



Student Engagement: Students as active partners in shaping their learning experience

Case Study Title	Students as Change Agents
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Department / Faculty	Graduate School of Education
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Summary:

'Students as Change Agents' is a student-led action research project undertaken at the University of Exeter. It aims to bring together the university's students' union known as the Guild of Students, with academic staff and current students, as partners in improving learning and teaching. The Guild of Students organises and supports student representatives from all subject areas to contribute to 'Staff Student Liaison Committees' (SSLCs). Membership of each SSLC consists of student representatives and staff members, with one student acting as Chair. The Students as Change Agents project has involved the student representatives and the Chairs of the SSLCs by supporting them to take the lead in bringing about evidence-based change by undertaking small-scale research projects.

Students involved decide on a topic for investigation (something that has been raised in a SSLC meeting), develop a research question, plan their own methods of data collection and analysis, and provide recommendations and solutions. Over a period of eighteen months, twenty small-scale projects have now involved mostly undergraduate students in almost all subject areas, investigating topics such as assessment and feedback, seminar provision, technology, employability, personal and peer- tutoring, and academic writing.

Background

The idea that students could act as 'agents for change' was first instigated by Brenda Smith of the Higher Education Academy, who ran a workshop at the University of Exeter for educational development staff. This workshop explored the concept of students acting as change agents, in the context of assessment and feedback. Staff were interested in the idea that students were capable of more than being taught and were interested in actively engaging with other aspects of learning and teaching. What emerged was a desire to find a

way of engaging students, so that we would not only be listening to the student voice, but that students could act as 'change agents'. A 'change agent' is something or someone who brings about, or helps bring about change, and is to a certain extent, dissatisfied with that they see around them.

The project centred on a further key principle, that students should be equal and active partners in bringing about change in pedagogy. There were already a range of opportunities for students to engage with the university however, the emphasis of these were on the university being the driver e.g. the university asking students to evaluate their student experience. This project was an opportunity for a different type of engagement, one where students were the drivers for change and with the emphasis being on student action rather than that of the university. This led to the development of a project where students research a topic of their choosing and make recommendations and take action to improve learning and teaching in their subject areas.

Description of your activity:

Students from SSLCs were asked whether there was a learning and teaching issue which they would like to support their School to improve. They would be able to do this by researching the identified issue and eventually making recommendations for change and creating outputs (e.g. advice booklets, presentations and videos etc). They were asked to complete an application form explaining what their research question was, how they would collect data, what support they would need, the benefits of their project to their School and what outcomes they wanted to achieve. These were signed off by a member of academic staff involved with the SSLC, usually the School's Head of Learning and Teaching.

Students had the support of a graduate management trainee who helped to design questionnaires, provided some basic research training (e.g. interview question design and the running of focus groups) as well as providing general support to the students. In the first year, ten projects were researched by individual or groups of students on a wide range of topics including student engagement in lectures, seminars, peer tutoring, assessment and feedback and learning spaces. The students' findings were presented by the students at a student-led research conference at the end of the year. This is attended by a large range of senior academics and School management staff as well as students. The Schools are then expected to take responsibility for embedding recommendations for change into strategic planning and action.

Below are a couple of the projects in more detail so that you can get a flavour of what was achieved by the students involved:

School/ Department	Topic	Some key findings	Recommendations & Solutions
Classics	Peer language tutors Language skills on entry to Classics courses vary enormously and those students entering at Level 1 can sometimes struggle to keep up with the pace of language classes. Could third year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students come with differing levels of ancient language learning. 38% of students study Level 1 in their first year, but many struggle if they have not had any previous experience of 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A peer language tutoring system should be implemented. Run a pilot at the start of term with 5 -10 willing volunteers. If this is successful, look to develop the scheme.

	<p>students help support first year students entering study at Level 1 through a peer tutoring scheme? What would the cost and benefits be of such a scheme? How might such a scheme be implemented? Would there be a need for training?</p>	<p>ancient language learning.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 67% of students thought that supporting others helped them in their learning. • 70% of students would find a peer tutor useful. 	<p>Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer language scheme was set up and run by students in the Department of Classics.
Psychology	<p>Podcasts</p> <p>How do students use podcasts? What are the benefits of lecture podcasting? How do they impact upon lecture attendance and exam performance? The worry of having a negative impact on attendance is currently a reason for not podcasting more lectures. This study hopes to provide school staff with a better understanding of why students have been asking for podcasts through the SSLC.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Podcasts are being used extensively in the US and is beginning to be used in the UK. • Studies show that they improve exam results because students can review what was said in a lecture and make more comprehensive notes. • The study found that podcasts were used to make notes, recap on things missed in a lecture and recap on information they have not understood. • 89% of students felt more prepared for exams where a podcast was available. • Very few students use them as a substitute for lectures and 77% of students would be prepared to have 	<p>Podcast use in Psychology should be supported by academic staff. DVC has recommended trialling podcasts of all first year lectures.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Podcasts should be made available for more lectures. • Lecturers can monitor attendance formally or subjectively if concerned about falling attendance. • Podcast provision will be limited if problems arise. <p>Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More podcast were introduced. • Several other subjects began to podcast lectures. • In one subject, students are responsible for recording and uploading podcasts.

