'I am wary of giving too much power to students" - addressing the "but" in the principle of staff-student collaboration.

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Abstract

Staff and students coming together to enhance learning is a key educational challenge facing the higher education sector. Literature proposes different ways of achieving this around co-creation, partnership and collaboration. This paper focuses solely on staff perspectives of a staff-student partnership project aimed at improving feedback strategies. Through a mixed-methods approach staff within four disciplines in one UK University were questioned in regard to collaborating with students, asked to take part in a co-creation experience and then invited to take part in a follow-up interview. Findings indicated that staff initially supported greater student engagement in curriculum development, but were very wary of how far they would be prepared to change in the design of curriculum content. Some doubted the experience and abilities of students in this context. The overarching response was a positive statement followed by 'but' and then the issues that could be caused by this type of approach.

Key words

Staff perspectives; partnership working; co-creation; feedback; educational change

INTRODUCTION

Students should play an active part in their education (Marquis, Puri, Wan, Ahmad, Goff, Knorr and Vasslileva, 2015). It is argued that the use of staff-student partnerships to adjust, design and compliment curriculum design is one of the most significant challenges, and opportunities, facing higher education today (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014; Bovill, 2013; Ryan & Tilbury, 2013). There are many ways that students can and do work in partnership with universities, this paper focuses solely on staff and students working collaboratively to co-create part of their curriculum with a specific focus on assessment. According to Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014, p7) a partnership "is a relationship in which all participants are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together."

In the UK there have been national calls for the sector to explore and enhance the ways in which students can become more involved in the design and delivery of their own learning experiences. For example, the National Union of Students suggests that students should be more involved in shaping their own learning, and contributing to course content and delivery (NUS, 2012). This is supported by regulating bodies' agencies such as the Quality Assurance Agency who call for universities to 'provide opportunities for students to influence their individual and collective learning journey' (QAA, 2012). This approach has gained substantial support from within the Higher Education Academy (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014), to the extent that the need for change appears to be almost unquestioned. However, within this context of general acceptance and support for the notion of enhancing opportunities for staff-student partnership lie a number of other generally acknowledged issues: what is the extent of academic resistance to such work? What are the issues of concern? And, how can these be addressed? This paper offers some answers to these questions from the perspective of a group of academic staff in a UK university who were involved in a staff-student partnership project to co-create assessment and feedback strategies.

The literature suggest that where staff and students come together to explore curriculum issues and design, this is normally initiated by academics (Deeley & Bovill, 2015). However, unless the claimed benefits are understood by staff, the value of co-creation may never come to fruition. These are not easy concepts, due in part to the strength of the established cultural norms alongside having to establish the mechanisms to enable students to participate in decision–making (Bovill & Bulley, 2011). Therefore academics are only likely to be persuaded into developing staff-student partnerships if there are strong reasons as to

why they should commit their time and energy in an already crowded higher education climate.

The benefits of collaborative partnership work.

The benefits of staff-student partnerships are frequently reported in academic literature (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014), with suggestions that partnership working can be a positive experience for both staff and students (Piper, 2006). In a Swedish anthology on active student participation, Gardebo and Wiggberg (2012) propose that students are an unspent resource in an educational system that is struggling to manage the sheer growth in size of student numbers whilst maintaining the quality of the experience. Strategic and appropriate involvement of students can facilitate the design of curricula that are engaging and empowering, and active involvement in assessment can enhance motivation and student engagement, and may also help to foster the development of a learning community (Deeley & Bovill, 2015).

This is not a one-sided arrangement and from a student perspective there are also many benefits to working in partnership for the development of learning (Zaitseva, Clifford, Nixon, Deja, & Murphy, 2010). Such benefits include the development of academic knowledge and study skills and disciplinary knowledge, as well as more confidence in expressing such skills (Delpish, Darby, Holmes, Knight-McKenna, Mihans, King, & Felten, 2010). A pedagogic case for learning and working in partnership is outlined by Healey et al., (2014) who suggest that such work has the potential for transformative learning whilst acknowledging that it may still involve a relatively small number of students, may not suit everyone and requires

further research. This study adds to this body of knowledge by exploring staff views of co-creation before and after being involved in a partnership project.

