

Debating Student as Producer: Relationships, Contexts, and Challenges for Higher Education

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KATIE STRUDWICK

University of Lincoln

kstrudwick@lincoln.ac.uk

Abstract

*The purpose of this paper is to evaluate Student as Producer, as a form of curriculum development in higher education based on the practice and principles of research-engaged teaching. The paper provides an account of my experiences embedding and adopting Student as Producer within my own research and teaching at the University of Lincoln, an institution which is recognised as being a pioneer in research-engaged teaching. My work includes, the role as guest editor for a special 'Student as Producer' edition of the journal *Enhancing Learning in Social Sciences (ELiSS)*, teaching *Criminology in the Professions*, and working on funded research projects at Lincoln around aspects of the undergraduate student experience, e.g. student as partners and student engagement. As well as this focus on my own teaching practice the paper sets out the theory and concepts which underpin Student as Producer and the way in which it has responded to current government policy, in particular the notion of student as consumer.*

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate Student as Producer, as a form of curriculum development in higher education based on the practice and principles of research-engaged teaching. The paper provides an account of my experiences of embedding and adopting Student as Producer within my own research and teaching at the University of Lincoln, an institution recognised as a pioneer for this approach to research-engaged teaching. My work has included performing the role as guest editor for a special 'Student as Producer' edition of the journal *Enhancing Learning in Social Sciences (ELiSS)*, teaching a new module entitled *Criminology in the Professions*, and working on funded research projects at Lincoln around aspects of the undergraduate student experience, such as student as partners and student

engagement. As well as this focus on my own teaching practice, the paper sets out the theory and concepts which underpin Student as Producer and the way in which it has responded to current government policy, in particular the notion of student as consumer and the marketization of higher education.

1.2 What is Student as Producer?

Student as Producer emerged as a teaching and learning practice in higher education at the University of Warwick in 2004, where it formed the basis of The Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research and a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning¹, before being developed at the University of Lincoln from 2007. The basis of Student as Producer at Lincoln is research-engaged teaching where students are collaborators with their university teachers in the creation and production of knowledge and meaning. Student as Producer is a self-conscious critique of government policy which has sought to develop the concept and practice of student as consumer (Neary et al, 2014).

Student as Producer is framed within Marxist social theory and critical pedagogy, taking its name from Walter Benjamin's *The Author as Producer* (1934). Philosophically, the origins of Student as Producer are based on a critique of the principles found within the Liberal humanist writings of Humboldt (1810) and his model of 'Organic Scholarship', where he sought to address the imbalance between teaching and research; plus, concerns regarding the principles of academic freedom (Neary and Winn, 2009, p.128; Neary and Hagyard, 2010).

By taking some of its conceptual foundations from Benjamin, particularly his notion that social transformation depends on the revolution of the capitalist mode of production, this pedagogical framework has provided a critique to student as consumers through its sustained and evolving pedagogic responses to the increased marketisation of higher education. Student as Producer has built on Benjamin's foundational critique of capitalist production and focused on the creativity and productive relationship between student and teachers; through addressing ways for collaborative engagement not only within the University but in ways that challenge the institutional form of higher education (Neary and Winn, 2009, p.202; Neary and Saunders, 2016).

The Student as Producer project was funded at Lincoln by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in 2010 as *Student as Producer: research-engaged teaching, an institutional strategy*. Since 2010- 13 Student as Producer has been institutionally embedded as a teaching and learning development project to 're-engineer the relationship between research and teaching'². It was designed as an 'institutional framework', a conceptual model, to embrace student engagement with academics in teaching, learning and research. Its working definition of research-engaged teaching and learning was identified as:

A fundamental principle of curriculum design whereby students learn primarily by engagement in real research projects, or projects which replicate the process of

¹ For *The Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research and a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning*, see http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/iatl/cetl

² For more information, see <http://www.studentasproducer.lincoln.ac.uk>

research in their discipline. Engagement is created through active collaboration amongst and between students and academics (Neary et al., 2014, p.9).

Since this project there has been a sustained progression of Student as Producer as an overriding pedagogic paradigm within academic practices across disciplines (Neary et al., 2014). Through embedding students in higher education, not as recipients or consumers, or customers, but as collaborators, Student as Producer embraces the importance of ensuring meaningful participation between academics and students. Students are seen on an “equal footing”, broadening their learning experiences through opportunities to be participants in research activity as well as teaching and learning projects. Such reshaping effectively demonstrates to students the benefits of skills, knowledge, and engagement within a culture of partnerships in teaching and learning.

