Appreciative inquiry as a developmental research approach for higher education pedagogy: space for the shadow

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This article explores arguments for adopting appreciative inquiry (AI) as an action research approach that generates pedagogic development in UK and international higher education. An overview of AI considering the methodological dilemma of focussing only on positive experiences is discussed. Findings from focus group discussions in a post-1992 UK university are presented that demonstrate AI's efficacy as a developmental pedagogic research approach. This AI research was part of the wider UK retention and success project, 'What Works?', which aimed to support first year undergraduates' belonging during HE transition in order to enhance their engagement, retention and success. These focus groups explored first year undergraduates' experiences of learning, teaching, assessment and support, incorporating retention interventions in Business, Social Science and Digital Media courses. Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital and Wenger's community of practice model are applied as an analytical lens to illuminate the role of structure and agency relating to students' experiences. The findings show how AI focus groups were a way for participants to explore and discuss positive perceptions and experiences of starting university. They also enabled participants to discuss problems, solutions, and ways to enhance pedagogy and support, contributing to educational development at course, institutional and sector-wide levels. We argue that embracing the 'shadow' (Fitzgerald & Oliver, 2010) in AI is a commitment that should be shared by a variety of stakeholders in order to gain a holistic understanding of what is needed to facilitate transformative change in HE development.

Appreciative inquiry, action research, transformative change, higher education development

Introduction

This article presents an original case for adopting appreciative inquiry (AI) as an action research approach that generates transformative development in UK, and international HE

contexts (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012). Typically, AI as research method builds on participants' positive experiences as a catalyst to generate change, but as Bushe (2007) argues, AI focus groups should enable participants' discussion of positive perceptions and experiences, and problems and solutions. Johnson (2013) proposes that a nuanced approach incorporating the 'shadow' of participants' discussion of more negative experiences or suppressed feelings strengthens AI. The 'shadow' may be defined as "censored feeling and cognition, where the term censored refers to any conscious or unconscious regulation of cognition and/or emotion by self and/or others where their experience and/or expression is judged to not fit with "accepted" cultural or group norms" (Fitzgerald & Oliver, 2010). In our article, we demonstrate how AI that incorporates the 'shadow' contributed towards enhancing pedagogy and support in Digital Media, Business and Social Science courses in a UK post-92 university.

In increasingly precarious HE contexts, educational developers have adopted action research, including AI, to help generate positive change in institutional learning and teaching practices (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012). Jones (2013, p. 385) illustrates how the 'Scholarship-Teaching-Action-Research' framework supported students to sustainably contribute to 'new knowledge'. Pitkethly and Prosser (2001) adopted a longitudinal action research approach over two years as an evaluation of a success and change model. This addressed issues with first year student retention in an Australian university leading to change at an institutional level. Kadi-Hanifi et al. (2013) employed AI as an action research change model to enhance pedagogy and student engagement and success across a UK university. Kadi-Hanifi et al. (2013) describe how focus groups prompted participants' discussion of positive experiences, in order to identify good pedagogic practice that may be replicated across the institution. Our article discusses the adoption of an AI approach in a

post-1992 UK university. We contribute to knowledge by illustrating how incorporating the 'shadow' enriches AI as a developmental research approach for HE pedagogy. We draw on Bourdieu (1988) and Wenger (2009) in arguing that AI provides students from diverse backgrounds with greater voice and agency, enabling their uncensored views and feelings to be aired and negotiated, including solutions that can enable positive change. We first provide a background to the What Works? programme, followed by a discussion of AI. The next section presents our AI research and comprises: the context, key concepts, aims and methods, and findings. The Destiny Action section outlines how the findings influenced positive change at course and institutional levels. Finally, we discuss how our study corroborates and challenges previous work, contributes new knowledge, and identifies remaining challenges to address.