The types of student involvement in curriculum development

It is important that the meaning of staff-student partnership is clear. Previous studies have analysed various ways in which students can be involved in their own, or others' learning experience. Bovill and Bulley (2011) offer a continuum of levels of student participation in curriculum design where the level of interaction ranges from a dictated curriculum where there is no interaction, through to students having some choice and influence to where they are in total control. It is therefore desirable that academics are aware of ways in which their own needs might be met by the various models of interaction.

Other literature confirms the breadth of opportunities offered by partnership including student involvement in pedagogical planning (Bovill & Bulley, 2011), students as researchers (Maunder, Cunliffe, Galvin, Mjali & Rogers, 2012) and students as strategic developers (Healey, Mason O'Connor, & Broadfoot, 2010). Dunne and Zandstra (2011) propose a theoretical model for integrating students into educational change and detail how the involvement of students in cross-university research initiatives drove institutional change and contributed to student engagement. Their matrix for students as change agents has four positions:

a. Students as evaluators of their HE experience
b. Students as participants in decision-making processes
c. Students as partners, co-creators and experts

d. Students as agents for change

This framework offers a model on which to explore ways of working with students and was utilised within this study to frame staff ideas of how they viewed partnership co-creation in their own work. In this study we aligned with the view of Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, Millard, and Moore-Cherry (2016, p.196) in relation to co-creating a course-level feedback strategy; "co-creation of learning and teaching occurs when staff and students work collaboratively with one another to create components of curricula and/or pedagogical approaches".

Staff perspectives of collaboration

Some literature suggests that staff may be reluctant to become involved in such work (Bovill, et al., 2016). Despite sector wide knowledge of the strategic importance, and evidence of the associated benefits, as a pragmatic activity partnership working is considered as "unfamiliar" for some students and staff (Bovill, 2014), and in this sense staff may struggle with the challenge of actually making it happen (Allin, 2014). Healey et al., (2014, p.21) identify that "change can be experienced as deeply threatening to one's personal and professional identities." Partnership working can challenge the accepted roles and practices and evoke feelings of vulnerability and risk (Bovill, 2014). The general reluctance to expend the time and energy in such work may be related to an underlying resistance to change amongst an academic community that is adjusting to loss of autonomy, "change fatigue" and increased managerialism (Sundberg, Josephson, Reeves & Nordquist, 2015).

Disciplinary cultures and practices will impact upon staff perspectives of partnership

working, and also willingness to engage. In this sense, whilst some staff will be willing to engage and embrace this practice, others may be less willing or feel less able to do so. There is some evidence, for example, that the professional requirements of some degrees leads some staff to question the potential involvement of students in designing curricula. In a study in a law school in the UK, Brooman, Darwent and Pimor, (2015) found that although staff were concerned about the need to maintain control due to the external requirements, staff-student collaboration enhanced the current practice. Seale (2009), suggests that this new area of participation has the power to both empower students and increase the possibility that staff will respond to student voices.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

This study aims to answer calls to develop our understanding of the 'pedagogies of partnership' (Healey et al., 2014) and the need for more evaluation studies investigating initiatives where students have been co-creators of curricula (Bovill et al., 2016). Given the rising profile of this type of activity it is imperative that such methods are subject to exploration and evaluation in order to test their voracity. This article discusses the perceptions of teaching staff regarding working in partnership with students both before and after an intervention.

We focus on the important aspect of staff willingness to engage in putting such activities into the heart of their academic practice. In particular, we explore the changing perceptions of a cross-disciplinary staff group, before and after they experienced working in partnerships with students to create a feedback strategy. What were staff perceptions of such processes before the intervention? Did this change after the intervention? What

conclusions can be drawn for the potential of partnership processes in higher education curriculum design?

