. At the same time, the project brought students into direct contact with various researchers, industry experts, and Chilean exile communities as well as the broader publics of Leeds. Engagements with the community is not often an asset of current modules, and the project showed the value of incorporating such publics into academic collaborations. Meeting Chilean exiles was described as 'more real', as 'living history' that was 'sensitising'. Having the opportunity to interact with these individuals gave a new meaning to the content they were learning, also being able to break out of the student bubble and engage with the public of Leeds was repeatedly

mentioned as an inspiring experience. Interviewees also mentioned how such opportunities to socialise within teaching, whether that is with communities or other students, can benefit mental health and promote friendships as well as creating professional networks that will support career development and opportunities.



Summarising individual and project outcomes

After looking over my research I believe striking a balance of teaching approaches is the most important takeaway. To enrich students with skills and knowledge, education should provide a variety of assignments and opportunities. *Thinking Inside the Box* has been described as 'the most experience rich' after providing such a breadth of skills that were considered arguably more relevant for future practical employment than those developed through most modules. The project's outputs included essays, workshops, website building, documentary filming, interviewing, organising events such as concerts and curating exhibitions.

To summarise our own outputs of research, after wider in-depth readings we have essentially formed a database containing relevant literature supporting archival pedagogical framework, which will be combined with our own primary data of interview material to contribute to a book. Additionally, our data evidences the need for promoting decolonial and transformative methods and can shape future iterations of the project whether that is continuing as a voluntary project or forming an archive-based module.

Increasing Awareness

Connections on the Laidlaw Network

During our research, I contributed to numerous strategies to increase the awareness of both the *Thinking Inside the Box* project and the Laidlaw programme. To begin with, sharing weekly updates on the Laidlaw network has resulted in a substantial increase in my connections with individuals from across the world. Igniting

conversations with individuals spanning from New York to Saint Andrews, where discussions of the commonalities in our research have occurred and even debating conflicting research. Similarities were found in other archival research finding that other students also feel that using these sources sensitised the content they were learning and how it provided stronger emotions and meaning. Additionally expressing their findings on 'silence in the archives' and how there are large gaps and lost perspectives in historical events due to archives being removed due to censorship or never found. Conflicts involved the ideas of assessment, although some researchers agreed that alternative assessment should be implemented more as it allows inclusivity for all different types of learners. Others believed that the ideas are not objective or quantifiable enough to be pushed far in university education and when looked at realistically the options are limited in terms of their feasibility. They did make a point that these types of assessment such as podcasts would engage the students more, however they do not see the humanities department changing as they are too focused on their traditional academic skills.

Engaging with individuals beyond my immediate cohort has effectively heightened the recognition of our research including both the process and outcome. Noting that a shared trait among all scholars is our status as students. We have experienced traditional teaching and have formed our own opinions on how we would like to learn. By directly raising awareness within this target audience using the network it allows students a platform to share their opinion and voices on the matter and whether they are satisfied with their current traditional teaching. Also sharing opinions may allow students from other universities to relate and realise change should be made part of our teaching practices in order to improve the student experience.

I also designed a research poster employing the same colour schemes as those used in the initial project promotions, with the intention of publishing my work on the *Thinking Inside the Box* public website. The poster will offer a concise overview of the project's impacts on learning, supported by quotes from actual students, staff and other stakeholders who participated in the project. I believe that disseminating our findings in this way will justify why the project as a whole was so successful with students and the community.

Education Conference

Furthermore, aiming to reach a broader audience, myself and the other two Laidlaw Scholars on the project were accepted to present our research findings at the 2023 Success in Taught Student Education conference at Leeds. This presents us with an opportunity to introduce these alternative teaching methods to educators directly

and clarify the significance of integrating them into universities. Our participation also serves to represent the Laidlaw scholarship programme, highlighting how it encourages students to engage in scholarly research, a pursuit not commonly associated with first-year university education. By doing so, we are working to raise awareness about the existence of such programmes and their capacity to offer students a wealth of experience, leadership skills, and social networking opportunities. More broadly, we intend to showcase how the *Thinking Inside the Box* approach does not only serve as a steppingstone to good grades and future careers, but also contributes to personal growth and development.

Leadership skills and personal development

Changes in perspective

Engaging in this research project has truly been a transformative experience for me in both skill and personal development. Initially, the lines of my research were blurred, leaving a sense of ambiguity and feeling out of place. However, a pivotal moment occurred when I began interviewing the students, triggering a lightbulb moment. Stories of the individuals pieced together to form a full picture, highlighting the extent to which the lives of students and the community had been positively impacted. Uncovering how *Thinking Inside the Box* had influenced career decisions, social interactions, and skill development highlighted the project's substantial impact and its diverse effects on individuals.

Having just finished my first year, I was unsure as to whether it was just me who found it difficult to engage with lecture-based teaching, or whether it was an experience shared by other students. Through the interviews, I heard students from different academic years express similar difficulties during university. It left me feeling less isolated but at the same time frustrated. Despite there being a consensus of dissatisfaction and even acknowledgement from lecturers that ‘lecture-based teaching is not an effective way to learn’, there has been only a small scope for change. In contrast, most participants commented on how *Thinking Inside the Box* changed their whole perspective on education and transformed their university experience. These interviews did not only highlight the need for the education system to change but motivated me to use my research to innovate this change.

