SRHE Research Scoping Study Award: Final Report May 2014

Students as co-developers of learning and teaching: Redefining expertise and student voice through student participation in professional development

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1. Aims of the study

This scoping study aimed:

- To engage students to work in partnership with tutors and new lecturers on a Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP) programme;
- To evaluate the perspectives and experiences of new lecturers when working with students as pedagogic consultants with professional development;
- To survey and contribute to the emerging theorisation of student "voice" work within higher education from the perspective of students and new lecturers
- To determine future directions for embedding student engagement in the enhancement of learning and teaching.

2. Background to study

In response to the new fee regime, a national student partnership agenda is focusing on eliciting student voice and working with students in new ways to enhance the student learning experience. This agenda has proposed potentially transformative ways of working with the students in response to higher education reform. There are emerging examples of how students can be reconceptualised as participants and experts in educational change as well as partners and agents for that change (Dunne and Zandstra 2011). For example, students have assumed collaborative roles in curriculum design and development (Bovill et al. 2011, Mihans et al. 2008), strategy development (Healey et al. 2010) and pedagogic evaluation (Bovill et al. 2010). It has been noted, however, that models of professional development continue to operate on the basis that students do not have an active role in informing the learning of academic staff (Cook-Sather 2011).

The lack of student engagement in academic development practice is beginning to be addressed in a number of recent examples in the UK (Alsford, 2012; Freeman et al. 2013). It has been suggested, however, that student participation in enhancement activities with staff is

a "threshold concept" for academic development because "it contradicts prevailing notions that students do not have understanding or experience to inform teaching practice and that faculty developers or colleagues are best positioned to inform and guide faculty" (Cook-Sather 2013, 4). Student-engaged academic development, therefore, is a key site for the exploration of questions about the nature of learning and teaching expertise as well as the professional role and expertise of academics and academic developers in the enhancement of the student educational experience.

With a broad definition of student engagement across institutional governance, pedagogy and representation, it has been argued that previous research on student partnership has not fully acknowledged the complex realities of expertise and authority in the classroom when advocating new models of staff-student dialogue about learning and teaching (Taylor and Robinson 2009; Seale 2010). Recognising that the language of empowerment and agency underpinning the processes for eliciting and engaging with student voice in higher education is not neutral, such activities, therefore, pose important methodological and theoretical questions for advocates of the broader student engagement agenda. For example, drawing on Fielding's (2004) work on student voice in schools, it can be argued that by seeking to engage and validate a few students to function as representatives for all students, student pedagogic consultants are potentially co-opted into the normative practice of speaking for and about others as subjects rather than as transformative agents that challenge existing beliefs about the needs of a diverse student body in the classroom.

This scoping study responded to that gap in our understanding of how both staff and students conceptualise the expertise that students might bring to teaching through participating in student-engaged professional development. The study explored the following research questions:

- What are the perspectives of students, new lecturers and development programme tutors of learning and teaching "expertise" in the context of professional development?
- How do students, new lecturers and development programme tutors construct the concept of "student voice" in the context of a professional development programme?
- How might staff perspectives on students as co-developers inform the future design and delivery of professional development interventions?

3. Implementation of the study

Ethical approval from King's College London was confirmed on February 2013 and assured informed consent for participation and anonymity in the reporting of data. All data is reported here using pseudonyms for the purposes of confidentiality. In March 2013 three undergraduate students (Maria, Nasir and Zander) were recruited to work in partnership with three new teachers (Karen, Devyani and Anya) in a postgraduate-level teaching qualification in one research-intensive UK university. Participants undertook the following activities:

- Each student led a teaching observation with one new lecturer participating on a PGCAP and facilitated by an experienced PGCAP programme tutor with the aim to engage in collaborative dialogue about observed teaching practice. The students also participated in one programme seminar linked to the observation activities (March-April 2013);
- Students, new lecturers and PGCAP programme tutors were asked to create concept maps facilitated by the researchers at each stage of the process (before, during and after interventions) to elicit conceptions of teaching and learning "expertise" and the role of "student voice" in learning and teaching enhancement (March-June 2013);
- Students and new lecturers participated in a concept-map mediated interview drawing on the concept map data to explore perspectives of student engagement in professional development (June 2013).

The final data set comprised sixty-three concept maps in total and seven transcriptions of the final semi-structured and concept-map mediated interviews. Data analysis of concept maps and interview transcriptions was completed by February 2014 and informed preparation of abstracts for conference and published outputs as detailed below. Project mentoring was provided by Dr Cathy Bovill (University of Glasgow) and this was supported through email correspondence, Skype discussion and face-to-face meetings. Dr Bovill reviewed and commented on both the interim and this final project report.

