Innovative pedagogies series: 
Illuminating pedagogy through experiential knowledge

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# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contents</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing communities of learning and practice</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is distinctly innovative about my pedagogic practice?</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory to practice and challenging pedagogy</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical steps to consider on the implementation of experiential</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>knowledge in the curriculum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Introduction**

My approach to pedagogical innovation reflects a commitment to advancing the importance of *experiential knowledge* in helping Social Work students understand concepts which are both challenging, yet crucial to their knowledge development. This type of experiential knowledge, based on lived experience, has been a defining characteristic and feature of how I have pioneered innovative ways of working alongside service users and carers in the teaching of Social Work students both nationally and internationally.

This narrative will provide examples of how this type of partnership approach, involving communities of learning (Wenger 1998), has helped students to grasp *threshold concepts* and *troublesome knowledge* (Meyer and Land 2005; Foote 2012). I will contextualise my approach within the broader context of Social Work teaching and provide some advice to support colleagues in their pursuit of similar innovative practices.

**Background**

One of the novel features, central to the reform of Social Work education in the United Kingdom (UK), was the requirement that service users and carers would be actively involved in the teaching of Social Work students (DOH, 2002). This elevated positioning of experiential and lived knowledge in the UK Social Work curriculum has not, however, been replicated on such a mandatory footing anywhere else in the world (Anghel and Roman 2009). I write from a Northern Ireland perspective, a country whose Social Work education journey has experienced its own particular challenges as a result of a distinct milieu of violent political conflict. The Northern Ireland Social Work curriculum had always struggled in finding a safe way of teaching students about the 'Troubles', the euphemism historically used to describe this country's history of violence. The Social Work reforms introduced to Northern Ireland (DHSSPS 2003) recognised these challenges in pedagogy by stipulating that Social Work students should also be taught about 'the Northern Ireland Context'. In guidance subsequently published by the regulatory body for Social Work, this 'Context' referred to how individuals, groups and communities had been impacted by a sustained period of conflict (DHSSPS 2003).

With expectations already in place around involving service users and carers in the Social Work curriculum, my particular path towards innovation began in 2003 with my first university lecturing job in Social Work. As someone who was new to the world of academia, I quickly became aware of the importance of research and publications. This was at first quite daunting, characterised by the need to generate ideas and projects which were innovative, original and had impact. I did, however, reflect that this was also a very interesting time to be starting a university academic career in Social Work, when so much change was in the air. This was, therefore, very much a time of personal reflection and reflexivity.

I was particularly intrigued by this new curriculum requirement to involve Social Work service users and carers in the education of Social Work students. I questioned how would this be approached to achieve genuine, non-tokenistic, service user and carer involvement? In my reflections, I remembered what impacted on me as a young carer and how my own father felt when he was part of 'the system'.

This marked the start of my academic journey towards research and publications aimed at achieving meaningful ways of involving people who use Social Work services. As I became more familiar with the literature, I frequently encountered references about avoiding tokenism in this work. The works of authors such as Campbell (1996), Beresford (2000), Beresford and Croft (2004), Carr (2004), Davis (2006), Zavirsek and Videmsek (2009) and McLaughlin (2009), were all particularly influential on my approach to viewing service user engagement in both an empowering, yet critical way.
One of the primary pedagogical innovations I pioneered was based on the concept of involving service users and carers with lived experience of the ‘Troubles’, directly sharing their experiences with Social Work students. By doing so, the Northern Ireland curriculum would not only directly involve service users and carers in teaching but at the same time afford creative pedagogical opportunities for exposing students to narratives of the ‘Troubles’, thereby evidencing the ‘Northern Ireland Context’, mentioned earlier.

My first publication, *Participating and learning - citizen involvement in Social Work education in a Northern Ireland context*, funded from the then Higher Education Academy’s Subject Centre for Social Policy and Social Work, was written as a good practice guide for Social Work educators on involving service users and carers in Social Work education. The guide, published in 2006, also recognised that service users and carers could help students to understand how experiences of conflict had directly affected their lives. The guide has been influential in guiding Social Work educators in implementing user initiatives in the curriculum and has formed the basis for the curriculum innovations I describe in this report.