Despite initially feeling out of my depth, my supervisor insisted that myself and the other two Laidlaw Scholars collectively decide the pathway of our engagement with the project, as well as our intended outcomes. Looking back, I realised this was the embodiment of the *Thinking Inside the Box* approach. Experiencing first-hand the same positive impacts of these student-centred methods brought our research full circle to where we began. Whether or not this was our supervisor’s intention, her

approach to engaging us as collaborators encouraged liberation of ideas, self-reflection, and effective collaboration. Ultimately, my contribution pushed me out of my comfort zone and gave me the opportunity to step into more leadership roles.

Leadership skills and achievements

Unlike other Laidlaw allocations our project was a unique experience due to having a team project contrasting those who had an independent one. I was fortunate to have two fellow scholars, Hazel Maris and Grace Nash, as research partners and believe it provided me with a completely different experience that contrasts scholars who may have worked independently. Having that support triangle during the research allowed us to cover all bases with each of our individual strengths and work collaboratively. This definitely made my experience less daunting and allowed multiple insights to drive what direction the research was going. As a group we took responsibility for different parts of the project depending on our interests and therefore we all had the opportunity to take leadership roles in different aspects of the project, for example I led the student component while my fellow scholars led the staff and stakeholder component. This was a beneficial experience as not only have I made friends, but I have also learnt communication skills, team management and active listening when working with individuals I had initially never met.

Since taking on this project, I feel as though I have gained immense confidence in my abilities. My research has acted as a springboard for my skills to develop and for further opportunities to open. Specifically, engaging in this research project has cultivated my skills in planning and organisation. Right from the outset, I took responsibility for establishing group deadlines and outlining potential objectives for specific weeks. Although this process enhanced our project management abilities, as a group we encountered challenges such as sometimes difficulties keeping up with deadlines and research-related hurdles. Consequently, I developed adaptability and quick thinking. For instance, I initially aimed to complete all my paired interviews within a 2-week period at the beginning of the project. However, issues with cancellations and no shows led to delays. This allowed me to develop strategies involving empathy, adaptability and practical solutions when rearranging interviews with participants. Such as reaching out to participants on more active social media platforms and improvising by contacting substitute participants to prevent interviews from being cancelled.

Within our group, I also took a role in the task allocation and determining how to distribute the workload. This involved extensive communication with both my supervisor and fellow scholars to ensure everyone felt comfortable with their assigned tasks and to gather their input. My idea of assigning each scholar a different participant group to interview proved successful, reducing confusion, and evenly

distributing the workload. Effective communication also extended to our group meetings, where we shared our progress, intentions, and criteria to further progress. These weekly meetings served as a collaborative platform for everyone to stay informed and help if someone encountered difficulties. For instance, I provided support to individuals with tasks such as transcription and anonymising information. During the course of the project, I came to recognise that my strengths lie in critical evaluations of methods, assessing the feasibility and practicality of ideas alongside project management roles that involve decision-making and delegation.

Overall, the research process increased my ability to multitask by managing research tasks while also attending to other commitments. Having two jobs alongside this project, in mental health support work and appetite research, meant I had to manage my time effectively to ensure my contributions to the project were made. This developed my ability to prioritise and order my tasks in terms of urgency to ensure all tasks were being completed. This also showcased my discipline as despite difficulty at times with long working hours or constant travelling, I have persisted and because of that I have almost completed my care certification, Laidlaw research and my first assistant psychologist research post.

My Future

These strengths have shaped the trajectory of my future career aspirations to specialise in forming intervention strategies rooted in psychology, particularly aimed at aiding vulnerable groups. These groups encompass individuals with complex needs, survivors of domestic abuse, and those battling a history of addiction. Also noting the wider literature, I have gathered from this project is relevant to these vulnerable groups, involving the broader philosophy of the pedagogy of the oppressed and the humanist decolonial approach. This ambition has sprouted from the passion I possess in my present position as a mental health support worker. In my capacity as a support worker, my primary duty revolves around assisting in development of autonomy and life skills through a compassionate approach that restores dignity. Empowering individuals with choices, thereby reinstating control over their lives despite their diagnosis. Witnessing the tangible positive transformations, I have facilitated has driven me to seek entry into a doctorate program in clinical psychology. The wealth of experience I have gained from my participation in the Laidlaw programme serves as a robust foundation for my pursuit of this competitive doctorate. This program has played a vital role in enhancing my self-confidence in leadership capabilities and gaining relevant skills that will prove invaluable during my doctoral journey.

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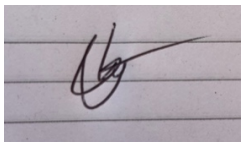
Supervisor Comments from Anna Grimaldi, POLIS.

As part of a four-person team (myself and two other Laidlaw Scholars), Lily conducted and analysed a series of interviews to evaluate the effectiveness of a pedagogical framework titled *Thinking Inside the Box.* Lily is extremely organised and efficient in her work, without losing sight of precision and depth, showing a degree of high standards of someone well beyond her career stage. Entirely of her own initiative, Lily sought out relevant literature and volunteered her previous experiences and evaluations to significantly shape the project's methodological framework. She took leadership in the delegation of tasks and the management of data collection and took responsibility by seeking relevant advice and experience in the more complex matters, for example ethics and anonymity. Her leadership skills most certainly lie in management, but what is key in Lily's case is her calm and supportive demeanour, her ability to take everyone's views and capacities into consideration, as well as her ability to adapt and be flexible. I believe what the project provided her with was some space to reflect on her own interpretations and experiences of being a student, and I can see this has inspired her thinking in meaningful ways. It has been an honour and a privilege to work with her!

Signature of Scholar  Date: 19/09/2023

Signature of Project Leader Date: 19/09/2023