Student Researchers: Potentials and Challenges

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore the experience of two undergraduate student researchers who were part of an academic research team. In line with previous literature on action research (McNiff, 2013; Arnold & Norton, 2018a), we found that the student researchers facilitated greater student engagement offering insights into aspects of the student experience that others would not have been able to. However, it became apparent to us, and this is not necessarily dwelt on in the literature, that they also struggled to achieve a critical distance from the project and the views of students participating in the project. More specific to this context however, the student researchers' contribution was negatively impacted by a lack of confidence in their research skills and a strong desire to please the academic members of the research team by reporting the successes of the project and underplaying the difficulties.

To add to existing knowledge about students as partners the paper focuses on the student researcher experience rather than the project they were working on. We do so by reflecting on interviews with them, as well as exploring data they collected over the course of the project: their field notes and transcripts of interviews conducted by them.

We argue that supporting undergraduate students to act as insider student researchers is an exciting avenue for development in research into student experience in higher education but that particular attention needs to be paid to the development of skills and confidence among student researchers. A high degree of reflexivity is required in relation to the communication that occurs between students and academics who are part of the same research team. Lessons that we learnt inform recommendations for future staff-student partnerships.

Introduction

Understanding how to improve the students' learning experiences depends on research projects that engage with students' ideas and views in new ways. Academic and student researchers working together may be one way to facilitate these new insights into student experience. Student researchers can act as insider researchers to offer intimate knowledge of the university context, and a deeper understanding of responses from student participants, but as with all action research, the potentials are coupled with particular challenges.

This paper considers the potential for improvements that are likely to arise when students act as insider researchers in a research project looking at student experience. We recognize that the undergraduate experience may differ from a postgraduate student researcher experience however this is beyond the scope of this paper to explore.

In a review of literature, we consider issues around insider research in general, followed by a more focused look at insider research in higher education and projects that have involved students as part of the research team.

The project which the student researchers were involved in was to explore how undergraduate students on a social sciences degree might use the social media platform *Instagram* to enhance their learning both in and out of formal learning environments. The project involved 60 second year students on the BA Education Studies completing a sociological module on the themes of equality and diversity. Through workshop sessions built into their normal contact time, the students were invited to participate in dialogues through Instagram, which involved taking and posting their own photographs and commenting on those of others. The role of the student researchers was to observe these sessions making fields notes, interview the second year students on this module, and support data analysis.

As we were exploring the student researcher experience, we have therefore not included the findings of the project the students were working on in this paper. In addition, the unique nature of Instagram for research into learning and teaching as well as previous work covering social media insider research and its attached ethics are not addressed at this time whilst acknowledging these issues are important.

The potential for improvements that arose through the involvement of these student researchers is explored as analysed through their own reflection. We then present our findings which illuminates and expands our understanding of student researcher experience.

We report on four themes:

1) the insight offered by the student researchers;

2) the difficulty of achieving critical distance;

3) the student researchers' lack of confidence in their research competence

4) the uneven power dynamic between the academic researchers and student researchers involved in the project.

In the discussion, we make recommendations that particularly address (3) and (4) since these issues are specific to insider research conducted by student researchers. We acknowledge limitations in that the student researchers graduated three months after the research had been completed. This meant we were unable to explore their experiences and reflections with them more retrospectively and over a longer time-period.

However we do suggest practical measures and recommendations that can be taken to develop the research confidence and abilities of student researchers, and to engage the entire research team in reflecting on the power-dynamics involved and how these are likely to impact on the research findings.

Insider research: potential for improvement and strategic approaches

Insider research is 'conducted within a social group, organization or culture of which the researcher is also a member' (Greene, 2014, p. 1). Insider research can be undertaken within any of the three major research paradigms: positivism,

hermeneutics, and action research (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007) ours was contacted within the paradigm of action research.

Insider research has some obvious advantages. Those who undertake insider research already have an intimate and immersive knowledge of the culture and politics of the organization and its normative values, as well as potentially easier access to research subjects (Costley et al., 2006). In this way, it has the potential to make a significant contribution to educational research by broadening our understanding of the state of knowledge, allowing us to raise critical questions of the educational institutions in which we work, through evidence and making recommendations for future practices.