**Developing communities of learning and practice**

Wenger’s work on communities of learning and practice has been particularly helpful as a theoretical basis to informing the pedagogical initiatives I have developed (Wenger 1998). Partnership working has therefore been an undergirding feature of my approach to teaching from the very outset. Directly involving service users and carers with lived experiences of challenging and oppressive life circumstances and with no prior experience of teaching, presents challenges at both conceptual and practical levels. While partnership is recognised and established in the Social Work literature as a core Social Work value (Miley et al. 2001; Hepworth *et al.* 2002; Scheyett and Diehl 2004), Gutman *et al.* (2012) contend that Social Work education is the most appropriate site for students to most effectively learn what partnership means in practice. The following section of my report describes four examples of how service user and carer experience-based knowledge has contributed to helping students in their grasp of key domains of Social Work knowledge.

**Example 1**

In this first example I led on the development of an original and innovative way of teaching Social Work students involving service users and carers in their own community and practice settings (Duffy and Hayes 2012). By re-orientating the site for student learning beyond the university and into the community, I advocate for a knowledge base which is inclusive (Gutman *et al.* 2012). Central to this is the involvement of service users and carers in bridging the gap between theory and practice (Brown and Young 2008). The potential for such communities of practice to meaningfully construct a living curriculum (Wenger 1998) is at the heart of this pedagogical initiative. In this way, service users and carers, working from their own community settings, collaborated with academic staff to bring life and meaning to theoretical aspects of teaching. My research addressed the criticism that students are often provided with lists of Social Work values through their teaching without being encouraged to reflect critically on their meaning or application to practice (Horne 1999; Trevithick 2008), so as to engage in “values talk” (Timms 1983). Cooper and Spencer-Dawe (2006) also observed how important it is to particularly expose first year Social Work students to service user perspectives to assist in helping them make links between theory and practice. This pedagogic initiative addressed this gap in the literature and was valued by all participants in this community of learning as the following evaluation quotes highlight:
Hearing first-hand accounts of the impact of both positive and negative Social Work practice on service users had a huge influence on my understanding of the importance of good values. (Student)

We helped the students...they stopped seeing us as learning disability people and saw us as equals... they learnt that a person with a learning disability is an individual. (Service User)

...Gave students much more insight into the world of the service user and what it's like to have a social worker in your life. (Tutor)

This project also revealed surprises, for example how involvement in this type of teaching helped reassure students that Social Work was the correct career choice for them:

It brought to life the lectures and made me more convinced that Social Work is the right career for me. (Student)

(Duffy and Hayes, 2012)

**Example 2**

In this second example, I developed a project that enhanced the role that service users occupy in the assessment of Social Work students (Duffy, Das and Davidson 2012). This is highlighted in the following example drawn from the ‘Preparation for Practice Learning’ module. A key assessment requirement here is for students to demonstrate that they are competent and safe in their practice skills before their first practice learning Social Work placement. This is assessed by the students taking part in a videoed role-play where they interview someone in the role of service user. In the role play, the students are expected to evidence competence in key skill areas.

Previously, drama students had played these roles, but following feedback from a participating service user in the module evaluation meeting, service users now act in these role plays instead of drama students, to make the experience more realistic for the students. I led colleagues in this innovation in which service users worked with academic tutors in developing case study material for use in the examination. A central feature of this debate was whether service users would base these case studies on their own experiences or use standardised cases with some resemblance to their own lives. This was a challenging and emotional debate which we concluded that the best option would be to use standardised cases, recognising that talking about personal and often very difficult experiences could be distressing for service users.

The experience of being assessed by service users was then thoroughly evaluated with the students. These evaluations showed the substantial impact that service user involvement had on student development. They reported that the involvement of service users in the role-play assessment greatly enhanced the authenticity of the experience for them. It inspired them to perform realistically and ultimately to feel more prepared for practice. Staff and service users participating in the project also evaluated this new development very positively. These comments from students, service users and tutors again describe the impact of this innovation in assessment:
The use of service users in the role-play was effective...It makes the situation more real and the responses more genuine. This will make me more prepared to go out on placement. (Student)

It felt more real and focused me on how I engaged with people at a professional level. (Student).

