Bovill, C., Cook-Sather, A., and Felten, P. (2011) *Students as co-creators of teaching approaches, course design and curricula: implications for academic developers.* International Journal for Academic Development, 16 (2). pp. 133-145. ISSN 1360-144X

http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/54132/

Deposited on: 20 December 2011

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow
http://eprints.gla.ac.uk

International Journal for Academic Development
Vol. 16, No. 2, May 2011, 133-145

ARTICLE

Students as co-creators of teaching approaches, course design and curricula: Implications for academic developers

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Abstract

Within higher education, students' voices are frequently overlooked in the design of teaching approaches, courses and curricula. In this paper we outline the theoretical background to arguments for including students as partners in pedagogical planning processes. We present examples where students have worked collaboratively in design processes along with the beneficial outcomes of these examples. Finally, we focus on some of the implications and opportunities for academic developers of proposing collaborative approaches to pedagogical planning.

Key words: learning, engagement, student voice, co-construction, pedagogical planning

Introduction

> '…I think some teachers…are so focused on getting stuff done that they don't pay attention to their students, who I think are the most valuable resources in a classroom.' (Mihans, Long & Felten, 2005, p. 9)

> 'Asking students to talk about their education is so simple that — whether we are teachers, parents, researchers, or policymakers — we inevitably forget to do it.' (White, 2010, p. xi)

The college student and the business executive quoted above make the same assertion: students are an important resource but are rarely consulted about their educational experiences. Drawing on current literature about student engagement and on a growing body of student voice research, we contend that academic staff should not only consult students but also explore ways for students to become full participants in the design of teaching approaches, courses and curricula.

This contention challenges conventional conceptions of learners as subordinate to the expert tutor/faculty in engaging with what is taught and how. Moving away from traditional hierarchical models of expertise, it strives for 'radical collegiality' in which students are 'agents in the process of transformative learning' (Fielding, 1999, p. 22). Such a move raises questions for academic developers about how they can support and challenge academic staff to be open to democratic approaches and to hold greater expectations for students as well as challenge students to demonstrate more active engagement in learning.

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In this paper, we (1) provide theoretical grounding for these proposed changes, (2) describe three forms of student participation in pedagogical planning that complicate traditional roles and responsibilities in higher education and improve the quality of learning that students experience (Cook-Sather, Felten, & Bovill, 2010), (3) outline some of the benefits of student participation in pedagogical planning, and (4) explore some of the implications for academic developers of doing this work.

Theoretical Grounding

Student engagement is considered crucial to student success in higher education, with engagement understood as serious interest in, active taking up of, and commitment to learning (Kuh, Kinzie, Shuh & Whitt, 2010). In virtually every definition of engaged learning, students take an active role in the learning process (Wolf-Wendel, Ward & Kinzie, 2009), with recent calls for students to become co-creators of learning (Davis & Sumara, 2002; McCulloch, 2009).

Adopting an active and participatory role in learning is thought to enhance learning processes and outcomes (Kuh, 2008) through, for example: students engaging in meaningful (as opposed to rote) learning; staff and students breaking down the power differential between them; and students experiencing the freedom to become critical thinkers and critical beings in the world (Barnett, 1997; Freire 2003). Student choice contributes to learners taking more responsibility for their own learning (hooks, 1994; Rogers & Freiberg, 1969).

Active learning implies not only a shift from passivity to agency but also from merely doing to developing a meta-cognitive awareness about what is being done. When students make this transition from simply enacting what is required of them to learn, to consciously analyzing what constitutes and enhances that learning, they change 'not just what the learner knows…but also who the learner is' (Dreier, 2003, in Wortham, 2004, p. 716; see also Cook-Sather, 2006). Baxter Magolda (2009) calls this self-authorship. Although there might be student and academic staff resistance to this transition, such a transformation makes students more likely to adopt deep approaches to learning, as they 'become adaptive experts who both recognize and even relish the opportunity and necessity for breaking with traditional approaches and inventing new ones' (Bain & Zimmerman, 2009, p. 10).