Background: The What Works? Programme

First year undergraduate student engagement, retention and success are a continuing concern for UK and international universities (Bowles & Brindle, 2017). The What Works? programme, led by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and Paul Hamlyn Foundation, aimed to enhance first year student retention and success in UK HE. It is not possible to generalise about what works since student engagement and retention is context specific. However, this programme emphasised generating continuing improvement in first year undergraduates' experiences built on good practice, and by addressing issues relating to student disengagement (Thomas, Hill, O' Mahony & Yorke, 2017). Alongside several UK universities, our university participated in this programme linked to a new strategic plan that set out a transformational student learning experience aimed at improving first year undergraduate continuation rates. A key objective of What Works? was to evaluate key

changes using student surveys. At our university we also adopted AI as a qualitative approach to gain a rich understanding of students' experiences of starting their degrees including retention interventions embedded in a range of courses with specific retention challenges (Bowden, Jones, Fowlie, Fyvie-Gauld & Guy, 2017). Our AI directed study aimed to identify ways in which discipline related pedagogic interventions enable student belonging, confidence and engagement. In addition, the AI would highlight challenges detrimentally impacting students' experiences, and identify possible solutions.

Our focus in this article on space for the 'shadow' in AI in the context of this study relates to what doesn't work, as well as what does, in students' experiences of starting their degrees; and how problems regarding students' disengagement, and the reasons for this, may be resolved. We emphasise that students are all individuals, and hence, research into students' experiences should consider their diverse backgrounds and identities, and how such factors may relate to their engagement and success. Students' disengagement may relate to their experiences of inequality compared to more privileged groups (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). AI can provide such students with a voice to express their opinions and suggest ways to address their disengagement.

As discussed, other HE development projects have adopted action research including AI to help identify good practice that can facilitate learning and teaching development in universities (Pitkethly & Prosser, 2010; Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012; Kadi-Hanifi et al., 2013). The research presented in this article shows how AI draws on participants' challenging as well as positive experiences in focus group discussion. Gaining a richer understanding of both positive and challenging aspects of participants' experiences, the factors that shape these experiences, and possible solutions, can better inform effective change.

Appreciative inquiry as a research methodology for change

AI traditionally involves stakeholders in organisational development through group discussion and teamwork (Ludema, Cooperrider & Barrett, 2006). In AI focus groups, a moderator poses questions that enable participants to build on positive experiences within an organisation to explore the potential for development (Fitzgerald, Murrell & Newman, 2001). AI incorporates four stages enabling participants to discuss what works well, articulate goals to achieve further success (Boyd & Bright, 2007), and decide on an action plan to achieve these goals (Fitzgerald et al., 2001). The four stages comprise: discovery, focusing on identifying the most positive aspects of experience; dream, where ideal future development is envisioned; design, where participants consolidate plans, and ways in which their ideal can be attained; and destiny, where plans are actioned outside the group discussion. AI is described as most effective when a wide variety of stakeholders are involved and when a long-term approach is taken, enabling the research to evolve and create an impact within an organisation over time (Liebling et al., 1999, p. 78). This approach has been found to give organisation-wide ownership of positive transformation (Rogers & Fraser, 2003). Hence, evaluation becomes a collaborative means of improving organisational systems and is negotiated, not imposed (Baume, 2008). Research participants are empowered by sharing ownership of their organisational development. Epistemologically, this approach is aligned to social construction theory where truth can be discovered through meaning making that is socially constructed through human interaction (Gergen, 2009).

AI practitioners typically focus on eliciting solely positive responses from participants in focus groups in order to inform HE development (He & Hutson, 2015; Kadi-Hanifi et al., 2013; Sandars & Murdoch-Eaton; 2017). However, as Rogers and Fraser (2003) argue, AI

can produce a more effective transformational impact on an organisation by articulating strengths, and by developing the capacity to face up to and address the 'shadow' of existing problems (Donovan, Meyer & Fitzgerald, 2007). As Bushe (2007) argues, the research may be biased if group discussion only focuses on participants' positive experiences and prevents any negative aspects from being mentioned. Although some AI practitioners may disagree, we argue that to ensure plausibility in AI, issues, such as the 'shadow' of students' disengagement, as well positive experiences should be discussed (Johnson, 2013). When more negative experiences are discussed they should be explored by asking participants to suggest solutions (Bushe, 2007; Rogers & Fraser, 2003). As discussed, our contribution to knowledge is informed by our research that highlights how incorporating the 'shadow' in focus groups enriches AI as a developmental research approach for HE pedagogy. We also argue that AI provides students from diverse backgrounds with greater voice and agency that can help contribute towards positive change.