At the same time as enabling insights through immersive knowledge and better access to participants, insider research can involve a lack of clear boundaries between the researcher, the participants and the topic of research. Being overly familiar with an organization or community of practice can lead to misinterpretation of findings and unspoken assumptions as a result of unspoken bias and stereotyping. Lathlean (1994) suggests that there is a risk that such an approach might be disruptive leaving participants in the position of living with the consequences when the project has ended. Insider research may alter power-dynamics and continuing relationships with research subjects. Taylor (2011) describes her own experience of conducting insider research into queer culture and the need for a more critical exploration of how the positionality of the researcher impacts on the quality of the data generated. Taylor was especially interested in 'intimate insider research' where the researcher-self may be part of the narrative of the researched and the ethical negotiations resulting from this situation are unlikely to be straightforward. This was illustrated in this enquiry as the student researchers were simultaneously students, peers of those under investigation and part of the research team.

In response to our search for potential improvements different recommendations and strategies have been suggested when it comes to carrying out insider research. According to Greene (2014), insider researchers need to place an emphasis on establishing their trustworthiness in the eyes of the research participants and research communities. Techniques suggested by Greene (2014) adapt guidance given by Guba (1981) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) based on the principles of credible qualitative research, such as establishing credibility, investing sufficient time in the field, detailed note taking and debriefing with peers or colleagues. If these are applied carefully in contexts of insider research, the researcher will be seen as a trustworthy figure who, while still an insider, also manages to achieve the status of a researcher in the eyes of the participants.

Insider researchers also need to adopt a reflexive stance, reflecting on their own assumptions and inherent prejudices. Finefter-Rosenbluh (2017) advocates that researchers must continually acknowledge their own presence in the field and the effect this is having on others, whilst carefully monitoring how their personal biases, beliefs and experiences impact on their research. Fineafter-Rosenbluh (2017, p. 3) argues that 'perspective taking' will strengthen insider research processes. In their own research on teachers' perceptions of professional development programmes for example, they sought to look at the situation from both their own insider perspective, but also to attempt to see the situation from an outsider perspective. Through this

perspective-taking approach, the researcher is better able to achieve critical distance from the research topic and responses from participants.

A binary view which sets insider/outsider research in opposition may be unhelpful and suggest an inaccurate picture of the realities of conducting research within organisations (Mercer, 2007; Chavez, 2008; Greene, 2014). Trowler (2011) has suggested that it may be more accurate to present the role of the researcher on a continuum. Between all research projects there will be differences in positionality and how data is gathered, but there will also be common ground between researchers who see themselves as 'insider' or 'outsider' research, for example, in terms of how they analyse data collected. On the other hand, Greene (2014) suggests that more categories are needed to describe insider research: some insider researchers may be total insiders while others are partial insiders .Even within the same research project, it is possible for the role of the researcher to shift and the extent to which they are an 'insider' to change; we need to recognize the insider position as fluid and constantly re-negotiated through context.

Costley and Gibbs (2006) make a strong argument for insider researchers to adopt and practice an 'ethics of care' to safeguard the practitioner-researcher's personal and moral relations with others. They suggest that standard ethics codes used by university and other institutions' committees do not encourage insider researchers to consider fully the ethical considerations associated with their research. These standard ethical codes focus more on subjects' privacy access to confidential or sensitive data, and how the data will be managed and handled. They argue that with 'insider research' more attention needs to be given to the particular position of the researcher in the study and their relationships with others. The researcher needs to be fully aware of themselves as an 'ethical being within the community of practice being research' (Costley & Gibbs, 2006, p. 248).

Floyd and Arthur (2012) reflect together on their experiences of conducting insider research in a Higher Education context. Floyd (2009) having investigated academics' career trajectories and Arthur (2010) having focused on the merger of two HE institutions. Both researchers were concerned by the narratives that emerged through the research process and who was implicated in these narratives. They suggested the need for insider researchers in higher education to consider more extensively what will happen to the research findings and how these will impact on different members of the community that participated in the research. In addition, they explored the difficulty of maintaining the anonymity of the participants when the research process is conducted in a particular corner of the HE institution in which the researcher is the insider. Linked to this, Costley et al. (2010) suggest the main challenge facing 'insider research' lies in negotiating existing systems and bringing about long-lasting change and improvements. A concern for insider- researchers embarking on a path of enquiry in a higher education setting can be the risk that because of the research findings the individuals, the organization and its practices may be shown in a less than favorable light.

