



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

Case Study Title	Enhanced student engagement through collaborative evaluation of a research module.
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Summary:

On a Masters level educational research module, participants were invited to set up an action research project to collaborate in evaluating the module. Participants were encouraged to use the knowledge and skills learned on the module to design different evaluation exercises at each face to face class and to select suitable methods for collecting evaluation data about their own module. They then worked individually, in pairs or small groups to carry out the small scale evaluations and to collate and analyse the data gathered. My role as the module co-ordinator was to act as a facilitator and guide rather than taking any control of the direction the evaluation went in. The module cohort then agreed that a subgroup of the class would continue to meet after the end of the module to carry out further evaluation and write up their results for publication.

Background:

Much evaluation that takes place in higher education focuses on end of course/programme questionnaires. This approach has been criticised for its limitations by many authors with suggestions that a broader range of evaluation approaches need to be used (Guba & Lincoln, 1992; Kember, Leung, & Kwan, 2002). Some academic staff use formative evaluation during teaching that enable changes to be made in response to participant feedback and for the benefit of current cohorts of students (George & Cowan, 1999). However, there are few examples in the literature where students are given a high degree of control and decision making power over the evaluation of a module they are studying.

In an attempt to ensure that students on a Masters level educational research module would have an authentic learning experience with opportunities for application of knowledge learned, I encouraged students to set up an action research project to evaluate their own module. This project enabled students to make very strong research and teaching linkages that illustrate Healey and Jenkins (2009) description of a 'research based' approach where students actively undertake research and inquiry.

Action research is a form of enquiry used to investigate and evaluate work and is '...undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve...educational

practices, as well as their own understanding of these practices and situations in which these practices are carried out' (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, 162). One benefit of action research is that it can offer a democratic and collaborative approach involving stakeholders and can therefore be an inclusive process appropriate for a group of students who may be new to research and who wish to work collectively (McNiff and Whitehead, 2006). The traditional role of the researcher or tutor is adapted in action research. The lead researcher or tutor adopts the role of facilitator and acts as a catalyst to assist and support stakeholders (Stringer 2007).

Action research follows an experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984) and generally moves through stages of planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Kolb, 1984; Zuber-Skerritt 1992). Some authors have also described a research spiral within action research where stages of planning, acting, observing and reflecting are repeated but at progressively higher levels. These higher levels are reached through critical reflection on action and experience, which can lead to learning, and therefore new modes of action and experience of the topic being researched (Armstrong and Moore 2004; Carr and Kemmis 1986; Koshy 2005).

In suggesting to students that they might like to be involved in action research as an approach to module evaluation, I aimed to facilitate meaningful evaluation of the course in addition to providing valuable learning opportunities for students. Direction, content and processes of the evaluation research were student-determined, giving students control over elements of their own, and the group's, learning experiences.

Description of your activity:

I had the opportunity as module co-ordinator to redesign a Masters level educational research module. I thought that this was a real opportunity to enable participants to apply their educational research knowledge in practice through an authentic task – evaluating a module. Students seemed to be genuinely interested in this task as it related to their module and therefore they seemed to accept ownership of the project from quite an early stage. 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.

Participants were invited to set up an action research project to collaborate in evaluating the module. This was an entirely voluntary activity and any students that didn't want to take part were offered the opportunity to complete a standard University end of course evaluation form. All 20 participants on the module chose to take part. The early cycles of the action research project involved individuals, pairs and groups planning what they wanted to evaluate about the module, deciding how to collect this evaluation data and then reflecting upon what they had collected. They then planned their next rounds of evaluation and went through the action research cycle again. Finally, a smaller cohort of the group decided to enter another action research cycle where they collected final evaluation data about the module and also about what students thought of being involved in the action research project. This subgroup clearly demonstrated the greatest level of engagement with the project. The reflections on this work led to the subgroup collaborating with me to publish the outcomes of their evaluation experiences at conferences and in a peer reviewed international journal article (Bovill et al, 2010; Bovill and Roseweir, 2008; Bovill, 2007). My role throughout the project was to act as a facilitator and guide rather than taking any control of the direction the evaluation went in.

