13eg Gynhadledd Dysgu ac Addysgu Flynyddol

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Who Broke the Ice, and What Came Crawling Out?

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This presentation explores how metaphor, creativity, and student-led narrative can foster engagement, support autonomous learning, and build meaningful community in the classroom. It begins with a simple, playful prompt: “Draw me an animal. Give it a name.” Without overthinking, students create creatures that they resonate with building that emotional tie - some draw whales who need the group to thrive, others sketch solitary rhinos who charge ahead on their own terms. Each drawing becomes a reflection of identity, agency, and how students situate themselves within a learning environment.

These spontaneous illustrations open up unexpected conversations. They reveal how students understand themselves not just as learners, but as participants in a classroom ecosystem - sometimes confident, sometimes hesitant, often humorous, and always unique. By giving their animal a name, students take ownership of their narrative. This activity disarms anxiety, lowers barriers to participation, and lays the groundwork for dialogue about learning styles, support needs, and group collaboration.

This session will share insights from implementing this task in undergraduate teaching, with examples of how it helped develop reflective practice and fostered an inclusive sense of belonging. It will also provide adaptable resources for using metaphor-based prompts across disciplines and levels. The session argues that the animals students draw - however odd or abstract - offer a powerful way to surface hidden dimensions of engagement and autonomy. The polar bear may break the ice, but it’s the named creatures that crawl out which shape the learning that follows.