Like engagement, student voice is a theory and set of practices that position students as active agents in analyses and revisions of education. Developed largely in school contexts in the UK, Australia, Canada, and the US, 'student voice' is premised on the notions that students have a unique perspective on teaching and learning and that they should be invited to share their insights, which warrant not only the attention but also the response of educators (Fielding, 2001; Rudduck, 2007). These assertions are supported by Hattie's (2008) meta-analysis of student achievement, in which he argues that student learning is deepest when students become their own teachers and when their teachers learn from them through feedback and other means. Nascent efforts to engage undergraduate voices in higher education value student perspectives and reposition students to share those perspectives (Delpish, Holmes, Knight-McKenna, Mihans, Darby, King & Felten, 2010).

Proposals for higher education students to collaborate in pedagogical planning are not new (Dewey, 1916). However, students often lack agency within university educational structures and processes. Encouragingly, a new strand of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning embraces 'a commitment to more shared responsibility for learning among students and teachers, a more democratic intellectual community, and more authentic co-inquiry' (Hutchins & Huber, 2010, p. xii). Such sharing of the work of conceptualizing and enacting approaches to learning requires new notions of power (Mihans et al., 2008) that in turn 'mean greater ability to act and thus a greater sense of responsibility' (Manor, Bloch-Schulman, Flannery & Felten, 2010, p. 10). Positioning students as peers who have valuable perspectives (Sorenson, 2001) is key to

supporting collegial partnerships between faculty members and students with the goal of clarifying and improving classroom practice (Cook-Sather, 2010; 2009, 2008). However, it is important to note that enhancing student participation in pedagogical planning does not replace teachers' expertise and their key role in facilitating learning (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000).

Although there are numerous benefits to student participation in pedagogical planning, scholars also issue warnings. Participatory approaches risk unquestioningly reifying the views of the less powerful (Cooke & Kothari, 2001) — in this case, students. This can lead to an uncritical value being placed on students' views, irrespective of the nature of these views (Silva & Rubin, 2003; Shor cited in O'Loughlin, 1995) and to ignoring the diversity of motivations and experiences that different students bring to learning. Furthermore, claims of participation that are not genuine and forms of participation where students remain as 'outsiders' in relation to the academic world may result in the alienation of students (Mann, 2001). Finally, co-creation can be threatening to students who are used to teachers dominating the classroom and thus may be resistant to deviating from this norm (Shor, 1992).

Mindful of both the potential and the challenges of this work, we present in the following section some examples of students becoming partners in pedagogical planning.

Three Forms of Student Participation in Pedagogical Planning

The programmes we describe here unfolded in different contexts: a small liberal arts college in the United States, a medium-sized liberal arts university in the United States, a large National University in Ireland, and a small 'post 1992' university in Scotland. Each example is outlined in order to demonstrate some of the range of possibilities within student participation in pedagogical planning.

Students as Co-creators of Teaching Approaches

The first programme we highlight, called Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT), is funded by a grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Part of the Teaching and Learning Initiative at Bryn Mawr College, the programme invites faculty and students to engage in reflective dialogue about what is happening and what could be happening in higher education classrooms.

SaLT consists of two interrelated forums for faculty: (1) a semester-long seminar that includes weekly two-hour meetings, weekly posts to a closed blog, mid- and end-of-semester feedback, and development of a final portfolio and (2) a partnership with a student consultant. Since 2007, SaLT has supported 108 faculty members (who span ranks and divisions and range from new to those with 45 years of teaching experience) and 57 student consultants (second-year through to fourth-year undergraduate students who major in different fields, claim different identities, and bring varying degrees of formal preparation in educational studies) in a total of 137 partnerships.

Students are not enrolled in the courses for which they serve as consultants. Rather, each student consultant: meets with the faculty member to establish goals and plans for the semester; visits one class session each week; takes detailed observation notes on the pedagogical issues the faculty member identifies; surveys or interviews students in the class (if the faculty member wishes); meets weekly with the faculty member to discuss observation notes and other feedback and implications; participates in weekly meetings with one another and with the coordinator of SaLT; and visits one or more faculty seminars five times over the course of the semester.

