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Student-Led, Individually-Created Courses: Using Structured Reflection within Experiential Learning to Enable Widening Participation Students' Transitions Through and Beyond Higher Education

Neil M Speirs, Simon C Riley, and Gavin McCabe, University of Edinburgh, UK

ABSTRACT

The notion of students as partners in the co-creation of curricula and indeed co-evaluating or co-grading has shown positive outcomes that include increased engagement and motivation (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014; Cook-Sather 2014; Cook-Sather & Motz-Storey 2016). In order for a student to be a pedagogical co-designer or indeed a change agent it is reasonable to suggest that they must already possess a substantial level of social and cultural capital (Woolcock, 2001) to enable this engagement. However, students from lower socio-economic status backgrounds are more likely to lack such capital and to not understand the “rules of the game” (Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu, 1984). In this situation, the value or pay-off of being involved in such co-design in terms of attribute development through a novel sense of experiential learning, may not be fully appreciated. Therefore, there are likely limits to the extent that co-creation and radical collegiality (Fielding, 1999), will lead to the democratisation of curricula and enhance students' experiences, irrespective of social background. Despite the barriers outlined above, Student-Led, Individually-Created Courses (SLICCs) are an emerging area of practice at the University of Edinburgh through which widening participation (WVP) students are successfully being engaged in the graduate attributes and employability agendas and ultimately in the pedagogical co-design of their own credit-bearing curriculum. SLICCs provide a flexible reflective-learning framework for experiential learning that enables individuals and groups of students to work across disciplinary and structural boundaries. These courses broaden the scope of what is considered to be ‘curricular’, bringing what was previously co- and extra-curricular into the credit-bearing provision. This paper will explore how WVP students are engaged in the radical collegiality of SLICCs, despite the many barriers related to capital, through a rational pedagogy as outlined by Bourdieu and Passeron (1979).

Keywords: experiential learning; widening participation; reflection; radical collegiality; rational pedagogy

Successes of and barriers to engagement: what research and experience tell us

The notion of students as partners in the co-creation of curriculum and indeed co-evaluating or co-grading has shown positive outcomes. These include increased engagement and motivation or a greater meta-cognitive understanding of learning and teaching (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014; Cook-Sather, 2014; Cook-Sather & Motz-Storey, 2016); Fluckiger, Tixier y Vigil, Pasco, & Danielson, 2010). This of course goes beyond simply listening to the student voice which Dunne and Zandstra (2009) suggest considers the student as merely a consumer. This fits with the current neoliberal approach where education is commodified and is “just another service to be delivered on the market to those who can afford to buy it” (Lynch, 2006 p. 6; Giroux, 2002). Rather than the student-consumer simply being listened to, Jensen and Bennett (2016, p. 41) suggests that they should be “equal and knowledgeable partners in structuring the teaching and learning experience”. McCulloch (2009, p. 174) warns of the shift from “educational process to educational product” which can lead to a decline in student. Indeed Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, Millard, and Moore-Cherry (2016, p. 197) note that when “students take authentic responsibility for the educational process, they shift from being passive recipients or consumers to being active agents”.

It can be argued then that the notion of students as co-creators, as well as providing the benefits already noted, can also assist in lifting the degree experience from one of the passive neoliberal student-consumer to the engaged student-staff partnership. This partnership can be “a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis” (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, pp6-7). A key to this successful transformation is student engagement, which Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014) have divided into three levels: micro, meso and macro. To paraphrase the authors: macro engagement involves students working at a strategic level; meso engagement might involve pedagogical enhancements or quality assurance issues; while micro engagement will involve students considering their own learning for example. The level of engagement that each student will be personally satisfied with will vary, and it is unwise to prescribe what appropriate levels of engagement for each student would look like. However, it is clear that engagement at some level is required in order to “shift from merely completing

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learning tasks to developing a meta-cognitive awareness about what is being learned" (Bovill et al, 2016, p. 197; Baxter Magolda, 2006).