I hadn't realised it would have such an impact... it made me realise how much I have to share... If the students listen properly, they will be better social workers. (Service User)

I've been turned around. It made it easier to see and assess skills better by observing the reactions of service users...It was more realistic, authentic and engaging. (Tutor) (Duffy, Das and Davidson, 2013)

Example 3

As mentioned previously, one of my baseline ideas was to look at how the Social Work curriculum could capture the service user and carer voice in regard to helping students develop improved insights into the effects of Northern Ireland's 'Troubles'. I therefore worked as part of a team of academics, agency partners and members of WAVE (a non-governmental organisation in Northern Ireland supporting those bereaved, injured and traumatised through the Troubles) to develop specialist teaching and tutorials to look at this aspect of troublesome knowledge (this concept will be returned to later).

Members of this teaching team have published the findings from this initiative in leading Social Work journals and presented at international Social Work conferences. This work is therefore being used as an example for other Social Work educators, living and practising in areas affected by conflict, to address how such uncomfortable pedagogy, can be approached in the curriculum (this notion of pedagogy of discomfort will also be further developed later).

The project occurs over a two-week period involving two full days of teaching and tutorials. In the two teaching days, the students in the morning lectures are introduced to important historical and policy perspectives that are central to having an informed understanding about Northern Ireland's conflict. An important introductory part of this involves the students being told the rationale for including this topic in their teaching. A further aspect of this generic introduction is also the teaching contract that reflects the very sensitive nature of this teaching content and the supports that are available in the event of any student becoming adversely affected.

In terms of innovative pedagogy, the direct involvement of service users with lived experience of the ‘Troubles’ is what defines this initiative as unique. This occurs in the afternoon small group tutorials that are jointly convened by a tutor and service user. The students are firstly invited to introduce themselves using a ‘name game’ exercise. This is a technique borrowed from family therapy (Byng-Hall 1998) and used to ‘warm the context’ (Bateson 1972) particularly when the context is one potentially fraught with discomfort in terms of content and discussion. The students therefore, using their name as a catalyst, are invited to share important aspects of their particular biographies with other group members. Group leaders also participate in this. This ice breaker exercise is designed to be light hearted but nonetheless important in terms of getting the students to engage on a reflexive level about important aspects of their particular identities. The tutor then invites the service user to share their particular story/experiences with the students. Typically, this will involve the service user openly sharing personal experiences of trauma, bereavement, loss and/or injury.

Given the highly emotive and sensitive nature of this potentially discomforting material, the students are then given a short break before being invited to reflect on how they feel and react to exposure to this content.

As with the examples already provided, it has been important to evaluate the students' views on the impact of this teaching. The following are a sample of their comments reflected in these evaluations:
I think this is a good thing to be taught about as it was important to address it and not side-line it. This is the reality.

Provided an excellent opportunity for us as students to actively engage and this increased my understanding of victims/survivors in NI.

I felt it was critical to my learning and understanding and empathy to hear from someone directly affected.

It gave the module a ‘real’ aspect.

One of the ‘survivors’ who spoke today I felt his experience.

(Duffy 2012, pp.727-8)

**Example 4**

A further innovative aspect of my approach to pedagogical practice in this area has involved looking at the understanding of Social Work knowledge, skills and values in an international context. Using the same methodology applied in Example 1 (Duffy and Hayes 2012), I led an international team with colleagues from the Universities of Alicante (Spain) and Ljubljana (Slovenia) (Duffy, Martinez-Roman, and Zavirsek, 2013). This project was funded by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and involved working in partnership with carers, service users and Social Work students from the University of Ljubljana, University of Alicante and Queen’s University, Belfast, in the production of a DVD.

The DVD has been produced in three languages with subtitles in Spanish, English and Slovene. In each country, the participating service users and carers were asked seven questions, all of which related to key aspects of Social Work knowledge, skills and values (Duffy and Hayes 2012).

1. What are the most important attitudes and qualities a social worker should have?
2. How can a social worker best show you respect when they are working with you?
3. If any plans are being made about help that you might need, how would you want to be involved in these plans?
4. What are the things that matter most when a social worker visits or makes contact with you?
5. What lets you know that a social worker is really listening to you?
6. How can you tell when a social worker is trying to understand how you are feeling?
7. From your point of view, what are the things that a social worker should know about you when they are trying to help you?

