'An online survey is less personal whereas I actually sat with the lecturer and it felt like you actually cared about what I am saying': A pedagogy-oriented action research to improve student engagement in criminology

SCHOLARONE™
Manuscripts

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

'An online survey is less personal whereas I actually sat with the lecturer and it felt like you actually cared about what I am saying': A pedagogy-oriented action research to improve student engagement in criminology

Student engagement plays a central role in teaching and learning, given its impact on students' retention and ability to actively participate in the learning process. This study evaluates the impact of an Interactive Action-Oriented Learning (IAOL) and teaching style on improving students' engagement in the Explaining Punishment module in a UK university by adopting McNiff's model of action research. Furthermore, it aims to fill a gap in the existing literature regarding the paucity of research on improving student engagement within the Criminology and Criminal Justice discipline. Two focus group discussions, each comprising eight students, were conducted. Additional data were collated from module evaluation, end terms results, and peer-feedback. Based on the end-term results, it was found that the inclusion of the IAOL contents and teaching style improved student engagement and student performance. Hence, this study suggests a model that provides practical outcomes that inform best practices in teaching and learning.

Keywords: action research; criminology; criminal justice; student engagement; McNiff; pedagogy

Introduction

In the changing landscape of higher education (HE), student engagement has become central to the teaching and learning process for students. The socio-economic and dynamic political context of the UK's HE system has spurred a burgeoning focus on consumer-influenced teaching adapted to suit the needs of students. The Government White Paper which focuses on 'Students at the Heart of the System' promotes choices that are strongly influenced by the price and quality of student experiences as the main drivers in shaping HE provision (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2011).

1

In fact, this view is echoed in the policy and pedagogical literatures highlighting the fact that the introduction of fees for students will trigger a stronger consumerist mindset in students who will nurture perceived notions of 'value for money' and a relatively high expectation for quality education (Docherty 2011). The implications of this view are reinforced by the necessity for HE providers and their staff to engage more intensively with students who are the direct consumers of their educational services.

From a pedagogical standpoint, academicians from many disciplines have become increasingly aware of the need to enhance students' engagement from a subject-based context-specific position (Jidong 2019; Albers 2007; Slunt and Giancarlo 2004). Some disciplines increasingly appear to have explored the improvement of student engagement and learning more deeply than other disciplines. The academic discipline of Criminology and Criminal Justice highlights a paucity of in-depth exploration into this aspect of research (Stack 2007). Instructors of Criminology and Criminal Justice acknowledge the adoption of technological innovations to enhance interactive and engaging teaching methods (Davis et al. 2014). However, their use has mainly focused on service learning, the use of internships, and experiential learning (Davis et al. 2014). The adoption of team-based learning also represents a technique that have been recognised in this discipline. However, reduced resources and increased class sizes limit the frequent use of this technique (Stamatel et al. 2013). The use of action research, which engages students in the active action inquiry process and improvement of engagement, seems to be lacking.

Bradford, Mowder and Bohte (2016) argue that although many instructors may be employing innovative teaching techniques, they are limited by their non-assessment in a research context or the lack of publication regarding the approaches they adopted. It is against this backdrop that this study intends to contribute to the growing body of literature on the improvement of student engagement as well as pave the way for further

2

pedagogical research, specifically through the adoption of the Jean McNiff model of action research in the discipline of Criminology and Criminal Justice.

Pedagogical research is mainly aimed at identifying the best practices that improve learning outcomes of students (Haggis 2009). This entails a definition of the outcomes and the adoption of techniques to empirically assess their impact on those outcomes. The growing use of student-centred learning approaches has led to the emergence of various techniques which include those addressed in the current research: interactive action-oriented learning (IAOL) and teaching content. Briefly defined, the highlighted pedagogical techniques employed facilitated group-work, and an interactive and integrative mode of teaching and learning in the classroom which involves designing the teaching content and course delivery and assessment and improvement of the channel of communication between the lecturer and the students.

As previously mentioned, the learning outcomes that the proposed techniques hope to impact are also worth defining. An increase in students' course grades or improve performance in examinations represent frequently used measures (Haggis 2009); however, other modes include student engagement and other subjective and objective measures of learning (Bradford, Mowder and Bohte 2016). The rationale for the present research was informed by the observation that the average student of Criminology and Criminal Justice disliked the 'Explaining Punishment' (CRI3023-N) module owing to the theoretical and philosophical underpinning often construed as boring; this impacted students performance and engagement. This observation is empirically tied to the concept that from a general perspective, students are mostly apathetic towards the traditional methods of learning (Stamatel et al. 2013). This research seeks to explore and report the findings concerning a single research question: Is the adoption of Jean McNiff model of action research alongside IAOL and teaching contents effective in improving student

engagement?

Background

Student engagement has increasingly formed the focus of attention amongst teachers and classroom practitioners with the aim of enhancing teaching and learning across the HE sector. The importance of student engagement is delineated in the plethora of studies that have established the link between the involvement of students in a set of purposive educational activities, and the positive outcomes of student development and success, including social engagement, satisfaction, and academic achievement (Astin 1984; Chickering and Gamson 1987; Kuh et al. 2005; Wigfield and Eccles 2020). As Kuh (2003) argues, where students study and what they bring to such HE institutions play a limited role in their development and success compared to what they specifically engage in during their time as students. Although, Kuh's (2003) postulations are almost two decades old, they appear to be very relevant to the defining chances of success, reflecting the need for enhanced student engagement in learning and teaching today.

Diverse definitions exist about the meaning of student engagement. These span the extent to which students are engaged in activities (Krause and Coates 2008) to the quality of effort students themselves devote to educational activities and institutional involvement in improving engagement (Kuh 2009). However, as Coates (2007, 12) notes, engagement entails 'a broad construct intended to encompass salient academic as well as certain non-academic aspects of the student experience', including

- collaborative and active learning

- involvement in challenging academic activities

- formative communication with academic staff

- participation in enriching educational experiences

- feeling legitimate and supported by the learning communities of the university.

