



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

Case Study Title	Students and staff co-creating the curriculum: research into three case studies from Scotland, Ireland and the USA
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Summary:

In 2009 I received funding from a Carnegie Research Grant, to support a research study investigating three examples of active student participation in curriculum design. The three examples investigated were from an environmental justice course at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, a geography course at University College Dublin, Ireland, and from an education course at Elon University, North Carolina, USA. The research explored: descriptions of the curriculum design work undertaken; the rationales tutors gave for adopting a collaborative curriculum design process; the processes involved in carrying out the work; factors which influenced the level of student participation aimed for and achieved; and also whether the outcomes differed in any way from adopting a tutor-led curriculum design approach. Many beneficial outcomes of active student participation in curriculum design were reported by students and academic staff.

Background:

There is growing interest within higher education (HE) discourse in students becoming more active participants and co-creators of their learning experiences (Collis & Moonen, 2005; Davis & Sumara, 2002; McCulloch, 2009). One of the key areas where students could have greater engagement and impact on their own learning is in curriculum design. Scholars do not agree about definitions of curriculum, but most common conceptualisations view the curriculum as the 'structure and content of a unit...[or]...programme of study' (Fraser and Bosanquet, 2006:272). However, Fraser and Bosanquet also draw attention to other definitions of curriculum given by academic staff as 'the students' experience of learning' and 'a dynamic and interactive process of teaching and learning' (Fraser and Bosanquet, 2006: 272).

Often students are absent from curriculum planning processes, other than where their feedback is gathered in course and programme questionnaires and these views are used to a greater or lesser extent to inform the curriculum for the following academic session. What is less common is students being more active in decision making roles about

curriculum design. Indeed, currently, academic staff often act as gatekeepers to curriculum design.

In a previous study that focused on gathering examples of good practice in first year curriculum design (Bovill et al, 2008), a small number of examples stood apart from the rest of the examples due to their deep level of student engagement through the students' active participation in the curriculum design process. Therefore it was decided to follow up this earlier study with a research project using a case study methodology to focus on these three examples to gather more in-depth information about the nature of these co-created curricular processes. The three examples were from an environmental justice course at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, a geography course at University College Dublin, Ireland, and an education course at Elon University, North Carolina, USA.

Description of your activity:

In 2009 I visited the three institutions where the examples originated and interviewed the programme co-ordinators for the programmes that involved active student participation in curriculum design. I also met with some of the students involved, observed some classes and gathered programme documentation related to the examples. Each example is presented here briefly.

At Queen Margaret University the undergraduate programme (HE Certificate) in environmental justice had 16 participants enrolled on the programme. The course was targeted at local activists within their own communities who were interested in learning more about processes of social change and environmental justice in order to support them in their role as activists. Tutors created a framework for the curriculum which included, for example, a plan for there to be a module on science and a module on the law, but the content of the curriculum was entirely based upon the specific issues that each participant brought with them to the course. So for example one student was active in campaigning against high levels of fish farming on the West Coast of Scotland, the law module therefore adapted to ensure that the law of the sea became an important part of the legislative elements covered in the curriculum. Another student was concerned about toxic waste dumping in their local community. The science module curriculum was therefore created to meet the needs of increasing knowledge of chemicals that leach into the soil and rivers due to dumping, as well as other scientific knowledge required by other participants. Participants were encouraged to develop responsibility for making decisions about the curriculum and other aspects of their own learning. Booklets that were produced by the participants about their work have been used by Friends of the Earth Scotland and other students to inform their environmental justice work.

At University College Dublin, the first year geography programme has approximately 400 student participants each year. This programme was redesigned to try to enhance student engagement. Interviews were held with third year students interested in becoming involved in first year curriculum design of the geography course. A small group of three third year students were employed over the summer to design an exciting virtual learning environment (VLE) for the course, based around some case studies negotiated between staff and students. These case studies included for example, a case study about trade focused on coffee, a case study about migration and another about the siting of an oil pipeline off the coast of Ireland. The case studies became the focus for much of the first year students' work in groups online and in class. The third year students also acted as classroom tutors in the large first year classes, helping to make the lectures much more interactive than previously through, for example, use of question and answer sessions

using a roving microphone. The tutors then used examples of good first year students' work as the basis for the curriculum in class. They referred to the work that some student groups had produced in the VLE, for example, one student group had drawn a very good migration map illustrating the migratory movements of all their family members over the last 50-100 years and this was then used as the basis for classroom discussion and contingent teaching around the issue of migration.

