

Setting up and Sharing: Insights into introducing Labyrinth practice in university settings

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'In the end, why and how it works remains a great mystery' Helen Curry (2000, p.209)

My journey begins

In this chapter, I aim to share the joys and barriers of an individual practitioner developing 'labyrinth' paths in two UK Higher Education Institutions.

My involvement with the labyrinth came very unexpectedly. At a Teaching and Learning Conference, exploring the poster displays before the conference started, I was attracted by some beautiful music. I found a woman in a nearby area laying out a large canvas 'carpet' on the floor and sorting a huge bundle of white socks into different coloured baskets. Intrigued, I asked what was happening, and my introduction to the labyrinth, through Jan Sellers and the 'Creative Campus' at the University of Kent, began (Sellers, 2014). That wet April morning, before anyone else came along I walked a medieval canvas labyrinth and was entranced. I spent most of the next two days finding out more, and returned to my home institution with a request to be funded for a three-day labyrinth facilitators' training course, to be held at the University of Kent later in the year.

My line manager was bemused; as the leader of our Technology into Teaching strand in the Business School, my usual requests were for hardware or software packages to enhance the students' learning through different technical mediums. However, my request for funding was granted, and later in the year I packed my case for a one day 'Journeys through the Labyrinth' workshop. This was led by Canon Lauren Artress, founder of the labyrinth training, non-profit organisation Veriditas and a pioneer of contemporary developments with the labyrinth (Artress, 2015). It was followed by a two-day labyrinth facilitator training weekend, hosted by the University of Kent and led by Di Williams, a senior Veriditas teacher and a University Chaplain (for more on the innovative work of university chaplains with labyrinths, see Di Williams' chapter in this book). Our group was able to access the hardstanding, outdoor Canterbury Labyrinth, in its stunning location overlooking Canterbury cathedral, as well as the painted indoor canvas labyrinth. The mix of students

on the course amazed me – men and women of all ages, and from all walks of life, drawn to explore further the possibilities of the labyrinth.

First Steps

Returning home, I was keen to share my new experiences, and to develop a group of staff who might like to consider some aspects of the labyrinth in their working practice. Securing funding to run a one-day workshop for staff was not difficult, as I framed the request in terms of 'staff development in reflective practices' which *incorporated* the labyrinth. I then set about arranging the staff development day.

The early interest of colleagues and ease of funding were encouraging but in stark contrast, one colleague objected strongly to the idea, stating that she felt the labyrinth to be a satanic device. Staff attitudes can be a barrier to the implementation of new ideas, and I was much perturbed to receive such negative feedback for an optional session. However, the staff development team was very supportive of well-being initiatives, and explained that it was not unusual for a member of staff to take exception to some of the courses on offer. On their advice, I left the email unanswered. At a later stage, I followed up on this issue, reading and reflecting on the theme of labyrinths and the Christian tradition, starting with Sally Welch's excellent chapter on this topic in *Walking the Labyrinth* (Welch, 2010, pp.15-27). My colleague's email was, as I now appreciate, simply an issue of ignorance about labyrinths, and can be resolved by showing that labyrinths are ancient, in all cultures, and have a real place within the Christian tradition. Rather than being destructive, the labyrinth is a tool that enriches spirituality.

My first workshop comprised a morning session for support staff with eight staff, who had various different roles, attending: careers advisers; study advisers; student services; counselling; plus one academic staff member unable to attend the afternoon slot. The afternoon slot was mainly for academic staff; 17 attended from business, computing, psychology, health and education. The lunchtime session saw three 'walk in' staff members come and walk the canvas labyrinth that had been set out, with several others coming in to browse the books and take an information sheet.

The feedback from all the staff who attended was incredibly positive:

'I didn't know what to expect – glad I came.'

'Loved it! Thanks for the opportunity. Look forward to using it more at Uni.'

'Want to use in teaching – can we form a group?'

The result was a University Labyrinth Users Group. Setting up a group mailing list offered a place to discuss ideas, to share practice and events, and it quickly grew as members of staff heard about the work. A great pleasure was the success of inviting mailing list members to attend events; for example, members of the group attended Jan Sellers' guest lecture with accompanying labyrinth walks at St. Giles Cripplegate, Barbican, London (Sellers, 2011).

Shared ideas led to the idea of a postgraduate students' creative writing day, featuring three different aspects of learning, comprising a library session, a creative writing session and a labyrinth session with a concluding plenary, aimed at supporting students about to undertake writing their Masters thesis. Aspects of creativity, periods of silence and retreat have been a feature of my work with students ever since.

Second steps

Moving from an inner city university to a university in a smaller town, I not only changed universities, but disciplines, from a Business School to an Education Faculty. I was keen to bring the labyrinth into my teaching practice, and to share the space offered with the wider body of staff and students. My first challenge was to find out where I could gain support for a labyrinth. My early hopes of new colleagues becoming involved were not realised, partly due to the pressures of preparing for an OFSTED inspection (the UK external school inspectorate regime) and partly the need to be supporting our trainees in schools and consequently not on site for periods of time. Undeterred, I spoke to Student Services, where members of the Counselling Team were interested, and to the Chaplaincy Team.

