



Student Engagement Final Report: Sharing Control: a partnership approach to curriculum design and delivery

Project lead institution	University of Edinburgh
Project title	Sharing Control: a partnership approach to curriculum design and delivery
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Introduction

This project considers issues and practices around student engagement in curriculum design and delivery. The starting point is the observation of Trowler and Trowler (2010) that much of the literature on student engagement in the structure and process of higher education has been in the realm of governance and leadership (eg committee representation) rather than direct involvement in curriculum design and delivery. This project is also the realisation of our long-held interest in issues of power and social justice within higher education; ranging from the general conceptual level of the purposes of higher education (eg. McArthur, 2011) to the details of classroom activities and participation (eg. Huxham, 2005).

The focus of this project has been a partnership between students and us aimed at revising the design and delivery of a module that these students will be taking in the next academic year. We invited students who planned to take this fourth year, honours-level module to work with us over the summer and made a commitment to consider any sort of changes to any part of the module. This paper reports on the process and outcomes of this collaboration. We also suggest further areas for investigation and the issues surrounding enabling genuine partnerships with students in the design and delivery of the curriculum.

Throughout this project we have sought to understand the design and delivery of the curriculum in broader contexts, focusing particularly on the interrelationship between macro, meso and micro levels of organizational activity (P. Trowler, 2008). In so doing we have been interested in the relationships between institutional aspects of structure and process, course level design/delivery and individual student learning and achievement.

Driving our approach to sharing control with students are three basic commitments. Firstly, to find ways to engage in genuine rather than surface negotiation with our student partners (see Rowland, 2000). Secondly, to ensure that the participation of student partners is informed; therefore an important aspect of this project has been to consider how to provide students with the information needed for informed participation, and indeed, to determine what sort of information is most helpful. Finally, our project has taken issues of trust, power and authority very seriously. Rather than denying or hiding the differences in our roles and those of our students we have tried to make these explicit and deal openly with the implications of such differences.

Background

We have previously worked together to consider ways of enhancing teaching and learning through feedback as dialogue (see McArthur, Huxham, Hounsell, & Warsop, 2011). An important emphasis in our previous work, and in this project, is the idea of students and teachers as equal, but different, participants in a teaching and learning relationship. We place our work within the broad sphere of critical pedagogy, such as the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (eg. 1996, 2005). Similarly, our work is informed by critical theorists such as Habermas (eg. 1971; 1991) and, for the first author particularly, the work of Thomas Adorno (eg. 1973, 2003, 2005, 2006). McLean's (2006) critical pedagogy, which is also heavily influenced by Habermas, has also been influential in promoting our ideas about the possibilities of social justice within everyday classroom situations. Similarly, Greene's (eg. 1978; 1995) conception of learning in terms of imagining things to be different has proven a powerful influence, particularly as this project has been a series of attempts, by us and our student partners, to imagine the curriculum and our relationships in different ways.

Two previous examples of trying to share control with students provided a wealth of ideas for us to build on within this project. Firstly, Shor's (1996) account of trying to invest power in students at a New York college. We took from this practical ideas as well as general observations about the necessity of this being an uncomfortable process, if it is to be genuine. For example, Shor relates:

In the coming months these students ate my liver twice a week while I lay chained to the rock of experimental democracy. To my amazement, they told me far more than I was comfortable knowing (p. 124).

Secondly, Rowland's (2000) provided us with a key idea, and challenge, through his account of trying to negotiate a curriculum with Masters level students. Rowland stresses the importance of genuine rather than superficial negotiation with students. Throughout this project our explicit commitment was always to genuine forms of negotiation and partnership: despite our best intentions, achieving real negotiation is, in our experience, considerably difficult.

Project Approach

The following research questions inform this study:

1. At what levels or stages in the curriculum design process might direct student engagement with this design be practical and most beneficial to (a) individual students' experiences and (b) effecting institutional change towards a culture of genuine student engagement?
2. How important is it for students to understand institutional and contextual factors (policies, regulations etc) if they are to actively engage with individual course design and delivery?
3. What are students' perceptions of the potential benefits/pitfalls of greater engagement with course design and delivery? How do these relate to different levels or stages of involvement in the curriculum design process?