A way to foster this student engagement is to promote ecological learning systems, where an increased emphasis is placed on "the ways in which individuals interact and develop" (Hall, 2017, p. 124). Within these interactions it is important that the student voice is present, in order to lead to "a radical collegiality that redefines the traditional student-tutor relationship" (Fielding, 1999; Fielding, 2001; Carey, 2013, p. 83). It is here that Fielding (1999, p. 21, p. 22, & p. 25) points us towards radical collegiality, acknowledging the "power of peer learning", the notion of "students as teachers and teachers as learners", and finally to consider education as "a democratic project". This radical approach is key to the re-thinking of what is meant by the student voice. To simply assume a form of participation through oral communication is not sufficient (Taylor & Robinson, 2009). It is of course part of what the student voice is, but we must also add "tactile and experiential dimensions" (Smith, 2006) and "aspects of visuality" (Lodge, 2006). These partnerships in pedagogy may, to some, appear threatening to the traditional role of the academic staff member. However, "student participation in pedagogical planning does not replace teachers' expertise and their key role in facilitating learning" (Bovill, Cook-Sather, & Felten, 2011, p. 135; Breen & Littlejohn, 2000), while previously Fielding (1999, p. 28) has said: "It is important to emphasise that [...] radical collegiality" does not "entail a betrayal of teachers' experience, training or pedagogical expertise". It may also be the case that the student-consumer may find the blurring of the traditional lines between staff and student do not fit with their expectations regarding the product they have bought. However, when staff and students are engaged in co-operative practices, there is an intrinsic power gap between the staff and students (Huxham et al., 2016, p11). The authors explained this by considering Sandra Harding's (1993) work, noting that "powerless positions bring perspectives to social reality that are less distorted than those of the powerful".

If belonging to an ecological learning system or a community of shared practice is not the driving motivation for a student to become part of the pedagogies of partnership (Pauli, Raymond-Backer, & Worrell, 2016) then what might they be? Harris and Shelswell (2005, p. 173) note that it may be to "realise their personal needs" and as a result it is reasonable to suggest that Fielding's radical collegiality may not always necessarily be completely collegiate. Taylor and Robinson (2009, p. 167) commented on the students taking part in student voice projects being those that "have a stake in their education and the cultural capital to participate". McIntyre, Pedder and Rudduck (2005, p. 155) questioned whether it was the case that student voice projects can become a "dividing practice" whereupon certain student voices are side-lined due to the fact that they "don't fit the dominant discourse and academic aspirations" of their institutions. Bovill et al. (2016) summarised the challenges that can be faced when initiating co-learning and co-teaching projects, some of which have already been mentioned here, but serve as a reminder to the narrative surrounding this area of work. The authors note:

- "Overcoming resistance to co-creating learning and teaching" (p. 199), the resistance being potentially from staff and students alike;
- "Navigating institutional structures, practices and norms" (p. 201) which could be expressed as navigating institutional habitus (Burke, Emmerich, & Ingram, 2013; Raey, 2004) and;
- "Establishing an inclusive co-creation approach" (p. 203) which mentions that staff may choose to work with those students who have "often been excluded from, or underrepresented in, higher education" (p. 203) without specifically referring to socio-economic status or widening participation.

However, the authors also comment on how staff "determine whom they will invite and which students have the capacity to contribute" (p. 203). This notion of determining "which students have the capacity to contribute" (p. 203) can be argued to originate from staff that are complicit in the propagation of the institutional habitus that will potentially fail to recognise the value that certain groups of students can provide to such partnership pedagogies. Moreover, students that speak the same language (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) as the institution – and its constituent parts – are more likely to be deemed to have the capacity to contribute.

Reflecting on Bourdieu

In order for a student to be a pedagogical co-designer or indeed a change agent – regardless of identified intrinsic power gaps in the relationships between academic staff and student – it is reasonable to suggest that they must already possess a substantial level of social and cultural capital, both bridging and linking (Woolcock, 2001), that allows such levels of engagement to occur in the first place. Given that students from lower socio-economic status communities are more likely to lack such capital, they are as a result more likely not to understand the 'rules of the game' or have a 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu, 1990; Lareau, Evans, & Yee, 2016). In this situation, the value or pay-off of being involved in such co-design in terms of attribute development through a novel sense of experiential learning, may not be fully appreciated. Consequently, those students that already possess economic and social advantage – that know the rules of the game – are more likely to present themselves to partake in student voice, co-creation of curriculum and co-evaluating or co-grading projects. Through this they open further valuable networks and experiential learning opportunities that afford important attribute development and ultimately employability. As Bourdieu (1996) explains, education is used by families in a strategic fashion to reproduce and indeed advance their position in social space. The sense of not understanding the rules of the game can lead to missed opportunities – we can imagine the limited capital that the WP student possesses not being relevant in the field (higher education) – in which the student is situated. This is very much akin to Bourdieu's notion of hysteresis (1977, p. 83) – what happens when habitus and field are out of synch. Bourdieu defines hysteresis as the "lag between opportunities