Student consultants and faculty members forge partnerships outside of the regular teacher/student relationship, explore dimensions of teaching and learning not generally discussed outside of education courses, and model for the entire community a form of collaboration that challenges traditional role

distinctions and notions of who is responsible for the education that unfolds in college classrooms (Cook-Sather, 2010, 2009, 2008).

Students as Co-creators of Course Design

Although much educational development focuses on pedagogical technique, course design might be the most important barrier to quality teaching and learning in higher education (Fink 2003). Since 2005, faculty, students, and academic development staff at Elon University have experimented with a variety of approaches to partnering in 'course design teams' (CDT) that co-create, or re-create, a course syllabus.

Each team's process varies, but typically a CDT includes one or two faculty, between two and six undergraduate students, and one academic developer (Delpish et al., 2010; Mihans et al., 2008; Moore, Altvater, Mattera & Regan, 2010). Faculty members initiate the redesign process, inviting the students and developer to co-construct a team. Students usually apply to participate in a CDT, motivated by a desire to contribute to a course they have taken or that is important to the curriculum in their disciplinary home. Once the CDT is assembled, the CDT uses a 'backward design' approach (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), first developing course goals and then building pedagogical strategies and learning assessments on the foundation of those goals.

These student-faculty partnerships to redesign undergraduate courses challenge students' customary, and often comfortable, passive role in the classroom, as well as a common academic staff assumption that their disciplinary expertise gives them complete authority over the learning process. This collaborative approach prompts both students and academic staff to confront fundamental questions about the nature of teaching and learning.

Time is the most important element in the success of a CDT. Successful teams usually meet weekly for two or three months, providing ample opportunities to both accomplish the CDT's practical purpose of redesigning the course and, perhaps more importantly, to develop a true partnership that welcomes student voices. Students often doubt that they will be taken seriously in the process, and they also need time to develop the language and the confidence to express pedagogical ideas clearly. Many CDTs experience a liminal moment when everyone present recognizes that a fundamental boundary has been crossed, either by a faculty member ceding significant authority for the course design or by students claiming power in the process.

Students as Co-creators of Curricula

Co-creation of curricula implies students and academic staff working in partnership to create some or all aspects of the planning, implementation and evaluation of the learning experience. A recent research project examined the role of students as co-creators of first year curricula in the USA, Ireland and Scotland (Bovill, 2009). The example from the USA was based at Elon University and has been outlined above. The other two examples are presented here.

At University College Dublin, programme co-ordinators redesigned the first year geography curriculum in collaboration with students. The programme enrolls approximately 400 students each year. The co-ordinators advertised for four third-year students to apply for the job of co-designing the curriculum with existing academic staff. These students were paid to design a new virtual learning environment based around case studies covering important themes for first-year geography, such as migration and the coffee trade. They then produced written, audio and video resources for the virtual learning environment that first-year students could interact with and use to support their learning. These case studies prompted discussion among small groups of students online and in class. The third-year students then collaborated with the programme co-

ordinators to identify examples of good student work that could be used as the basis for teaching sessions. In this way, the current students' work directly influenced and contributed to the curriculum.

At Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh, academic staff run an undergraduate programme in environmental justice. Approximately 16 students who have some experience as community activists enter the course in order to learn ways to enhance their capabilities as activists within their own community. A curriculum framework is designed by academic staff; for example, they plan that there will be a science module and a law module. However, the content of the modules will be dependent on what the students need to learn to become more informed active citizens, for example, legislation and science relating to toxic waste dumping. Students and academic staff developed their negotiation skills through discussion, compromise and agreement about curriculum decisions. These processes helped students to realise that they were being taken seriously and that their participation was meaningful rather than tokenistic.

