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ORIGINAL WORK OF RESEARCH

Experiences of learning through collaborative evaluation from a Masters Programme in Professional Education

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from a collaborative evaluation project within a masters programme in professional education. The project aimed to increase knowledge of research methodologies and methods through authentic learning where participants worked in partnership with the tutor to evaluate the module which they were studying.

The project processes, areas of the course evaluated and the data collection methods are outlined. The findings focus on key themes from evaluating the effectiveness of using a collaborative evaluation approach, including: enhanced student engagement; creativity of the collaborative evaluation approach; equality between the tutor and students; and enhanced research skills. Discussion focuses on: the outcomes and effectiveness of the project and tutor reflections on adopting a collaborative approach. This paper highlights lessons from the project relevant to those interested in staff-student partnership approaches and those facilitating postgraduate learning and teaching programmes and educational research courses.

Keywords: collaborative evaluation; student engagement; research-teaching linkages.

Introduction

Higher education institutions are expected to be accountable; this includes a requirement for regular review and evaluation of taught courses (QAA, 2006). One of the most commonly used

measures of quality is student feedback via evaluation questionnaires, often distributed at the end of a course. Many authors have identified limitations to this evaluation method and have suggested employing a wider range of approaches in order to maximise the authenticity of findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1992; Kember, Leung, & Kwan, 2002). Some course tutors use evaluations throughout a course, offering the opportunity to make adaptations in response to participant feedback and for the benefit of the current cohort of students (George & Cowan, 1999).

Alongside this emphasis on evaluation, staff responsible for postgraduate courses in learning, teaching and assessment aim to ensure participants are aware of key developments and research in academic practice including: student engagement; improving research skills and critical thinking skills; and strengthening teaching-research linkages (Brew, 2006; Hand & Bryson, 2008; Kemp & Seagraves, 1995). Another key message from higher education funding bodies is for students to become 'co-creators' of their own learning (Scottish Funding Council, 2008). Academic development staff face additional pressure to model good practice within their courses on learning and teaching (McAlpine, 2006; Swennen, Lunenberg & Korthagen, 2008).

In response to these imperatives, this paper presents a collaborative evaluation project where participants and staff worked in partnership to evaluate the module that these participants were studying. The Introduction to Education Research module that this paper focuses on currently forms part of the MSc in Professional Education programme at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh. The Introduction to Education Research module was undertaken by 20 participants in 2006/07. These participants included health professionals with an educational remit (12), academic staff from Queen Margaret University (5), non-health professionals with an educational remit (2) and academic staff from another university (1). The course tutor worked in the Centre for Academic Practice. Within this group, there were three international students studying full time. All other students studied the programme part-time. The module lasted for 13 weeks and comprised 25 hours of classroom contact and 125 hours of independent and directed study. The university's virtual learning environment (VLE) provided access to relevant learning resources and provided a forum for questions, discussions, group work and evaluations.

The module aims to provide participants with an overview of the theoretical foundations and methods of educational research. In this context, the collaborative evaluation project was intended to act as a tool to evaluate the module and as a process where tutor and participants enhanced their learning about research and evaluation methodologies through active participation in evaluating the module.

The aim of this paper is to present the experiences and outcomes from the collaborative evaluation project, but also to explore the lessons learned from adopting a collaborative evaluation approach. First, the theoretical background to the project is outlined. Then the methodology section details the participant and tutor roles in the project, the choices taken by participants in the evaluation process, and the methods of data collection used. The project outcomes, including participants' experiences, are then presented. The discussion section focuses on investigating whether the project met its intended aims and includes tutor reflections upon adopting a collaborative evaluation approach. Finally some lessons learned and conclusions are presented.

Theoretical background

Many authors, particularly those involved in school education, have emphasised that students should be given greater choice in the classroom (Dewey, 1916; Rogers & Freiberg, 1969; Shor, 1992). More specifically in relation to higher education, active student participation and experiential learning are considered crucial for students to engage in authentic, relevant and meaningful learning; for breaking down power differentials between staff and students that can support learning; and for students to experience the freedom to become critical thinkers and critical beings in the world (Barnett & Coate, 2005; Taylor, Barr, & Steele, 2002).