Students as insider researchers

The development of research skills in undergraduates has been a growing area of interest in HE pedagogy and curriculum. Healey and Jenkins (2009) suggests that the

learning of research skills relates to cognitive gain and also has the potential to add value to the degree experience by enhancing employability prospects. Willison and 0'Regan (2006) developed a conceptual, tabulated framework which encompassed six facets of research. This framework known as the Research Skills Development (RSD) framework was integrated in 28 semester length courses in five universities in Australia. Whilst the majority of students found the criteria useful the findings showed that "there is no substitute for classroom dialogue about expectations, the meaning of criteria, practice in their use and facilitating student response to feedback" (Willison, 2012, p. 916.

Most often it is postgraduate students who carry out insider research projects and various tools and resources are aimed at this group. For example, Helliwell (2006) shares a range of critical questions which can be used to facilitate doctoral students in improving their reflexive writing. Helliwell observed that these questions helped his students to articulate their frequently shifting positions as insider/outsider researchers. Building confidence and agency as an insider researcher appears to depend on creating a space for students to ask questions in the context of coursework and then in the context of their own independent research (Franken, 2013). Undergraduate students typically require higher levels of support in conducting research and this is acknowledged by Costley and Armsby (2007) who created a range of web-based resources on research methodologies which could be then applied in the student's own work-based projects.

Healey and Jenkins (2009) identify two main models for engaging students as partners in research. In the 'elite model', a small group of the most able students are chosen to work as interns supporting research projects over the summer break or to participate in established projects led by academics during term-time. In the 'mainstreaming model', opportunities to co-research is integrated into the curriculum in the form of project work. Healey et al. (2014) offer a plethora of case studies where students have engaged as research partners in a wide range of subjects. Bovill et al. (2013) develop this idea further by describing how students might become pedagogical consultants through their participation in the research process. This chimes with our experience that our student researchers were both contributing to our understanding of the scholarship of teaching and learning whilst being active producers of knowledge through their unique perspective and their ability to gain access.

Students and teachers working together as researchers may be one way to foster better relationships which in turn facilitate student engagement, retention and success (Hagenauer and Volet, 2014). There appears to be a link between the positive relationships students have with academics and successful study outcomes. The recent literature which focuses on students as partners in a research context (Healey et al. 2014; Aaen & Norgard, 2015; Maunder et al., 2012; Thiry & Laursen, 2012) offers compelling evidence that such endeavors both give a voice to students whilst creating participatory academic communities.

Methodology Section

An action research approach was taken so we might apply our research to practical issues with intention of attempting a change in our working practices and then monitoring the results. It seemed an appropriate fit which would be enable us to

address the research question and if necessary, take action to improve the situation in future.

We used the following definition of action research: "Action research is a form of enquiry that enables practitioners in every job and walk of life to investigate and evaluate their work" (McNiff, 2011, p. 7). The student researchers were selected through competitive application for paid work at the beginning of the academic year, this paid work was to take place alongside their studies. The nature of the research was explained along with the job description, hours required and fee which would be paid. Following interviews by the academics involved two third year students were appointed into the role. The main pre-requisites were a knowledge of research. The funding to pay them came from within the institution following an invitation to submit bids for innovative pedagogic research projects.

Potential applicants were restricted to students embarking on their third and final year on a BA Education Studies programme. The decision to recruit from this cohort rather than widening the recruitment pool to include all students across the institution including post-graduate students was deliberate. It was felt that these two third year students by virtue of being on the same academic course and studying that module the previous year would bring a specific and helpful perspective. One of the two selected students was a student rep for his cohort however we did not see this as relevant to the selection process nor did it influence it.

The term 'students as researchers' came from a particular pedagogic approach to supporting students to undertake research rather than a description of the students themselves (Wallington, 2015). Of the five levels of student participation that Healey and Jenkins (2009) found the third approach best characterizes that undertaken by students in our study i.e. students have little autonomy however can develop skills and contribute important perspectives. Anderson and Priest (2014) suggest that this gives student's first-hand experience of research-based consultancy through life projects. Whilst the research proposal itself had been developed entirely by the academic staff it was made clear to the students that they would be consulted and informed during its' duration.

