

A Student-Staff Partnership Approach to Course Enhancement: Principles for enabling dialogue through repurposing subject-specific materials and metaphors

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Mechanisms for listening and responding to students need to offer space for diverse voices and meaningful dialogue for greater student-staff partnership. This study explores the beneficial impacts and challenges of using creative pedagogical methods to support rich dialogue for module evaluation. A variety of evaluation activities were embedded throughout a postgraduate module, using creative materials and metaphorical reflective questions. Whilst there are logistical and perceptive barriers to adopting creative approaches, this paper demonstrates the beneficial impacts on both students' and staffs' experiences of learning and teaching, and the culture of partnership it develops. Deeper reflection and evaluation from students enabled inclusive student-staff dialogue. More nuanced and richer feedback allowed staff a responsive approach to module design, empowering the students and cultivating trusting student-staff relationships. Supporting the transferability of this practice across non-arts disciplines, principles for using discipline-specific materials and metaphors, for triggering reflection and evaluation are proposed.

Keywords: student-staff partnership; student-engagement; evaluation; inclusive practice; creative methods

Introduction

The student-staff partnership agenda is gaining rapid momentum in the Higher Education (HE) sector (Peters and Mathias, 2018; Bovill, 2017). The increased marketization of HE

over the last 30 years in Western societies has led to some positioning students as consumers and customers (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005). This dynamic contributes to a passive, disempowered approach for some students' learning, rather than the self-directed, producer-of-knowledge agency that HE seeks to develop in students (Levy et al, 2011). Attempting to redress this relationship between students and staff is this notion of student-staff partnership, described by Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014) as “a relationship in which all involved—students, academics, professional services staff, senior managers, students' unions—are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together” (p. 12).

Recognising the potential positive outcomes of working together, embedding a student-staff partnership approach in HE is now firmly established in UK HE policy and gaining momentum in learning and teaching practice (Bovill, 2017). This is reflected through key criteria in the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF, 2019). HE providers are required to evidence how they engage students as partners in delivery, development and enhancement of provision at an institutional and course level (TEF, 2019). Professional bodies including the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland (SPARQS) and the National Union of Students (NUS) all provide guidance on activities to involve students, solicit the ‘student voice’ and make demonstrable enhancements to course development. However, through emphasis on voice through quantitative measures in policy it is argued that ‘the student experience’ is being sacralised, homogenised and commodified, reinforcing a Neoliberal customer-satisfaction-style transaction between students and staff (Freeman and Dobbins, 2013; Sabri, 2011). This paper highlights the benefits of student-staff collaborative dialogue for the purpose of course enhancement; including the sharing of experiences and perspectives of a complex and diverse

student body, and providing staff opportunities to challenge students where appropriate and respond meaningfully.

In focus is practice at module level on a pioneering Inclusive Arts Practice (IAP) Masters, and Arts practices currently underutilized in student-staff partnership literature, particularly the emerging concept of ‘expanded listening’ (Fox and MacPherson, 2015). On an IAP module, learning was facilitated at Tate Modern through a series of public talks, dialogue with the public, arts-based activities responding to collections and gallery space, individual and group reflections and a peer-assessed research poster. The authors worked as a project team; MA Inclusive Arts Practice Course Leader (Fox), Educational Developer (Chilvers), postgraduate Inclusive Arts Practice Student (Bennett). Seeking to develop active student-staff learning communities, the team secured Learning and Teaching Scholarship funding to explore creative approaches to module evaluation captured in a short film (<https://vimeo.com/228028622>).

IAP facilitates arts-based dialogue between artists and marginalised groups, such as people with learning disabilities or experiencing social exclusion due to economic or health reasons. IAP is used across educational, healthcare, arts-based or community settings to enhance communication for therapeutic and developmental purposes. In these contexts, the practice of expanded listening (Fox and Macpherson, 2015) is an approach employing the nuances of listening (non-verbal, gestural or visual cues, additional to verbal communication), to enable open dialogue. This openness to all forms of communication and listening in an expanded sense informed the facilitation of the module as shall be explained. This study highlights the value of such an approach in deepening staff-student dialogue and partnership work. The values informing the project design were supported by 1) values from

the HEA's Student Engagement in Partnership Framework (Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014) and 2) Inclusive Arts Practice (IAP), particularly Fox and Macpherson's (2015) identified features for successful collaborative practice (p. 80). Table 1. presents a summary of these values, highlighting their intersections and subtly different framings of shared territory.