One approach to enhance authenticity for participants on a Postgraduate Certificate or Masters programme in Professional Education is to consider the use of collaborative participatory evaluation. There is a paucity of literature outlining collaborative evaluation approaches that involve students as partners in the evaluation process. Kane et al. (2008) state that commonality resulting from collaborative processes creates a learning environment within which the evaluator is no longer perceived as the expert. Thus the outcome of such collaboration represents the multiple realities of all participants.

Furthermore, Haggis (2006) argues that in collaborative learning it is the tutor's responsibility to create situations within which student perceptions are integral to the subject being taught. In attempting to fulfil this responsibility, the tutor facilitated student/tutor collaboration in the design and evaluation of the module that the students were studying and learning about pedagogic evaluation methodologies. Students became actively engaged through being allowed to choose the subject and data collection methods for the evaluation. This collaborative approach was informed by aims to ensure the students were given the freedom to make choices and that they were viewed as knowledgeable and critical partners in learning (Freire, 2003; Rogers & Freiberg, 1969). This collaborative approach has the potential to enhance learning benefits to the participants and tutor as well as to the evaluation outcomes.

Within relevant higher education literature, there is limited of research describing module or programme evaluation where students are involved in all stages of the process. Gapp & Fisher (2006) outline work involving action research to evaluate course design, whilst Giles, Martin, Bryce & Henry (2004) describe working in partnership with students to evaluate an online learning resource. These two Australian publications appear to have most similarity to the work described here. However, Giles and her colleagues involved only five students as partners, whereas, the project outlined in this paper initially involved the entire class of students and all students were invited to take part in all elements of the evaluation process. Gapp & Fisher (2006) and Giles et al. (2004) did not involve students in the writing process, whilst in contrast this paper has been written collaboratively by a subgroup of participants and the tutor. Other authors have engaged students as co-researchers in an attempt to achieve a learner-centred evaluation (for example, Creese & Kemelfield, 2002); however, it appears uncommon for students to be given the opportunity to collaborate in evaluating their own course.

This work, therefore contributes to the currently limited literature in this area. It outlines a possible approach to learning that aligns with current priorities to enhance student engagement, research and critical thinking skills, and to find genuine ways of strengthening research – teaching

linkages. It also offers the opportunity to enhance both current and future curricula within those areas of learning and teaching that participants identify as most important. In addition, it may also offer academic developers an opportunity to model good practice in evaluation as well as in collaborative learning. The methods and processes of the collaborative evaluation are outlined in more detail in the following section.

Methodology

In adopting a collaborative participatory evaluation methodology, this project was informed by critical pedagogy and critical inquiry literature, which emphasises the political nature of education and the need to challenge accepted ways of thinking and acting in the classroom (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000; Dardar, Baltodano & Torres, 2003). Participatory evaluation "...is a partnership approach to evaluation in which stakeholders actively engage in developing the evaluation and all phases of its implementation" (Zukoski & Luluquisen, 2002, p. 1). Participatory and collaborative evaluation aim to flatten the hierarchy between the evaluators and the evaluated (Feuerstein, 1987), and Patton (2002) claims that in participative evaluation, the facilitator values the participants' expertise and perspectives. These characteristics of collaborative evaluation were achieved in this project, through the students and tutor working together to evaluate and critique the Introduction to Education Research Module. This approach was favoured over, for example, a more traditional, tutor-led evaluative methodology for the potential added benefits to tutor and student learning from adopting a more collaborative process. As Patton (2002) claims, "One of the negative connotations often associated with evaluation is that it is something done *to* people. Participatory evaluation, in contrast, involves working *with* people" (Patton, 2002, p. 183).