To reduce conflict of interests and minimize ethical issues neither of the two students were being taught or having their dissertations supervised at that time by any of the project team. Mentoring by one of the academics on the project team was given to the student researchers for the duration of the study this took the form of guidance and support. Regular meetings of the entire research team took place throughout the duration of the project for planning and reviewing purposes. These were felt to be sufficient in managing the student researchers and through these regular, open discussions seeking to minimise insider researcher bias.

Conversations at the end of the project between the student researchers and other members of the team were recorded and transcribed. These conversations focused on what the student researchers had found difficult about their involvement in the project, what they had enjoyed and what they had learned for the future. In addition to these conversations, we analysed the interview data and written field notes made by the student researchers as a means of exploring their role within the project. Permission was sought for this from the student researchers with confidentiality and anonymity assured.

Through the interview data, we could also consider how the student researchers engaged and connected with the students who were participating in the project. Through the field notes, we gained insights into how the student researchers were approaching the research task and how they saw themselves in relation to the student participants. The data mentioned above were annotated by two academic members of the research team. These annotations all relate back to the research question: what are the potentials and challenges of working with student researchers to investigate student experience? Annotations were grouped and four themes emerged from the data. These are reported below and illustrated with relevant extracts from the data.

Action research can also help practitioners to affirm aspects of their practice and their tacit knowledge. However, Herr and Anderson (2015) caution that insider practitioner researchers could be tempted to put a positive 'spin' on their data to reinforce existing ways of working, because they believe in their particular practices. One way of lessening this risk is by opening up our research to peer scrutiny through dissemination, either formally through publications and conference presentations, or informally through discussion with trusted colleagues (Norton, 2009). To ensure robust feedback from peers and colleagues, and to avoid the risk of cosiness, McNiff (2017) suggests that the formation of specific research review groups (called validation groups) can be a fruitful way of facilitating ongoing scrutiny research. Such groups set out to ask questions, provide critique and check whether claims can be substantiated.

The two students graduated and consequently left the university shortly after the conclusion of the project. With hindsight it would have been valuable to revisit them 6 months to a year on to explore through further interviews whether their views had changed including their own self-assessment of the experience and to what extent the skills gained had been beneficial.

Given our focus is on the potentials and challenges of working with student researchers and the data analysed is particular to that aim. It can be argued that the analysis is limited because the emphasis is on what principal researchers might do to improve the student experience and make their impact more significant. We have sought to give the student researchers' a voice so they might articulate what might help for future such initiatives. Whilst room for improvement the ability of the student researchers in achieving student engagement was evident from the levels of participation in the *Instagram* project, the richness of the data obtained from the interviews they conducted and the insights from their field notes. This is shown in the section below.

Findings

These focused on four key areas:

1) Relationships between participant and student researcher
2) Confidence in research skills
3) Critical distance from project
4) Relationship between student researcher and academic

The rationale for this was based on the main themes that emerged from the data.

Relationship between participant and student researcher

The excerpt below from SR1 demonstrates how the student researchers were able to build strong and open dialogues with the student participants in the project.

> *As a student researcher I was more likely to see how people were actually getting on with the project – many of my conversations with the participating students were about the difficulties they were finding – I could then feed back to the research team and this would have an impact on how the research developed. I was aware that the students needed more guidance on the practicalities of using Instagram, whereas the research team had assumed that they would all be familiar with Instagram.*

The SRs talked 2-3 times with the students each week, finding moments at the beginning and end of taught sessions to have brief conversations about the students' experiences of the project and module overall. In contrast, the academic researchers conducted the scheduled workshops with the student participants but created fewer opportunities for and were less likely to attract 'off-the-cuff' conversations with participants. The SRs were open, informal and relaxed when discussing the project with the student participants and the participants responded with a level of openness that was not apparent in interactions with the academic researchers: they asked questions, sought clarification and ventured opinions. This provided compelling evidence of the potential value of student researchers in facilitating student engagement based on trust, shared experience and lack of power differentials.