4

This definition is particularly useful particularly in contextualising student engagement within the Criminology and Criminal Justice disciplines and in enhancing a student-centred approach to improve teaching and learning through action research. Student-Centred Learning (SCL) highlights the need for students to play a more active role in directing their own learning (Judi and Sahari 2013). Oblinger and Maruyama (1996) argue the importance of developing the students' ability to seek learning resources available to them actively, while the instructor employs and facilitates pedagogical methods that encourage the use of the identified resources. The use of SCL often relies on methods such as dedicated group structured assignments and cooperative learning (Felder and Brent, 1996). Building on these foundations, the IAOL and teaching interventions came to rely on a mixture of group-work learning, writing exercises and the inclusion of educative video contents from real-life case studies to enhance student engagement. Studies have shown that the use of approaches including group-work prove to be effective as it is recognised that students who work as part of a group or team tend to outperform students who work individually (Nicoll-Senft 2009; Jafari 2014).

To achieve the aim of improving student engagement, this research project also adopted action research, specifically the Jean McNiff (2016; 2017) model, as an approach for enhancing engagement. McNiff (2016) argues that action research encompasses a way of investigating and evaluating what works and how to improve current teaching practices. According to McNiff and Whitehead (2011, 7), action research also serves as a means in which one produces an account of practice which shows '(1) how they are trying to improve what they are doing, which involves first thinking about and learning how to do it better; and (2) how they try to influence others to do the same thing. These accounts stand as their own practical theories of practice, from which others can learn.'

Action research encompasses a liberating, distinctive and powerful form of professional enquiry as it allows practitioners, including instructors, to investigate their practices as they seek a direction that highlights their educational values. It allows inquirers to decide on what to do to improve their practice in negotiation with others. As McNiff and Whitehead (2011, 8) add, action research allows practitioners to investigate and 'put their stories of learning into the public domain', and therefore, one's 'story can add to this collection and strengthen it.' In essence, a major and compelling reason for adopting action research is to investigate and describe the process of inquiry into addressing the impact of the adoption of McNiff model of action research on improving student engagement in a discipline where there seems to be a paucity in the use of action research.

Action research has been particularly useful in improving pedagogy. There is no doubt that implementing evidence-based practice could help improve teaching, learning, and the engagement of students in the context of HE. This is because action research arguably possesses the potential to generate new and practical knowledge by collaborating with the students as stakeholders in developing learning materials and ensuring effective content delivery that foster engagement (Jidong 2019). Waterman et al. (2001, 11) define action research as:

> A period of inquiry which describes, interprets and explains
>
> social situations while executing a change intervention aimed at
>
> improvement and involvement. It is problem-focused, context
>
> specific and future oriented. Action research is a group activity
>
> with an explicit critical value basis and is founded on a
>
> partnership between action researchers and participants, all of
>
> whom are involved in the change process.

As a process, action research enables teaching staff in their respective disciplines to systematically change their approach to teaching while also improving student performance by facilitating an increasing in their learning and engagement with teaching material (Biggs 2003). As Biggs (2003, 254) argues, action research is a 'trial and re-try cycle', that is, 'you try something, see if it works, then try again with a slight variation.' The importance of action research is reflected more in teaching strategies, which might positively impact students' learning strategies.

Existing literature suggests that students' learning strategies are correlated with their perceptions of the teaching and learning environment created (Ramsden 2003). Ramsden and Entwistle (1981) elaborate on the relationship between student perceptions of an academically heavy workload and the use of a surface approach to learning. Eley (1992) found in his study that to cope with set tasks when the course suggests formal achievement, surface learning approaches are more likely to be employed by students alongside deep approaches to understand the key principles and practices of subjects.

Thus, there is a need to engage students in the co-creative design of intervention to improve active learning and engagement through the joint design of solution to the problem that directly affects them. The involvement of students in in this process is particularly beneficial to students' feelings of competence, relatedness, and being part of a process that addresses their needs, all of which are fundamental to human motivation, psychological well-being (Ryan and Deci 2000), and educational success (Mitra 2004).

In addition, there is the need for an enhanced pedagogical approach to be adopted to engage students in learning Explaining Punishment. As such, the quality of the methods aimed at students' learning needs to include techniques that actively engage the students while also encouraging in-depth learning (Albrecht and Sack 2000). In fact, Barr and

Tagg (1995) advocate the need to adopt a shift from the traditionally accepted form of university instruction to a more student-centred approach to teaching and learning.

The benefit accrued to students as active learners cannot be underestimated given the advantage it has on them to achieve more in-depth learning and also interact with peers whilst also building a sense of community within the course (Smith et al. 2005). To ensure a desired level of engagement and interaction among students, there is a need to redesign how CRI3023-N is delivered and taught to reflect a student-centred approach. This approach is also supported by Adler and Isaacs (1982) who argue that genuine learning is meant to be active and encompass a delivery process which places the student as the agent and not the facilitator. Jidong (2019, 345) further argues that 'engaging students as active partners in their own learning is instrumental to active learning and students' engagement.' As Chickering and Gamson (1987) note, it is important for students to talk about their learning as a basis for improvement and engagement.

Literature review suggests the importance of adopting a student-centred, interactive and collaborative pedagogy that enriches students' learning experiences. The action research reports the integration of student-informed Interactive Action-Oriented Learning (IAOL) content and teaching style as a means of engaging students in CRI3023-N. The research anticipates delivering a better understanding of the context within which action research is employed in order to improve students' engagement and enhance teaching and learning experiences.