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and the dispositions to grasp them". One of our challenges is to build appropriate capital in the WP student and as a result minimise this lag.

Given many institutions engage actively in widening participation, and face the challenge of supporting school pupils from lower socio-economic status families through providing advice, guidance and assisting in the building of social and cultural capital – it is then a responsibility of the institution to provide the equity of experience when the student is at university. It appears that just when such students may be close to being on an equitable footing at the point of entry to degree level study, they then fall behind in an engagement and developmental sense where such co-curricular projects – as discussed here – are more likely to set their more advantaged student-peers ahead. This can perhaps simply be thought of as the re-appearance of hysteresis. This need for an ever growing "rational pedagogy" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, p. 76) – that Grenfell and James (1998, p. 105) states is a solution to the problem and involves "cutting free the culture of higher education from its class anchorage" – is never clearer. While radical collegiality is shown to have various benefits to those involved, it is clear that it has limitations, particularly when considering who might be involved, despite Fielding's (1999, p. 25) genuine call for education to be "a democratic project". However, rather than abandoning Fielding's call for radical collegiality, we argue that set before it is Bourdieu's notion of rational pedagogy (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, p. 76) that would "help to reduce inequalities in education and culture". With the employment of this rational pedagogy, it is then possible to engage with radical collegiality in a meaningful way that should have excluded the class anchorage and dependence on capital as outlined above. This paper will now outline how students from lower socio-economic status backgrounds were engaged in radical collegiality through curriculum co-design in Student-Led, Individually-Created Courses (SLICCs). This was made possible by the employment of an inclusive rational pedagogy through our Widening Horizons programme.

Student-led individually-created courses

Piloted initially in summer 2015, the SLICCs initiative is being developed across the University of Edinburgh to provide a flexible reflective framework for experiential learning based around an e-portfolio of evidence, reflective blogs and reports. SLICCs can be applied to a very wide range of experiential projects, tasks and opportunities, to reward co- and extra-curricular activities with academic credit, for instance summer projects, as well as being embedded within existing programmes of study. SLICCs can work across academic fields, with individuals or groups of students, even in different years, and in single- or inter-disciplinary ways across centres, programmes, schools and colleges. SLICCs enable students to better recognise and articulate their development through experiences, and boost students' learning and assessment literacy. A full set of resources have been developed to support staff and students to undertake SLICCs from foundation, through undergraduate and into postgraduate study (SCQF levels 7 to 11). SLICCs can give students the agency to propose their own learning experience, for example, activity in a profession or organisation, or the learning experience may be designed by staff and lie within existing programmes. In the SLICC framework, students propose their own plan around a chosen project. They start to define their anticipated learning based on five generic learning outcomes (LO) that address 'analysis' (LO1), 'application' (LO2), 'skills' (LO3), 'mindsets' (LO4), and 'evaluation' (LO5), re-interpreting these in the context of their own learning experience. These learning outcomes are aligned with our institutional graduate attributes, creating a direct tie to student development and employability at the same time as achieving significant gains in terms of assessment literacy. At this early stage, the student receives feedback from their SLICC staff tutor, who offers them guidance on how they may gain greater insight during the learning experience and maximise the opportunities. Students engaging with their anticipated learning before the experience has begun is a key step in the SLICC framework, enabling them to recognise the extent of their learning throughout. The student then undertakes their project, frequently reflecting on their learning in a regular blog, together with collecting evidence of that learning in their e-portfolio. This evidence can be varied, creative and extensive, exhibiting profound breadth and depth of insight. Students are provided with formative feedback on an 'Interim Reflective Report', where the students reflect on their learning and their progress towards achieving their personalised learning outcomes. This SLICC 'Interim Reflective Report', and feedback on it, then forms the basis of the final summative 'Final Reflective Report' of their learning journey and achievements. By way of example, in SLICCs running during summer months, students have gained academic credit for a wide range of experiences, including work placements, internships, academic summer studentships, expeditions, cultural exchanges, volunteering and self-directed research. An important element of the SLICC reflective learning and assessment framework is that it develops students' learning and assessment literacy, and ability to articulate that learning. It strongly values the significant learning opportunities that come from dealing with problems, challenges or even mistakes, which are often penalised by our existing assessment methods. If the student clearly articulates and evidences how they have taken full advantage of the learning opportunity, successfully navigated through and learned from the experience, and indicated a change in their future approaches, this can be strongly and positively recognised in the summative SLICC assessment.