Benefits to Students and Academic Staff

Each programme discussed here has been analyzed through a different process. SaLT has, since its inception, been the subject of an action research project approved by Bryn Mawr College's Institutional Review Board. Through this project, the primary investigator and student researchers have engaged in the 'spiral of self-reflective cycles' of planning a change, acting and observing the consequences of the change, reflecting on these processes and consequences, and then re-planning (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998, p. 21). The primary methods of analysis have been constant comparison and grounded theory (Creswell, 2006; Strauss, 1987). Elon's course design initiative has followed a similar research process, including multiple projects approved by the University's Institutional Review Board. To synthesize results across these several projects, Elon faculty and students used constant comparison and grounded theory. The co-created curricula examples were investigated using case study methodology in a research study approved by the University of Glasgow's Education Ethics Committee. The relevant programme co-ordinators and academic staff were interviewed, informal meetings were held with students and documentary analysis of key programme documentation was undertaken. Analysis involved identifying 'within case' themes and then moved to identifying cross-case themes (Creswell, 2006). To inform the present discussion, we shared with one another findings from our respective studies and selected the commonalities across them — those benefits that were identified with greatest frequency in all three studies.

Students and Academic Staff Gain a Deeper Understanding of Learning

When students work with academic staff to develop pedagogical approaches, they gain a different angle on, and a deeper understanding of, learning. In one Bryn Mawr student's words: 'You really don't understand the way you learn and how others learn until you can step back from it and are not in the class with the main aim to learn the material of the class but more to understand what is going on in the class and what is going through people's minds as they relate with that material' (Cook-Sather, 2008, p. 481). The stepping back and analyzing this student describes leads to deeper learning (Bain & Zimmerman, 2009) through fostering the development of meta-cognitive awareness, and it contributes to self authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2009) because students become not only more aware but also more active in and responsible for their learning (Cook-Sather, forthcoming).

Likewise, when academic staff engage in dialogue with students and one another about learning expectations, pedagogical rationales are clarified. As one professor explained: 'If done properly, pedagogical transparency can lead to greater student responsibility, as my expectations for what they do to learn are made more clear.' This is consistent with Hattie's (2008) findings regarding how 'visible teaching' and 'visible

learning' improve student learning outcomes. As an academic staff member claimed: '…students… demonstrated high levels of self-directed learning and autonomy…improved levels of confidence and motivation with a resultant impact on improved student performance' (Bovill, 2009, p. 41-42).

Students and Academic Staff Experience Enhanced Engagement, Motivation, and Enthusiasm

Having the opportunity to work collaboratively with faculty in developing pedagogical approaches inspires students to experience an increased sense of engagement, motivation, and enthusiasm. One Elon second-year student captured this vividly in his journal: 'I grew up thinking what I assumed every other student thought and the majority of students still think—what do I want to get out of this class? An A. The thought of actively trying to learn something never crossed my mind. Then one day as we were discussing…the subject of teacher and student responsibility…the realization hit me: What were my own responsibilities for my education?' (Manor et al., 2010, p. 5). This student's recognition that he has a choice regarding the nature of his participation in his education contributes to his taking more responsibility for his own learning (hooks, 1994; Rogers & Freiberg, 1969) — a recognition that leads to a re-energizing and renewed commitment to learning.

Academic staff experience a similar re-invigoration and renewal (Delpish et al. 2010, p. 112; Bovill, 2009, p. 43). Many academic staff echo a Bryn Mawr colleague who wrote: 'I reconnected with [my students and] repositioned myself as their advocate.' One of the teachers at University College Dublin stated '…[this work has] really transformed how I think about teaching and how I teach. And the buzz I get from teaching in a way that's interactive…it's really changed how I work' (Bovill, 2009, p. 25). When academic staff feel re-energized and engage more deeply in their work through extending more opportunities to students to actively engage, learning processes and outcomes are enhanced (Kuh, 2008).

Students and Academic Staff Relate Differently

Students and academic staff who work together on pedagogical planning assert consistently that they revise their sense of relationship with one another. Students regularly state: 'Participating in this programme has dramatically helped me to become more patient and take more responsibility for my education. I am finding myself being more understanding of my professor's struggles, and thinking more carefully about what I can do to improve my own experience in the classroom.' Academic staff similarly comment on the change in relationship: 'I work with students more as colleagues, more as people engaged in similar struggles to learn and grow.' They embrace the notion, in another professor's words, that 'the learning process [is] a collaborative venture of students and teacher. We're all learning through engagement with the subject and each other.' These articulations of shared commitment and collaborative efforts attest to the power of positioning students as co-creators of learning (Davis & Sumara, 2002).