Student as Producer at the University of Lincoln is based on eight key principles that were developed in consultation with academics, professional support staff and students at the start of the HEA funded project. They shape the learning experience by:

- Encouraging research as a form of *Discovery*, characterised by a problem based, enquiry based or research based approach to learning;
- *Technology in Teaching*, changing the relationship between tutor and student through digital scholarship from on-line technologies;
- *Space and Spatiality*, use of spaces in teaching;
- *Assessment*, as part of the discovery and research engaged teaching approach;
- *Research and Evaluations*, use of research engaged teaching in student learning and teaching;
- *Student voice*, citizen engagement within student voice to provide responsibility for learning;
- *Support for research based teaching through expert engagement with information resources*, engaging the library service to support individual programmes;
- *Creating for the Future*, using employability, enterprise, and postgraduate study to support career preparation and aspirations of students (Neary et al., 2014).

The impact of Student as Producer has had far reaching pedagogic dissemination and this impact, both nationally and globally such as Newcastle University, University of Liverpool, University of Hull, Vanderbilt University in the USA and the University of British Columbia in Canada; meets with wider objectives of Student as Producer for restating ‘the meaning and purpose of higher education by reconnecting the core activities of universities i.e. research and teaching’³.

1.3 Policy context

The emerging trend towards an explicit consumerist ethos for teaching and learning has sought to reshape the higher education sector as a whole. It has resulted in a system where:

³ For more information, see <http://www.studentasproducer.lincoln.ac.uk>

Marketisation is a reality in United Kingdom universities but often ‘... it sits uneasily with the values of many academics, who came into higher education with a nobler motivation’ (Lomas, 2007, p.32; Green, 2004, p.14).

Scott (2013, p.32) observes that higher education has been ‘drowning’ in policy developments linking innovation, industry, enterprise, with intrusions into management and accountability of policy delivery. Woodhall et al. (2014, p.3) consider the restructuring that has led to the ‘insidious incursion of the customer concept’; a framework first introduced by the Dearing Report (1998) and intensified by The Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance, chaired by Lord Browne, (2010). A process where the Browne report claimed to have ‘discovered a consensus on the need for reform’ (BIS, 2010, p.24).

The proposals for reform were not positively received within some higher education communities. Through comparing responses to Dearing and Browne, Scott (2013, p.41) refers to more acceptance of the former with the latter receiving ‘widespread antagonism’ for its offer of ‘more superficial – and perhaps token – engagement’. Further critiques were put forward by Jameson et al. (2012a, p.11) with their acknowledgment of a ‘rhetoric of choice’:

Browne’s justification for high tuition fees is being couched in terms of the economic good of having a degree and that students are given the ultimate choice in purchasing a stake in their own economic wellbeing.

Browne’s recommendations and proposals subsequently ensured that the greater commodification of higher education was proposed but at the same time engendered a critical response from within the higher education teaching and learning community. Following this review, another government report *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System* (BIS, 2011) set out the case for ‘greater competition’ in the modernisation of higher education by introducing much higher levels of fees. Changes occurring under these reforms further confirmed the shifts towards marketization. Placing students ‘at the heart of the system’ in the title resulted in an ideological framing of students as customers or consumers within a ‘business like’ model of higher education. It has been claimed that the post 2010 reforms symbolize a ‘watershed’ moment representing, ‘a fundamental ideological shift: competition is now entrenched as the major dynamic for improvement and more active (and informed) student choice is the instrument of securing it’ (Scott, 2013, p.52).

The increased fees led to debates about the (perceived) level of instrumentalism occurring, with students ‘paying’ for their degree. There was a notable shift in governments’ expectations, resulting from policies and reforms focusing on reshaping higher education towards measuring teaching standards and quality. There have been more recent centralised policy calls for higher education to become more accountable, as shown in the Green Paper *Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice* (BIS, 2015). Core elements of this paper have been widely debated within higher education, with its ‘vision’ for higher education for the future. Most pertinent to this discussion, it proposed the creation of a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) with differential tuition fees as one aspect of its ‘vision’. Basing teaching quality on a measurable metrics system, with accountability on

an institutional and programme level, explicitly links excellence with higher fees, to be measured by the TEF.

Debates have succeeded in raising considerable questions, and uncertainty, about such proposals. Academic debates have acknowledged the myriad of complications and complexities with measuring standards among institutions, at a discipline and subject level [see HEPI responses 2015; 2016; WONKE; Ashwin, 2016]. In contrast, there were more contented responses to the recognition of the importance of teaching in Universities, shown by placing the status of teaching alongside those of research [see Peck, 2017; Unialliance; Higher Education Academy]. These divergences in opinions and responses within higher education highlight the continued confusion and questioning about plans for its future.

