



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

<b>Case Study Title</b>	Feedback, Evaluation and Development of an Enquiry Based Learning Module: A Student's Perspective
<b>Institution</b>	The University of Manchester
<b>Department / Faculty</b>	School of Arts, Histories and Cultures
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<b>Position</b>	Student

### Summary:

Since January 2008 I have been involved with various areas of feedback, evaluation and development of a second year undergraduate module 'Religion, Culture and Gender'. I have worked alongside the lecturer of the course, the Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA), and members of staff at the Centre of Excellence for Enquiry Based Learning (CEEBL) to try and improve areas of the course. We particularly considered the structure of the course, the workload, the format of the Student Led Discussions (SLDs) and the assessment process. In this respect my work has focused on developing the delivery of the Enquiry Based Learning (EBL) module as opposed to its topic content. I have contributed to changes in these areas which will affect future students. I voluntarily attended the initial module feedback session, held in a focus group format but since then I have been paid for my work as a student researcher.

### Background:

In the second year of my undergraduate degree, I took an EBL module in the first semester called 'Religion, Culture and Gender'. I had enjoyed the course and was awarded good marks in it. But it was one of very few EBL modules available to students in Manchester's school of Religions & Theology.

The lecturer designed a set of questions for a focus group with the CEEBL team both for feedback purposes and to give students the opportunity to voice their opinion about the positive and negative experiences of the course delivery. For one reason or another, I was the only student who attended this focus group, but I attempted to provide a broad and honest summary of the course from a student's perspective. As I was the only student who spoke at the focus group, I agreed to lose my 'anonymity' so that the lecturer could ask me directly to help her on further feedback and evaluation of the course from a student perspective. She asked me to do this with the intention of incorporating any necessary changes for the following year.

### Description of your activity:

As I met with the lecturer for further feedback, evaluation and development sessions, the essential point that I wanted to stress was that the workload was too heavy for a second year module. The lecturer, however, also had questions for me about areas of the course that she felt the students were struggling with and presented two particular problems. The

first problematic area was that the students were giving a presentation rather than facilitating a class discussion in their SLDs. Second, was the fact that some students, found it difficult to approach a class discussion over emotive topics, such as religion and sexuality and religion and reproduction. More often than not these sessions were held in the CEEBL room at Manchester and our conversations were sometimes recorded. If the CEEBL room was already booked, however, we would use spare rooms at the University to meet.

I therefore worked alongside the lecturer to suggest ways in which the format of the SLDs could be changed. I first proposed that bigger SLD groups would help as we had only done our SLDs in pairs and found it difficult to present a topic as well as lead and scribe a discussion with only two people. Moreover, if the groups were larger, I suggested, then the necessary skills for facilitating a discussion could be practised within the groups during their SLD preparation and before they have to facilitate a whole class discussion. I further suggested that the groups should be awarded more time to prepare their SLDs before presenting them to the class. I gave my SLD in the 3<sup>rd</sup> week, but I thought that the SLDs could start in the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> week (as the groups were now larger in numbers this was a feasible change) as this would, again, give them more time to prepare and develop their facilitating skills.

In terms of understanding ways in which the class discussion on emotive content topics could become more productive, I attended meetings with the CEEBL team who had given the initial module workshops to introduce students to the EBL structure of the course. I expressed, from a student perspective, which activities were regarded as helpful or useful to my peers, and which were regarded as patronising or unnecessary. Again I thought that the best method for this would be to voice an honest opinion about what I thought as well comments which my peers had made across the duration of the course. I suggested that as the module was, for many, the first EBL module they had done at Uni, the concept of EBL, and how this is different to more traditional module formats at the University, had to be explained more. I worked alongside the CEEBL team to develop a workshop activity in which students were asked to discuss an 'emotive topic' which was not directly related to the module content. This way, the students could practise discussing a topic which could provoke various contrasting opinions without forming pre-conceived opinions amongst each other for discussions later on in the course.

Whilst the two areas of research and development listed above represent the initial contributions that I made, these feedback, evaluation and development sessions have acted as a continuing reflection on the course delivery, format and structure. As well as the changes I suggested in 2008, I have worked alongside the same people until 2010 on developing, and in some cases re-developing, various elements of the course.

### **Impact**

All the changes that I suggested were in some way incorporated in the module format for the following cohort. For example, the reading pack was halved and the workload was therefore significantly reduced. The SLD groups grew from pairs to groups of 5-6 and the first SLD took place in the 5<sup>th</sup>, not the 3<sup>rd</sup> week. A workshop activity which discussed a news report on hedgehog culling was also incorporated into the introductory sessions to the module.

The work has also had an impact on my experience as a student at Manchester. It has given me the opportunity to voice my opinion about course delivery, as well as promote the overarching enthusiasm for EBL courses from a student's perspective.

Furthermore, as part of this work, I have presented and co-presented parts of our research and activity at various conferences. I have also co-authored a paper on my engagement in the evaluation of an EBL module. I believe that EBL is, for some students, a more productive way to approach academic material at HE level, and I have tried to voice this opinion to lecturers, as well as other students, at the conferences which I have spoken at.

### **Issues and challenges**

My lecturer and I, as well as the other people that we work with, have had to remember that my opinion may not always reflect that of every student who has studied for this module. We have therefore incorporated feedback questionnaires as part of the assessment criteria in following years to ensure that a balanced student perspective is brought to the development sessions.

Nor has everything which I have suggested been a complete success amongst subsequent cohorts. For example, some expressed that the idea of discussing hedgehog culling to practice their discussion skills about an emotive topic, was pointless and irrelevant. This has meant that my suggestions have to be re-evaluated every year to see how each cohort has adapted to the changes.

### **Advice to others**

I have always strived to give an honest and balanced opinion about my experiences as a student at these sessions, and appreciate that this might not be the same view as the other students. The more honest you are to the lecturer about the course delivery, the more productive the evaluation.

Also, when the lecturer wants to discuss areas of the course which have been implemented after I finished the module, she may get more recent students to give her feedback as I haven't had the direct experience of this area as a student.

### **Further details**

- The course requires students to complete a learning journal, a reading log and a Student Led Discussion on a particular theme.
- The meeting space and equipment for recording interviews was provided by Manchester's CEEBL staff.