		their attendance monitored for more podcasts.	
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The project has now run for two consecutive years. The second year built on the success of the first with a further nine projects being presented, many from Schools who had not previously taken part, wanting to get involved.

Impact

There have been some very obvious outputs which have directly impacted students at the University. For example, as a result of research undertaken by a Geography student on support for essay writing, a skills workshop was set up. Research done by a Psychology student on the use of podcasting of lectures has resulted in an increase in the use of podcasts not only in their School but across the University. In the Business School, students now act as technology champions and are responsible for recording and uploading podcasts of a variety of teaching sessions. Essay guides and good practice guides have been produced by the students which have been distributed to all students within their Schools. One student ran a careers fair tailored specifically to Archaeology students' needs. In the first year almost 1000 students were involved in the research through completion of student-designed questionnaires and attendance in focus groups and many more were involved by the second year.

However, some of the project's impact is harder to measure such as how the project has changed the way staff and students at the University view each other and how they work together to bring about change. Sometimes the research outcomes can surprise the student and/or academic. However, when working from a basis of well researched evidence, change happens in a more sustainable, positive way; in which students and staff are partners in creating an excellent student experience.

Issues and challenges

When the project was first started, it was not known who would want to be involved. The aim was to work in partnership with the Students' Guild but initially there was some confusion about what the purpose of the project was. This served as a lesson. The project was such a new and innovative way of working with students, it was important to establish very clear messages so students and staff (including administrative staff) understood what the project entailed. Clear communication was vital to ensuring that staff and students worked well together.

These are some important aspects of the project which you may wish to consider:

Communication:

- Make sure that the right people know about it and engage academic staff early on. It also helps to think about how students communicate: students campaign but

softening their language can have more of an impact. Ensure you get permission from staff involved and acknowledge the hard work of members of staff. Finally, it is important to be sensitive to different perspectives.

Funding:

- Students were not paid to take part but buying sandwiches, fruit and refreshments for the focus groups was a real hit. Funding ensured that we were able to deliver the conferences to a professional standard and this encouraged people to attend, the students were taken seriously and the project subsequently gained more recognition.

Philosophy:

- Maintain your commitment to evidence-based change by having a vision of what might be achieved and engaging those around you in this.

Support:

- Students may be keen but help with designing research tools and keeping them motivated by being available for discussion.

Advice to others

This type of project can be quite demanding for both staff and students however if it is run well it is also extremely rewarding. Ensuring that students are positive about researching their topic and act impartially as possible will mean that their research is taken seriously and they learn a whole host of professional skills. Finally the outcomes of the project can have great implications on learning and teaching. Here are a few hints and tips for both staff and students:

Staff:

- Ensure students get permission from their School/Department etc before students start researching.
- Set high expectations of the students who get involved – the project is supposed to be challenging.
- Support students with their research. This could include, for example, training them to run focus groups, helping to design questionnaires, undertaking data analysis as well as making contact with teaching staff.
- Enable students to share the good practice from their research – this is a good way of acknowledging the hard work of members of staff.
- Involve teaching staff as early on as possible – this will help them to engage with the findings and bring about change.

Students:

- Ensure the area you choose to research affects a large number of students on your course and is something that will have widespread benefit.
- Be respectful of those who teach on your course at all times and ensure that anonymity is held where appropriate.
- Get other students involved as this will help to manage the workload and build your group-working and team-leading skills.
- Do not be afraid to ask for help.
- See the project through to the end and handover your findings and recommendations if you are leaving at the end of the year.

Further details

ESCalate the HEA subject centre for Education is publishing a publication about Students as Change Agents. This will provide further information about the project and will include activities to engage staff and students in this agenda. The publication is due to be available towards the end of 2010.

You may also wish to visit the project's website for further details, including presentations made by the students: <http://as.exeter.ac.uk/support/educationenhancementprojects/change/>