Academic staff 'spoke of the importance of having a liminal…moment early in the negotiation of collaborative relationships, where students realised that they were being listened to and taken seriously' (Bovill, 2009, p. 47). In one case, for example, the collaborative selection of a course textbook changed 'the dynamic of the design group, empowering students to be active participants and showing faculty the value of listening to students' (Felten in Bovill et al., 2008, p. 88). When students are listened to by academic staff, both the students and the staff see themselves differently, as one academic staff member commented: 'You work in a university and you get surrounded by people who should like teaching but who…don't like teaching and don't like students…"they're so stupid", "they don't do any work", "they're so lazy"…and I think actually, it's our problem, because they're not, they're smart, they're engaged, they're interested' (Bovill, 2009, p. 25). These revisions of students as partners in constructing pedagogical processes reflect a

commitment to 'shared responsibility for learning among students and teachers' (Hutchins & Huber, 2010, p. xii).

Implications for Academic Developers

Recent approaches to academic development build on constructive alternatives to what Shulman (2004) has called 'pedagogical solitude'. Reflective and collaborative approaches to professional development (Cowan & Westwood, 2006) and faculty learning communities (Richlin & Cox, 2004) have become models of good practice. Yet, student involvement in faculty development practices has been 'virtually invisible' (Cox & Sorenson, 2000, p. 99; Sorenson, 2001). Since the academic development scholarship of the past decade suggests that standard practices fail to integrate student voices into much of our work, how do academic developers encourage students to share responsibility with academic staff and academic developers for analyzing and designing pedagogical practices? Drawing upon the approaches we have presented, we suggest that embracing the following characteristics may enable academic developers to begin to effect this change:

1. *Invite students to be partners* (active and authoritative collaborators) with academic staff in pedagogical planning, thus challenging traditional hierarchies and roles.
2. *Support dialogue across differences* (of position and perspective), which yields fresh insights and deeper engagement in teaching and learning.
3. *Foster collaboration* through which both academic staff and students take more responsibility for teaching and learning and adopt new views of both.
4. *Serve as intermediaries,* facilitating new relationships between students and academic staff.

We outline some key challenges, opportunities, recommendations and questions for those with an academic development role within higher education.

Challenges

Relinquishing control over pedagogical planning. We recognize that many academic staff may be uncomfortable with the necessary change in power relations a more democratic pedagogical planning process requires. Academic developers can play a diplomatic role in acknowledging the perceived threat to existing privilege and power, whilst working to reinterpret the possibilities that this shift might engender. They can also be honest about the potential discomfort experienced when adopting new and radical pedagogies and provide information about the benefits of co-creative approaches such 'radical collegiality' Fielding (1999) calls for.

Rethinking time investments. Academic staff might resist new approaches viewed as time consuming if they already feel overloaded with work. Academic developers can outline a range of different possible levels of student participation, encouraging academic staff to start with small scale co-creative innovations. They can acknowledge that what is possible will vary in different contexts, and provide illustrative frameworks for academic staff to use in guiding their first attempts at partnership planning with students. Time investments up front can pay off later as students take a more active role in the learning process (Wolf-Wendel et al, 2009).

Meeting professional requirements. Academic staff from disciplines with requirements from professional bodies may consider these strictures limit the possibilities of co-creation. Academic developers can

understand and work with the disciplinary differences and needs across the university setting (Jenkins, 1996), and they can remind academic staff that professional requirements usually relate to outcomes in terms of 'fitness to practice' and less frequently dictate the way in which the knowledge, skills and values required of a professional graduate are to be achieved. This leaves flexibility in choosing pedagogical approaches most suitable to engender these graduate attributes.