The project was funded by a competitive, institutional funding stream for initiatives designed to support the enhancement of teaching, learning and assessment practices. The aim was to explore ways in which second year students and programme staff can work together as co-creators in developing feedback strategies and processes for the future. This cross-discipline project was conducted at a large university in the northwest of England and included four degree programmes, Events, Law, Sport Science and Quantity Surveying, which were all located in different faculties. These programmes were chosen as they were subjects that the researchers taught on. The core project team included four academic staff members and three student project officers. The project officer was a paid position and they were selected through an application and interview process. The three successful candidates were all were studying full time master degree programmes in one of the four subject areas. Prior to the commencement of the project they were involved in extensive discussions about staff-student partnership and they were supported throughout by the research team.

The project officers facilitated 12 workshops (four per programme) exploring feedback and co-creation of a programme level feedback strategy which included 60 students and 35 members of staff. The project officers worked with undergraduate students to review and develop ideas for a course-level feedback strategy, and subsequently came together with the staff team to review and refine. The participants of this study were sent the students ideas around their course-level feedback prior to the co-creation workshop. They then met

with the student group (there were four of these sessions) and between them they created the programme feedback strategy (see Nixon et al. 2016). The overall process resulted in a programme level feedback strategy for each of the four programmes, written by the staff and students.

Within the project we aimed to position the students as partners, in structuring the teaching and learning process, and in this sense utilized the principles outlined by Dunne and Zandstra (2011, p. 4) of the student as "active collaborator" and that outlined by Cook-Sather (2014), that students are experts at being students; and Crawford (2012, p.60), that students are experts on the "experience" of learning in higher education. The project aligns with Bovill et al., (2016), category of students as pedagogic co-designers where there is a shared responsibility for aspects of teaching and learning which requires staff to explore differently their assumptions about their role in the learning experience (King & Felten 2012). Similar approaches to student positioning are described elsewhere (Cook-Sather, 2014; Jensen & Bennet, 2016; Woolmer et al., 2016).

METHODS

The four programmes used in this study were purposively chosen because of the subject connection of the research group, each of the researchers worked in one of the subject groups across the university. Participants of this paper were academic staff members working in each of the four programmes of study, their background and demographics was not collected which may be a limitation to this study when exploring the results. A mixed method sequential explanatory approach (Creswell 2003), utilising questionnaires and

interviews, was undertaken (Johnson and Christensen, 2011), and data was collected in two phases.

In phase one staff perceptions about co-creation were gathered using a survey format. A survey was electronically disseminated to all staff in the four participating departments. The survey covered three main topics, staff perspectives on co-creation, involvement of students in curriculum design and barriers to involving students in curriculum design. The survey comprised nine questions that were structured in an open and closed format. The 35 academic staff members who responded to the questionnaire were based in the following disciplines: events and management n=5; quantity surveying n=4; law, n=10; sport and exercise science n=16. Responses to closed questions were collated and represented using descriptive statistic and inductive thematic analysis was undertaken on the qualitative comments to identify themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In phase two all staff participants who had taken part in the project were invited to attend a semi-structured interview to discuss their experiences and perspectives of engaging in the process. Sixteen academic staff members took part (this was out of a possible 21), with interviews facilitated by the student project officers. A semi-structured interview guide was used to ensure consistency in interview approach and to allow freedom in response whilst also ensuring a degree of commonality across the transcripts (Flick, 2009). Interviews took place in a familiar work setting, during work hours and within a space where participants could be overlooked but not overheard. Interviews lasted on average 14 minutes (range 8–17 min), were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Interview questions were developed based upon the experience of working in partnership with the students, the

result of this narrow focus was that the interviews were short in length. For analysis of qualitative data, verbatim transcripts of interviews were read and re-read to allow familiarisation of the data. Thematic analysis techniques were used to identify core and common themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The project staff then discussed and debated emerging themes in the data with reference to the study aims. Key emergent themes and participant quotes have been used to ensure authenticity in the represented data.

University ethical approval was granted for the project and all staff and students received participant information sheets, were verbally briefed about the project and their right to withdraw at any time and then all signed consent forms. In accordance with the Data Protection Act, all the data from the project has been held either in secure password protected files or a locked filing cabinet.