4. Results and discussion

Data analysis of the concept maps and interview data identified three primary themes:

- Distinctiveness of student perspectives

- The nature of student 'expertise' in learning and teaching
- The form of student feedback

The key concerns of each theme are described below but these are taken from the fuller account, incorporating both concept map and transcribed interview data, to be submitted in June 2014 for peer review for publication in *Teaching in Higher Education*.

Distinctiveness of student perspectives

For the lecturer participants, engaging students in observing teaching provided opportunities to access the "student point of view" (Nasir, student). Student views of teaching "really pointed out things that I could have just forgotten about, you know, forgotten how the student would think or would receive that" (Devyani, teacher). This opportunity to see teaching practice in different ways could be powerful and enlightening and was seen as unavailable to teaching staff unless they seek this perspective from students. These benefits of alternative insights were not unidirectional. Participation in teaching observation also enabled student participants to "get an understanding of how everything works behind the scenes" in terms of the pedagogic decisions that teachers have to make (Nasir, student). Likewise Maria explained that "I'm a lot more aware of what they [teachers] are made to do, how they're made to do it, you know, how they try to do it and I sympathise with them completely" (student). The experience of participating collaboratively in teaching observation, created an important nexus between the experiences of teachers and students based around empathy, the capacity for a lecturer to remember the feelings of being a student, and sympathy, the capacity of a student to understand the experience of teachers within the constraints of their workplace and role.

The nature of student 'expertise' in learning and teaching

While students were deemed to have access to a different perspective on learning and teaching, both teaching staff and students resisted framing this unique student perspective as a form of "expertise". For example Devyani argued that an academic developer could provide feedback on her practice that included the "fundamental points that you can maybe find in any teaching textbook". Similarly, when defining the "expertise" students might bring to the enhancement of learning and teaching, a student explained "I'd put expert in quotation marks because I think expert implies, sort of, a familiarity with, I suppose, the knowledge base and

teaching theory, because students by definition won't be familiar with the knowledge base, they're becoming familiar with it" (Zander, student).

As such, academic developers and lecturers are seen to have an expertise that is defined as essentially logico-rational, knowledge that encapsulates traditional, "textbook", ways of knowing. Conversely, while "expertise" was related to mastery of the discipline or of pedagogic theory, student perspectives were described as intuitive, emotional and experiential. New lecturer Karen commented that "I think they [the students] know how to give feedback on whether or not they've enjoyed a class and whether or not they feel like they've learned things, but I'm not sure they necessarily have the tools […] to say this bit of your teaching worked better than this bit". Nevertheless "that kind of feelings feedback is as useful as the specific kind of discipline feedback". From this perspective, students' apparent lack of expertise in disciplinary and pedagogic terms and their alternative capacity to communicate feelings, therefore, was seen to be the real value of student contributions to professional development.

When student feedback was perceived to be more critical or articulated in more abstract ways than expected, for example the types of feedback expected exclusively from a peer or academic developer, new teacher Anya "was surprised, coming from a first-year student, this kind of, you know, these kind of things". The capacity of her student observer to explore the teaching he saw in more abstract terms, Anya suggested, made him "atypical" and, while she found his feedback useful, she expressed a wish also to get feedback from an "average student". This juxtaposition between the student individual, experiential and affective perspective and an expert theoretical, critical perspective on teaching was a construction of expertise that indicated that the value of student voice was because it was perceived to give access to intuitive, personal and, hence for the participants in this study, distinctly non-expert views on teaching that would "balance" with the more expert, disciplined voices of developers and peers.

The form of student feedback
A fundamental third theme emerged around conceptions of the student voice in higher education as "collected data". This conception was derived from quality assurance regimes and was framed in terms of traditional evaluation mechanisms such as evaluation questionnaires or satisfaction surveys. When student voice collection is systematized, there is not always enough time to provide what is seen as more meaningful feedback: "the ability of students to raise problems with the university is diminished because they're always asked to

comment on things within quite a strict framework. There's not a lot of opportunity for informal feedback" (Karen, teacher). Yet, for Karen, the most valuable feedback from students was when there was "room for more informal discussions of what makes a good teacher among undergraduates". For Karen, this juxtaposed personal (affective, socio-cultural and relational) conceptions of student voice with the more systematic and instrumental approaches to accessing student feedback.

