



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

Case Study Title	Independent Study Module – The Creation
Institution	Newcastle University
Department / Faculty	Combined Honours
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Others involved:	
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Name	Gina Collings – third year undergraduate A course representative at the time

Summary:

A new independent studies module has been created for Combined Honours students at Newcastle University. This was birthed out of the student voice through the staff student committee (SSC) and student consultation. Its creation has been a learning curve for all involved, as we have sought to create a module that will truly enhance the student learning experience. The students were given control of what the module would look like and have worked in close collaboration with their Degree Programme Director (DPD) to produce a module that is academically rigorous, yet also accessible, flexible and transparent for the students who take up the module. The final ‘product’ is a module that has one-to-one tutorials, relevant and timely workshops, as well as flexible assessment methods and flexible assessment criteria.

Background:

Since the arrival of the new Degree Programme Director (DPD) there has been a major drive to empower students and be responsive to the student voice. The DPD is committed to the notion of student engagement, and takes a different approach to many staff in this research led Russell Group university. There was a perceived lack of community and sense of coherent identity in a programme where students could undertake their degree in 4000 different subject combinations. As a first step, students were invited to propose what changes they wanted to see in the programme – and the lack of ability for many students to undertake an independent study module in a subject or an interdisciplinary study arose from this.

'Research' is high on the agenda for our university and so the potential for such a module fitted in nicely with the current trends of encouraging research across a wider area of programmes. Our DPD agreed that the SSC could create such a module, in partnership with him, for Combined Honours students.

Description of your activity:

Initial discussions

A working party was created of four students (from the SSC), in late October 2009, who began researching what an independent studies module would look like. We were keen to draw on our own experience of modules that had engaged us in their content and that encouraged us in our personal, as well as academic, development. We also wanted to draw on this kind of good practice in other universities.

Our DPD met with us initially to discuss what his aims for the module were - to overcome the student inability to study independently, and undertake an interdisciplinary study. We were also keen to incorporate these elements as we were passionate about wanting a module to fulfil the needs of our cohort. Our first meetings were fairly informal as we discussed and bounced around as many ideas as possible.

We then met in early November and started off with thinking about the kind of elements that we would like to see in the module – lectures were off the list, and workshops and personal tutorials were definitely on the list. We incorporated small groups and workshop style contact time because we felt that this is best for the student learning experience, as students could be actively participating in their learning and developing the skills that each workshop would focus on. We also wanted to include tutorials so that students could receive one-to-one support, this is something that we feel is missing from our experience of Higher Education (HE), to its detriment, and we wanted this support to be available to students on this module.

Developing form

There are six workshops in this module. Each workshop is designed to help the students develop and enhance their skills at timely moments throughout the Semester. For instance – a workshop on referencing is not really relevant at the beginning of the module, but a workshop on research methods would be. As students, we understand the experience of undertaking a module and what skills it involves at different points, and so we were best placed to inform what these workshops should be and when they should be delivered. It is seemingly simple decisions like this that students can make to fully optimise the engagement of future course peers.

Our meetings soon took on a more formal agenda as the module began to take shape and we systematically discussed each part of the module structure during meetings. Our DPD expressed concerns about students taking on projects that were too big or too small, and so we decided to build in 'safety nets' so this would not occur. These included a proposal meeting before students had even signed up to the module, and a brief written assessed piece in the first few months so that students could demonstrate their study was on course and of a substantial level. This brief written assessment will help the student to critically reflect on their learning practices to help them plan more efficiently the direction of their study. It will also build the starting blocks for their final submission, being directed by what their reflections have highlighted as areas of strength and weakness.

Considering assessment

We were also allowed to decide how the module would be evaluated – we decided that we wanted to be assessed on *what* we learnt and our learning *process*. So we added an assessed interview element in addition to the final project. This was borrowed good practice from another module some of us had taken and we wanted more students to experience it. The interview will last about 20 minutes during which the student will be able to discuss the processes and skills they have used over the course of their project. A final project does not always give a student the opportunity to show that they have been innovative in their methodology, or been persistent in tackling obstacles to complete the project. It is these kinds of skills and attributes that students develop over the course of a module that we wanted to have recognised and rewarded.

Towards the end of the creation process, in late February, we started tackling the need for marking criteria. We realised fixed criteria were going to cause a problem if each student was able to do a different style final project. We decided that the marking criteria will be flexible, as each project will be slightly different and so we wanted students to be able to work to their strengths and be marked suitably. The marking criteria will have broad bands of criterion, and will have certain features that must be met (a more obvious example being that there must be a final project) but the criteria will be discussed with each student so that they can create a project that is their best effort without having to lessen their ambitions because of fixed criteria.