On the first day of contact, the tutor introduced the concept of a collaborative evaluation project. Ethical approval had been granted, in advance, by the University ethics committee. Participation in the project was voluntary and it was made clear to the 20 module participants that there were no penalties for not participating. The module assessment was anonymously marked, thus bearing no relation to participation in the project. Anyone reluctant to participate would be given a standard evaluation form to complete at the end of the module. However, all students in the class chose to take part. The tutor outlined her role as supporter and facilitator of this participant-led process.

Participants were asked to select aspects of the module to evaluate and then to design and implement appropriate methods of data collection and analysis. Freedom to evaluate any aspect of the module was welcomed by participants and provided an opportunity for individuals to scrutinise areas of individual or shared interest. This freedom also minimised tutor influence upon the evaluation outcomes resulting in a diverse range of evaluation topics. Table 1 outlines the topics chosen and the data collection methods used by those who led evaluations during the five face-to-face classroom sessions.

Table 1. Evaluation topics and data collection methods chosen by participants.

| Session number | Topic/Questions | Data collection method |
|----------------|---|--|
| 1 | What did you learn? What did you appreciate? What would you change? | "Post-it" notes posted and displayed on 3 flip |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | charts. |
| 2 | Do you have a preference for using quantitative or qualitative methods? (Part 1) | Anonymously submitted on paper using a pseudonym, in class. |
| 2 | How many hours of contact time today could have been delivered in another way? | Students posted a vote against a range of numbers of hours on a flip chart. |
| 3 | Is engagement with WebCT greater if tasks are assessed? | Questionnaire posted into a discussion forum of VLE. |
| 4 | Is source of funding linked to rationale for module choice? | Questionnaire posted into a discussion forum of VLE. |
| 4 | Which teaching methods in the module do you find helpful? | Questionnaire posted into a discussion forum of VLE. |
| 5 | Do you have a preference for using quantitative or qualitative methods? (Part 2) | Anonymously submitted on paper using a pseudonym. Results collated and comparison made to responses in Part 1 |
| 5 | Which elements of the reading list and course handouts have you found most helpful? | Ranking exercise and Likert scale questionnaire handed out in class. |

At some sessions, more than one evaluation exercise was conducted. Eight of the 20 students from the class volunteered to lead an evaluation exercise. These eight students represented a range of international/home, male/female, older/younger, confident/less confident students. The expectation was not that all students would lead evaluation exercises, but that they would have the opportunity to lead parts of the evaluation if they wished to. The tutor did not expect equal contributions from students, but instead, the aim was to provide equitable opportunities for participation.

The data from these evaluations were used in class discussions in subsequent classes and by the tutor for designing teaching for the remainder of the module. Rather than focus upon these local findings, this paper focuses upon the outcomes of evaluating the actual collaborative evaluation project itself. Once students had completed the module, the tutor suggested that the group might continue meeting to develop the evaluation further. Almost all of the class expressed interest. It soon became apparent, however, that the pressures of professional and personal commitments would preclude the committed participation of a majority of the group. In the end, one third of the class (n=6) and the tutor opted to continue meeting to perform further evaluation of both the collaborative evaluation project and the overall module and in order to write an article for publication. The six students, who joined this subgroup from the original class of 20, were comprised of two members of academic staff from Queen Margaret University, two health professionals with an educational remit, one non-health professional with an educational remit and one full-time international student. There was no relationship between leading an evaluation in

class and membership of the writing group.

Two questionnaires were then designed by the subgroup in order to evaluate the participants' experience of the collaborative evaluation project and to evaluate the module (see Table 2).

Table 2. Second cycle of evaluation: questions from the collaborative evaluation project and module evaluation questionnaires.

| Collaborative Evaluation Project Questions | Module Evaluation Questions |
|---|--|
| What influenced your decision to participate? | Describe, briefly, 2 aspects of your personal learning from this module. |
| What was your experience of leading an evaluation exercise? If you led an evaluation exercise, what influenced your choice of evaluation topic? | Was the assessment appropriate in meeting the module outcomes? Describe changes to your practice as a result of undertaking the module. |
| What was your experience of participating in evaluations led by others? | Any additional comments? |
| How did your experience of the action research evaluation project compare to previous experiences of standard module evaluations? | |
| Any additional comments? | |