[please insert Table 1 here]

In the context of these values we explore the research question 'How can creative pedagogical approaches support inclusive, reciprocal dialogue for learning and teaching enhancement?'. We examine the impacts on student and staff learning and practice development, through analysing the 1) benefits and 2) challenges to these creative approaches to module evaluation, and 3) transferability of these approaches across disciplines.

Literature Review

Student-Staff Partnership

A recent review of student-staff partnership literature (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017) highlights the importance of reciprocity in partnership, and the need for more inclusive learning communities; two issues this study considers in the context of course enhancement.

The importance of reciprocity in partnership is described by Mercer-Mapstone et al. (2017) as being "premised on dialogue, negotiation, and exchange of ideas between partners. This interaction positions both students and staff as having essential expertise to contribute to the goal of furthering education" (p. 14). This notion of students having expertise in their educational experiences is shared in the overlapping field of research into the theory of

‘student voice’. Developed in the school context in UK, Australia and US, students are believed to have unique experiences and perspectives which should be listened and responded to by educators (Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felten, 2011). In her critique of student voice literature in HE, McLeod (2011) argues that “if higher education practitioners wish to court student voice, then something more meaningful needs to be done in response than a course evaluation questionnaire” (p. 187). In the context of Widening Participation agendas, the need for inclusive partnership practice is vital for ensuring all students, including those of ‘non-traditional’ identities and diverse backgrounds are involved, and partnership practice avoids conforming to institutional and neoliberal ideals of successful learners (O’Shea, 2018). Therefore, mechanisms for listening to students need to give space for diverse voices, engaged dialogue and responding in meaningful ways (McLeod, 2011). Practices for actively listening to the voices of all partners is supported by the core value of inclusivity within partnership, defined by Healey et al (2014) as practice which “embraces the different talents, perspectives and experiences that all parties bring, and there are no barriers” (p. 14).

However, this notion of having ‘no barriers’ is an ideal which in practice can be hard to implement due to more traditional HE power dynamics present between students and staff. Within the context of module evaluation, student assessment creates an unavoidable hierarchy bound to influence students’ responses. Therefore, timings and anonymity of evaluation should be carefully considered. With end-of-module evaluation surveys benefitting staff more directly, one solution is to embed formative and summative evaluation activities into the curriculum to provide students with opportunities for reflecting on their own learning, as well as shaping their ongoing learning experiences. Literature suggests the challenges for HE practitioners are not in inciting the student voice, but rather in implementing more varied approaches for reciprocal dialogue between students and staff

(Sabri, 2011). Therefore, attention shall be turned to Arts literature for inspiration in developing such student-staff partnership approaches.

Artful Thinking and Expanded Listening

IAP considers the importance of the role of the listener, creative activities and materials in enabling more meaningful dialogue between artists and marginalized people. This discourse illuminates points for consideration when seeking to involve students as partners beyond the confinements of surveys. As a practice with reciprocal, dialogical exchange and learning through risk and uncertainty, IAP disrupts the notion of ‘expert’, making space to acknowledge all contributors as experts in their own experience (Fox and Macpherson, 2015). Challenging hierarchy in collaboration, Fox and Macpherson (2015) argue the positioning of the facilitator as having notable impact on the quality of dialogue and learning, and propose a shift from leader to collaborator, to support listening:

At times, the facilitator may need to be prepared to ‘dissolve’ partially into the artwork and think of themselves as developing new forms of collective understanding that would not have been possible without the group. This requires an acceptance of our incompleteness as practitioners and a capacity to un-learn as well as learn from each other. (p. 88)

Embracing the validity of subjective experience and facing uncertainty with curiosity and confidence may be more familiar to staff in arts disciplines and therefore a challenging position for some staff. Nevertheless, the space created for students to share their expertise in their experiences of learning and teaching is likely to have valuable insights for course development. In terms of initiating dialogue between learners and teachers, Macpherson and Fox (2016) highlight the role of the listener in constructing what can be heard: “Certain voices do not come into being unless we construct spaces for artful listening that are conducive to hearing what is said” (p. 27). This is supported by Peters and Mathias (2018) who argue “space must be created to hear under-represented voices and share

experiences...our diversity is a strength” (p. 62), highlighting the powerful role staff play as initiators and facilitators of spaces for partnership.