The initial project was set up by the Department of Education, Chaplaincy and Student Services. The project brief was firmly based on students and their well-being and, after some discussion, funding for a classical labyrinth, painted on the grass outside the assessment centre, was given. The first painting and erection of the signs explaining the use and purpose of the labyrinth took place in early May, to be available for students to walk at a time of stress. The Chaplain persuaded a member of staff from the Surveying Department to lend us his surveying students to map out the pattern on the grass, and the Estates Director offered her ground staff to paint the pattern. Labyrinth designer Jeff Saward talked me through how to plan the project, and my first labyrinth at my new location came to life.

Having the labyrinth there generates a 'space', and it is noticeable how many groups visiting the campus stop and talk at this location.

To promote cross-university links for the future, the first Labyrinth Staff Development event was a combined 'Student Services, Chaplaincy and Department of Education' event. Developed as a labyrinth 'taster' workshop, it comprised a short presentation illustrated with photographs of labyrinths through the ages, sourced from Jeff Seward's extensive collection (Labyrinthos, 2015), and a facilitated walk. Around ten staff attended, once again from a wide range of roles and disciplines. Further publicity about the labyrinth and an invitation to join the mailing group was communicated through the in-house magazine (Cant and Holley, 2011). This led to a range of informal discussions, and an invitation to facilitate a labyrinth walk at the autumn student induction week, as a quieter space for reflection away from the busyness of other activities. I subsequently offered a facilitated walk for our annual Doctoral Students Research Conference, under the 'taster workshop' format. This comprised a short introduction to the labyrinth in a 30 minute scheduled slot, with a facilitated walk following immediately, accompanied by an open invitation to walk the labyrinth at any point during the day. Colleagues from mental health nursing and Chaplaincy have since requested sessions for their students.

Offering the taster slots and physically painting the labyrinth two to three times a year has led to surprising events. Staff regularly report that students use the labyrinth when the campus is quiet, and talk about regular local community visitors. The ground staff, who really enjoy painting the labyrinth, took it upon themselves last winter to plant out the grass pattern with daffodil bulbs; coming to work one wet and windy March morning it was stunning to see the whole labyrinth as a floral display.

Within my own department, I found an ally in Sara Knight, a pioneer of Forest School and champion of outdoor play for children who uses the outdoor labyrinth as a resource for her accredited Masters summer school module (Comparing Outdoor Learning Experiences). The Chaplain, wearing his 'community' hat, put us in touch with the local park and woodland manager. This led to a collaboration where Sara's students, with community volunteers, planted a living 'Willow' labyrinth, and designed and erected an information sign. Funded by the Woodland Trust, this living labyrinth is available to the community (Knight, 2012). Once again, I started with a small labyrinth interest group. This is developing into an embryonic staff 'Well-being' Group, and our labyrinth is now formally embedded as part of the Health Visitors' curriculum, as one of a series of timetabled wellbeing activities.

Walking with Others

It is in terms of my own reflective practice and well-being that I most notice the effects of my labyrinth work. My fascination with the labyrinth has increased, not diminished as I seek out different spaces to develop my own practice outside the workplace.

Recently I was privileged to be invited to work with the community organisers at the Saffron Walden 'Amazing Maze' weekend. Saffron Walden has one of the most ancient labyrinths documented in the UK (Labyrinth Society, 2015) and – despite the title – it was actually a community labyrinth weekend, with activities including a knitted labyrinth, and indoor and outdoor labyrinths. Seeing the whole community, old and young, enjoy the time and space offered by different labyrinth walks in both inside and outside locations was inspiring (Saffron Walden, 2013).

The educational impact of the labyrinth continues. The small initial mailing group has now grown significantly. The Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) funded a labyrinth-making workshop, developed and run by practitioners from the first small group meeting, which was attended by fifteen interested parties from across the university sector. As reported in Bright and Pokorny's (2012) article, the delegates went away to share and develop their own labyrinth practices.

And for me? I have continued to read, walk and guide others; working with health practitioners has raised questions about the evidence base for wellbeing and labyrinth walking. A report on 'Commonly Reported Effects of Labyrinth Walking' (Rhodes 2008) summarises research findings from a number of studies, and benefits such as 'peace; calming; centeredness and clarity and a decrease of agitation' are described by participants along with physical benefits such as the equalisation blood pressure; stress reduction and a feeling of relaxation. These studies are consistent across culture, gender, ethnicity, employment status, age and those of faith/ no faith.

It is encouraging to know that in an increasingly technical and pressurised world, we are able to reach back to earlier times and learn again how to access the simplicity of an ancient practice. Thus relatively few paces can gently take us on an unconscious voyage towards enhancing our own wellbeing. I would encourage the reader to take those first steps; develop friendships and find encouragement; make contacts in surprising places; enrich your life and the lives of others – all through sharing a simple walk - a walk of exploration and discovery around a labyrinth.

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