Methodology and Techniques for Data Collection

This study adopted an action research approach from McNiff's (2016; 2017) theoretical model. McNiff (2016; 2017) highlights an action research process that involves a systematic approach. This was adopted to facilitate a mode of classroom inquiry in which

8

researchers can resolve social issues affecting their lives to achieve a change (McNiff 2016; Lewin 1946; Ronen 2020).

Contents of two focus group discussions, students' feedback from module evaluation, peer observation, and course grades were used to examine and improve teaching content and the quality of teaching sessions, and monitor its impact on increasing student engagement. The use of action research as the method of inquiry enabled a detailed study which allowed for a problem to be diagnosed, an intervention designed and implemented, and its impact in causing a change evaluated (McNiff 2016). An action research methodology was utilised because it enabled not only a clear diagnosis of areas for improvement but allowed for the depiction of teaching innovations that allows the incorporation of the ability to reflect during the course of the entire process (Riding, Fowell and Levy 1995).

In a typical process of action research, each cycle is informed and improved upon by the activities undertaken in the previous cycles (Stringer 2004). An action research approach, therefore, entails a systematic and cyclic spiral of activities as represented in the Jean McNiff model (2016). McNiff (2016; 2017) identified eight cycles of research activities including the review of current practice, identification of an aspect in need of investigation, the imagination of a way forward, implementation of the proposed intervention, stock-taking of what happens, modification of intervention(s) in light of what is found whilst also continuing to try another option if a previous round of intervention does not seems to be working, monitor actions, and review and evaluate the modified action. This process informed the action research reported in this study which provided a theoretical contribution by describing how the research was conducted alongside the result derived from the process.

Techniques for data gathering

Action research as an approach provides a convenient platform for an investigation into learning scenarios within an educational setting given its adoption of a holistic approach using evidence from multiple sources (Smith, Whipp, and Willmott 1988; Yin 1994). This study utilised semi-structured focus group interviews, module evaluation and results (Yin 1994) to ensure the increased contextual validity of the study (McKinnon 1989; Patton 1987). The triangulation of the methods and sources ensured the results were balanced, broadly based and grounded in the perceptions of students of CRI3023-N stakeholders (Winter 1989).

Students of CRI3023-N participated in the two focus group interviews comprising eight students each to enable a rich flow of in-depth information from the students' perspective to be obtained (Strauss and Corbin 1990). A multiple respondent approach was used as the form of data collection to reduce the impact of any single individual's as being treated as representing the situation of the class and to limit the likelihood of a distorted approach in reconstructing events (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Moreover, before data collection, ethical approval was sought and approved by the Instructor's university Research Ethics Committee. All participants in the focus groups were given a written consent form and briefed of the purpose of the study before they were asked to sign if they wished to participate. Participation was purely voluntary and devoid of monetary payments.

It is worth acknowledging that the data have been subject to thematic analysis and interpretation through the values, assumptions and judgement I held; the product of which may differ from others perspectives and interpretations. Notwithstanding this fact, the internal validity of the project was enhanced by the consistent repetition of the action research cycle as denoted in McNiff's (2016; 2017) model of action research.

Results

The main aims of the result section are to describe the essence, objectives, and mode of delivery of CRI3023-N. This is followed by a description of activities that occurred in each stage of the research, design, and implementation of the interventions followed by an evaluation of the process. Each cycle of the action research further includes my detailed reflection of the process; a summary of the findings; and the relation of lessons learnt to the students' perspective and learning in order to further improve their engagement.

The Module

The Explaining Punishment module is taught in the third year of Criminology degree at the University I teach situated in the United Kingdom. The course is offered to students studying Criminology, Criminology with Psychology, and Criminology with Law degrees. The main aims of the module are to enable students to develop a critical understanding of the relationship between economic, political, and ideological changes in society and the institutions of punishment. This is designed to enable students to involve in a comprehensive discussion of Marxist, functionalist, institutionalist, and postmodernist approaches to the subject matter. Thus, this module offers ample opportunity for students to apply and critically evaluate the explanatory potential of such approaches with respect to specific features and functions of the modern penal system.

The course is run through a single semester commencing in September in each academic year. Approximately 59 students, including male and female and mature students were enrolled in the course. The course also comprised a 2-hour weekly lecture and a 2-hour seminar divided into three groups of 20 students in each seminar. The lectures and seminars were delivered in the university I teach located in the Town Centre of Middlesbrough, which once used to be an industrialist town. The university is situated

11

in an area that is socially and economically deprived. The university has a diverse range of students comprising fulltime workers, students who are the first from their respective families to go to university, international students and students from within the region. Data from the two focus groups were collated from approximately 16 students comprising eight students each of which eight were females while the other eight were males.

Identification of the problem

McNiff (2016;2017) described this stage as an important aspect where the issue for improvement is identified, recorded, and analysed. Anecdotal evidence from reduced student attendance and disengagement suggests that the key problem with modules such as CRI3023-N, was the perceived lack of engagement with the module partly owing to its historical perspective that draws on the works of Durkheim, Max Weber, Michel Foucault, and Karl Marx. These problems are central to engagement, given the lack of interest in learning these perspectives among students. Focus group discussions were used to elicit students' views on questions such as what factors limit engagement? From the Explaining Punishment (CRI3023-N) focus groups discussions conducted, four common themes emerged including information overload, repetitive approach of the module as a sub-component of the programme, indifference towards students' background as a requisite for engagement, and the use of virtual learning environment (VLE) to enhance learning.

Information overload

Teaching to cover curriculum and content has often been a central aspect of teaching and learning. Such importance is underscored by the perceived role of 'value for money' which has often dominated the contemporary HE landscape. A common theme that emerged from the data was a sense that 'information overload' constituted one of the main barriers to engagement. Given the design of the module, which drew on lots of richly

12

detailed historical perspectives, students expressed views which seems to suggest a negative aspect of such in their learning and active engagement. For instance, one of the level six participants commented that:

> I thought every now and then there is a bit too much information.
>
> Sometimes, especially now like it is just easy to switch off.
>
> Obviously, when you are in a big room full of people, so it is just
>
> when you are finding something hard and you do not get
>
> something it is easier to just switch off than actually trying to
>
> understand it.