In addition to showing the openness of the dialogue between the SRs and student participants, the quotation above also suggests the SRs' familiarity with the contexts of the participants, and in particular, an understanding of their digital literacy skills. While the academic researchers had assumed a higher level of digital literacy among the participants and familiarity with social media platforms like *Instagram*, the SRs were more attuned to the reality that this was unfamiliar territory to a significant proportion of the participants and that many of the participants lacked confidence in even creating an account on *Instagram*.

The practical implications of this insight were important. When this was fed back to the project team in a meeting, we formulated plans to offer more training and guidelines regarding *Instagram* to the student participants. Without this, there would have been less engagement in the project. As well as practical implications, the SRs' insight led to more in-depth considerations regarding the research questions posed by the project team at the outset and the theoretical framing of the project. We had assumed that *Instagram* was part of the students' existing 'funds of knowledge' (Gonzalez et al., 2006) and would be a platform for expression that belonged more to the students than the lecturers on the module. The finding that many of the students felt unsure and under-confident about their skills and competencies in using the most basic functions of *Instagram* prompted us to rethink this as a starting point for our research. While the content we were asking students to share via *Instagram* may have been part of their everyday lives and experiences, the means through which this sharing took place was unfamiliar to many. We had tried to create an activity for students that would link difficult concepts to everyday realities, and we had inadvertently introduced some difficult digital processes and tools. The SRs were fundamental in highlighting this and

ensuring that the academic research team engaged with the heterogeneity of the student participants, rather than assuming the same competencies across the group.

Sometimes the SRs purposefully offered an insight into what the students were thinking, and particularly what they were concerned about (as above). At other points in the project, they offered insights into the project in less intentional ways. For example, SR2 documented one of the taught sessions for the module through written field notes and photographs that were compiled on PowerPoint slides. On one of the slides, they explained that at one point in the seminar an academic had invited the students to look at and comment on an image which had been shared on *Instagram* and this had been met with a prolonged silence. On the field notes, the student researcher had written:

> **awkward silence**

While an academic researcher would probably have documented the existence of the silence and noted some of its qualities (such as its length, and perhaps the eye contact that was shared during the silence), it is unlikely that they would have summarised what they felt about the tone of the silence to this extent. Comments like this suggest that the SRs were moving back and forth between their identities as researchers and as students; the identification of this moment as 'awkward' belongs to the student self of the SR. They feel the awkwardness on behalf of the participants in the project and add a further level of insight which can then be used in facilitating more student engagement. In this case it was around introducing more small group and paired discussions rather than whole group discussions.

Confidence in research skills

One of the criteria in the recruitment of the student researchers was their experience with and enthusiasm for research methods in social sciences. The two students selected as student researchers had achieved well on a second year module that focused on basic training in research methods and they expressed eagerness to learn more, particularly as this would potentially help them with their third year dissertation research. As part of their involvement in the project, they attended two specific training sessions with the academic researcher team: one on documentation (photography and video observations) and one on interview techniques. In addition to these more formal sessions, the SRs met on a weekly basis with the lead academic researcher on the project team. One of the main aims of these meetings was to discuss how to employ research methods and to create an ongoing dialogue about how to improve the quality of the research the team members were conducting. For example, time in each of these weekly meetings was devoted to a discussion of the SRs' field notes and their usefulness to the project team in relation to the research questions.

Throughout the project, the student researchers expressed varying levels of confidence in relation to the different research methods they were using. One SR showed high levels of anxiety around the creation of field notes. He describes this in the extract below. His initial approach to field notes was to write down absolutely everything that occurred in each taught module session, without consideration of the relevance of the information to the research topic. Through a meeting in which alternative ways to make field notes were suggested, the SR's confidence was

negatively impacted further and he expressed a concern that he was simply no good at this type of research.

> *I also wanted to develop more in the way I wrote field notes – this was completely new to me and I was very worried about making it right; I wanted to have more practice in writing field notes.*

Further training on writing field notes – a difficult skill for any researcher – could have been offered. At the same time, the academic researchers were concerned about striking a balance in which the SRs felt confident about what they were doing but were also not constrained by templates or specific instructions relating to qualitative research methods. Observations can be made in a plethora of ways and rather than offer one way as 'the solution' to the SRs, we hoped that they would develop a way that worked for them. For SR2 this approach was liberating and they worked eagerly to develop their own style of field notes; for SR1 however, it was an almost constant source of anxiety. They wanted a more structured approach and suggested that future improvements should include a better preparation for such tasks and more guidance.