Although it was voluntary whether students chose to lead evaluation exercises, I was encouraged by the high level of participation and enthusiasm that students exhibited. Some of the quiet and shy members of the group took part in leading evaluations. I also think that some of the international students in the class became more engaged in the class and with their peers as a result of this collaborative approach. The participants became very engaged in the process choosing to use a wide range of different methodologies to carry out the evaluation. One of the things that I found most interesting was that participants chose to evaluate issues that I might not have considered evaluating, such as 'which were the most useful items on the reading list? and 'how many hours of today's class do you think were best conducted face to face in class or would you rather replaced with online activities?. The data informed changes to the module during the time when these students were studying the module, as well as informing changes to future iterations of the module.

Impact:

The evaluations that students carried out of both the module and of the action research project elicited the following key inter-related themes: 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.

Students reported being more engaged in learning because they thought the action research project was relevant and they had greater ownership of the process. Most students reported that they had positive learning experiences due to the high level of group involvement and the wide variety of different opportunities and approaches used on the module. Students enjoyed the 'hands-on', 'dynamic' and 'fun' nature of the module. One student also specifically mentioned how refreshing it was that I treated all the students in the module as 'equals' and was prepared to share decision making with them. Many students had started out as very concerned or even intimidated by the idea of doing educational research, and students argued that they had gained confidence that they could design and carry out research projects in the future in their own workplace.

From my perspective, this was a challenging piece of work that lasted beyond the end of the module and therefore involved more work than more traditional approaches to module co-ordination. However, the outcomes were very rewarding in terms of seeing the levels of engagement and growing confidence of the whole class and the satisfaction of guiding six people through the process of publishing an article in an international peer reviewed journal, with none of the six students having ever published before.

Issues and challenges:

The action research project was challenging in the extra workload that I needed to take on, including: supporting participants to undertake evaluations exercises; 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 obviously raises questions about the longer term sustainability of this kind of evaluation approach beyond this first module cohort

My teaching approach is influenced by my broadly Freirian philosophy. This helps to explain why I adopted an 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. I treated this project as an ongoing shared learning process for the students and for me. I think that all academic staff will have their own motivations as to why they may want to consider conducting collaborative evaluation and/or action research projects with their students. I think it is important to consider what your underlying motivations are, as they are likely to influence many of the decisions you take and can be helpful in guiding you when you meet challenges along the way.

It is always possible that some students might not want to take part in a project like this. It is absolutely essential that you have a plan of how you will ensure any student not choosing to take part will not be affected detrimentally by their decision. It is almost impossible to achieve equal levels of participation in any group. If this is not handled well, it can lead to resentment between members of a group. I think it helps to be honest about some people taking lead roles and others choosing not to participate in lead roles but in different ways. 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 ground rules that we agreed collaboratively at the beginning of the project

Advice to others:

Drawing on my experiences of undertaking this project, I would offer several pieces of advice to anyone considering adopting a similar collaborative approach:

- Be wary of committing to more than one action research or collaborative project at any one time. The extra energy required to facilitate these kinds of projects suggests they are likely to be more effective if you are not trying to run other similar collaborative project simultaneously
- Collaboratively create some ground rules or group rules early on in the process. At the time this can seem a bit obvious/tedious, but our experience was that they can be very useful as a reminder to people where any group dynamics or individual behaviours are threatening the collaborative nature of the work.
- In hindsight, I would have asked students to come up with a more explicit overall plan for the action research project at the start. Even though the spontaneity of the project was a positive characteristic, students found it hard to link some of the evaluation exercises they carried out and only latterly came to the conclusion that a stronger planning session in the first action research cycle would have been helpful.

Further details:

References

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