Here, information overload is seen to pose a challenge that inhibits the student's learning. In addition, the method of delivery, especially within the context of a large class, is perceived as central to improving engagement. A possible explanation for this is given the students perceived difficulty in engaging in a large lecture and demystifying the essence of the lecture. This, thus, brings to the fore how teaching to cover the content and curriculum might have an impact on the students' learning.

Perceived repetitive approach of the module as a sub-component of the programme

A key theme that also emerged was the perceived repetitive approach of the module, which is viewed from a less positive perspective. Talking about this, a participant said, 'I think the topic is a bit dry and that is why most people do not like it. So, I think is all about Durkheim that you have kind of learn about for the entire time of the year.' This perceived sense of repetition which resonates in their perceptions was aptly noted by another level six participant who said the following:

> I think, not just for this specific module but the entire programme
>
> where you do like a module like in the first year that is very
>
> similar in third year. […] You are basically like learning the same

13

> stuff. […] you might actually learn it on a basic level in the first
>
> year and a deeper level in third year, but you are already feeling
>
> like you know it. It can then get repetitive.

Here, the positive attribute of having a foundational background to a complex sociological account of punishment is considered detrimental to engagement as it gives students a sense of learning which does not challenge their thinking. Prior knowledge, even if at an elementary level, is construed as being equal to in-depth knowledge. This approach, which builds on previous knowledge, is construed as being problematic from the student's perspective.

Indifference towards students' background as a requisite for engagement

A common pattern that emerged in the dataset was the perceived importance of the lecturer's awareness of the students' backgrounds as a central tenet for engagement. This importance was construed from the vantage point of how modules are and impact students' engagement. One of the students, while elucidating on how teachers' indifference towards students' background impact their learning, said:

> I think it is just that people do not understand that we are not at
>
> the PhD level and Masters level and when they discuss things and
>
> touch upon a complex term like this is how it is, it may tip of
>
> someone and as a consequence you kind of zone out [disengage].
>
> And when you do not understand it, they are almost like not
>
> condescending towards your understanding. Everyone does not
>
> learn at the same level.

This perspective on the impact of the complex issues on limited engagement is central. Such a perspective is particularly interesting given the nature of the module which draws on the complex sociological argument for understanding punishment. A notable example

14

includes Weber's *verstehen* and Durkheim's mechanical and organic solidarity; all of these have been perceived by the students as complex terms in the module. Designing a teaching style that embraces awareness of these complexities and the challenges it poses on the students' learning seems crucial in fostering engagement.

A notable point that could also be gleaned from the extract is the context of 'responsibility'. The impact of this is delineated in how students felt an easy route might be to disengage as opposed to asking questions for clarity. Hence, suggesting a teaching delivery and design that accommodate the needs of learners with diverse levels of understanding by creating the opportunity for anonymous questions.

VLE to enhance learning and improve channel of communication

A final theme that emerged from the discussions was the perceived inclusion of VLE as a means of enhancing engagement. This was mostly construed from perspectives such as the inclusion of technology-enhanced learning software as a means of improving engagement and communication. Talking about this, a participant said: 'I think communication outside like in lectures and seminars is a big thing and an online channel, beside the traditional email, could help enhance student learning'. Here, this form of learning environment is given considerable importance for meeting the needs of diverse learners.

Imagination of a solution to the problem

Given the nature of the problems identified, I consider how these may be tackled in the context of the traditional model which led to the conclusion that such a procedure may not serve as a useful strategy to improve and solve practical problems as not just an independently thinking teacher but also one who aims to adopt a student-centred approach for addressing the issue. This led to the formulation of the questions as needs.

15

To solve this issue, students were asked to co-engage and design solutions for the challenges identified. This was done through the focus group discussion where students were asked what possible solutions are feasible to solve the identified issues. After considering the issues affecting their engagement, the students discussed strategies for improving the same. In this light, the tutor ensured the participation of students as co-researchers in designing interventions that could meet their needs. Students suggested redesigning of teaching content and delivery to improve their ability to address the assessment task; they also suggested improving channel of communications through online media platforms to address issues of limited communication.

Their involvement was beneficial in that it helped enhance the effectiveness of the intervention through a tailored-made solution (Proctor et al. 2011) and its student-centred nature (Levin, 2000). However, some of the difficulties and dilemmas inherent in the development process involved the inability to discard the perceived repetition of the first-year module, which introduced students to sociological theories, as this was beyond the tutor's control.

Nevertheless, students' involvement allowed the tutor to better understand the factors that limited their engagement. The student-led communication about practical solutions to the problem, including an improved channel of communication, laid the groundwork for its implementation through the collective design of the IAOL interventions that met their needs.

I adopted an active teaching philosophy which encompassed an IAOL content and teaching style. In this light, the IAOL intervention was seen as an episode within the action research process, which is essential to the professional development necessary for improving practice and generating knowledge for students in the course of the actions

16

devised. Thus, IAOL incorporated the earlier suggestions of the students and this enabled

students to be engaged in an interactive and integrative classroom environment (Ramsden

2003; Biggs 2003). An active classroom involves the integration of various means of

learning to promote engagement as opposed to the traditional context of students

passively listening to the lecture delivered by teaching staff (Paulson and Faust 2003).

This approach was designed as an intervention by incorporating three key facets informed

by the students suggested solutions including – the design of the teaching content and

course delivery, assessment, and an improved channel of communication between the

tutor and the students. The rationale behind focusing on these three specific areas was the

fact that while it is not possible to address all their needs of students, a small consistent

change in key areas may make a difference (McNiff 2016).