IAP highlights the catalytic role of creative activities in enhancing expanded listening, key to enabling trust and dialogue. Macpherson and Fox (2016) suggest “certain art practices and materials can offer non-verbal ‘meeting points’ between people” (p. 6), allowing more considered responses to questions (Gauntlett and Holzwarth, 2006). Ridley and Rogers’ (2010) ‘Drawing to Learn’ publications capture the capacity of visual methods to offer students different ways for reflecting, exploring and constructing knowledge and understanding, and propose a variety of creative pedagogical activities for across disciplines. In the one example the authors found of creative methods used in partnership literature, Lubicz-Nawrocka and Simoni (2018) asked students and staff to select images to articulate their views of students’ engagement with course enhancement and shared striking examples of critical and personal reflection triggered.

Whilst some subjects are more explicitly creative than others, this study argues that through using discipline-specific materials and metaphors, this practice can be transferable and valuable across disciplines (Ridley and Rogers, 2010). It is the dialogue that these creative activities lead to that is key. However, creativity often requires bravery and risk-taking, often emerging from uncertainty and flourishing in emotionally safe spaces where ‘failures’ are seen as territories of discovery and valuable steps towards understanding. In the context of partnership, these “brave spaces” (Cook-Sather, 2016, p. 1) are built on staff humility and student trust. Staff may be used to conducting evaluation independently and might perceive personal and professional risk in allowing students’ involvement in this

evaluation process (Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, Millard & Moore-Cherry, 2016). The brave spaces fostered in this study were used as places for open student-staff dialogue.

Methodology

Methodological Approach

A social constructivist approach (Guba and Lincoln, 1994) underpinned qualitative methods employed through formative and summative reflection and evaluation activities, embedded throughout the module. These included open-ended questions and creative materials prompting reflection and space for student-staff dialogue. An interpretivist thematic content-analysis (Mason, 2002) of the evaluation activities described below, were conducted by the research team. Participants (n=18) were from the IAP Masters, so familiar with creative approaches to dialogue, principles for transferring this practice across disciplines are discussed later.

Creative and Expanded Listening Methods

In the context of the IAP Module, Tate Modern, the formative and summative evaluation activities were embedded to facilitate a student-staff partnership approach including:

Formative Activities

- A daily framework of embedded reflection and evaluation - a rhythm of discussions opening and closing each day enabling students to feedback on structure and activities, informing staff's responsive real-time module-design

- Parcel Tags and Scales - Students were given a question about the design of the day to consider anonymously, writing responses on parcel tags and sticking them to a gradient scale line. For example, 'Did facilitating a discussion with the public enhance your learning? If so, how?', with the scale ranging from 'not much' to 'significantly'. Tutors used these comments as starting points for group discussions
- Peer Learning in Motion - Students were asked to walk around Tate Modern in pairs, whilst talking reflectively about their learning, and simultaneously producing collaborative drawings as a visual trace of their dialogue in motion

Summative Activities

After the peer assessed research posters had been presented and marks confirmed, summative evaluation activities included:

- Box activity - Students were given a small cardboard box and a variety of creative materials to capture their reflections on their learning and module experiences. Questions prompted reflection, and the external and internal domains of the box provided distinct spaces to explore different facets of their experience through image-based and metaphorical responses. Students and staff came together using the boxes as a starting point for individual feedback and whole group dialogue
- Online module evaluation survey - Completed by students to comply with the institution's standardised approach

- End of year Course field trip - the IAP MA students and staff engage in an annual field trip to enable students and staff to reflect collaboratively on their course experiences, in a neutral environment. Activities include a guided reflection in a willow dome; a shared meal prepared by staff and students, and sculptures about their course experiences to initiate group dialogue. During this day, students were asked to make sculptures for informing student-staff discussions: ‘Thinking about the process of course evaluation, and your sense of involvement in shaping your course experience – how have our use of materials enabled you to feel listened to, and involved in evaluating your learning? For example, in the Tate Modern module where we used daily questions with lines and tags, ice, tape, boxes and materials. And other times throughout your course?’.

Ethics

Ethical permission was gained for all filming and students’ informed consent and right to withdraw for the content analysis of all course evaluation feedback that was captured via tags, box discussions, evaluation surveys and focus group. Timings of the activities in relation to assessment were carefully considered; the anonymity and confidentiality of responses was protected as much as possible by the Educational Developer project member anonymizing data.

Key Findings and Discussion

Returning to the research question ‘How can creative pedagogical approaches support meaningful, reciprocal dialogue for learning and teaching enhancement?’, reflections from

students and staff from the evaluation activities shall be shared. The impact on students' and staff's learning and practice shall be explored by analysing the 1) benefits and 2) challenges to these creative approaches to module evaluation, and 3) their transferability across disciplines.