At Elon University in North Carolina, academic staff ran an education course for 50 students. Both the academic staff and students thought that this course could be improved. The course was redesigned with students and staff working in collaboration. The academic staff advertised for students to become part of a curriculum design group and eight students were employed to take part in the redesign of the curriculum. This included four students who had previously taken the course and four students who were about to take the course in the next semester. Students were involved in everything from reviewing and choosing text books to decisions about the content of the curriculum. There was recognition that students who had not studied the course might not feel experienced enough to contribute to curriculum design, but they were encouraged to recognise that they were experts in their own student experiences. Academic staff emphasised the importance of having an early 'liminal' moment in the collaborative work where students are taken seriously by academic staff, for example, where students made decisions about the course text book. This is crucial if students are to believe that their views and decisions are being listened to and acted upon.

Impact:

The main findings focused around the following themes: the feeling of risk experienced by students and academic staff adopting a new shared pedagogic approach; the pivotal role of the student-teacher relationship in enabling collaborative forms of curriculum design to be possible; the influence of individuals and also the institutional culture in supporting or hindering active student participation in curriculum design; the influence that a (lack of) familiarity with different forms of pedagogical approaches can have on the willingness of teachers and students to engage in collaborative curriculum design; and the importance of academic staff holding greater expectations of their students – in most cases, even where academic staff had high expectations of students, students still exceeded these expectations.

Other outcomes from the examples of co-constructed curricula included an increase in collective and individual responsibility among students and towards teachers. Collaborative learning and greater group cohesion were reported. Academic staff also reported that students demonstrated high levels of self-directed learning and autonomy along with improved levels of confidence and motivation with a resultant impact on improved student performance. Students changed their views of curriculum design as a result of their active participation in curricula processes. They understood course design to be a complex process and had a greater understanding of the demands on academic staff within this process. The process of collaborating with students demanded a lot from academic staff in terms of their negotiation skills and the work was time consuming and 'intense'. However, all tutors described the rich experience they had of learning from students through opening up more meaningful dialogue with students, with one teacher describing her experiences as 'transformatory'.

Issues and challenges:

For many academic staff and students the perceived risk in doing something different can be seen as a barrier. For many academic staff, the idea of handing over some control of the curriculum to students will seem very threatening, or they may feel that students, particularly first years, have little to offer the curriculum design process. However, students in all of the examples above, demonstrated that they could contribute meaningfully in the curriculum design process if they received support from teachers and as long as their suggestions were taken seriously.

For many teachers, constraints on their time will be a barrier to them trying new approaches that appear to be time consuming. For some teachers, there is concern that they are the people responsible for ensuring the course/programme is taught and if anything goes wrong, the perception is that it will be deemed their fault. However, academic staff and students who have co-created the curriculum talk about the very real rewards they have experienced from working together and the shared responsibility for the curriculum that emerges from the process.

Students are likely to get the most from actively participating in curricula that are their own courses – this helps them to gain the greatest ownership over their own learning. However, by definition this implies that each new course/programme cohort needs to actively participate in creating their own curriculum, raising concerns about the sustainability of this kind of collaborative approach to curriculum design.

Advice to others:

Drawing on the experience of the academic staff and students involved in this study, and my own experience of collaborative work, the following are recommendations to anyone considering providing opportunities for students to actively participate in curriculum design:

- Students can participate on different levels. Consider starting small, by involving students in part of the curriculum design, e.g. the timetable or choice of a text book.
- Try to find a like-minded colleague who would be interested to work with you the first time you try getting students to actively participate in curriculum design. You can share ideas and it may feel safer to have someone collaborating with you the first time you try this approach.
- Consider involving students from first year onwards, but offer clear guidelines on what you are asking them to do. By starting with later years of students, they may be no clearer what is required in curriculum design processes if we have not introduced these ideas and experiences earlier. All students can contribute in different ways.
- Don't just involve students who achieve good grades, a diversity of students will bring different things to the curriculum design process.
- Consider carefully if you will involve the whole class, or a smaller cohort. If you are not involving the whole class, ensure you have clear and fair rationale for selection of students.

Further details:

References

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Other related resources

Bovill, C. (2009) *Influences on the nature of active student participation in curriculum design: an investigation of three case studies from higher education*. Unpublished Masters Thesis, University of Glasgow.

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