First year undergraduates' experiences of starting their degrees: how AI generated pedagogic development in a UK university

Context

In 2013/14 the What Works? core team at our university identified three courses that would benefit from change to enhance student retention and success. These included Social Science, Digital Media and Business courses, which typically attract students from diverse backgrounds across age group, ethnicity, gender and socio-economic background. Interventions were introduced to enable first year students' early academic social engagement and belonging. While acknowledging all students' individuality, we argue that social

engagement and belonging in course communities of practice (COPs) can help to enhance learners' engagement, confidence and success (Thomas, 2012).

That year, all first year Business students were enrolled on a key employment and success skills module. As Thomas argues, student identity development related to employability is motivating for students (Thomas, 2012). A module intervention comprised a blended learning resource, where students reflectively wrote about their learning and achievement of milestones. Finally, they created a webpage and personal development plan. This aimed to strengthen students' belonging and engagement by developing resilience, links with their course community, personal targets, key achievements and social knowledge construction (Bowden et al., 2017).

In Social Science, an extended induction continued throughout the academic year. This comprised: pre-entry activities, student mentors, and a course website. The pre-entry activities incorporated: a course that introduced students from diverse backgrounds to HE by directing them towards academic and pastoral support, and post-clearing taster sessions. Mentors were available to support students throughout their first year. The course website aimed to encourage communication between academic staff, students and mentors; and enhance students' belonging and engagement (Bowden et al., 2017). This intervention was appropriate in Social Science, where students include those who may be mature and/or socio-economically disadvantaged. In this context, Baxter and Britton (2001, p.89) refer to Bourdieu (1988) in conceptualising how mature students often experience starting HE as a "sense of dislocation, which is often expressed in terms of a fragmentation or compartmentalisation of the self".

The Digital Media intervention intended to support students' success through an extended induction by enhancing their sense of belonging to a course COP. This aimed to

relate to the curriculum, help students reflect on their degree choice, and address mismatches between students' expectations and the course's technical aspects. Theoretically this would engage students before starting their course and strengthen their resilience and motivation. Activities included: a pre-entry 'challenge' circulated to students via email and through a course webpage; course preparation during the first week; and a group assignment to design a mobile app (Bowden et al., 2017).

Underpinning concepts of structure and agency

This article adopts two theories that provide a conceptual perspective on our findings. Bourdieu's (1988) concepts of capital and habitus help theorize ways in which first year undergraduates experience challenges in developing belonging, confidence and engagement during transition to HE. Wenger's (2009) communities of practice (COPs) model highlights ways in which first year students' learning and identities develop in relation to course communities that they participate in.

Students' experiences may vary according to age, gender, ethnicity, nationality and socio-economic background. As Rawolle and Lingard explain (2013, p. 120), Bourdieu argued that "education acted as a sorting institution that functioned to divide groups primarily through the valuing of cultural capital", and that "cultural capital was implicit in school curricula and pedagogy, and was aligned with, embodied, assumed and possessed by certain classes". Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) suggest that students who already have a sense of institutional habitus linked to cultural capital when starting university, are more likely to fit in and be engaged both socially and academically. Habitus evolves through individuals' experiences over time enabling people to act correctly in particular contexts (or fields) such as education (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). However, as Thomas (2002) argues 'privileged' students, who

may be defined as young, white and middle class, may already have developed a strong institutional habitus related to their cultural capital when starting HE that enables their sense of belonging.   In contrast, as Thomas (2002) argues, students from less 'privileged' backgrounds may lack economic and cultural capital when starting HE, and struggle to develop the necessary habitus and sense of belonging in order to be successful.

Wenger (2009) proposes that learning occurs though participating in social practices relating to communities of practice, developing identities within these communities, meaning-making and developing knowledge; and he suggests that transformative learning is learning that involves belonging to COPs. Thomas (2012) similarly argues belonging is the starting point for students' academic success and therefore universities should encourage a culture of belonging, through facilitating COPs that can support students during transition. By interpreting our findings through the lenses of Bourdieu (1988), and Wenger (2009), we will show how students may counteract inequalities in capital and habitus when starting HE; and may develop agency, learner identity development, belonging, confidence and success.

Aims and purpose

Our study aimed to investigate students' experiences of starting HE, including retention interventions, in the three disciplines described above. AI focus groups explored aspects of experience that enabled student success, by enhancing students' engagement, belonging and confidence. Following Bushe (2007), our AI also explored 'the shadow' of participants' more negative experiences, such as their experiences of disengagement. As explained previously, some first-year students may be disengaged because they may be and feel disadvantaged. By discussing negative aspects of experience in AI, participants could voice ways in which university practices may be further enhanced to better address students' needs.