Radical and rational

Our aim was to engage WP students with the newly launched SLICCs, and by doing so, engage our WP students with radical collegiality. However, as these take place over the summer months, students typically require an internship or an international experience to have been arranged; it is these experiences that the SLICCs wrap around and thereby a project that is based on the student's LOs agreed in co-operation with their academic tutor. We have outlined the barriers to participation in such radical collegiality for WP students. We required a situation where attempts were already being made to employ a rational pedagogy, where

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WP students were able to take part in the co- and extra-curricular. One of many such examples existed in our work engaging WP students with international experiences. Due to a range of factors such as low income, family commitments or the necessity for paid part-time summer work, WP students rarely graduate having been through an international experience. In addition to these commitments and circumstances, many such students also have low volume social capital (Crozier & Davies, 2006) and do not understand the "rules of the game" (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu, 1990) that we have mentioned previously. This lack of capital and knowledge of how to navigate the higher education system and beyond can lead to little appreciation for how important these co- or extra-curricular activities are. Given that graduates from non-traditional backgrounds can also face disadvantage in the labour market (Thomas, 2002; Gorard et al., 2006; Jacob, Klein, & Iannelli, 2015), it is vital that WP students have equal access to those opportunities that will prepare them for the world of work, as the rest of the student cohort does. The engagement with such a rich and diverse set of student experiences leads to the development of key graduate attributes and in turn increased employability. Kuh (1995, p. 124) refers to this as engaging with the "other curriculum". Moffatt (1988) noted that "For about 40 percent of students, the do-it-yourself side of college [what took place outside the classroom] was the most significant educational experience". While Howard (1986, p. 551) notes that "too much importance has been given to grades, too little attention has been paid to extracurricular activities." It is clear that participation in co- and extra-curricular activities is vital to each and every student. However, institutions "cannot force students to participate in organized campus activities or perform leadership roles. However, they can and should be accountable for creating the conditions that promote such behaviour" (Kuh 1995 p. 150). The Widening Horizons programme (WH) creates such conditions and provides such an opportunity for WP students. The project provides a fully funded international experience, so financial barriers to participation are removed, with a timetable of academic and socio-cultural activities and classes. In addition to the intrinsic value of an international experience, the project allows for the development of skills and attributes (Crossman & Clarke, 2010; McGourty, 2014), but also an understanding of how and why to navigate the co- and extra-curricular of campus life. WH is an example of this rational pedagogy as it removes the class anchorage to international experiences and builds the socio-cultural capital that is required to then take part in the radical collegiality of the SLICCs. WH students were actively encouraged to use the SLICCS opportunity to support their development during their international experience and to give it formal recognition and academic credit. As a result, 45% of the SLICCs cohort from summer 2016 were part of the WH initiative, without the employment of a radical pedagogy none of the 45% would have taken part in SLICCs. The students focused on topics such as: 'Music and Identity in India', 'Gaining understanding of life as a woman in South India' or 'An intensive course in Swahili in Tanzania'. For each of these, students worked in partnership with their tutor to develop and refine their own personal LOs for their SLICC and consider models of reflective learning practice. The students provided evidence of their learning in a number of different ways, through written pieces, photographs, audio clips and sketch books. Engaging with the five LOs – analysis, application, skills, mindsets and evaluation – led the students to a number of conclusions. Firstly they were able to freely express and evidence their learning, often in a very creative manner, partly due to their ownership of the curriculum – it was their project. Secondly the students became better at monitoring and understanding their own development, but perhaps more importantly was the surfacing of an understanding and appreciation of their pre-existing higher order skills and attributes. Recalling the idea of speaking the same language (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), we see the students develop the capital required to effectively engage in discussions with staff and students about their work. As well as that, and very importantly, we see how the staff and non-WP students begin to accept the value of what our WP students have to say, their perspective, told in a new way.