The responses to these questions from service user and carer participants in the three countries revealed consistencies in terms of expectations. The following are a sample of the responses provided to the first question:

What are the most important attitudes and qualities a social worker should have?

To not feel judged, not being judged. I would also want to be spoken to with words I can understand. (Alicante respondent)

I would expect that a social worker is full of social feeling...” (Ljubljana respondent)

I think social workers should be non-judgemental in their attitude towards people, they should treat people as people first and not cases. (Northern Ireland respondent)

These sample responses suggest there is a basic expectation around being treated with respect and that this has a degree of universality across these three countries which have diverse systems of social welfare.
What is distinctly innovative about my pedagogic practice?

The central theme underpinning my pedagogy in the examples provided relates to how I have approached fundamental questions of epistemology, particularly in regard to knowledge which stems from lived and personal experience. What my work therefore seeks to achieve is epistemological enrichment in how experiential and lived knowledge is used to advance improved insights for Social Work students in their learning. My approach to pedagogy is, therefore, best described as progressive, aimed at both problem-posing and problem-solving in line with the thinking of Paolo Freire (Freire 2006). My practice also falls within the contours of what Preston and Aslett (2014) describe as activist pedagogy where I am interested in cultivating opportunities for Social Work students to become ‘critical thinkers’ as opposed to ‘entrepreneurial learners’ (Servage 2009). Servage argues that such entrepreneurialism in learning is a characteristic of a neo-liberal and managerially driven system of higher education. Related to this, contemporary Social Work practice is also described as having become ‘commodified’ where the focus on the relationship has become secondary to the more regulated and procedurally driven aspects of the job (Ferguson and Lavalette 2006, p. 313). My work is therefore important in its distinct emphasis on the importance of ‘the relationship’ in a helping and person-centred profession such as social work.

To more critically understand my pedagogic practice, however, requires a closer exposition of knowledge itself. My work calls for a fundamental recognition of personal knowledge. Being close to lived experience arguably equips the service user with a particular type of knowledge arising from what Beresford (2000) describes as: “personal and collective experience of policy, practice and services” (p. 493). McLaughlin (2009) argues that the highly individualistic nature of service user experiential knowledge can be located within a standpoint theory perspective which he defines as: “theory based upon identity and, in particular, an individual’s membership of a particular social group, whether this is women, people with disabilities or service users” (p. 12). Associated with the works of Harding (1987, 1991) and Collins (1986), the basic tenet of standpoint theory is that: “less powerful members of society experience a different reality as a consequence of their oppression” (Swigonski 1994, p. 390). Swigonski goes on to assert that: “less partial and distorted understandings of nature and social relations will result from research that begins from the standpoint of particular marginalised groups of human beings” (p. 390).

Acceptance of knowledge that has its roots in lived experience can, however, present a threat to more traditional and positivistic perceptions of knowledge that instead view knowledge as having to be both propositional (Eraut 1996) and expert (Fook 2002). The status of service user knowledge, therefore, requires analysis. Ramon (2003) asserts that service users bring new knowledge which is of value in terms of policy, practice and research. Concerns about: “ordinary people taking on powerful roles” is, however, an expression of challenge towards the status of this knowledge (Rimmer 1997, p. 33). Other parts of the literature convey similar scepticism (Popay and Williams 1996; Prior 2003; McLaughlin 2009; El Enany et al 2013). Prior (2003), for example, argues that lay knowledge can simply be wrong, subjective and personally linked to one instance and, therefore, not capable of delivering an objective truth. Trevithick’s (2008) work on the Social Work knowledge base is also important in this debate. She argues that service user/carer knowledge is situated within the factual domain of knowledge in Social Work. Reflecting on service users’ direct experiential knowledge of the social welfare system, Trevithick argues that: “it is important for us to recognise and to acknowledge this pool of knowledge and to use this information creatively” (2012, p. 1226). Example 2 in this report describes a novel teaching project where service user knowledge is used creatively to assess Social Work students’ readiness to practise. In the publication reporting on this, one of the service users reflected: “It makes you realise how much you have to share” (Duffy et al. 2012, p. 12). Such a comment chimes with Cotterell and Morris’ (2012) view about the lack of confidence that marginalised individuals can sometimes attach to the value of their lived, experiential knowledge. These authors again turn to the work of Paulo Freire (1972) in stating that: “only a critical consciousness of the knowledge in one’s possession can in turn lead to action and transformation” (2012, p. 60). The comment in the same paper by a teaching colleague: “I’ve been...
turned around”, also reflects something of a similar transformation occurring towards the value of involving service users in this way (Duffy et al. 2012, p. 12).