Methods

We conducted focus groups with first year undergraduates in Business, Social Science and Digital Media disciplines in 2013/14 at the end of or following the first semester. We also conducted a second stage of focus groups with Social Science and Business students during Semester Two. The findings presented here focus on the first stage, which are considered relevant to the critical phase of first year student transition at the end of Semester One (Wilson et al., 2016). A summary of key Stage Two findings that support findings from Stage One are also presented. The findings from both stages informed course improvements the following year, which were again explored through AI focus groups in 2014/15 (Bowden et al., 2017).

We adopted a purposive sampling approach (Ritchie, Lewis & Elam, 2003) inviting all students to participate who were on the three courses described above. Participants "reflect particular features of groups within the sampled population" (Ritchie et al., 2003, p. 78), but were self-selecting. We sent participants email invitations and they were free to participate voluntarily. The sample was "criterion based" (Ritchie et al., 2003, p. 78) and "heterogeneous" (Ritchie et al., 2003, p. 79) in that participants in each group were from diverse backgrounds across: age, gender, ethnicity, nationality and socio-economic background. The subject specific focus groups included nine Business students, seven Social Science students and eight Digital Media students. Overall the sample comprised fourteen females and ten males whose ages ranged from eighteen to fifty-five years.

The focus groups lasted on average one hour thirty minutes and were digitally recorded. We clarified that the aim was to discuss benefits, ideals and plans; and problems that detrimentally influenced students' experiences (Bushe, 2007). When problems were discussed we encouraged participants to consider solutions. The AI comprised four stages:

discovery, dream, design and destiny enabling the process of: building on success, affirming ideals and goals, planning ahead, and putting plans into action (Ludema et al., 2001, p. 189). The first three stages were incorporated within the focus groups. Stage four, destiny, was an action stage following the focus groups. The destiny phase was a developmental responsibility shared by researchers, participants, the What Works team, managers and support staff. As discussed, AI enables participants such as students to contribute to change by voicing their opinions, facilitating a socially constructed dialogue and institutional research process.

We adopted cross-sectional content analysis, within and across focus groups (Spencer et al., 2003, p. 203), assisted by NVivo for data management. The data was coded, adopting pre coding, relating to the broad themes of belonging, engagement and confidence and course interventions; and open coding, which allowed new themes to emerge. Data was thematically categorised, interpreted and presented. This process involved triangulation in that the thematic categorisation was identified by two researchers. The research was approved through our university ethical review process; and participants signed consent forms to signal their full informed consent to participate and for the data to be subsequently analysed and reported. We informed participants that they were free to withdraw from the research at any time; their identities are and remain anonymised; and the data remains confidential and stored securely in accordance with data protection legislation. Data was transcribed by an external transcription agency.

Findings: How AI can generate change in HE development

Phase 1: Discovery

As explained, the AI discovery phase initially enables participants to focus on positive aspects of experience (Ludema et al., 2006). Hence, the questions sought to elicit beneficial aspects of students' experiences, and afterwards challenges were also discussed. Across disciplines, many participants described how the interventions helped them develop belonging, greater confidence, engagement, and agency. For instance, in Digital Media, most participants who engaged in the extended induction, described how they had developed a sense of belonging to a peer community. This relates back to Thomas' (2013) argument linking belonging and engagement and Wenger's (2009) COP conceptual framework. Conceptually, students' development of belonging also relates to their evolving habitus and strengthened social capital (Bourdieu, 1988).

> *It makes you talk to others, so you have other options to make friends with people, which is good. If you're shy and you're doing group work, you've got to get on with it. Plus, it's quite a good topic as well designing an app.*
> *(Participant 5, Digital Media)*

Through social media, most participants across disciplines, described how they shared ideas and resources that provided mutual learning support. In Digital Media most participants described how they had formed an online COP, through Facebook and online course components. Online communication with peers and lecturers was described as fast and convenient. As Thomas (2002) argues with reference to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), such membership of course COPs can enable students to develop a sense of belonging linked to evolving habitus, contributing to their cultural capital related to increased confidence. Across disciplines, participants also described the engaging nature of practical and real-life learning. In Digital Media, for instance, many participants were enthusiastic about the course's technical and creative aspects, which enhanced their employability skills.