The project was based on a fourth year Honours module on "Advances in Ecology" at Edinburgh Napier University. Prior to the summer break of 2011 the second author approached students on a third year module that he took to ask if they would like to participate in redesigning this fourth year module, which all of them were going to be taking. A large number of students were enthusiastic about the idea; however, participation was limited by the need for many students to work over the summer period. In total 17 students participated at some point, to meetings and/or Facebook discussions.

We made a deliberate decision not to provide students with incentives to participate (such as Amazon vouchers) because we did not want our relationship to be one of them "helping" us out. It was important to the project to try as much as possible to realise a relationship of equal but different partners contributing to a common goal.

Our roles within the project differed slightly. Mark's role focused on being one of the two lecturers for this module, with both subject expertise and an interest in alternative approaches to pedagogy. Jan's role was as the outsider, free from any of the formal power roles that Mark would inevitably have (eg as assessor of the students' work). Jan's background was also more immersed in the educational literature and thus her second role was to bring in ideas from the literature to help inform the discussions and decisions.

Our Experiences Sharing Control

At the start of the project we distributed a questionnaire to students asking for their thoughts on the module, assessment and teaching and learning methods. We also asked them about the factors that they thought might influence curriculum design and delivery and any potential barriers to change. Most striking in their responses was the extent to which students believed that the design and delivery of a module was almost entirely within the control of the academic teaching it. There was almost no awareness of institutional factors such as the process for approving module descriptors and quality

requirements. There was even less sense of the way in which sector-wide requirements, such as funding bodies and the QAA (Quality Assurance Agency) might influence an individual module. We also found that students appeared uncomfortable being asked about their perceptions of the power relationship between academics and students. Indeed one student actually said this was a very strange question to be asked and could not imagine why we asked it.

A series of three two-hour meetings were planned over the summer to discuss different aspects of the forthcoming course. We ideally hoped that each meeting would lead to a decision on a particular aspect and that between meetings we could maintain a dialogue between participants in some way.

At the initial meeting, and in emails to students, we stressed that everything about the module should be considered as “on the table” and open for discussion about change. However, due to the formal bureaucratic requirements when it comes to changing learning outcomes or assessment strategies we did suggest that we discuss these first so that there would be time to seek formal approval for any recommendations agreed.

Meeting One

The first meeting provided an overview of the module as it currently existed and an introduction to the ideas of critical pedagogy, sharing control and academic-student partnerships.

Following an idea from Shor (1996) we decided to ask the students to make a decision about an aspect of the project early on in the discussion as a way of encouraging their active engagement. This first decision focused on how we would maintain discussions between meetings. We asked the students if they would prefer to use email or WebCT. After an initial hesitation the students then became very animated and, to our great surprise, suggested we use Facebook. They had used this previously on other projects and also in their social lives and were very comfortable with it. The same could not be said of us; however, we agreed and felt that we had rather importantly allowed the students to take control for the first time.

The students decided not to change the module learning outcomes. There were three main reasons given for this: some did not consider learning outcomes to be important; most felt that the learning outcomes were all right as they were (having looked at them in the meeting); and some students felt that writing different learning outcomes was too far outside their experiences. Overall we felt comfortable that the students had understood the learning outcomes and were happy to leave them unchanged.

The students showed much greater interest in the question of assessment. We proposed four questions for our student partners to help focus the discussion. Initially we found that many students tended to almost caricature themselves with comments such as, ‘well we’re students so we are interested in assessments that give us the highest marks’. However, as the discussions were allowed to develop the students demonstrated far more complex and nuanced views on assessment. The four questions and general conclusions are outlined in the table below:

What is assessment for?	Grading, standards, what you have learned, motivation, discriminating, feedback
What is good assessment?	Tests understanding, relevant, useful, clear
What are the best assessments for Advances in Ecology	Choice, varied, relevant, practical, fair weighting
How should we organise these assessments (timings, feedback, weighting)?	Change weighting, greater choice, other commitments

Summary of meeting one discussion on assessment

Provision of Assessment Resources

Between the first and second meetings we posted a number of documents on the Facebook site, along with the summary of the assessment discussion from meeting one. These further resources included the institution's Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy, Assessment handbook and Procedures for major and minor module descriptor changes. Our aim was for the students to have access to the same institutional resources as academics. We were also interested in the extent to which students became aware of, and cared about, the links between this module and institutional policies and requirements. To our knowledge, no students chose to look at these documents.

