Demystifying the dissertation: learning through magic

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Why magic?

- Magic's narrative structure can be used to help students think through ideas and processes (Wiseman *et al.*, 2020; Landman, 2018).
- It stimulates divergent thinking and curiosity (Wiseman *et al.*, 2021).
- It acts as a microcosm of the learning experience where students can quickly access "a sense of progress and mastery" (Wiseman and Watt, 2020, p.2) which can be used to build confidence.
- Learning with a trick rather than subject content removes pressure (Houstoun, 2021).
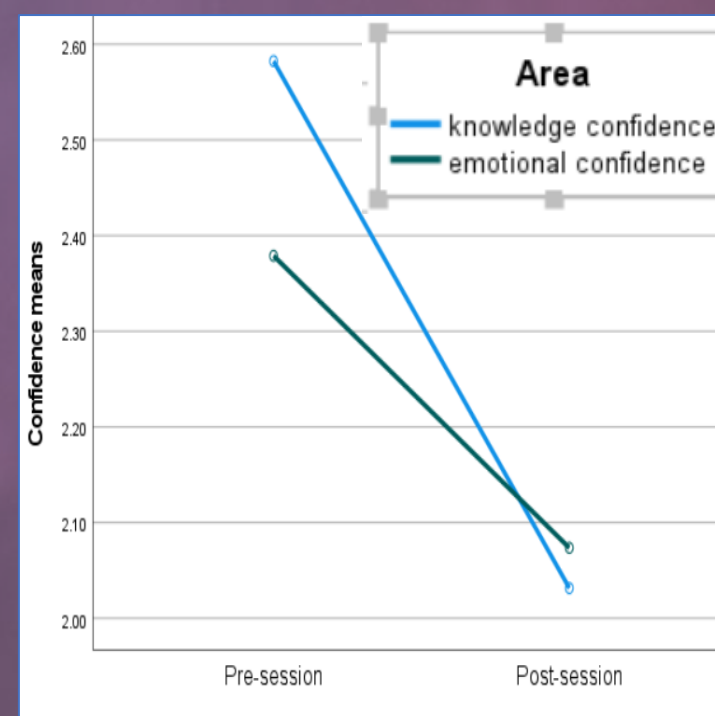- It increases motivation and problem solving (Moss *et al.*, 2017).

Previous projects have situated the teacher as magician. In our project, students learned the magic themselves, giving them the opportunity to think through the process from learning to presenting.

What did we do?
Learning Development dissertation session (end of Year 2)

Session
Explained use of magic; taught students a trick; students performed tricks; supported students to make links between the process and their dissertation; explored skills to support dissertation writing.

Data collection
Ethical approval given; participant consent sought and given; pre- and post-session questionnaires completed by 57 students; further post-session questionnaire completed.

What happened?

Student comments:
➢ "the magic tricks...helped to put the point across about dissertations seeming hard when you don't know how to start, but once you do know it becomes a lot easier."
➢ "It made me want to perfect the magic trick and doing the same with my [project]."
➢ "It was fun! The whole room was engaged."
➢ "It also made it memorable."

Questions were on a 1-5 scale; a lower score means students were more confident

Two constructs, 'knowledge' and 'emotion' towards dissertation, had five questions each. All scales had high level of internal consistency (determined by Cronbach's alphas) and were grouped. Statistically significant interaction between constructs and pre/post confidence scores: $F_{(1,112)} = 8.405$, $p<.01$, partial $\eta2 = .07$. Knowledge confidence: statistically significantly improved post-session: $F_{(1,56)} = 69.699$, $p<.001$, partial $\eta2 = .524$, compared to pre-session. Emotional confidence: statistically significantly improved post-session: $F_{(1,56)} = 41.264$, $p<.001$, partial $\eta2 = .424$, compared to pre-session.

What might it mean?

Data evidences that the magic session improved students' 'knowledge' and 'emotional' confidence around dissertation.

Skills learned in mastering and presenting a magic trick were transferable to the dissertation process, allowing students to think through strategies such as: preparation, organisation, practice, narrative and how to deal with setbacks.

Using a playful approach to remove the fear of failing (Nørgård *et al.*, 2017) allowed for a fun, memorable and motivating session. The post-session questionnaire showed that students remembered points learned from the session later in the dissertation process.

However, some students found it difficult to make clear links between the magic and the dissertation. Facilitators should structure activities and discussions to support meaning-making where needed.

What next?

1. Share our experience of using magic as part of creative learning and teaching.
2. When using magic, support students to make strong links between the magic and the details of key learning.
3. Further research could focus on exploring different kinds of magic tricks or supporting different skills.

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