Discussion: Student voice and the "ethics of care" in professional development
While the data has revealed a potential undervaluing of student "expertise" to provide critical insight into the experience of learning in the classroom by contrasting lecturer and student expertise, the themes above also identify an important alternative discourse of care that affirms the relational over the transactional model of staff-student interaction. Arguably in seeking to formalise, validate and become accountable for student feedback on teaching, staff and students are losing opportunities to engage with experiences of sympathy and empathy as learners in the social community of university and how this offers new insights into learning and teaching by reframing the learner and teacher encounter. The participation of students in feedback dialogues around observed teaching enabled access to a different set of values of professional development, values based on the emotional, intuitive, personal and experiential. Participants found and valued this "ethics of care" through the dialogic, mutually-enlightening and "informal" mechanisms of the student-engaged model of teaching observation. It therefore offers a valuable alternative to measurable, instrumental and formal representational models of student feedback. It is, Bozalek et al. (2014) argue, a moral framework for evaluating professional development as an alternative to the neo-liberal discourses of accountability and individual professionalisation of teaching.

5. Dissemination and project outputs

In targeting the appropriate avenues for disseminating the outcomes for the scoping study, we have sought to find opportunities to contextualise our research within leading international debates about student co-inquiry. For this reason we have accepted the timescale for the *Teaching and Learning Inquiry* special issue below linked to the panel proposal for the ISSOTL 2014 conference.

Project outputs delivered to date:

- Saranne Weller and Camille B. Kandiko (2013) "Students as co-developers of learning and teaching: Conceptualising 'student voice' in professional development", Symposium paper, SRHE Annual Conference 2014, 11-13 December, Celtic Manor, Wales.
- Kandiko Howson, C. B. (2014). "Researching the student experience". Higher Education Academy (HEA)/ Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE) Leading the Student Experience Network. 5 March 2014. The Hatton, London, UK.

Future planned outputs:

- Camille Kandiko Howson and Saranne Weller (2014) Panel presentation in proposed panel 'Engaging students as co-inquirers in SoTL: Diverse perspectives from around the globe', ISSOTL14, 22-25 October, Quebec City, Canada [Panel proposal currently under review]
    - Panel chair: Roselynn Verwood (University of British Columbia). Other panel members: Mick Healey (University of Gloucestershire, UK); Abbi Flint (Higher Education Academy, UK); Katherine Harrington (Higher Education Academy, UK); Carmen Werder and Shevell Thibou (Western Washington University), Tawanna Franklin and Karen Hornsby (North Carolina A&T State University).
- Saranne Weller and Camille Kandiko Howson (2014) '"There was…a real appetite for them to tell me what they wanted": Exploring conceptions of student voice in teaching enhancement', ISSOTL14, 22-25 October, Quebec City, Canada [Abstract ABS103 submitted 17 April 2014 and under review]
- Saranne Weller and Camille Kandiko Howson (2014) 'Students as co-developers: Staff and student conceptions of learning and teaching expertise in student-engaged academic development', to be submitted to *Teaching in Higher Education* [Draft manuscript in final preparation for submission June 2014].
- Camille Kandiko Howson and Saranne Weller (2016) 'Students and new lecturers as co-inquirers into learning and teaching practice', *Teaching and Learning Inquiry* Special Issue [Abstract accepted for special issue and manuscript deadline 1 January 2016 for publication September 2016].

- o Special issue editors: Carmen Werder (Western Washington University, USA), Rebecca Pope-Ruark (Elon University, USA) and Roselynn Verwoord (University of British Columbia, Canada).

6. Conclusions

The scoping study has provided evidence that a student-engaged model of teaching observation can initiate valuable social relations that are seen as meaningful to lecturers and students. The study has also identified more complex responses to the systemisation of collecting student feedback even as this feedback agenda increases the opportunities for students to evaluate their experience and requires staff and institutions to be accountable to them. In particular the function of teacher-student "discourses of care" that are identified in this study warrant further research, particularly in the context of strategies for teaching development and changes in the staff-student ratio. The framing of students as non-experts, however, also reveals an ongoing hierarchy of authority and power in the university classroom. Within a partnership model, staff did not perceive parity in the relationship between student and staff knowledge. There is a hierarchy within Western intellectual traditions that value and prioritise rational over emotional knowledge and this study signals that even when positive outcomes are perceived from student-staff partnerships, existing power relationships remain unaltered. Strategies for future implementation must therefore explore if and how such activities can achieve the transformational change and paradigmatic shifts claimed by much student engagement research.

7. Future research

There are several directions of inquiry that stem from this project. There is clearly more research needed about the hierarchies, roles and power relations that develop in response to new and developing relationships between students and staff, particularly those new to teaching roles. The scoping study also raised wider questions about nature of student voice, and whether it was representing individual or collective views. On a more practical level, there are issues around the logistics of bringing students into structured development courses. The possibility of a co-planned, co-created curriculum to support co-development models would be an exciting idea to pursue.

8. References

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