The questionnaires were distributed by e-mail to all 20 students who studied the module. Participants were given the option of completing the questionnaires on-line, or if they wished to remain anonymous, returning their questionnaires by post. In total, 12 module evaluation questionnaires (MEQs) were returned and 11 collaborative evaluation project questionnaires (CEPQs), demonstrating a 60% and 55% response rate respectively. These return rates were encouraging considering that it is not uncommon for a return rate to be as low as 15% (Denscombe, 1998). The questionnaires were returned anonymously, so we cannot comment on the particular characteristics of those who responded or did not respond other than to note that one member of the subgroup explicitly stated that they did not return the questionnaire. Nevertheless, feedback was gathered from over half of the class to both questionnaires, and this feedback was almost entirely positive. The results from open questions in the questionnaires were analysed by a process of thematic analysis, similar to that outlined by Leininger (1985). Results were collated by one member of the subgroup who analysed the transcriptions for emergent themes and other members of the group each compared their own analysis of key themes against this original thematic analysis. The following section outlines the outcomes and experiences from the questionnaires.

Outcomes and participants' experiences

The key inter-related themes that emerged from the analysis of the questionnaires were: enhanced student engagement, motivation and enthusiasm; creativity of the research approach; the more equal relationship with the course tutor; and increased student confidence in their research skills. Quotes included below are illustrative of the views expressed in the questionnaires rather than representative of all students' experiences.

The students reported being engaged in the learning process because it was relevant and they had ownership of the process. This was consistent with the aims of the project and also with Brown, Collins & Duguid's (1989) description of authentic learning and Patton's (2002) key principles of fully participatory and collaborative inquiry. As one participant stated *'I was much more engaged in the process and thought about the way the module was running throughout, rather than just at the end'*. Just over half of the respondents from the CEPQs stated that their participation in the collaborative evaluation project had benefited their learning, with high levels of group involvement, and variety being identified as key motivating factors: *'the approach with this module engaged my interest and...I probably thought more deeply about what I wanted to say and how my learning/knowledge was developing'*. This implies that some participants were doing what Rogers & Freiberg (1969) describe as entering into the process of learning.

Participants emphasised the importance of having the opportunity to learn by doing. One participant commented that the approach taken was, *'...a dynamic sort of evaluation, compared to those of other courses'*. One student who led an evaluation exercise outlined personal reasons for choosing her evaluation area, stating that she *'...wanted a topic that needed statistical work to get practical experience...'*. Whilst another student reported valuable learning from their experiences of leading an evaluation exercise, describing difficulties caused when respondents failed to follow the instructions provided. Many students commented that the experiential learning experience *'...was much more interesting and fun...'*, suggesting that participants were actively engaged, which Boud et al. (1994) argue is critical for learning.

In both the CEPQs and MEQs, students described the tutor as effective in supporting them to examine a variety of evaluation topics and the tutor was credited with having adopted a creative approach. One student stated that, *'...we were treated as equals from day one'*. This was a key aim of the project, as Patton argues, "genuinely collaborative approaches to research and evaluation require power sharing" (Patton, 2002, p.183). Another student argued that the approach *'...engaged the entire class, giving individuals ownership and equity with the course leader...'*. One participant reported that the tutor managed to achieve a *'...good balance between being supportive and allowing me to lead...'*.

The project has, for some participants, demystified the research process. One student originally described themselves as *'research-phobic'*, but along with others reported having developed the confidence, knowledge and skills to design, conduct, analyse and critically evaluate research. One participant reported that since completing the module they are *'...planning a research project...'* and *'...trying to get some research experience...'*. One student said the module had enabled them *'...to put theory into practice...'*. Another student reported that they had gained an *'...increased understanding of research especially methods and methodology...'* and that they had

'...enthusiasm and increased interest to go and continue to read about research and I am now thinking about continuing with the course to dissertation level, previously I wanted to stop at diploma'. One participant reported that they, '...have since carried out a small scale case study to develop the knowledge and skills I gained...'. These statements demonstrate students who have become engaged and enthusiastic about educational research. Perhaps even more encouraging, is that some participants appear to have moved from simply applying their knowledge of research methods in the classroom to what Eraut (1994) describes as transferring this knowledge to a new professional context.