With employers based in mind, all the website design, I would never have done that off

my own back, but now I can code my own website.

(Participant 9, Digital Media)

Here, website design is an example of practical learning that increased participants' confidence and future employability within their industry. Developing such professional skills contributed to students' growing confidence. It may be argued that designing a website relates to students' evolving habitus related to their professional identity. Developing employability skills also evidenced participants' growing sense of independence. The findings described in this section help illuminate how the discovery stage gave student participants' voice in articulating what was working well.

The Discovery Phase Shadow

Across all three disciplines, when discussing challenges and problems towards the end of the discovery phase, some participants agreed that some pre-entry activities were not relevant to their academic learning and this was demotivating. The following quote from a Social Science student evidences their opinion that pre-entry activities relating to pastoral support were excessive in addition to their main degree.

We haven't got that much time to waste on this, we don't want those additional bits, what

we want is the lectures, we can seek out the other stuff if we need it.

(Participant 4, Applied Social Science)

In Business, participants frequently mentioned that they found the online resource embedded in the intervention insufficiently challenging. For instance, the first milestone relating to settling in was described as unrelated to academic work and patronising.

The other thing I thought was that this was patronising, it's not challenging enough. It's just like kind of like Freshers' Fair. It's like a year 8 kind of thing. We don't need to be overlooked in that way. We're big people. We could examine it ourselves without being told to.
(Participant 9, Business Management)

Although this part of the intervention aimed to help students develop a sense of belonging, this wasn't the purpose of university for some students. This point links to wider HE debates concerning universities' purpose. As Collini (2012) argues, high tuition fees have resulted in discourses of students as consumers and universities as businesses catering for students' needs, which may result in students being insufficiently challenged.

Another facet that many participants struggled with across disciplines was group work, which is linked to an additional current HE discourse relating to student employability. The requirement for students to be employable drives universities to train students to develop team skills. Although many participants discussed the beneficial aspects of group work, some found it frustrating.

When I was working in the App project, it felt really unjust, almost being graded like lots of people being given the same grade, but like one person is working in the group.
(Participant 4, Digital Media)

This participant expressed their lack of agency and indignation regarding collective rather than individual grading for a group assignment. The broad aim of group work is to encourage and develop students' employability, but this example highlights how students are individual learners, and how group assignments may be demotivating in not acknowledging their individual contributions.

In Social Science, several participants were mature students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Some of these students discussed transition challenges for which they were receiving insufficient support. For instance, some participants had returned to HE as mature students having left education for several years, and they were struggling with academic writing.

One of my criticisms on my practice essay that I got back just recently was that my style might have been acceptable for GCSE, but it's not acceptable now. Yeah, so really, I clearly am stuck in what I was taught, but if I'm not taught another way, how am I supposed to change what I'm trying to say?
(Participant 7, Social Science)

This quote reflects many participants' frustrations who needed more support with academic writing and were demotivated by overly critical feedback, which did not consider their individual needs. This finding is supported by Reay (2002), who found that mature students who struggle with transition into HE, have often experienced a disrupted education. The following quote also highlights how some participants were concerned about additional costs associated with their course.

We're going to be having to pay this off for quite a while. And then it's you get to the library and you have to go and top up if you're running low on money; it's an extra cost continuously each week to have to photocopy the reading material and print it off, and then print off the lecture notes as well, and I just think it's the basic things for £9,000 we should be given the lecture notes at least.
(Participant 7, Social Science)

In this context, our findings are supported by Reay (2002), who suggest that poverty may be a significant contributing factor in relation to mature student disengagement and non-completion.

Phases Two and Three: Dream and Design

The AI Dream phase enables participants to discuss ideal future development based on their experience. Design consolidates dream and discovery where participants plan how to achieve their ideals (Ludema et al., 2006). In our study, at the beginning of the dream phase we asked participants what their ideal extended induction would include, and how problems they discussed could be addressed. In the design phase participants worked collectively to consolidate their ideas on flip charts, which they then articulated at the end of the discussion. These phases helped to empower students to participate in the process of enhancing their courses as change agents.