Teaching content and course delivery

The teaching content and delivery were redesigned for CRI3023-N to incorporate a

combination of engaging interactive lectures, assigned readings, and inclusion of videos

including case studies that connect to real-life context. These lectures were delivered once

a week and tailored to address specific issues and concepts which constructively aligned

with the course's aims. These were done to provide the students with achievable and

measurable outputs during the lectures (Mladenovic 2000). Activities conducted within

the lectures included a recapitulation of prior lectures and a brief reminder of the

assessment task, brainstorming sessions, peer discussions, debates and short formative

quizzes to test learning. The quizzes were designed using Kahoot, which is an online

software that allows for the incorporation of videos where appropriate. The quizzes aimed

at serving as a diagnostic approach to teaching designed to examine areas that students

found challenging and in need of further clarity. This activity worked particularly well as

the students' response to the quizzes were anonymous, and it was easy to see the number

17

of students that got a specific answer right or wrong. In this way, a tailored explanation of the concept was provided.

The seminar was designed to expand on some of the core themes addressed in the lecture. Prior to the seminar activities, a 10 minute-long recapitulation on the main themes from the previous week's lecture which formed the basis of the seminar was provided to give the students a context for the day's seminar. Besides, real-life examples were used to give the students a sense of the importance of what was being taught. For instance, topics such as 'Excursus on Michel Foucault's "Discipline and Punish"' were taught by giving students the opportunity to connect how the penal machinery operates in the modern world, shifting punishment from the body to punishment of the soul. Use of surveillance cameras and prisons were elucidated to give the students a sense of the importance of how scholars have enabled us to understand penal institutions and the purpose these serve. Additional activities in the seminar included videos, opportunity to engage in debates, peer discussions of the group task and a writing session aimed at facilitating course assessment.

Course assessment

CRI3023 was designed to address two key components which comprised of a written 1000-word report worth 30% of the overall marks and a 3000-word essay worth 70% of the marks. Each assessment was designed to achieve specific learning outcomes. This suggests that the teaching strategies adopted aligned with the course assessment. For instance, the inclusion of a writing task in the seminar enabled students to attempt the structure of their written reports while also receiving feedback within the class from their peers and the tutor that helped them improve. This teaching philosophy provided the students with opportunities to build on their knowledge of key aspects of the course

18

through the formative practice of the assessment which helped them progress towards the main summative report and essays.

Improved channel of communication between the tutor and the students

To facilitate improved channels of communication, additional drop-in sessions were designated to allow the students the opportunity to be able to get more support in the form of feedback from drafts for structure and clarity on areas they struggled with. To accommodate their diverse needs and address the issue of having to be physically present in class, a Microsoft Teams network was set up where students could ask questions and receive support on areas relating to the course.

Try it out and take stock of what happens

The interventions were implemented during the 12-week-long teaching session. Data were collected using students' feedbacks from module evaluation, end-of-term results, and peer observation by a critical friend. These were subsequently analysed at the end of the semester to provide me with insights and direction for improvement. Although the teaching sessions were observed by a critical friend who was a senior colleague, the participating students were still construed as the experts in driving how the interventions were designed and implemented. The critical friend and the tutor assumed the role of a moderator by being particularly careful not to regress to the tutor-student power relationship. For instance, after engaging students in a report writing task, students subsequently conducted writing tasks on topics of their own choice that built upon the knowledge gained in the previous session.

The restructured teaching contents and mode of delivery seemed beneficial to the level six students who found it useful. Increased level of student understanding of core concepts in the module was demonstrated through the formative quiz and final assessments. The use of virtual learning platforms and technologies stimulated

engagement, and activities which made students adopt a deep approach to learning which drew on inter-state comparisons as a basis for discussion were advantageous. More specifically, students used real-life examples of private corporations' involvement in prisons in both the USA and the UK to demonstrating how their involvement tends to serve a profit interest as opposed to the reduction of crime given fewer prisoners equal poor business for the private firms. The impact of the interventions is delineated in the module results which saw some improved performances compared to the previous year as delineated in Figures 1 and 2 below.

[Insert figure 1 and 2 here]

Using descriptive statistics and the measure of central tendencies, the data suggest that there was a slight improvement in student performance in comparison with the previous year. This is delineated in the mean of 64.24% for 2019 as compared to 62.75% for 2018. Such result appears apparent despite the differences in the number of students which is 59 for 2019 and 69 for 2018.

In addition, the inclusion of video contents which contained anonymised examples of different people committing crimes such as shoplifting, drawing of graffiti on a bus stand, and even murder was perceived to be effective based on follow-up students' feedback. For instance, students described class activities positively when one of them stated that:

> The inclusion of interactive activities is really engaging and they
> enable us to understand the sociological debate behind
> punishment. For instance, using video examples to illustrate
> different crimes has really got me thinking about the rationale for
> punishment and brought to life an otherwise abstract concept.

20

This response highlights one of the goals behind the activities, which was designed to test students' knowledge of the guiding principles behind punishment. The ability for students to communicate and engage in debates with one another during the delivery of the session was also another key aim behind the activities. For instance, after the video clip was viewed, when asked how they would punish the offenders, there were mixed debates in the class as to the punishment, and at the end the students were supported using principles of punishment such as deterrence, rehabilitation and retribution as some of the guiding norms to explain punishment.

The inclusion of writing tasks in the seminars met with a perceived positive response from the students who had the opportunities to present their draft with their peers and receive constructive feedback aimed at improvement. This particularly prepared them in advance for, both their in-course and end-course assessment. More specifically, students view from its use is captured at the end of term module evaluation where, for instance, one of the students commented that:

> The module is well led with informative lectures and seminars,
>
> although feedback of assessments are not due till after Christmas,
>
> the tutor has given lots of encouragement to submit essay plans
>
> to herself.