Such overarching concerns were exacerbated by the publication of the White Paper in May 2016, *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*. This paper proposed plans for government monitoring through assessment of the quality of teaching. By focusing on creating a competitive market of higher education, such proposals led to a revised/intensified marketisation system. Through the continued use of “business” language, the paper stated the proposal will be keeping students at the centre of higher education, reinforcing their role as “consumers” by:

...introducing more competition and informed choice into higher education, we will deliver better outcomes and value for students, employers and the taxpayers who underwrite the system (BIS, 2016a, p.8).

There is no doubt that the 2016 White Paper represents a ‘defining moment’ in the future of higher education (Jamdar, 2016). It contains explicit references and links to previous policies, placing emphasis on the role of students, whether that be as customer or consumer, with their satisfaction confirmed as a core part of the measurements; as exemplified by the 2017 National Student Survey question amendments. The proposals in the White Paper addressed ‘values’ and measures on a number of levels through the relationships between research and teaching; the place of teaching in institutions; the introduction of metrics as a valid measure; value for money and resource implications and widening participation. These values are discussed by Woodhall et al. (2014) in their critical evaluation of consumer issues in the context of higher education. In addressing student experiences and values, the authors note the variation and ‘conceptual conflict’ apparent in higher education. Their framework indicates five different ways of conceptualising customer values - Attributes; Outcomes; Value for Money; Net Value and Cheapest option - stating:

if students do occasionally demonstrate customer-like behaviour; and if – as they manifestly do - university managements construe them collectively as a source of revenue; then ‘customer’ becomes a legitimate frame of reference and analysis – and value, then, becomes an issue of shared concern (Woodhall et al, 2014, p.6).

In the continued move towards consumer concepts within higher education, the commonalities and noted complexities of impacts within reforms continue to be raised. Academic and policy debates inform current trends through the widespread dissemination of supporting literature, blogs, opinion pieces, critiques, and informed discussion (see Wonkhe;

HEA). Watson (2013, p.204) provides some conclusions for meeting the challenges raised by government higher education policy with a thought provoking note for reflection:

Survival and prosperity will once again only securely be achieved – as it has been in the past – by understanding and adapting in a framework of enduring principles.

In the next section I will discuss my own work in relation to Student as Producer and elsewhere. This work is written up as seven case studies based on specific projects which are illustrative of the impact of Student as producer to research and teaching developments within the curriculum at Lincoln.

2. Case Studies

2.1 Case Studies from Student as Producer

(i) **'Criminology in the Professions' (2010)**. This project was funded by the Centre for Sociology, Anthropology and Politics (C-SAP) the former subject centre at the HEA. It is a platform for enhancing Student as Producer at the University through the curriculum. It has resulted in a module that has been externally recognised for 'best practice' by learned societies such as the British Society of Criminology, as part of the programme award for teaching excellence in 2013. It has been a core employability module at level five at the University of Lincoln since 2010, as it is designed to bridge the gaps between academic knowledge and theory and professional practice and employability skills. Teaching and learning on this module embraces partnerships and collaboration with joint practitioner and academic lectures. Employability considerations are focused through career workshops, alumni evenings and peer reflections; with links provided by institutional services for volunteering and careers and guidance. It is supported by the Lincoln Award provided for students at the University that acts as an employability framework to support, enhance and recognise their extra-curricular activity. Through formally assessing student engagement, participation and attendance the module has been the forerunner for embedding employability within the curriculum and continues to have an impact in curriculum terms. This demonstration of effective practical implementation of Student as Producer continues to develop with new emerging opportunities for student volunteering (Jameson et al., 2010).

(ii) **Subject Interest group case study and DVD (2010)⁴**. The production of a DVD as part of the project ensures that Criminology in the Professions (CIP) has created a learning resource that implants Student as Producer into the curriculum, and beyond. It was produced by the School of Social Sciences at the University of Lincoln and Working Pictures Ltd, with funding from C-SAP to present thoughts of undergraduate Criminology students. It explores student reflections on how employability skills may be developed through their studies, including reflections from alumni whose comments are informed by their subsequent graduate employment; input was also provided by academic and careers practitioners from the University of Lincoln.