In Business, most participants explored how the online resource could potentially help them articulate goals and reflect on achievements. Recording achievements would empower their independence and clarify their academic journey stages. Arguably, this relates to students' growing awareness of how the resource could enable ownership of their learning. To resolve the issues previously mentioned participants suggested that the resource should fully relate to academic work, incorporate links to external businesses and be more accessible.

> *Because academically, we're a university for academic purposes, main purpose. Socially, it's just kind of a bonus to it. So, I think… if it is part of our academic learning to do the milestones, then yes, I think we should kind of focus on that more.*
> *(Participant 5, Business)*

This is an example of how students' voices in AI can enable change, which took effect in 2014/15 and will be elaborated in the following section. Here, participants mostly agreed that relating the resource to academic work, would better motivate students during transition into HE. Following Bourdieu (1988), improving the resource's accessibility may be argued to enhance students' belonging, linked to their evolving habitus, and links to the business world may contribute to their cultural and social capital.

In Social Science, most participants suggested that pre-printed hand-outs and reading materials could be provided by all lecturers, which might affect some students' decisions to stay on the course. There was also a consensus that: more library books on reading lists should be available; and academic writing support sessions early in semester one would help increase students' confidence.

Post code funding doesn't take into account where you live. If you live in a nice area and live in a really dilapidated accommodation, then you're not entitled to the funding. That doesn't really work for household expenditure. It would be really handy to get the lecture notes and readers like they used to. An hour essay writing session would be amazing. (Participant 6, Social Science)

Although post-code funding aimed to support economically disadvantaged students, this quote shows that this initiative did not always meet the needs of such students living in 'nice' areas. This exemplifies how students can experience inequality, evidencing their lack of cultural, linked to economic capital, in HE contexts, which can affect their motivation. Some Social Science participants were considering giving up their course because of additional printing costs. The dream phase helped empower and provide these students with agency to participate in the developmental aspect of this research to enable change.

Summary of Stage Two Key Findings

As the first year progressed, findings from stage two focus groups showed that participants continued to develop their learner identities, and sense of belonging, in relation to their course communities. In this context, their sense of belonging to COPs that supported their learning strengthened, enhancing their confidence and engagement, for example through course group activities and social media, such as Facebook. Participants' confidence also increased linked to their achievements in coursework, group assignments, website designs, presentations and exams. In addition, participants discussed how learning experiences related to employability were engaging. Conceptually, we argue that participants' growing sense of belonging, confidence, engagement and achievement may contribute to their evolving institutional habitus, and growing social, cultural and academic capital (Bourdieu, 1988). These findings also relate to Wenger's (2009) COP model where students' social participation involving identity, community, practice and meaning making may enhance their sense of belonging and engagement. However, in terms of the 'shadow' in Stage Two focus groups, while participants discussed improvements in their course experiences since Semester One, difficulties discussed in stage one focus groups continued to be, and in some cases were increasingly frustrating for participants; and their suggestions for improvements to courses and interventions confirmed those already described in relation to stage one.

Destiny Action Phase

As discussed, the purpose of the destiny phase is to enable change beyond the group discussion as a result of plans identified by participants (Ludema et al., 2006). This phase took place as a result of the findings. Following Liebling et al., (1999) in our research, 'destiny' was a responsibility shared by project stakeholders in terms of impact on change at

course and institutional level. Participants were invited to contribute to findings and add further suggestions, so that their voices could enable change. With agreement from the What Works? team, course leaders took the findings into account and changed the interventions and other aspects of their courses in 2014/15.

In Business, the blended learning intervention was simplified, related more fully to academic work and rewarded students' engagement through successfully producing a publishable webpage. Students' employability was emphasised further since the webpage was made available to potential employers. In Digital Media pre-entry activities were reviewed to be more relevant to the course. The first week included an app design workshop to help encourage students to bond with their peer community and gain confidence by being prepared from the beginning of semester one. The actual app design followed during semester one. Group work issues were more closely monitored, and team skills were promoted by tutors. Students' understanding of future employability in the media industry was emphasised. In Social Science greater support was provided for students' academic skills development, including academic writing. There was a more formal mentoring scheme throughout the academic year, which aimed to support students more effectively and further enhance their belonging, engagement, confidence and success. In addition, resource provision for students was improved, including pre-printed handouts for all modules (Bowden et al., 2017).