The majority of respondents to the CEPQ (n=8) stated that they had taken part in all evaluation exercises with only one student experiencing difficulty in completing questionnaires within the VLE due to intermittent web access problems at home. When asked to compare their previous experiences of module evaluations with the collaborative evaluation project, 10 out of 11 CEPQ respondents were entirely positive. The one student, whose response was less positive, acknowledged the process was a *'new experience'* but could not decide whether the experience was *'better or just different'*.

Clearly, individual student experiences of the project varied, and the six students who chose to continue working together after the end of the module, demonstrated the greatest engagement in the project. The experiences and outcomes recorded here also inevitably reflect the views expressed by those who completed the evaluation questionnaires.

Discussion

The following discussion focuses on whether the collaborative evaluation project met its intended aims and also outlines the tutor's reflections on adopting a collaborative approach to evaluating a module.

Did the project outcomes meet the project aims?

This project set out with two main aims - that the collaborative evaluation approach would: 1) evaluate the module and 2) create a process where tutor and participants enhanced their learning about research and evaluation methodologies.

Addressing the first of these aims; the findings from the participant-led evaluation exercises were used to adapt the module in response to the feedback from the current cohort of students while they were still studying the module. These changes included, for example, extra time being built in for discussing the quantitative – qualitative debate. This data has also contributed to the redesign of the module for the following academic year. For example, teaching approaches and specific reading that were found to be most helpful by students have been emphasised within the redesigned module. Programme staff have also gained an insight into areas participants were particularly interested in evaluating within the module including whether contact teaching hours should be changed – an issue that the tutor had not previously considered.

In terms of the second aim, most respondents reported that their research skills were enhanced through being involved in real evaluation research activities with the tutor. In accordance with

Kane et al (2008) this demonstrates the degree of enhanced learning achieved through a shared experience of collaborative evaluation. Participants also reported increased confidence to undertake research due to their experiences from the project and from the module as a whole. These outcomes meet the aims of the project, but what is particularly encouraging is the reported level of motivation and enthusiasm as a result of having had more ownership over their own learning. Those participants who participated in collaborative writing in the final stages of the project also reported their enhanced confidence to undertake writing for publication (Bovill & Roseweir, 2008). These additional outcomes are consistent with Patton's claims for participative evaluation processes that "...have an impact on participators and collaborators quite beyond whatever findings or report they might produce by working together" (Patton, 2002, p. 183-184).

Tutor reflections on adopting a collaborative approach

From the perspective of the tutor, this project has presented a number of challenges. Choosing to adopt the collaborative evaluation approach resulted in a substantial number of extra hours of work, additional to the conventional role of module coordinator. This extra work consisted of: supporting participants to undertake evaluations in class; collating some of the evaluation exercises; corresponding and meeting regularly with participants; and taking minutes and contributing to the writing and editing process in the subgroup that continued to meet. This raises concerns about the sustainability of collaborative evaluation approaches as part of a course. In this case, writing activity extended over two years beyond completion of the module. However, the rewards of witnessing participants becoming enthusiastic about evaluation research, gaining confidence in undertaking research and writing for publication and the shared experience of learning were substantial. Also, it was very rewarding to genuinely contribute to many current priorities within academic practice, such as student engagement, enhanced critical thinking and research skills, and authentic teaching-research linkages. The authenticity and embedded nature of these priorities within this module curriculum are a refreshing alternative to what Atwood (2008) and Parker (2003) have described as instrumental approaches to teaching with a narrow focus on securing employment, currently dominant within higher education.