FINDINGS

Staff perceptions on staff- student partnership prior to the project

Overall prior to the project, the findings from the staff indicate that there is a positive perception in theory of working in partnership with students but this comes with many difficulties both philosophical and practical. Almost half of this group (42%; n=15) assigned their personal philosophy on working with students to "students as evaluators" from Dunne and Zandstras' (2011) continuum of co-creation. This relates to internal university surveys, for example in this case module evaluations, plus the external monitoring questionnaire which in the UK is the National Student Survey. Of the other three categories 28% (n= 10) of staff viewed students as participants in the decision-making process, with students as

partners, co-creators and experts and students as agents for change gaining 8% (n=5) of the sample each.

Staff perceptions and understandings of staff-student partnerships, and their philosophy regarding their role as an academic, were found to influence their willingness to consider engaging in such activities. An indication of this was the perspectives regarding the boundaries of their role as a staff member as an expert or the "*assessor*" (or as an experienced professional), relative to student participation as the "*assessed*". The wider higher education environment was also highlighted as offering issues to working with students in this manner. Comments included (emphasis added):

*"There is clearly a powerful role for students and student feedback **but** in an environment shaped by fees there is a clear onus on staff to provide a quality and bespoke product"*

*"I am wary of giving too much power to students; I am happy to respond to their feedback, **but** I am not sure that I would be happy with them "designing" any substantive module components"*

*"I would welcome it **but** not in terms of content as we are the experts"*
*"There is scope to involve students in some elements of module creation, **but** I feel that this should not extend to assessment or taught elements".*

These quotes demonstrate that although there is a sense of this activity being beneficial, the reality in terms of actually making it happen is perceived more problematic. Participants discussed the issues of fees and the need to provide what they saw as a quality and bespoke

product, class and cohort sizes and issues related to the academic year where planning may take place when the students have finished for the summer months.

When asked about particular areas where they currently involve students in curriculum design (Figure 1), assessment (the focus of this project) was highlighted as an area where they rarely or never (57%; n=19) engage students in assessment aspects of curriculum design. Only one member of staff responded that they would often engage students in assessment aspects of curriculum design.

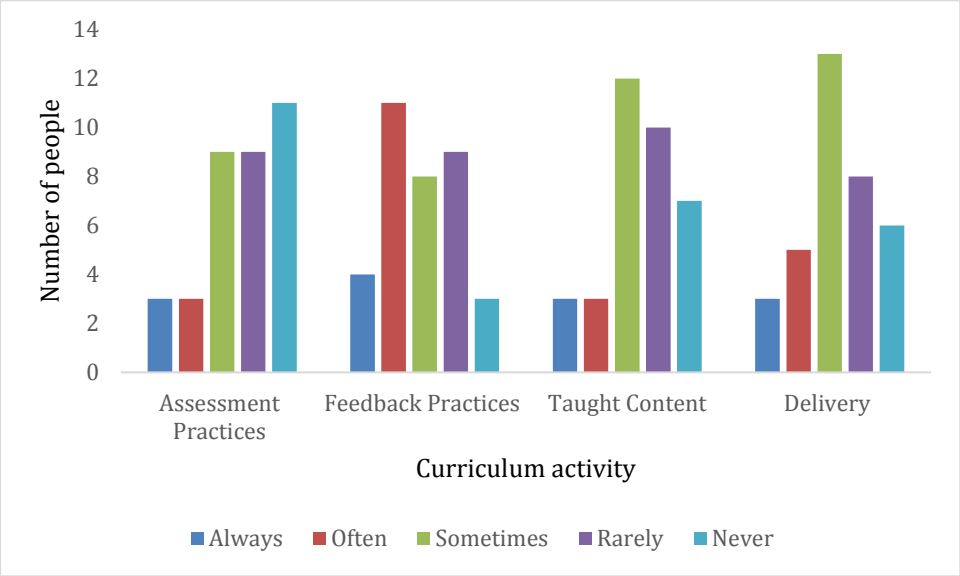

Figure1. Do you currently involve students in designing the following areas of curriculum?

In relation to barriers to partnership working, the staff perceived students subject, pedagogic and professional body awareness as issues to partnership activities (Figure 2). Time was considered to be a neutral issue but was still a key barrier to over 75% of the sample. This data strongly suggests that the staff felt the students themselves were the biggest barrier to working in this way. The key themes emerging form the data were around

the suitability of students to engage in a partnership process, in relation to variances in, student willingness to engage, interest, motivation, subject knowledge and expertise.