1) Benefits of Methods

Impact on Students' Learning

Regular reflection throughout the module prompted students to develop more autonomous, reflexive approaches to their learning, and a clearer understanding of methods that support this:

One thing I really enjoyed as a way of learning was when we made art responses to some of the themes, it really helped to digest all the things we'd been talking about...things came up in that process that helped me remember certain points through the day and gave it time to sink in. (IAP student)

Students shared their sense of involvement in shaping the module and how being listened and responded to made them feel supported: "A sense of being held in a space, a feeling of support...being listened to in that process of being held- within all the modules actually...I felt so heard by the tutors." (IAP student)

During the sculpture-making students explained the impact of using creative materials on their sense of being listened and responded to by tutors:

When you're making art with someone you can feel quite lost in the process and say things that you wouldn't normally say...it absorbs you in that process so you can have a relaxed and natural open conversation. (IAP student)

Stress and deadlines and a short amount of time can put pressure on students to express how they're feeling...the evaluation sessions using plasticine were very cathartic...it was a release of all the stress. (IAP student)

The change of environment for this course evaluation day was referred to as helpful in promoting their learning and reflection: “Change is a good thing, it promotes learning, changing environments just changed my mindset.” (IAP Student)

This demonstrates how, due to the module being delivered responsively to students’ feedback, not just future students but current students benefit.

Inclusivity

The activities purposely involved all students, not just the Student Reps. For example, the box activity enabled students time to reflect individually, before all being invited to address the group; the project team reflected:

Revisiting the audio recording from the box evaluation, I noticed a tangible depth and richness of communication. Students spoke personally about how they’d felt, with holistic feedback on their whole module experience. They spoke about their journeys, the impact on their families, how the experience connected with previous work...thoughts seemed to be raw and honest. (IAP Student Co-researcher)

This process of combining personal reflection and creative metaphorical responses, facilitated students in feeling able to share more considered and personal reflections, which then vitally informed group dialogue with staff and peers. This led to expanded listening (Fox and MacPherson, 2015) and a more inclusive, honest discussion in which non-verbal communication added richness, eliciting far deeper, more nuanced feedback and engaged dialogue than an evaluation survey could.

Impact on Staff’s Learning and Teaching Practice

Student involvement enriched the IAP Course design, and the relationships between students

and staff, which the Project team reflected upon:

What do you feel are the benefits of working collaboratively with students to inform module design? (Educational Developer)

The staff might be delivering it but we're not experiencing it. The only way we can find out what it's like is to ask the students, then we can make some useful changes. (Course Leader)

Staff remembered a key moment that influenced the module design:

We'd asked students to write on tags considering their learning from the day, and as you were reading them out one student commented 'my bath is completely full and overflowing', it was a real moment...we realised they needed more space in the afternoon for independent study, making work on their own and processing. (Educational Developer)

So we decided to stop inputting into the bath and built in time for reflection and the composting of ideas. (Course Leader)

Staff also reflected on the richness their postgraduate student colleague's input brought:

Something that really enriched the [module evaluation] experience was working with our postgraduate student colleague and her ideas...it sent a message to students that here's a peer of theirs working in partnership with staff to shape this activity. (Educational Developer)

Tutors visibly working in partnership with students demonstrates the respect and valuing of students' expertise in their learning experiences (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017), and their acknowledgement that staff do not have all the answers. Embedded evaluation offered greater specificity, and this more immediate, nuanced feedback offered the tutors clarity in understanding what students were referring to - something which may be lost with a summative module evaluation survey and key to implementing TEF agendas for understanding the student experience (TEF, 2019).

Cultivating a Culture of Partnership

Regular reflection helped to cultivate a culture of students feeling comfortable in giving feedback:

How do you create a safe space and a culture where the students that you're teaching and assessing feel comfortable to feed back in a critical way? (Educational Developer)

I always ask these questions after the assessment so students don't feel like their marks are going to be compromised. Turn it into a discussion where we're open to making it better... 'we're in this together, we all want it to work, what needs changing?', and then we seriously listen in a non-defensive manner so that we're all taking responsibility for making it better... I find that students really respond to that. If a student feels genuinely listened to, then it's a pleasurable and interesting experience. (Course Leader)

In the current Western HE context discussed earlier, where students can be positioned as customers, these practices challenge a consumerist approach to learning by empowering students and staff to relate as authentic learning partners.