Gaining access to students. Academic developers often have only indirect contact with students, unless they continue to teach in a specific discipline. Academic developers can intentionally seek out opportunities for developing relationships with students, and they can also help academic staff to encourage hesitant students to become partners in pedagogical planning. Finally, they work alongside teachers who are supporting students to take their first steps in partnership planning and offer constructive feedback and advice about what may feel an alien process to some students and academic staff. Such efforts enact and make visible a more democratic approach to supporting learning (Hutchins & Huber, 2010) with responsibility shared among academic staff, students, and academic developers.

Opportunities

We have suggested some possible responses to the challenges raised, but there are other possible opportunities for promoting student participation in pedagogical planning.

Build on existing commitments among academic staff. Many academic staff already collaborate with students in the research arena and others embrace liberatory pedagogies that place active student participation at the centre of their teaching practice. Academic developers can build upon these practices, find places where student voice work aligns with teachers' disciplinary and philosophical approaches, and help academic staff to bridge between existing approaches and new forms of collaboration. Such efforts make explicit for academic staff, as they do for students, the kinds of self-authorship in which they are engaged (Baxter Magolda, 2009; Cook-Sather, 2006).

Promote and practice co-creative approaches in academic development fora. Courses such as Postgraduate Certificates in Learning and Teaching emphasize the importance of reflection on and evaluation of one's own teaching practice. Academic development workshops and seminars and regular university quality assurance and enhancement frameworks such as programme review and audit are other fora where academic developers may be able to pose questions about the place of the student voice within pedagogical planning processes. These fora may also provide opportunities to promote alternative and democratic pedagogies and engender greater expectations of students. We can also practice what we preach by using co-creation in our own practice (Swennen, Lunenberg & Korthagen, 2008; Brew & Barrie, 1999).

Act as a bridge between different parts of the University and influence policy. Academic developers have a role that can be perceived as a bridge between academic staff and administrative staff within higher education. This positioning provides a range of additional opportunities for developers to influence and support student/academic staff partnership approaches at institutional policy levels, including, for example, influencing the nature of learning and teaching strategies.

Overall Recommendations for Academic Developers

On the basis of existing literature and our own experiences, we make some recommendations to academic developers who aim to support collaborative approaches to pedagogical planning.

- Consider carefully the academic context, and work with academic staff to identify appropriate co-creation opportunities.
- Try to create liminal spaces outside of typical structures and relationships where students understand they are taken seriously.
- Ensure that neither academic staff nor students feel compelled to participate and that participation is meaningful. Indeed, false claims of participation may lead to a sense of student alienation (Mann, 2001).
- Ensure the diversity of students and academic staff and their positions are brought into structured dialogue: actively critique approaches that treat students or academic staff as homogenous groups. This implies we need to value what individual students bring to pedagogical planning process and treat students as peers (Sorenson, 2001).
- Recognise that this work is on-going, that pedagogical planning is not transformed once and for all after a single period of participation.
- Value, and encourage academic staff and students to value, the processes of collaborative pedagogical planning and not just the products of the process.
- Support academic staff to take small steps in collaborative pedagogical planning - perhaps not starting by redesigning an entire curriculum but rather trying out something more contained and manageable (Bovill et al, 2009).
- Evaluate co-created pedagogical design and approaches to build a growing evidence base for the impact of the processes and outcomes of this work.

Questions for Further Exploration

The complexity of student participation in pedagogical planning means that there are many areas of practice with questions that remain unanswered: How do co-created teaching approaches, course and curricula design appear when viewed from different cultural standpoints? How do we ensure the sustainability of co-created pedagogical approaches? Involving students in designing their own educational experiences can enhance student ownership of their learning, but this implies the need for redesign by the next cohort of students to ensure that they achieve this same degree of ownership.

Involving students in pedagogical planning is a significant step in deepening engaged learning and might therefore be understood as a professional responsibility for academic developers. We have attempted to illustrate the added value of this approach: the implications in terms of deeper learning and changed relationships between academic staff and students. We suggest that, given the benefits that our preliminary studies have outlined, it is incumbent upon us to reconsider students' role in their education and reposition students to take a more active part: as co-creators of teaching approaches, course design and curricula.

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STATED WORD COUNT: 5992