This captures a sense of appreciation for an area which the students often found to be difficult. The provision of tailored feedback to improve the general scope of their writing highlights a student-centred approach driven by each student peculiar needs.

Furthermore, the intervention which included an improvised channel of communication via additional hours and the setup of VLE platforms such as Microsoft Teams for students proved useful as some students were able to discuss the structure of their assessments and also clarify certain points they were unsure of. So far, based on the

21

interventions, some of the key changes I noticed included the perceived increase in engagement on the part of level six students.

Modify what we did in light of changes found and monitor it

Given the results from the interventions, the previous modified interventions will be retained (e.g. inclusion of videos and the use of Kahoot) as some of the means of engaging the students. These will be further enhanced by including other engaging content and e-learning software such as Padlets and Polls everywhere to capture the diverse preferences of students on the elaboration of specific case studies or areas in need of further improvement.

Evaluation

In the evaluation cycle, I reflected on the changes caused as a result of the intervention (McNiff and Whitehead, 2011). This was measured by the level of students' satisfaction with the module. It also used peer observations and comments from a senior colleague, follow-up focus group discussion and the module evaluation as a yardstick for determining the effectiveness or impact of the intervention. Overall, the interventions adopted seem perceived from a positive vantage point. For instance, the inclusion of VLE enhanced learning, such as Kahoot and engaging group task within the seminar were perceived as helpful in facilitating collaborative learning. Commenting on this, one of the level six students opined that:

> I like the inclusion of interactive activities including Kahoot
>
> during the seminars because we can all sit together and we can all
>
> discuss and we can collectively put together our own thoughts and
>
> we can all get like answers […] When it is a group conversation,
>
> you are more likely to get involved in it.

This passage highlights findings of previous studies which found group-work and learning to be more effective than individual learning (Nicoll-Senft 2009; Jafari 2014). This improved engagement is seen as central as students were able to use it as a basis for improving their knowledge in the lectures which were initially thought of as difficult. This perceived impact is elucidated in the module evaluation where a student said, 'I have found seminars very helpful and built more confidence throughout the weeks and this has helped me within lectures also to focus more'. In a similar vein, another notable comment from students in the evaluation include:

> The lecturer provides all the information needed with [the] use of
>
> numerous examples enabling a complete understanding of the
>
> difficult lecture topics, also the repeated mentioning of the ICA
>
> and ECA is perfect for my organisation of the research materials.

The preceding comments reflect the students' perceptions of the intervention, which were construed from positive perspectives. It was also interesting to see how an improvement in one area transition into an improvement in the students learning experience for the module as seen with the slight improvement of the module result in comparison to the previous year. Moreover, over 70% of respondents in the module evaluation expressed satisfaction which suggested a positive development worthy of replication. In fact, a student praised the intervention as 'Excellent teaching, great quality.' This comment is also reflective of peer observation by a senior colleague about the use of the interventions in the seminar session. Commenting on the interventions, the colleague stated that:

> The seminar appeared to be well-structured with the use of slides
>
> and some activities which split the students into two groups. The
>
> instructions provided were very clear. and support was provided
>
> throughout each task. […] There was very good engagement with

23

the student discussion element such as summarizing points made

and, most importantly, asking further questions to harness better

understanding and clarity. The writing task was useful to embed

academic skills into the subject area at an embryonic stage of the

module.

This suggests how the interventions were perceived as helpful and in line with good

practice. Hence demonstrating a positive outlook on the interventions. Another notable

finding from the evaluation of the action research process was the perceived positive

views about the inclusion of students in the active action inquiry process. Talking about

this, a level six participant said, 'I think an online survey is less personal whereas I

actually sat with the lecturer and it felt like you actually cared about what I am saying'.

This comment suggests a sense of appreciation for the student-centred approach towards

addressing the students' learning needs in ways that allow them ownership of the process.

'Care' is seen as central to the approach which gives the student a sense of satisfaction

that the traditional module evaluation as used by the university seems not to provide.

Based on the action research conducted, I learnt that students considered the

inclusion of diverse teaching content that draws on real-life scenarios as well as the use

of VLE tools such as Kahoot as engaging and aspects that facilitated their learning. These

enable more participation, which translated to an improved student learning experience.

The provision of feedback on their drafts and the inclusion of additional hours to support

the students met with positive responses that assisted the students' improvement in their

studies. It was surmised that this level of support was essential to encourage motivation

and engagement with the course (Ramsden 2003).

Conclusion, implications and suggestions for further research

24

The main aim of this study was to address whether the adoption of Jean McNiff model of action research alongside IAOL and teaching contents are effective at improving student engagement. This study serves to fill an existing gap which highlights the paucity of research pertaining to improving student engagement using action research within the Criminology and Criminal Justice discipline. The study has presented an example of how action research using McNiff's model has been implemented across an undergraduate module from the context of a student–informed perspective to design teaching contents and their delivery that engaged the students.

Accordingly, a significant practical contribution of the present study is that it provides empirical data which serves as useful evidence that action research could be used to enhance engagement, learning, and student performance. It also highlights a useful point in that students' disdain for the Explaining Punishment module owing to its perceived boring historical and sociological contents could be overcome via the adoption of interactive action-oriented learning and teaching contents. The research showed the varying impacts interventions might have on students. For instance, the inclusion of real-life case studies allowed students the opportunity to connect the importance of the sociological and historical accounts with the transition of the practice of punishment to the modern-day understanding of the penal system. The relevance and mixture of a range of teaching styles incorporating VLEs and writing tasks alongside additional hours of support to students were perceived as positive interventions from students' perspectives. This is more clearly delineated with the linkage of a teaching style and delivery that explicitly relates theoretical concepts to real-life contexts. The adoption of the interventions also highlights a slight increase in the level of performance in students' results in comparison with the previous year that did not witness the adoption of such interventions.