The two SRs developed different researcher identities over the course of the project. For one, their self-identified strengths lay in quantitative tracking of the use of the *Instagram* platform. They recorded information about how the platform was being used by the student participants in insightful ways that had not been structured prior to the data collection. For the other SR, their strengths were more in making observations of the face to face interactions that occurred as part of the project, through written field notes and photographs. The difference between the researchers emerged organically – it was not an aspect we considered in the recruitment and selection processes. Having said this, complementarity of the two SRs was fundamental. Furthermore, the fact that were two SRs meant that they could offer much-needed morale support to one another when the project became difficult or when they felt particularly anxious about some aspect of their work.

The SRs were not at all involved in the analysis of the data. This arose from the practical circumstances and the timing of their contracts. On reflection, their involvement in the analysis of the data would have been helpful not just in terms of the project outcomes and findings, but also in relation to their own development as researchers. Closing the gap between data collection and data analysis and returning to the research questions would have offered them insights into the usefulness of different approaches to data collection. In particular, we wonder whether this would have helped SR1 to feel less anxious about the field notes and to see how some field notes become full of life again through the process of analysis, while others offer little. Both SR 1 and SR 2 expressed a disappointment in not being involved in data analysis as this would have closed the loop for them and added to their matrix of graduate skills.

Critical distance from project

Above, we explained the student's identification of an 'awkward silence' as evidence that they were able to adopt a student perspective on the activities involved in the project. Another way of seeing this comment, however, is as an imposition of their own viewpoint on the observations they were conducting. Rather than attempting to stay at

the level of careful description of the events as they unfolded, this comment is indicative of how the SRs would sometimes jump to conclusions about what the participants in the project were experiencing and thinking. They responded to participant comments on the project with their own views on the participants' experiences. For example, when one participant explained to an SR in an interview that they had been limited in their participation in the project because they felt under a lot of pressure from other academic commitments, the SR had responded with: 'Wait until you're in third year! 'This could have been belittling for the student and constrained how they talked about their experiences in the remainder of the interview with the SR. When the SR in question was asked about it, they responded that the issue of boundaries and distance aspect had never been explicitly addressed with them and should have been.

Both SRs had clear perspectives on how much the student participants should be engaging with the project and how the taught module sessions would ideally unfold. The following extract from an SR's field notes demonstrates how a session did not meet their expectations in terms of the content covered or the quality of students' dialogue:

> *Not much time was given for discussion, but overall students were engaged. Not much happened in this lesson (as much as I would have thought), but that could have been due to the fact we started late and photograph taking took too long.*

To the academic researchers, the SRs expressed frustration with students who were not participating fully in tasks and lessons. These feelings stemmed from feeling bad for the academics when this happened. Disconnection between intended outcomes and reality were developed further in their expressing concern that they might be somehow letting down the academics by not getting the participants more involved. Despite constant reassurance from the academic researchers that they were just as interested in students' non-participation as students' participation, the SRs were eager to present a positive face of the research. In project team meetings for example, they expressed verbally about feeling nervous at sharing bad news about a lack of participation.

As the project continued, the SRs were better able to achieve some distance from the students' participation. As they witnessed the academic researchers' interest in non-participation, they became more willing to document examples of non-participation and to talk about them openly. However, the difficulty in achieving this critical distance suggests that the SRs perhaps needed more time to engage with the research questions at the beginning of the project. While the research questions were all around how things would unfold – 'what is going on here?' – They had interpreted the starting point of the project as the implementation of a learning initiative that needed to 'work'. It is difficult to make sense of these different approaches in the context of an action research orientated project where a change is being introduced and then monitored. More explicit dialogue at the start of a project could be fostered through the discussion of scenarios (e.g. what will we do if some students refuse to engage with taking photographs on Instagram?).

Relationship between student researcher and academics

The SRs were embedded in a complex set of hierarchical relationships. They had been employed by the academic researchers on the project team, but they were also the students and ex-students of many of the members of the project team. In the debriefing session at the end of the project when invited to reflect on their experiences of being part of project meetings the language used by the student researchers was extraordinarily powerful e.g. 'I'm a student …what I am doing here?', 'I felt I couldn't keep asking questions' and 'I felt bad for the academics that some students weren't taking part'. SR 1 suggested that the rules of engagement for meetings should have been addressed from the onset particularly around their role in the meeting, as this was not done by the academics.