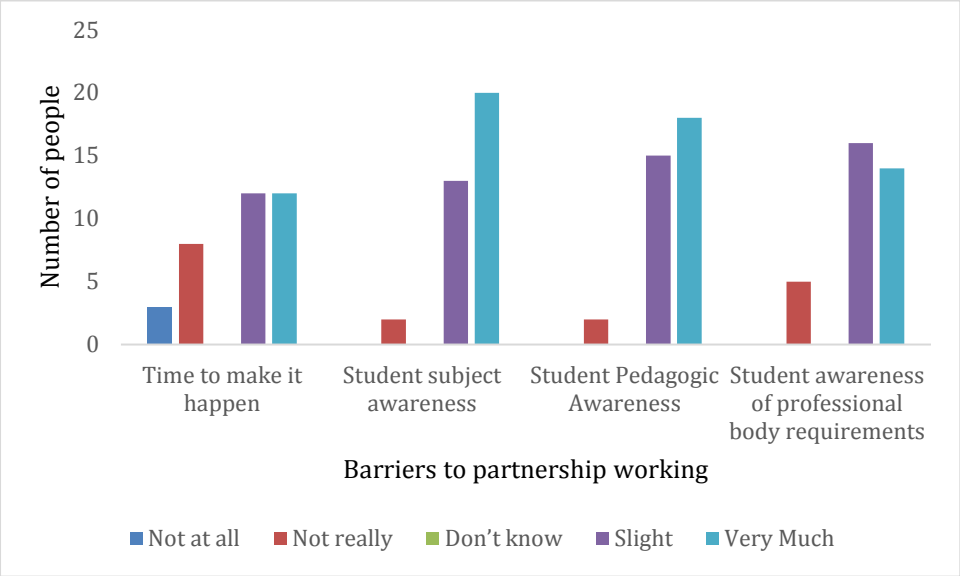

Figure 2. To what extent do you think the following represent barriers in relation to involving students as co-creators?

A perceived lack of engagement was highlighted as an issue not least because the students that do engage are not always representative of all students. There was a sense that, because of variances in motivation and commitment, some students could actively contribute to the partnership process, whilst others could not. One participant notes:

"Co-creation to my mind requires a high degree of maturity and motivation on the part of students. The majority of students will seek to engage in their learning experience to a minimum degree necessary to achieve their award".

The perception of the staff around subject content was that they were the expert and the students could not get involved in this aspect of the curriculum design.

"how does a student know what the curriculum should consist of when they don't know a

great deal about the subject?"

"the limitations of their understanding of the relevant subject matter, quality measures, and pedagogic issues would mean that this can only take place on a limited basis".

Staff perceived there to be a lack of expertise and relevant subject knowledge which affected what they believe students can contribute if they were to work in partnerships.

Staff perceptions on staff- student partnership after being involved in the project

Following the project the staff involved spoke favourably about the idea of, *"integrating ideas from the students";* involving students in *"some elements of module creation"* and *"making tweaks to course structure"* based upon *"meaningful dialogue".* Some staff articulated the importance of student perspectives, *"there is clearly a powerful role for students"* and in this sense, in principle, the partnership was welcomed: *"I have no problem in principle involving students in curriculum design and delivery".* The partnership process enabled staff to gain an appreciation of student perspectives, of which they valued *"it's been a while since we've been students"* and as such highlighted to them differing perspectives of staff and students as regards to feedback *"we had very different ideas about what is, sort of, covered by the term feedback".* One participant commented:

"It means that perhaps a lot of the assumptions that certainly I, and I think some of my colleagues have been working on, have perhaps been flawed. It confirmed that students think more about their learning as a process than I thought they did."