⁴ The video can be accessed at: <http://criminologyintheprofessions.blogs.lincoln.ac.uk/life-after-criminology>

(iii) Student reflections of CIP: One year on (2011). By collaboratively integrating the Student as Producer ethos into practice, this follow up evaluation enabled students to inform the development of CIP's module delivery and curriculum design for future cohorts, thus evidencing their role as the co-producers of research and knowledge. A mixed methodology approach was employed for this project, including semi structured questionnaires for recent graduates to find out information about their employment history, how they now rated their criminology degree and whether they felt it prepared them well for employment. Two further surveys were completed by students currently studying CIP. A semi structured survey was also used with employers and two focus groups were conducted with final year criminology students who had taken part in a paid work experience placement with the benefit fraud agency and staff from the careers service. The final method was a world café exercise with academic staff from the School of Social Sciences (Jameson et al., 2011).

(iv) Evaluation of the impact of Student Mentoring within a Social Sciences research methodology module (2012). This project was funded by the Fund for Educational Development (FED) a funding mechanism provided by the university to support and develop the research-engaged teaching agenda of Student as Producer. FED was accompanied by the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Scheme (UROS) that offered bursaries of up to £1000 to support collaborative working between staff and undergraduate students on research projects. This financial support was available for projects which could be either part of larger research or for one-off small scale projects, on condition they are committed by an undergraduate student working under the supervision of a member of academic staff. The impact of UROS on students was apparent in their collaborative work with academics where 'a shift in their role as a student' was reported (Neary et al., 2014, p.22).

The Student as Producer project established further grants with FED that focused on small scale evaluation projects relating to teaching and learning with funding available of up to £1500. These projects contributed to the implementation of Students as Producer as well as other curriculum developments, such as curriculum design. The pedagogic value of such funding offered academics the opportunity to create pilot projects, or small scale research, evaluating aspects of teaching and learning or reflective practice. Projects that have been funded include: Student-Engaged Subject Committee Meetings; Using the Artist in Residence Model as a Framework for Module Delivery; What factors enable or hinder students' research engaged learning in Practice Learning Opportunity 1; the School of Psychology Student Conference and my own project, the Evaluation of the impact of Student Mentoring within a Social Sciences research methodology module.

This evaluation assessed the impact of peer mentoring for learners in their first year of study through students' analysis of a student interactive blog, focus groups and a world café exercise. The role of students as co-researchers (named as 'evaluators' in this project) facilitated focus groups run on a cohort basis with level four and five students. Further co-production roles and principles were demonstrated by gaining levels of understanding and knowledge through a world café. Findings indicated that mentoring from second years for first-year students, effectively connects research with teaching. The skills of student mentors, working in collaboration with tutors, enabled a greater appreciation of teaching methods,

developed a better awareness of their own knowledge, and increased confidence for first year students. Evaluations of peer mentoring demonstrated the impact second-year mentors had as co-producers in offering support and guidance for first years on the core research methods module. Mentors demonstrated skills of confidence, communication and leadership in their role for demonstrating knowledge (Strudwick & Jameson, 2012a).

(v) The Embedding OER project (2012)⁵. This was funded through the HEA Change Academy and demonstrated a commitment to the Student as Producer ethos by concentrating on integrating Open Educational Resources (OERs) into academic teaching and learning practice. Student as Producer principles were integral to the production of an OER for the module 'Criminology in the Professions'. The project established the student's intellectual development, as a co-producer, rather than merely a consumer of knowledge, by releasing knowledge into the public domain. The resource was produced under an open licence, developing the use of technology as an 'enabler' in a resource learning process (Strudwick and Jameson 2012b).

(vi) Evaluating the dichotomies of student engagement: "Understanding the gaps" (2016). The work of Crawford et al (2015, p.14) considers the similarities between principles of Student as Producer, student engagement and partnerships. The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP) is a relationship between the National Union of Students and the Higher Education sector and provides further discourses on the variation and dimensions of student engagement, with reference to the HEA and Student as Producer⁶. Healey et al. (2014) address Student as Partners as *one* form of Student as Producer as a means to critically address challenges being presented in higher education.

My project sought to develop these insights by researching levels of student interest and participation, within student engagement in Social Sciences. Students were integral to the evaluation, taking the role as both participants (in interviews and focus groups) and also as researchers/facilitators in conducting the research. Again, this project demonstrates the commitment towards Student as Producer, substantiating the impact this form of collaborative culture can have on the student experiences. Summaries of findings indicated positive opinions on the opportunities offered by the student engagement outside of the curriculum, under the Student as Producer agenda. Core issues for students included the expansion of skills, increasing employability and enhancement of softer skills. The importance of the student voice was further highlighted as of great significance by the students who were actively engaged with these opportunities. Some barriers were identified that impeded engagement, with students noting time constraints and a lack of awareness about the opportunities. Academic colleagues identified the importance of extracurricular support offered by the Student as Producer ethos, such as partnerships, collaboration, and participation. One notable feature reported by academics was a lack of clarity about what encompasses student engagement and a possible need to manage expectations of both students and academics.