Theory to practice and challenging pedagogy

A further distinct feature of my innovative approach to pedagogy relates to how the work I lead has facilitated students in making links between theory and practice. Service users and carers, in the examples I refer to in this report, are seen as being active contributors and collaborators, as equals aligned to Beresford’s (2005) demands that such people are not seen as being different, vulnerable, or problematically ‘othered’ (Beresford 2013). In pedagogical terms, my work has demonstrated examples of how service user knowledge has enabled Social Work students to make effective links between theory and practice. While the value of service user knowledge is contested, as already discussed, the evaluation evidence in my work demonstrates concrete ways in which students have been better enabled to understand what Meyer and Land (2005) describe as threshold concepts in Social Work education such as Social Work values, the impact of conflict, and fitness for practice learning. These concepts fall within the realm of threshold theory as they are: “pivotal to a discipline and difficult for students to learn” (Foote 2012, p. 425) but potentially transformational to a student’s understanding, once learnt (Meyer and Land 2005, p. 373; cited in Foote 2012, p. 424).

For example, the work I currently lead, involving service users with direct lived experience of Northern Ireland’s ‘Troubles’, directly contributes to Social Work students engaging with what Bolter refers to as a pedagogy of discomfort (Bolter 1999; Bolter and Zembylas 2003). By its very nature, Social Work education requires a curriculum affording students opportunities to reflect on issues involving diversity. This is very firmly articulated by Siegel in terms of how universities need to approach issues of such diversity in teaching: “Members of the School of Social Work articulated the idea that issues of diversity and multiculturalism are so intricately ingrained in the ethos of the field that they have become nearly taken for granted by its educators and practitioners. The animating principles of Social Work have to do with social justice, empowerment, and social welfare – themes that resonate deeply in the communities to which many social services are directed.” (Siegel 2006, p. 471 cited in Coulter et al. 2013, p. 2). The ‘Troubles’ teaching initiative in partnership with people injured, bereaved and traumatised through violence, is a concrete example of how the curriculum in Northern Ireland has encouraged Social Work students to explore more innovative types of engagement with a marginalised and hitherto ‘hard to reach’ part of the population.

The pedagogy of discomfort model put forward by Bolter is rooted in the argument that those issues in the curriculum that are highly emotionally laden will by necessity require “a higher level of engagement involving the kinetic and emotional dimensions of learning” (Coulter et al. 2013, p. 3). This will involve educators openly engaging with emotional content and material in teaching. The example provided earlier involving the tutor being open in the ‘name game’ about aspects of their own personal biography, and being brave in doing so, is a pragmatic way in which the educator can evidence this. In the work that we have developed, we have found that the pedagogy of discomfort has been effective in empowering both tutors and students to “utilise their discomfort to construct new emotional understandings into ways of living with others (Bolter and Zembylas 2003 cited in Coulter et al. 2013, p. 3). This model has also been used in other international contexts, for example, “when exploring contradictory and emotionally complex dimensions of patriotism in the USA following the World Trade Centre and Pentagon attacks in 2001” (Zembylas and Bolter 2002 cited in Coulter et al. 2013, p. 3).

The current international definition of Social Work aligns with Siegel’s (2006) earlier calls for how Social Work educators need to address the diversity challenges inherent within the role.