Thus suggesting that getting staff involved in this type of activity may help staff and students come together to develop the learning experience in a positive way. Because of

engaging in this staff-student partnership, staff expressed their willingness to reconsider their practice with specific reference to the discussion topic of feedback. *"I certainly reflected on it in terms of my own development and my own practices going forward*." The participants felt working in this way was useful from the perspective of student engagement. *"I think it's a useful mechanism to use in addition to regular student engagement sessions",* and in providing opportunity for staff-student dialogue to enable staff to meet the expectations of students, *"I'm trying to get, to meet the students as much as I can, on how they want to learn".* In addition the process served to motivate staff *"it reinforces that it is something that we can do something about as staff and it kind of gives you that additional motivation to do something about it"* and provided evidence of the requirement to reflect upon practice for staff less willing to consider change *"it also gives us an opportunity to kind of go back to staff and maybe a bit less, or more reluctant ….. to kind of change practices".*

DISCUSSION

Before being involved with students in developing course-level strategies, this group of staff saw working with students as part of university processes (module evaluations) or decision-making (working at Institutional level) not as partners or agents of change (Dunne & Zandstras' (2011). Co-creation can challenge academics understanding of their roles and responsibilities in designing learning and teaching (Bovill, 2013). The cross-discipline group of staff involved in this study whilst positive about the concept of co-creation on the whole offered issues and problems that would make it difficult to carry out in practice, which we have labelled as the 'but' in co-creation. No differences were found between the four subject groups, except for the Law staff who were more wary of working in this way due to

the external accreditation. Further research is needed, to explore those subject areas with external accreditation, to ascertain whether this is a real or perceived issue.

The barriers around staff-student partnerships centred mainly round the students themselves (willingness, interest and expertise). Some staff considered this type of partnership to be something that challenged their professional legitimacy since it handed power to the students. If staff consider partnership in this, way it would make sense that they are less likely to engage with it. This was particularly true for staff involved in professionally accredited courses. They considered the process to create conflict in what was considered ideals in roles (assessor v assessed). Suggesting that the staff here still saw themselves as the expert rather than the reorientation that Bovill et al., (2016) suggest might happen from the expert to the facilitator of learning.

Staff interviewed after the co-creation process demonstrated some reinforcement of the reservations for involvement as cited in the initial questionnaire. Areas around staff being the experts "*I think that my judgment on the core content of the module is going to be stronger than the students I'm teaching"* and "*the fear of not knowing if they're competent enough to engage in the co-creation process"* were common themes from the interviews. However there was a sense that the experience of working with the students had offered an opportunity to appreciate another point of view. In this sense, the opportunity for shared dialogue (Cook-Sather et al., 2014) provided an opportunity for staff and students to understand each other's perspectives and the ideologies and boundaries within which they operate. These positive outcomes were found to be more related to staff understanding of the student perspective in relation to feedback suggesting, in alignment with literature, that there is benefit in staff and students working in partnership (Nygaard, Brand, Bartholomew

and Millard, 2013).

It was also felt that the process enabled students to gain an appreciation of staff perspectives, which may help develop this more shared perspective of feedback in this case. Our findings support previous literature in framing the partnership process as something that creates a shift in understanding, or a "threshold concept" in academic development (Cook-Sather, 2014; Meyer and Land, 2005). Staff reflections on practice as regards to both feedback and co-creation, showed it to be beneficial in terms of personal development and as a consequence beneficial to the students they teach. Fitting with the idea of a partnership threshold where staff and students understand and act on the collaboration (Marquis, et al., 2015). The originality of this study lies in the evidence that with some engagement in partnership work staff can experience the benefits of it and "cross the threshold".

Addressing the 'but' in co-creation

There is significant evidence in the literature that co-creation has many benefits (Healey et al., 2014) but fostering this with staff who maybe do not engage in the pedagogic literature will not be without its difficulties, it will be after all a change in culture and practice for many. However, with the exception of Cook-Sather et al., (2014) and Curran and Millard (2016) there appears to be a scarcity of practical guidance for academic staff wishing to engage in partnerships with students on the subject of curriculum design and development. In order to support others in this type of activity we have taken the main messages from the staff within this study and now offer suggestions to support the development of this curriculum development activity.