25

Another important implication of the present study is that it contributes to the existing literature by pedagogically and methodologically advancing the field of Criminology and Criminal Justice. The use of action research and its process reported could serve as a useful means of enhancing teaching practices and the improvement of student engagement, especially within the context of the Criminology and Criminal Justice discipline where such methods appear to be lacking. The reflective practice of action research which allows for a consistent trial of what works and the opportunity to modify teaching and students' learning in line with evidence of efficacy represents a useful method to enhance the students' learning experience and the teacher's practice.

Nevertheless, suggestions for further research might specifically consider the need to further explore the evaluation stage in the research. This might be particularly useful in the provision of a comprehensive understanding of the impact of each learning resources and intervention on the students. To achieve this, future research should also aim to adopt further action reflective cycles by evaluating the impact of interventions by enabling students to understand what good and engaged learning is like using learning activities, such as debates, report writing, real life scenarios culled from the news and videos, and their personal experiences, co-created by students. As Joy Mounter (nd, p.2) argues 'Understanding themselves, the things that make them tick, their worries and strengths, the quirks that make them an individual and influence their emotional learning will all identify the learner they are and the potential learner they could be.' This will help students formulate personalised learning values and articulate any improvements in them. Drawing on McNiff (2016/17) action research circle, future research could facilitate collection of data on interventions and activities that have been introduced to enhance learning. For instance, activities such as report-writing tasks may serve as useful ways to judge the quality of student learning by specifically engaging students in a deeper

26

reflection on their thoughts on the exercise. Informed by Mounter's (n.d) approach, students could be asked to document their learning experiences through a mind map which links all aspect of learning together. Students could use emotive feedback ideas such as smileys showing happy, sad, confused as a means of documenting their experience. This approach aims at highlighting the students' varied learning experiences by providing explanation of the symbols they choose.

Other sessions could include invitations of guest speakers such as probation officers to deliver talk on certain topics while giving the students the opportunity to engage in debates on their thoughts about the topic. Based on these activities, data could be collected to help make better judgment concerning how students think about certain concepts, and probe or challenge existing narratives on how punishment is construed. In this way, the quality of learning could be assessed as to whether deeper or surface learning has taken place, and this could be assessed by the encouragement of students to self-reflect, and record the moment in ways that they feel might express their learning appropriately, and evaluate the skills they have used and developed as learners.

27

28

References

Albers, C. 2007. 'Improving Pedagogy Through Action Learning and Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.' *Teaching Sociology* 36 (1): 79-86.

Astin, A.W. 1984. 'Student Involvement: A Developmental Theory for Higher Education.' *Journal of College Student Development* 25 (4): 297–308.

Biggs, J. 2003. *Teaching for Quality Learning at University.* (2nd ed.). Buckingham: Open University Press.

Bradford, J., D. Mowder, and J. Bohte. 2016. 'You Can Lead Students to Water, but You Can't Make Them Think: An Assessment of Student Engagement and Learning through Student-Centered Teaching.' *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 16 (4): 33-43.

Chickering, A.W., and Z.F. Gamson. 1987. Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education. *AAHE Bulletin*. 3-7.

Coates, H. 2007. 'A Model of Online and General Campus-Based Student Engagement.' *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 32 (2): 121–141. doi:10.1080/02602930600801878

Davis, J., C. Cronley, E. Madden, and Y. Kim. 2014. 'Service-Learning Use in Criminal Justice Education.' *Journal of Criminal Justice Education* 25 (2): 157-174.

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2011) Students at the Heart of the System. London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

Docherty, D. 2011. Universities Need to Work Harder to Turn UK Students into Global Graduates. The Guardian 29 November 2011. Available at http://www.theguardian.com/higher-

educationnetwork/blog/2011/nov/29/universities-uk-students-global-graduates (accessed 06 August 2020).

Felder, R.M. and R. Brent. 1996. 'Navigating the Bumpy Road to Student-Centred Instruction.' *College Teaching* 44 (2): 43-47.

Haggis, T. 2009. 'What Have We Been Thinking of? A Critical Overview of 40 years of Student Learning Research in Higher Education.' *Studies in Higher Education* 34 (4): 370-390.

Jafari, Z. 2014. 'A Comparison of Conventional Lecture and Team-Based Learning Methods in Terms of Student Learning and Teaching Satisfaction.' *Medical Journal of the Islamic Republic of Iran* 28: 5.

Jidong, D. E. 2019. 'Students as Partners in Co-creation of Learning Activities in Order to Include Differentiated Instruction.' *International Journal of Social Science Education* 1 (1): 342-349.

Judi, H. M., and N. Sahari. 2013. 'Student-Centered Learning in Statistics: Analysis of Systematic Review.' *Procedia—Social and Behavioral Sciences* 103: 844-851.

Krause, K., and H. Coates. 2008. 'Students' Engagement in First-Year University.' *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 33 (5): 493–505. doi:10.1080/02602930701698892

Kuh, G. D. 2009. 'What Student Affairs Professionals Need to Know about Student Engagement.' *Journal of College Student Development,* 50 (6): 683–706.

Kuh, G. D., J. Kinzie, J. H. Schuh, and E.J. Whitt. 2005. 'Never Let it Rest: Lessons about Student Success from High-Performing Colleges and Universities'. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 37 (4): 44–51. doi:10.3200/CHNG.37.4.44-51

Lewin, K. 1946. 'Action Research and Minority Problems.' *Journal of Social Issues* 2 (4): 34-46. doi:10.1111/j.1540-4560.1946.tb02295.x

McKinnon, J. 1989. 'Reliability and Validity in Field Research: Some Strategies and Tactics.' *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal* 1 (1): 34-54. doi:10.1108/EUM0000000004619

McNiff, J. 2016. *You and Your Action Research Project*. London: Routledge.