...
Humanities and indigenous knowledge, Social Work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. (IFSW 2014)

The thread running through this global definition refers to social workers needing to be directly involved in effecting change. To do so, however, will require social workers to develop skills in political engagement in order to actively promote and influence change, particularly at a structural level. This, however, is another area where social workers are falling short in their practice and which my pedagogical practice, in turn, addresses. In Duffy (2012) I observe that social workers are more likely to be ‘politically distant’ than to be politically engaged. This is a feature of practice not only in Northern Ireland but in other parts of the world coping with the presence or aftermath of political conflict. The ‘Troubles’ teaching project, however, addresses the skills deficit in political engagement very directly by providing a space in the curriculum for students to engage in “open debate and discussion with each other on political issues which hitherto would have been characterised by silence” (Duffy 2012, p. 732).

The call for social workers to become more politically active and aware is also expressed in the international DVD by a service user from Slovenia who stated: “I wanted to say that social workers work with sensitive groups. They should be politically active also on that field. Not that they are just a prolonged hand of the state, like they are now in Slovenia. They need to be in front lines when it comes to policy making and improving conditions that generate inequalities. I think that emancipation and political activism has died completely” (Duffy et al. 2013).

This impassioned plea clearly reminds student social workers to think politically. I use this in my teaching as a way to emphasise and forefront this key skill that is an essential component for effective and meaningful realisation and fulfilment of the previously mentioned international definition.

Practical steps to consider on the implementation of experiential knowledge in the curriculum

At an individual level, it is firstly of paramount importance to be fully committed to the value of inclusive and participatory models of education. Without such belief in the value of this type of pedagogy, the likelihood of effective and successful outcomes are reduced. In addition to being wedded to this philosophy, it is also important to approach these partnership endeavours in the belief that opportunities to enhance capacity building are also available for any service users, carers and patients who are participants in the education of others. The good practice guidance I published in 2006 (see Duffy 2006) provides many examples of the practical steps and measures which should be taken to ensure service users and carers are valued and supported in these teaching partnerships. The ethic of care approach advocated by Hugman (2005) and Ward and Gahagan (2012) could assist in ensuring that this type of involvement is approached in both a supportive, caring and non-tokenistic manner.

An important part of the latter is also about ensuring that service users and carers feel safe and comfortable in the sharing of personal and potentially highly emotional material in such a public manner with students. Providing these type of supports are absolutely crucial, and very central to this is the need for the host organiser to remain during the presentation of the service user to assist and help with any questions from students which could potentially be both awkward and difficult.

One of the major gaps in the literature in this field are publications which focus on the measurement of outcomes from this type of educational approach (Robinson and Webber 2012). This is important for both educators and for service users, carers and patients who are giving up their time so as to know if their experiential knowledge is having impact. Therefore, the projects I have referred to in this report have, for the most part, used evidence from evaluations to determine whether change has occurred in the level of
students’ understanding. I would suggest that evaluation is important to build in to the fabric when designing and planning similar projects where experiential/user knowledge is being engaged. This can then lead to opportunities not only for peer reviewed publications but also for service users to build their capacity as both collaborative researchers and co-authors in such publications.

We know from research evidence that workers who are part of organisations which are committed to participatory practices are more likely to be effective themselves in contributing to the emancipation of others (Tew 2006). Central to social workers practising in this emancipatory way will involve recognising the validity and important contribution of lay knowledge (Branfield and Beresford 2006). What my experience has taught me is the importance of forming close collaborative links with colleagues and other key stakeholders in the process of advancing initiatives on service user involvement. In this way, the worker is less likely to feel unsupported and isolated in pursuing curriculum innovation which may be fundamentally challenging to more traditional philosophies of teaching. There are, of course, ethical issues and certain levels of risk associated with the exposition of personal narrative, much of which may be trauma based, in the teaching situation. I have found, however, that the ethic of care approach has enabled me to successfully navigate a path through these types of issues which require open discussion and acknowledgement before shared decisions can be reached about approaches and course of action.

My experience in leading in this field of innovative pedagogy has been positive. The Social Work students involved in the curricular innovations that I have led on have evidenced improved insights in key domains of knowledge development which hitherto had been characterised as challenging and potentially troublesome. The exposure to this particular experiential knowledge has therefore positively added to their learning journeys in Social Work education. This leads me finally to concur with the observations of Nolan et al. (2007) about recognising the value of differing knowledge from different standpoints (Rose 2009), none of which are inherently superior over each other but which can collectively and cumulatively amount to enriched moments of pedagogical illumination.

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