Facebook Discussion of Assessment

The text box below provides an extract of the Facebook discussion that took place between the first and second meetings (student names are anonymised).

Christine: I think ideally assessment should not only test knowledge of a subject but also potential skills required once we go away from university. So interviews, field skills, the ability to construct experiments in relation to the module seem the most useful.

Roger: I agree with Christine. In applied terrestrial ecology there were a number of

assessments based around a project. I thought this worked well. We could maybe think about a project (not necessarily field work, especially if it's hard to fit in) upon which a number of assessments could be based on.

Mark Huxham really like the idea of building up expertise and knowledge around a core project and having regular group discussions - we can use the timetabled slots for anything we want and if we decide to commit more time then meet outside them (in the pub?). We'd need to think how to keep the assessment bit individual rather than group though

Leanne: I really liked the work we did in Portugal and I wouldn't mind doing something similar but I am not too keen on the idea of a lot of coursework being based on one project. If that one project went wrong then the course work would be affected :/

Lisa: I think that there should be an element of choice for our assessments, as not every student has the same strengths.

Roger: projects going wrong is good... lots to discuss ;-)

Table Two: extract from Facebook discussion

Meeting Two

The assessment discussion took up far more of this meeting than originally planned; however, we were happy with this adjustment because the discussion was very much in the spirit of *assessment for learning* and as such covered a broad range of teaching and learning issues.

Students approached changes in assessment with care. They demonstrated a surprisingly strong concern about the impact that changes would have on the course lecturer and we felt that we had to keep reinforcing their rights to suggest changes. We supported this with fairly wide-ranging discussions of the many different assessment strategies that could be employed.

Discussion about the first assessment (Critique of experimental design in a scientific paper) highlighted two issues that the students felt particularly strongly about: the authenticity of assessments, considered in terms of their "real-world" applications; and the provision of choice in recognition of students' different strengths and aspirations.

The longest discussion took place around the issue of an exam. Initially feelings tended towards abolishing the exam altogether. The students were very articulate about the difference between a form of assessment that tested memory and one which allowed them to demonstrate understanding. Comments included:

Assessment seems to me to be another learning opportunity and an exam

doesn't strike me as any sort of learning opportunity, it is just a memory exercise. I understand that there is a lot of technique involved in sitting exams and answering questions but I don't think that the exam is necessary to develop those particular techniques

problem solving questions – having to apply skills – whereas exams, if you can master mnemonics, or any other memory technique, then you just concertina the information down and then spread it back out again

If you are going to rejig the exam then I wholeheartedly support refocusing it on applying skills to solve problems rather than recounting knowledge.

As the final comment suggests, the discussion went beyond simply disparaging exams as a form of assessment and began to distil the positive aspects of exams from the negative. The students repeatedly expressed a belief that a variety of assessment measures is important. They also talked about the skills involved in answering certain types of exam questions. This led to the idea of stripping the exam of the negative features that were identified as the stress of a tightly focused three hour period and the type of questions that encouraged memorisation rather than problem-solving. As a result, students decided to keep the exam, but change it to a take home format. We both advised that this was not necessarily an “easier” option and after some discussion it was nevertheless agreed as being a better form of assessment.

In the spirit of sharing control, Jan raised the issue of whether these students needed set submission dates for their work, given that they were already accepting responsibility for some aspects of the module's design and delivery. This discussion proved far richer than we anticipated, and ranged from broad philosophical issues to practical details. As a result a different approach to submissions and extensions was agreed.

Proposed Assessment Changes

At the end of meeting two it was agreed to recommend the following proposed changes to all of the students planning to take this module. We were keen to encourage as many of the students who had not yet attended meetings or participated in discussions to engage with these recommendations. We therefore asked a student to volunteer to video a message explaining the changes to fellow students and asking for their feedback. This was posted on our Facebook site along with a document outlining the changes.

