

# Capturing and nurturing student confidence

**Sarah Wasson** offers an account of an engaging way to boost students' confidence and help them to become fully involved in their own learning processes. While the story she tells is rooted in her own discipline, the methodology and the lessons to be drawn from her story are universally applicable and are particularly relevant to anyone working in the context of a Widening Participation programme.

Literary and cultural theory are notoriously intimidating for students. This paper describes a recent action research project I undertook to find ways to capture and nurture student confidence on an SCQF (Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework) 09 (year 3) module in cultural theory. 'Confidence' already flickers through the existing research literature on teaching theory: as Joe Boulter notes, the prose style of theory – and even introductions or overviews of theory – is often 'intimidating and alienating', and as a result 'Undergraduates studying theory often become caught in a loop in which their lack of understanding and lack of confidence reinforce each other' (Boulter 2010, pp. 11.) 10).

Similarly, Deborah Wynne notes that learners often describe themselves as 'unconfident' when discovering gender theory (Wynne 2006).

'Confidence' has been defined in a variety of ways in educational research over the last decade, but a common thread in most definitions is the idea that confidence involves one's self-perceived ability to perform certain tasks; confidence is always integrally involved with 'doing'. Jan Eldred, Jane Ward, Yanina Dutton and Kay Snowdon, for example, define confidence as 'a belief in one's own abilities to do something in a specific situation' (Eldred et al, 2004, p. 6). Since confidence is not only about knowing, but also about

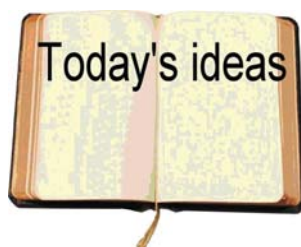
*doing*, I defined confidence in two parts for the purposes of this study: first, confidence that one *understands* the ideas of the particular theoretical text, and second, confidence that one is able to *apply* those ideas in analysing cultural products like novels, films, media phenomena or leisure practices. I created the research instruments with this two-part definition of confidence in mind.

## **Methodology**

Changes in confidence can be hard to capture, but Eldred et al suggest asking learners to self-assess their confidence at the start of the learning encounter, and then to re-assess their confidence after learning activities



(Eldred et al, 2004). I followed a similar strategy using a short questionnaire. Questionnaires are quick and cheap, but often give the respondents little opportunity to respond with the full richness of their experience. To rectify this I added two free-form entries: a free-form text box and the option of drawing a sketch. I asked students to draw themselves in relation to the ideas in the reading for the day's class. The prompt filled a page:



To prepare them, I showed some sample drawings of my own, illustrating some of the ways one could respond to the invitation, and reassuringly displaying my own lack of artistic finesse. The action research was staged during a lecture and tutorial session in which students were reading cultural theorists of national identity, mourning, and trauma, including the work of Cathy Caruth (Caruth, 1995 and 1996). The class featured a group visual activity in which students analysed particular structures commemorative of 9/11, art produced in South Africa in response to the tragic revelations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the Canadian World War I monument at Vimy

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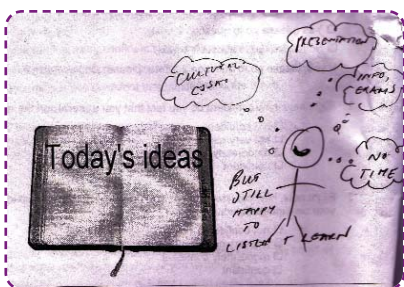
Ridge in France. The emotional nature of the material was factored into the consent forms and ethics approval of the action research. ▶



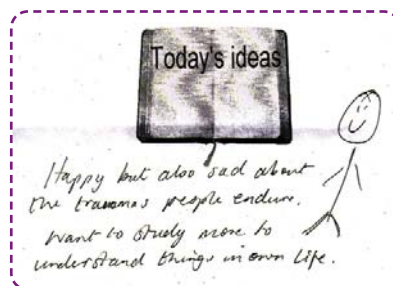
## Results

The learners' drawings were not only a valuable indication of their confidence, but also revealed interesting assumptions about what learning meant to them – notably, whether learning is passive or involves actively building new knowledge into existing mental schemata. There was a high correlation between increased learner confidence and increased sense of themselves as active learners. I will summarise some typical drawings.

Most students described themselves as unconfident at the start of the class, and their drawings reflect this. A2's response was representative:



This drawing emphasises the pressure learners are under. She lists the different assessments due: 'cultural [geography] essay', '[theory] presentation', 'info, exams' and 'no time'. Two things are notable about this sketch. First, she demonstrates enthusiasm despite these pressures, noting 'still happy to listen and learn'. This phrase implies a passive form of learning with connotations of subservience in the way it echoes the old 'listen and learn' catchphrases of childhood educational artefacts. However, the subsequent class involved active learning rather than listening, and in addition to rating herself as more confident her second drawing implies learning is an active process:



A2's caption here notes that she wants to 'study more [of this subject] to understand things in own life'; i.e. she is interested in applying her new knowledge.

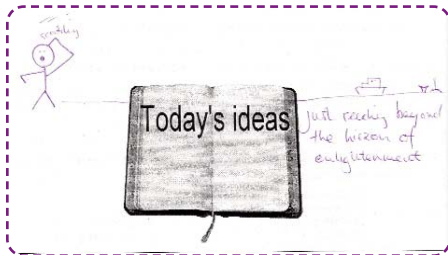
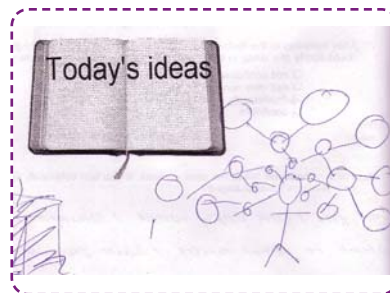
Student A8 rates himself as very confident both before and after class, and both his drawings depict learning as an active process. He responds to both questions with a swimming metaphor, captioning his first response 'Learning to Swim':



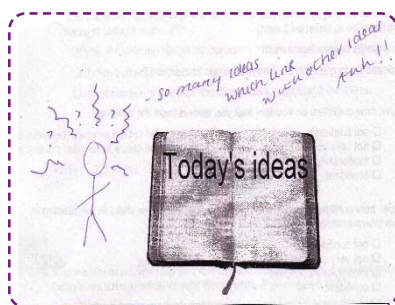
His second image continues the same metaphor and has a more confident caption: his caption is 'Definitely above the horizon!'



It is noteworthy that the stick figure is aware of her different schemata and possible links between ideas: she writes, 'So many ideas which link to other ideas Ahh!!'. In this initial picture such links are experienced as stressful, but after the class this learner drew a different sketch:



A similarly active model of learning shines through A5's drawings. Her first response is similar to the responses of several other learners, and expresses some of the stress which learners can feel when they are under pressure to synthesise a wide range of ideas and understanding:



A5 added in a caption, 'My ideas and understand [sic] has become more connected'. Both her first and subsequent drawings imply that learning involves actively making links to previous knowledge, and the learner feels that the class has helped her forge those links.

As a result of this research, since student confidence and students' sense of themselves as *active* seem so tightly correlated, I have taken steps to increase the student activity quotient in preparing for class, in two ways. I have always had lots of student activity and collaboration during class sessions, but I now ensure it is there in the class preparation, too, so that students can come to class confident and empowered.

## References

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