⁵ Resources, media links, guidance on reflexive practice and alumni video podcasts at: <http://criminologyintheprofessions.blogs.lincoln.ac.uk>

⁶ For more information, see <http://tsep.org.uk>

(vii) A special edition of the journal ‘Enhancing Learning in Social Sciences’ (2012)⁷. The final case study demonstrating the successful implementation and impact of Student as Producer within and beyond the University, is provided by the HEA’s publication of this journal commonly known as ELISS. In this special edition, academic papers debated and discussed pedagogic practices implemented through research and projects under Student as Producer collaborations. Six papers from staff at the University of Lincoln and eight external to the institution were published; these were accompanied by four other papers on undergraduate reflections of this approach to teaching and learning. The edition presented differential approaches to teaching and learning through case studies, innovative teaching practices and the reflections from students’ experiences. Its papers indicated the impact Student as Producer has had on teaching practice.

2.2 Meeting the challenges in higher education reforms?

The case studies above indicate some of the successful implementation of Student as Producer at Lincoln. Institutional support and ‘buy in’ has been a core element of the progression of Student as Producer and its student engagement (Neary et al., 2014). The embedding of the approach at an institutional level has demonstrably advanced student involvement and participation in both the sense of academic community and the culture of undergraduate teaching and learning. It can be said to have registered ‘...the movement away from a passive consumer, consuming knowledge...to the student as active producer of themselves as enterprising citizens’ (Jameson et al., 2012a, p.11). As a beneficiary of the implementation of this pedagogic framework and its principles at an institutional level, my role as an academic has been enabled to shape student engagement in a collaborative way. Conducting Student as Producer projects has facilitated dissemination of good practice and sharing of case studies that cross disciplinary boundaries and those of the institution itself.

There can be no doubt that higher education in the UK has been reshaped and reformed with recent government proposals (Scott, 2013). There has been a change in the relationships of students with academics and within higher education more widely, especially with the notion of consumer ‘choice’ (Jameson et al., 2012b). Student engagement (encompassing student voice, student gain and student satisfaction) now has a central place in measuring, and in “confirming” quality and standards in teaching and learning in higher education in the UK.

The most recent reform has concerned the government’s proposals set out in the White Paper (2016) ‘Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice’. It has been claimed the Bill will provide universities with reputational and financial inducements for raising teaching standards and for helping students from all backgrounds into employment or further study (BIS, 2016b). It received its Royal Assent in April 2017 thereby elevating its proposals into law through the Higher Education and Research Act 2017.

The argument remains for higher education policy to have effective consultation but in terms of how we can meet such demands, we need to be well informed of planned changes, and indeed to be aware of their consequences and implications for us on a wider level in higher education. One response to the myriad of debates that are occurring pedagogically is to

⁷ Student voices and academic reflections can be accessed at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rhep16/4/3?nav=toCList>

ensure that as academics we evidence 'what we do well' and emphasise innovation and good practice in teaching and learning projects like Student as Producer. This dissemination should be both internal and external to the institution to demonstrate values in the student voice and the extent of student engagement in its many forms.

3. Conclusion

This paper has reflected my 'journey' of working with the concept of Student as Producer as a framework to meet challenges in higher education. I have done this by providing a range of case studies that allow for a complex understanding and interpretation, plus the commonalities and differences that co-exist within the Student as Producer model.

Student as Producer can be applied as a challenge to the concept of student as consumers and the wider policy trends towards marketization that remain an on-going concern within higher education. The proposed reshaping of teaching quality and standards in higher education places student engagement and student voice as an imperative element in this process, but this is an issue which needs further research.

The relationship between Student as Producer and student engagement enables an exploration of the reshaping of core elements of engagement and participation. Interestingly, Carey's work (2013) identifies the '...scant evidence that students' choices are based on traditional consumer principles.' (p.251). This is a valuable source of reflection to "keep in mind" when designing, planning and implementing student engagement opportunities under Student as Producer.

Student as Producer has changed the relationships between students and academics by embracing core values of collaboration. Through the development of students as active participants, relationships between research and teaching are progressed. Opportunities for student engagement, Student as Partners and Student as Researchers, under Student as Producer, enhances the value of the student voice. Student as Producer, as a conceptual framework, can be continually reframed and revisited through its culture of teaching and learning.

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