2) Challenges of Methods

Staff Experiences

The intensive nature of the module delivery enabled staff to plan responsively whilst commuting together daily:

We discussed the nature of co-producing with students and how you have to remain quite unplanned so that you can respond in the moment...the way we worked as a team was quite reactive at times. I'm quite comfortable with being in control and being planned, so at first I struggled with that sort of uncertainty of "what will Thursday look like?". (Educational Developer)

Trusting relationships between colleagues are important for being able to work as a team to plan module delivery in a flexible responsive manner to student feedback. A shared understanding of essential module content is key so it does not get overlooked during the flexible delivery.

Student Experiences

Students' creative responses can be open to interpretation, which is why accompanying narrative is important. Staff should be aware that students' reflections may prompt personal

or negative experiences and should be willing to acknowledge and appreciate these, responding supportively where required.

Practical Constraints

In the current UK HE climate, courses are experiencing budget cuts and increased student cohorts. Staff might consider their curriculum too constrained to allow time for these creative evaluative activities, however this paper highlights the value of embedding activities prompting student reflection on their learning with module evaluation. Principles suggested below demonstrate a large budget is not required and staff teaching large cohorts can use digital technology, seminar time, and involve students from higher year groups to co-facilitate these activities.

3) *Transferability Across Disciplines*

A set of 5 principles for how these creative methods could be adapted by practitioners across disciplines are proposed:

5 Principles for Module Design for Embedding Creative Evaluation Approaches:

- 1) *An Embedded Approach:* embed regular opportunities for formative reflective and evaluative activities for students throughout modules, with summative activities after assessments as well

- 2) *A Dual Purpose:* ensure that evaluative activities prompt students to reflect on their own learning, personal and professional development, as well as their experiences of

the module delivery

- 3) *Responsive Listening*: working with groups of 15-20 students, ensure staff respond to students' reflections and evaluative comments through dialogue, and adapt pedagogical approaches where needed, involving Student Reps to co-facilitate activities if required
- 4) *Prioritising Time*: allocate adequate time throughout the module to enable creative activities to build a trusting environment and support authentic reflections
- 5) *Discipline-Specific Materials and Metaphors*: repurpose materials for activities that are low-cost and relevant to the discipline; draw on discipline-specific metaphorical themes to engage students, for example, Engineering students could use the development of prototypes as a metaphor for their own learning and professional development, or Media students could use photography and story boarding to capture their module experiences

The key transferable point is to use creative activities, materials and metaphors relevant to the discipline, to trigger deeper evaluative reflection as a springboard for dialogue between students and staff.

Conclusion

This study has shared the beneficial impacts and challenges of using creative pedagogies to facilitate a student-staff partnership approach to course enhancement. Benefits included 1) students felt supported and responded to by staff, and students' own learning, autonomy and

reflexivity developed through embedding reflection and evaluation activities throughout the module; 2) evaluation activities were inclusive of all module students ; 3) staff reported activities enriching course design, providing informative, nuanced and immediate feedback; 4) a culture of partnership nurtured through staff creating a safe space and non-defensive attitude, valuing student expertise and staff uncertainty. Challenges of using these creative partnership approaches included the relinquishing of control required by staff, practical constraints of cohort sizes, and pressured curriculum. Principles for practitioners to embed this practice in module design across disciplines have been shared.

Further research could explore students' perceptions of surveys vs creative approaches; the impact of creative approaches on students' perceived empowerment and identity as partners; or staff' perceptions of these partnership practices in relation to their professional identities.

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<i>HEA (2014)</i>	<i>IAP (2015)</i>
The belief that students have an expertise in their own learning which staff will gain from by respecting and listening to.	The people, skills, experience, knowledge, interests and space that you have together are assets worthy of exploration.
The curriculum needs space to develop inclusive listening pedagogies in new environments, to actively involve all students.	The answers are in the room; being open to all the languages we communicate in; choosing materials and processes that 'listen well'.
To enable open and honest dialogue, trust between student and staff partners is required where all are respected and treated fairly.	Trusting two-way relationships are crucial. Everyone has a unique contribution to make, give time to expanded listening.
Module evaluation is an opportunity for mutual reciprocal exchange, with meaningful dialogue valuable for students, staff and the institution.	Journeying together- a capacity to un-learn and learn from each other. Collaboration with mutual benefit, creating transformational space.
Courage - to challenge practices undermining partnership and take risks when developing practice.	Reflect on your practice. Be willing to let go. Embrace risk and uncertainty. Have the guts to not know what happens next.

Table 1. Values of partnership and inclusive arts practice informing this study