The module was then promoted through email and posters in the Combined Honours Common Room. Students registered their interest with the DPD before the formal online module selection in late March, and had one-to-one meetings to check their project ideas were suitable for this module and that they understood how the module worked.

Impact

This project was incredibly exciting for us because we were given a blank page as to how the module would look, and so we were eager to create something that would truly enhance the student learning experience. Being given such a responsibility was a great privilege, and so in turn we worked hard to create the best module for our fellow students.

As students, we feel a lot more closely affiliated with Combined Honours as we have been able to contribute something quite substantial for our fellow peers. Being given the experience to create a module has helped us all to better understand our own academic practice in other modules we are taking, and I personally feel that my work in other modules has benefitted from my engagement in concepts of teaching and learning.

Our enthusiasm for this module has helped in the recruitment process for the new module as we have been able to 'sell' it to Combined Honours students at module selection events. As the students know that it has been created by students, I think they feel more confident in its suitability for them, even though it is a new module with no track record.

This module is about to run in 2010/11 and we are all excited and apprehensive to see it do well. The interest in the module has been positive and a suitable number of students have signed up to the module. They, in turn, will be actively involved in continuing to mould and shape the module for themselves and the next year of students after them. This constant refining process will mean that the module will have maximum appeal and relevance to every group of students who take this module, and so will consistently promote student engagement each year it runs.

Issues and challenges

Differing visions

A potential issue at the beginning of this module could have been differing opinions on what people wanted this module to look like. This could have been further complicated by too many people taking charge of the creation process. We did not come into difficulties in this area, and I think this was for several reasons. Firstly, we had a common aim that was given to us by the student cohort, and so we had a constant point of reference. Secondly, our DPD was clear that we were driving the project and he would steer and advise where appropriate, whilst maintaining his right to have the final say on the module. This worked extremely well because our DPD was true to his word in passing over control to us; he did not try to subvert our ideas and was open and honest with areas he was concerned about. This honest relationship helped build us up as a team and created a positive working atmosphere.

Negotiating assessment activities

Adding an assessed interview element proved to be a very challenging element of the new module. Studying the module we borrowed the practice from, we came across some difficulties in unlocking the assessment criteria, and understanding how to do well in the interview. Since this experience, we have wanted to make sure that this module does not present the same pitfalls for students as our experience had shown it had the potential to do.

It was encouraging seeing our DPD persisting with our ideas that were not as easy to implement as others, he even trained as an interviewer in the module we took our interview element from. His help gave us some more insight into how we could adjust our interview to help fully capture the efforts of the student, and work *for* them instead of against them. This has meant that the interview will be less structured than our experience had been, and 'follow-up' questions will be used more to help each student enhance their answers specifically focused on their project instead of more generic questions.

Setting assessment criteria

The fixed criteria were going to cause a problem if each student was able to do a different style final project. Our DPD has a lot of experience in this, as an academic who has led many modules, and so we were grateful for his guidance in this area. The marking criteria will have broad bands of criterion as well as individually tailored criteria that are discussed with each student. We are aware of the issue that all assessment methods and criteria need to be equally challenging and comparable in quality and demand of the students – this will be a key focus for the DPD.

Implementation challenges

Up scaling the group size of this module will bring many challenges – one-to-one tutorials will become harder because of the DPD's already very full schedule of commitments, negotiating marking criteria with each student is also a time-demanding task.

Advice to others

If you are an academic:

- Let your students know that you have faith in their abilities to create high quality course modules and materials. Our DPD regularly voiced his faith in our efforts and this encouraged us all the more to work hard to see its completion.

- Be honest with your students about what your own hopes and aims are for the project, but be willing to compromise and expect different and potentially better ideas to come from the students.
- Be honest about how much control and input we have in a project, this is important so that we don't become disillusioned if we thought we had more input than we do, but equally we won't become overwhelmed if it is more than we had anticipated at the start.

If you are a student:

- Your own experience is important to unlocking what is helpful, and what is not, in a module structure. Ask your peers about their experiences as well so you can see how your experiences correlate – this is a powerful persuader for those who are unsure about a certain idea or process.
- Don't be afraid to voice your opinions about the project you are working on. You may have innovative ideas that no one has yet thought of. But respect the authority and wisdom of academics that have a lot of experience working in the University system.

Further details

We will be monitoring the successes and failures of this module closely. This will provide us with good evidence for how to improve the module; it will also provide positive evidence of the impact of student engagement in curriculum design.