Participant enthusiasm and motivation was noticeable within the classroom where students were animated and keen to discuss the findings of their evaluation exercises. Swennen et al (2008) maintain that tutors should model practices they are attempting to promote. At a time when Manathunga (2007) has observed that due to their location and role within universities, "academic developers are particularly vulnerable to being colonised by neoliberal discourses..." (Manthunga, 2007, p. 29), this collaborative evaluation enabled the tutor to model authentic evaluation practice whilst simultaneously pursuing a meaningful engagement with university and academic development priorities. Participants were provided with an opportunity to develop their own skills in pedagogic enquiry and to negotiate their individual role within a collaborative enterprise through ongoing dialogue with the tutor and peers. This is particularly valuable within a postgraduate Professional Education programme run by academic development staff aiming to demonstrate a range of pedagogic practices applicable across the disciplines. The significant benefits to both tutor and participants in terms of learning demonstrates that on balance the extra time and effort involved in running a collaborative evaluation project was entirely worthwhile. Nevertheless, one key lesson from this work is that those considering adopting a similar approach must be wary of committing themselves to supporting too many collaborative projects

simultaneously. On reflection, it is clear that the extra energy required to effectively facilitate this kind of project might restrict the frequency with which it could be undertaken. A sentiment shared by Moore (2004) who claims that the implementation of collaborative learning requires a high degree of insight, time and energy.

In reflecting on these experiences, the tutor's teaching approach was influenced by a broadly Freirian philosophy. This helps to explain why in this project the tutor adopted a pedagogical approach prioritising what Haggis (2006) describes as 'collective inquiry' and highlighting Rogers and Freiberg's (1969) aim to distribute power more equitably between tutor and participants. The collaborative approach adopted enabled us to "access and understand different constructions of knowledge...by giving particular voice to those whose voices were not usually heard" (Kane et al, 2008, p. 106). In common with visions of a more equal relationship between tutor and students outlined by Freire (2003), and Shor (1992) this collaborative evaluation project was an ongoing learning process for both tutor and students.

One lesson learned by the tutor was the importance of making a more explicit overall plan of what the group wanted to evaluate. The tutor left this relatively open at the beginning of this process in an attempt to give students full control over what was evaluated and how it was evaluated. However, experience demonstrated that it would have been beneficial for the group to create an initial overall project plan in which their evaluation exercises would fit together more explicitly. However, it would also be important to retain some flexibility within this plan.

The tutor was encouraged that all students chose to participate in the project and that some of the less confident students also chose to lead evaluation exercises. Levels of participation and contributions in any collaborative group will inevitably be varied and unequal (Kane et al., 2008; Moore, 2004) We experienced some of the predicted frustrations and challenges created by differences in the levels and nature of contribution from members of the group, but our experiences were predominantly positive and all group members contributed meaningfully to project processes. The group attributes some of this success to the ground rules agreed collaboratively at the beginning of the project.

Conclusions

The collaborative evaluation approach outlined in this paper has been a rich learning and development experience for both participants and tutor. Our findings contribute to the growing body of literature demonstrating the importance of employing imaginative methods of evaluating teaching that can enhance current learning experiences, not just those of future cohorts of students. There are few examples of collaborative evaluation in higher education literature that involve students in evaluating their own module to the extent that this project has done. This suggests there is room for further development of collaborative evaluation within higher education. This approach enabled academic development staff to model authentic learning and has contributed to enhancing the confidence of a group of new academics and health professionals to carry out educational research.

The benefits of using collaborative evaluation outlined in this paper suggest that this methodology has some additional benefits to those of many predominant models of evaluation and offers the

opportunity for students to enhance their ownership of, and their engagement in, learning. Key lessons from this project include: setting aside enough time to undertake this kind of work meaningfully; ensuring that an initial plan is negotiated between students and tutor in order for diverse contributions to be meaningful within the group plan; and taking time to collaboratively set and agree ground rules – these can be invaluable in negotiating group processes and behaviour related to the mutual responsibility of a group project.

The collaborative approach described offers unlimited ways in which new groups of tutors and students could concurrently learn about research methodologies and evaluate a module. This approach has the potential to be used to enhance creativity and learning within educational research courses and within postgraduate programmes in learning, teaching and assessment.

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