	Current	Proposed
1.	<p>Critique of experimental design in a scientific paper</p> <p>Weighting = 20%</p>	<p>Critique of experimental design in a scientific paper</p> <p>Weighting = 30% - greater choice</p> <p>Linked to tutorial discussions – formative</p>
2.	<p>Popular Science article</p> <p>Weighting = 20%</p>	<p>Popular Science article (unchanged)</p> <p>Weighting = 20%</p>
3.	<p>Timetabled 3 hour exam</p> <p>Weighting = 60%</p>	<p>Take home exam</p> <p>Weighting = 50%</p>
		<p><i>Other procedural changes</i></p> <p>One week submission “window”</p> <p>Extensions based on educational as well as health/personal reasons</p>

Online Survey

We developed a simple online survey – linked to via the Facebook site – so that students could vote on whether or not to accept the recommended changes. The results are outlined below:

1.	Have you looked at the proposed changes to Assessment in Advances in Ecology on our Facebook page?	100%
2.	Are you happy with the proposed changes to Assessment in the Advances in Ecology module?	12 very happy 4 fairly happy 1 neither
3.	Do you agree to us submitting the proposed changes in assessment in Advances in Ecology to the Quality Committee so that they can be approved for next semester?	100%
4.	Any other comments you would like to make about the proposed changes to assessment in Advances in Ecology?	4 comments – see below

n = 17

Comments:

I would prefer the removal of an exam as I feel that it is a test on one's ability to memorise someone's notes rather than a test of understanding and knowledge. The proposed change seems like a fair compromise

I'm still a bit iffy about the [take home] exam ... I know some people don't like exams but I feel I do fairly well in them as proven by my recent exam results I got today ... However, I'm happy to go with a majority so that everyone has the best and equal chance to do well

I am personally more interested in participating in deciding HOW the course

will be delivered than the actual content of the course itself; not through fear of the unknown or indifference but rather that in that matter I feel it is sensible and most beneficial to our education to defer to the wisdom of our teachers.

I'm not paid to make the curriculum, I'll just roll with the punches. In all honestly the way education is going why not just let us all pass and release us into a world where we can work in a bar or Tesco metro with all the other undergraduates ;)

Meeting Three

In the third meeting a final decision was made to take the proposed changes to assessment to the Quality Committee.

We then turned to consider the teaching and learning methods that could be used in Advances in Ecology. Discussed focused on the relative merits of lectures compared with tutorials, as well as the problems sometimes encountered in both formats. Eventually the discussion focused on collapsing the traditional lecture-tutorial format and having “classes” that mixed and moved between lecturer input and group discussion as appropriate. The key decision was that the type of approach taken would be determined by the subject matter and the students’ engagement with it at any given time, not by a pre-established timetable. The students felt that this more flexible format would give them greater opportunity to make day-to-day decisions about the delivery of the module.

The overall discussion demonstrated a desire to find ways to blur the boundaries related to when and where learning occurred. For example, we discussed the advantages of free time after timetabled classes to allow discussions to flow on if people were really engaged with an issue. Students were also keen to incorporate some type of field trip into the module. Our hope is that these changes to the timing and location of “classes” will enhance the partnership approach that we are applying to this entire module (see Decyk, Murphy, Currier, & TLong, 2010)

Lessons Learned: some provisional answers to our research questions

We acknowledge that this is a small, case-study based study, however, it has provided us with some valuable insights into our broad research questions which we hope to use to inform further work.

1 (a) At what levels or stages in the curriculum design process might direct student engagement with this design be practical and most beneficial to individual students’ experiences?

We would suggest that there is no prescriptive answer to this question. It is likely to be context dependent and vary from case to case. However, our experience has confirmed our sense that joint involvement in the entire design and delivery of a course is often likely to be prohibitively time-consuming for both students and academics. We found that a mixture of a focused partnership on a particular aspect of the curriculum (eg assessment) along with a more general ethos of sharing control worked well. We now plan to do further work focusing on the more day-to-day delivery of the course.

1 (b) At what levels or stages in the curriculum design process might direct student engagement with this design be practical and most beneficial to ... effecting institutional change towards a culture of genuine student engagement?

The focus of this second part of our first research question is more clearly upon the implications for institutional change of any such local initiative. How might it contribute to a change in the teaching and learning culture? We would suggest the importance of

visibility, either of the initial initiative or its outcomes and repercussions, if it is to have a wider influence. To this end, sharing control projects that require formal changes may have greater institutional impact as this forces them into the open and outside the closed doors of the classroom. However, in our case we also had to consider the problem of “passive” institutional responses to attempts to fundamentally change the established student-teacher relationships. In this case the changes to the module were accepted with little institutional engagement with the underlying rationale and aims – so the impact of broader culture was probably quite negligible. Evidence from another staff-student project suggests that a key factor to achieving institutional change was ensuring that differences were not suppressed but rather dealt with openly and publicly (Collins & Potter, 2011).