Increasing staff willingness and involvement

The sense of unfamiliarity with the partnership concept and the perceived lack of student competence in engaging supports suggestions regarding the need for preparation and support for both staff and students in the process. Little, Sharp, Stanley, Hayward, Gannon-Leary, O'Neill and Williams, (2011) suggests that before we can get to more involved we need to overcome any wariness staff have and convince them that it is worthwhile. The small-scale activity of designing a programme level feedback strategy was seen as both positive and successful for all cross-disciplinary teams. Therefore deciding on a starting place for staff and students to work together would seem to be a good place to start for programme teams, aligning with Cook- Sather, et al., (2014) practical recommendations for encouraging co-creation. Learning from this, programme teams could choose an area of their curriculum that is maybe not working as well as they would like and set up a staff-student partnership to explore the issues and offer solutions.

Developing students in the partnership process

Staff felt that they were the decision maker and the subject expert and they questioned both student engagement and expertise, and it has to be recognised that staff will have on the whole greater knowledge and expertise (Allin, 2014). However if we are truly to move away from the position of power and authority we have to find ways of utilising the staff expertise to empower the students in way that works for them. Could a partnership approach be built into an early module/ unit where the teaching staff and the students work together on one element of the curriculum? Student competence and confidence can also be developed through training activities (Jensen and Bennett, 2016) and this could also be undertaken with staff to start building on the idea of working together.

Staff as facilitators

The findings suggest that we need a shift from the staff member as the expert to that of a facilitator of developing knowledge and learning. Training is needed to support staff in moving from the position of expert, and case studies are required to enable programme teams to see the benefits of this type of activity. A process plan, external facilitation and a clear objective all helped in this study. Using students to facilitate the staff and students diffused any potential power implications and negotiating roles is seen as crucial to a positive outcome. Programme teams could work with students who are further on in their academic journey to support those just arriving and utilise post-graduate students to mediate and facilitate the activities between the staff and the students.

Partnership can be a staff development activity

Working with students can alert staff to areas where training and development activities are needed. Higher Education is an evolving environment and by listening and working with students, we can benefit and enhance both the staff and student experience. An understanding and development of the roles that staff and students play in the higher education arena are critical to this as Bovill et al., (2016, p.205) states the fact that these are "socially constructed and changeable can help both staff and students begin to think in fundamentally new ways about teaching and learning." Programme teams willing to work in this way should gain support from central university support for teaching and learning. An external viewpoint can help to support both groups and can then support the dissemination of practice. Re-focusing on a different way of working takes time and evaluation and this needs to be supported where possible by the wider institution.

CONCLUSION

Co-creating the curriculum although not a new area of study is emerging as an area of interest in Higher Education literature, and yet despite this it is far from common practice across universities. The strengths of the many different approaches suggest that there can be a very positive outcome when students and staff come together to develop and explore the learning experiences (Curran and Millard, 2016). However this does not come without significant barriers. This study has found that through a partnership experience, where staff and students came together to look at a programme level feedback strategy, the staff stepped over a threshold in relation to their thinking about working with students in this way.

Across the four disciplines the standpoint of staff, in relation to Dunne and Zandstras' (2011) model, was that of students as evaluators and unsurprisingly this was reflected in the lack of co-creation that had been undertaken up to that point. Almost everything that was said about working in partnership was prefixed with a 'but' showing that the idea has merit but delivering on these was not simple. Some of this 'but' was down to the perceived lack of engagement and subject awareness by the students. Activity such as this has been found to increase student engagement and motivation (Little et al., 2011). However as students may be reticent, a period of transition where students get used to working in this way may be helpful.

Another factor in relation to the 'but' was that of professional legitimacy. Clearly the staff were placing themselves in the position of expert and for co-creation to work this stance is not helpful. Co-creation processes can challenge learning relationships and the power frames that underpin them (Ryan and Tilbury, 2013). Empowerment of learners in

curriculum design, whilst challenging for some, is reported as a transformative process by pedagogic literature. Therefore despite the potential difficulties the end result seems to be worth the struggle. Training and development is crucial for both staff and students; further research is needed of case studies that show the benefits and also the model of engagement. If we are to overcome these 'buts', new ways of working and understanding will be crucial for future success.

The research was successfully reviewed according to the university regulations.

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