Institutional managers leading What Works? at the university supported this process, collated information from course leaders and researchers and encouraged dissemination within the institution, and externally through conference presentations and publications. The AI helped to generate positive educational change at an institutional and sector-wide level by sharing good practice and suggestions for further development, and the student voice was at the heart of this. The 2014/15 What Works? research in our institution suggests that the

course changes described above helped to enhance students' experiences across the three disciplines. In this context, survey respondents' (n =224) average scores for belonging, engagement and self-confidence in November 2014/15 were higher than those from the cohort in the November 2013/14 survey. Although there is no statistical proof of cause and effect, this data supports our argument that that our AI was effective in generating positive HE development (Bowden et al., 2017).

Discussion

Discussing challenging experiences in AI has been described as embracing the 'shadow', which exists at varied levels (Johnson, 2013). Following Clarke and Newman (1997), we argue that at HE macro, meso and individual levels, this shadow may be represented by discourses of competition that characterise a period of turbulence driven by threat. Arguably, such discourses increasingly affect organisations such as universities and individuals such as students. Aspects of the HE sector-wide and institutional 'shadows', which our findings help to highlight, are the key challenges relating to student inequality and disengagement that are still unaddressed. In universities, many students remain disengaged and continue to give up degrees. From a Bourdieusian perspective, our research suggests how inequality may play a contributory role in this 'shadow'; since students from diverse backgrounds may accrue unequal cultural, economic and educational capital throughout their lives, which may influence their institutional habitus when they start university, and their future success (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

However, our findings suggest that through participating and belonging to COPs promoted by course interventions (Wenger 2009) many participants became more confident and engaged across the three disciplines. Supported by Thomas' (2002) Bourdieusian

analysis, our findings demonstrate how belonging to course communities and gaining experience of real-life and practical learning, can enable students to develop employability skills and professional identities, linked to a stronger sense of institutional habitus, and increased social and cultural capital.

Nevertheless, while our findings showed that many participants were engaged by course interventions, some remained evidently demotivated. In this context, some students were experiencing frustrating transitions into HE, struggling to belong, be engaged and be confident. For instance, some mature student returners to HE described academic and financial challenges, while juggling study alongside caring responsibilities. Drawing on Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), our findings are supported by Reay et al. (2002), who found that mature students who have experienced a disrupted education and who are affected by poverty, may be more likely to be disengaged and give up their courses.

As Donovan et al. (2007, p. 4) suggest, an emotional tension can result from allowing ideals and problems to coexist in AI focus groups, which can create a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and be more likely to promote "transformative learning and change, both individually and collectively". In our research, AI helped to give students from diverse backgrounds, including those who are disadvantaged, greater voice and agency by participating in enabling change that could enhance their experiences and those of future students. As Fitzgerald et al. (2010, p. 230) argue, "AI cases that explore unintended, undesired consequences and incorporate pluralistic perspectives and voices, including those that the authors might perceive as negative or critical" can be beneficial when working with diverse groups, creating opportunities for dialogue and exploration, and opportunities to probe into richness and complexities. In contrast, if research does not acknowledge students'

repressed feelings, or challenging experiences, this may contribute to their increased attrition and demotivation.

In our research, AI was effective in contributing to enhancing pedagogy and support practice; and to developing students' belonging, confidence, engagement and success at course, institutional and, at HE sector-wide levels (through external dissemination). In this context, combining the notion of 'the shadow' with theoretical concepts that underpin this research enriches our understanding of the challenging experiences that students faced. We argue that it is possible to counteract destabilising discourses, such as competition, student inequality and disengagement in HE, by finding ways to extend the lessons learnt regarding good practice from this AI and other similar studies. Such lessons learnt can then contribute to further positive and sustainable change at institutional and sector-wide levels.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that AI is an effective action research approach that builds on positive experience, the envisioning of ideals, the articulation of plans, and a consequent development phase. We have argued why it is crucial that AI should allow participants to discuss problems, as well as successes within the group discussion context. Providing space for the 'shadow' in AI contributes to a balanced research picture and provides a stimulus for suggestions enabling positive change. Our research demonstrates the efficacy of AI as an HE development research methodology, which allows space for students' diverse voices to be heard; and which enables different stakeholders to contribute to change. We present a case for adopting AI that incorporates space for 'the shadow' in UK and international HE

educational development as a transformative force, which can to help enable student

belonging, engagement and success, and in which the student voice can play a central role.

Acknowledgements

Funding

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