McNiff, J. 2017. A*ction Research: All you Need to Know*. London: Sage.

McNiff, J. and J. Whitehead. 2011. *All you Need to Know about Action Research*. Sage Publications.

Mitra, D.L. 2004. 'The Significance of Students: Can Increasing 'Student Voice' in Schools Lead to Gains in Youth Development?.' *Teachers College Record* 106: 651–688.

Mladenovic, R. 2000. 'An Investigation into Ways of Challenging Introductory Accounting Students' Negative Perceptions of Accounting.' *Accounting Education* 9 (2): 135-155.

Mounter, J. (n.d) 'Can Children Carry out Action Research about Learning, Creating Their Own Learning Theory? https://www.actionresearch.net/writings/tuesdayma/joymounterull.pdf (accessed 30 September 2020).

Nicoll-Senft, J. 2009. 'Assessing the Impact of Team-based Learning.' *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching* 20 (2): 27-42.

Oblinger, D.G., and M. K. Maruyama. 1996. Distributed Learning. Boulder, CO: Cause Professional Paper Series, 14.

Patton, M. Q. 1987. *How to Use Qualitative Methods in Evaluation*. (2nd ed). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Paulson, D. and J. Faust. 2003. 'Active Learning for the College Classroom.' *Excellence in College Teaching, 9* (2): 3-24.

Proctor, E., H. Silmere., R. Raghavan., P. Hovmand., G. Aarons., A. Bunger., R. Griffey., and M. Hensley. 2011. 'Outcomes for Implementation Research: Conceptual Distinctions, Measurement Challenges, and Research Agenda.' *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research* 38 (2): 65–76.

Ramsden, P. 2003. *Learning to Teach in Higher Education*. (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.

Ronen, I. K. 2020. 'Action Research as a Methodology for Professional Development in Leading an Educational Process.' *Studies in Educational Evaluation 64*: 100826. doi:10.1016/j.stueduc.2019.100826

Ryan, R.M., and L.D. Edward. 2000. 'Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being.' *American Psychologist* 55 (1): 68–78.

Slunt, K.M., and Giancarlo, L.C. (2004). Student-Centered Learning: A Comparison of Two Different Methods of Instruction. *Journal of Chemical Education,* 81 (7): 985.

Smith, C., R. Whipp. and H. Willmott. 1998. 'Case Study Research in Accounting; Methodological Breakthrough or Ideological Weapon?' *Advances in Public Interest Accounting* 2: 95-120.

Stack, S. 2007. 'The Effect of Extra Credit Projects on Learning: A Research Note.' *Journal of Criminal Justice Education* 16 (2): 318-327.

Stamatel, J., S. Bushway, and W. Roberson. 2013. 'Shaking up Criminal Justice Education with Team-Based Learning.' *Journal of Criminal Justice Education* 24 (3): 417-434.

Strauss, A., and J. Corbin. 1990. *Basics of Qualitative Research. Grounded theory Procedures and Techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Waterman, H., D. Tillen., R. Dickson. and K. De Koning. 2001. 'Action Research: A Systematic Review and Guidance for Assessment.' *Health Technology Assessment 5* (23): 1-157.

Wigfield, A., and J. S. Eccles. 2020. '35 Years of Research on Students' Subjective Task Values and Motivation: A Look Back and a Look Forward. *Advances in Motivation Science* 7: 161-198. doi:10.1016/bs.adms.2019.05.002

Winter, R. 1989. *Learning from Experience: Principles and Practice in Action Research*. London: The Falmer Press.

Yin, R. K. 1994. *Case Study Research Design and Methods*. (2nd ed.), Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
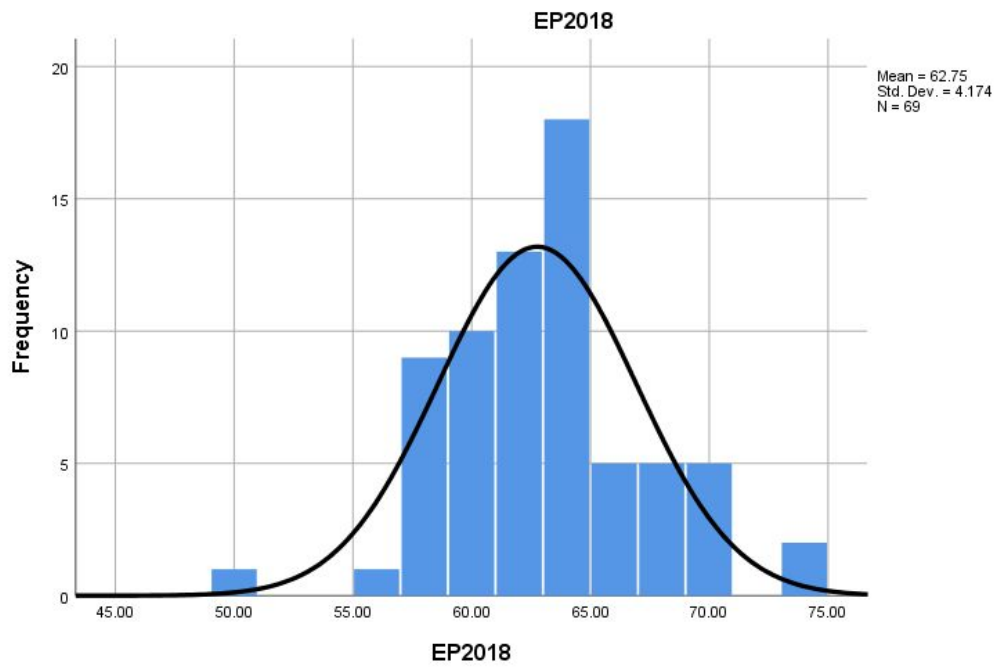
Figure 1. Showing module result for 2018 cohort

Figure 2. Showing module result for 2019 cohort

1