Work we have done on another project (McArthur, et al., 2011) also suggests that successful local initiatives may lead to changes in student expectations in other contexts that could lead to broader changes within a given institution. However, whether these can still lead to a change in the ethos of the institution is less certain.

2. How important is it for students to understand institutional and contextual factors (policies, regulations etc) if they are to actively engage with individual course design and delivery?

Our approach to this sharing control project was strongly influenced by Trowler’s (2008) analysis of the inter-relationship between micro, meso and macro institutional levels, particularly in relation to effecting organizational change. In addition, we were strongly committed to a genuine and informed sharing of control – thus we thought it important that our student partners had access to the same institutional resources as we did. However, this project suggests to us that we conceived of the institutional level too narrowly in terms of policy, procedures and so forth.

The question we now ask, based on this project is: do students need to be as weighed down by bureaucratic procedures as we are? Might their contribution be of greater value because it is outside the system? Indeed, the students’ perspective, grounded outside the institutional bureaucracy, could provide a powerful way of escaping the tyranny of the status-quo, which Adorno (2005) advises is so important to achieving genuine change and greater social justice.

A revelation to us, as academics, was the extent to which students were surprised by our own lack of control over significant parts of the curriculum design and delivery process – or at least the extent to which established, or mainstream, “good practice” influenced what we should or should not do. Ironically, we found that our relationship with the student partners was strengthened by a common sense of that which was beyond our control.

3. What are students’ perceptions of the potential benefits/pitfalls of greater engagement with course design and delivery? How do these relate to different levels or stages of involvement in the curriculum design process?

There are limits to the levels of involvement our student partners wanted. Our impression was that they wanted to remain as “students” and not to mimic the roles of academics. Indeed, that was our aspiration too, though we did have to reinforce this message several times: the benefit of this type of partnership approach to curriculum design lies in the different experiences and perspectives that the two partners – academics and students – bring to the enterprise. A key challenge in the project was to suggest a need to rethink established ideas of what it is to be a “student” or an “academic”.

Pre-planning for a new module required a commitment over the summer that not all students could make as many had to work intensively over this period to earn the funds to support their on-going studies. Similarly we anticipate that the work and study commitments of many students during term will also limit the time they can, and should, devote to partnering us in the design and delivery of the course. On the other hand, this tends to reinforce our sense of the importance of an ethos of experiencing the course as a partnership as much as co-designing every individual element.

We also felt that the students made informed decisions about the limits of their expertise when it came to curriculum design and delivery. For example, they were uncomfortable deciding on course content, which they believed requires the specialist knowledge of the lecturer, but were confident in suggesting the best ways of teaching any content.

The student partners clearly understood the importance of compromise in order to accommodate different students’ strengths, interests and aspiration. However, they did not always understand all the perspectives and variables to take into account

The project has confirmed that these students are more interested in direct involvement in the design and delivery of their own courses, rather than institutional levels of involvement that are more procedural and more abstracted, in their minds, from their studies. Further work remains to be done, however, on making the links between these different levels which, while not always apparent to or valued by the students, nevertheless remain important.

Conclusion

We suggest that a strong message from this project is that we need to go beyond simply thinking about bringing students into the different institutional levels, but rethinking those levels of the organisation, and the relationships between them in terms of student engagement.

A particular challenge for any such project is to navigate the fine line between avoiding novelty value without succumbing to standardization whereby the initiative is swallowed up into the mainstream institutional bureaucracy. Another way of looking at this is to ask whether students can critique prevailing structures without understanding them, and/or whether they can understand them without being drawn in to “the system” (through hegemonic practices). This is a particular area of further work that we aim to pursue.

Finally, a real delight of this project was to take part in discussions about teaching and learning in which no decision was agreed unless genuine educational arguments for that decision could be articulated.

Financial Statement

Initially £1800 was planned for researcher time; an additional £100 for catering and £100 for Amazon vouchers. The catering costs were met internally by institutional budgets and we decided against using Amazon vouchers. Hence, extra researcher time was employed and the total spend of £2000 went on this.

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