Conclusions

As an institution, we believe in the power of student agency (Basu, Barton, Clairmont, & Locke, 2008; Reeve & Tseng, 2011), and in particular, the importance of students as partners and co-creators. Arnold and Clarke (2014) commented on how the term agency has "lacked explicit operationalisation" (p. 736) and again there has been a "lack of coherence in its research usage" (p. 735). In the context of this paper we prefer to think of agency as a combination of two things, firstly is 'projectivity' – the capacity to fulfil ones goals while acting in accordance with a set of personal values (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Secondly, Sharma's (2007, p. 300) notion that "an individual does not have agency, but under opportune circumstances, she enacts or exercises agency". It is essential that regardless of background or experience, we enable all our students to harness, build and exercise their own agency. Yet we recognise some of the potential barriers for WP students in this area – borne out not only by theory and research in the sector but also by day-to-day experience. Having linked the WH initiative with SLICCs, we are able to work with our WP students, encouraging them to make the most of opportunities available, helping them see the value to them now and for their futures. The combination of initiative creates a supported opportunity that is specifically relevant to WP students, boosting their confidence, strengthening their graduate attributes and increasing their self-awareness. As highlighted in McCabe and Speirs (2016), this mirrors and stimulates equivalent strategies for our wider student body.

By engaging WP students with WH we witness the employment of a rational pedagogy. Building from this pedagogy we are able to see WP students become part of a partnership project around co-curriculum design. These WP students are therefore able to experience all the benefits of radical collegiality that they otherwise would not. We then find that with student agency in terms of 'projectivity', WP students are able to fulfil their own personal goals through taking part in WH but also through completing a project – with academic credit – that they have co-created. We would see this as an example of the WP student exercising agency. This expression of agency continues after the student has returned from their international experience and submitted their final reflective piece of work. As a result of the WP student having grown in capital and beginning to understand the 'rules of the game', they continue to take part in campus based co- and extra-curricular activities. Supported opportunities such as these have an

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immediacy and perceived accessibility that draw WP students to engage and participate with both the opportunities and, through them, the graduate attributes and co-creation agendas.

All students go through multiple transitions, but this paper has focused on elements of transitions through the undergraduate degree programme and how these prepare students for the transition to life beyond higher education. The WP student faces a number of additional challenges associated with multiple transitions; as Quinn (2010, p. 119) notes “the terms of the transition are set by others”. While Ecclestone, Biesta, and Hughes (2010, p. 6) reminds us that “successful transition requires students to navigate existing institutional pathways or systems”. We want the outcome of each of these elements of transition to result in a positive sense of development for our students, but we have outlined the necessity for various forms of capital that this requires. Otherwise students may feel that they do not have the dispositions required to grasp various opportunities. Although still relatively new, early signs are that this genuine combination of radical collegiality and rational pedagogy, produces a deep impact for both the students and the staff involved, changing mindsets, allowing opportunities to exercise agency, developing passion, or perhaps reinvigorating it, for learning and widening horizons for all involved.

Biographies

Dr Speirs works on a number of Widening Participation projects as a practitioner and researcher. His particular interests include: peer related pedagogical practices, retention, returning adult learners, early years engagement, equity of student experience and the academic underachievement of males.

Dr Riley is Director of Student Selected Components for the undergraduate medicine programme, where students choose their field of interest, gain research experience and undertake career exploration. Seconded to the Institute for Academic Development he is developing his interests in reflection, experiential learning, and student agency, to develop SLICCs institution-wide.

Dr McCabe leads the University's Employability Consultancy. With a background in statistical epidemiology, international development, careers advice and higher education projects, he is now responsible for supporting institutional strategy and initiatives relating to students' employability, development and graduate attributes, as well as fostering associated local-level activities and enhancements.

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