The language used by the SRs demonstrates the extent to which pleasing the academic researchers as a priority for them; at its most extreme, this language involved one SR referring to the academic researchers as a 'higher power' and 'getting it right' was a phrase that was mentioned often by both. They also talked about not wanting to let the academic researchers down 'I wanted to do a good job so they would feel they had made the right choice in choosing me'. Struggling to separate the 'individual self' from the 'researcher self' appeared to be a recurring theme.

At points in team meetings, academic members of the team would make an effort to engage SRs in the discussion by asking for their opinion explicitly, but a lot of the time the focus was on covering a large amount of content and decision-making in a limited time frame. Because of this, it is recognized that the participation of the SRs was not carefully monitored or engendered, this we can learn from.

While on the face of it the academic researchers invited the SRs to participate fully in the project team and contribute ideas and thoughts, the reality of the interactions was impacted greatly by the power differential between the SRs and the academic researchers. For example, while the SRs had been told that they should contribute openly in team meetings, they talked retrospectively when invited to reflect on their participation about their inhibitions in these meetings: 'I couldn't keep up' and 'I didn't want to ask as I didn't want to appear silly'. The opportunity to reflect formed part of a debriefing meeting.

It is naïve to think that there would have been a way to avoid the power dynamics that existed between the SRs and the academic researchers. The complex hierarchies in which the research took place were an unavoidable facet of the research and would always be present in some guise or other. On the other hand, the SRs' comments following the project suggest that a more explicit discussion about roles and relationships in the academic team could have been conducted at the beginning of the project, and that this would have led to more openness as the project unfolded. Again, using scenarios at the beginning of the project could have been one way for the SRs and academic researchers to talk more openly about how their interactions would occur and what factors would impact on this (e.g. What will you do if you disagree with another member of the team about the next steps for the project?).

Discussion

Our findings suggest that, in line with previous literature on insider research, student researchers carrying out insider research will offer particular insights into the research

topic (Costley et al., 2006; Greene, 2014), while also struggling to achieve a critical distance from participants and the data generated by the project (Taylor, 2011; Costley & Gibbs, 2006; Fineafter-Rosenbluh, 2017).

While we did not necessarily discover new insights which contradicted the literature but a greater understanding On the other hand, two issues arose that are more specific to insider research that is carried out by student researchers: 1) a lack of confidence in research skills and 2) the uneven power dynamic that is likely to exist between academic researchers and student researchers, and how this may affect the trajectory of the research project. We wish to engage with these issues in order to build a more nuanced understanding of insider research conducted by student researchers in higher education contexts. As Trowler (2011) argues, we need to move towards a nuanced understanding of the positionality of the researchers in so-called 'insider research'. This involves developing new dimensions of reflexivity in which research teams do not consider their position only in relation to the research participants, but also in relation to each other.

Considering the fact that engaged and successful students, those likely to want to please, were appointed we would certainly in the future adopt a validation group (McNiff, 2017). With hindsight it would have been relevant to explore with the student researchers and consider whether the paid aspect of the role was significant. Might the outcomes and motivations have been different if they were undertaking the research solely as part of their degree i.e. their final year project? Is research undertaken for educational and developmental reasons seen as different as that which is financially remunerated? This is a limitation of the paper and should be considered in future projects which focus on student researchers.

Although the student researchers made a vital contribution to this research project, they voiced anxiety about their research skills and repeatedly expressed the wish to develop their skills further. As Brew (2013) suggests, embedding research training in degree programmes can lead to enhanced employability as well as transferable learning gains. While we did offer some specific training to the student researchers on this project, we were concerned about being too rigid with the student researchers around their methods of data collection. It was important to us that we did not simply construct the student researchers as a less competent version of ourselves as researchers – training them to conduct research as we would. We argue that it is important to instead recognize and embed what is special about student researchers in the research design. For example, student researchers who are given only vague guidance on how to create field notes may struggle (as with SR1 in this project) but they may also find exciting ways in which to document what they see and think (as with SR2 in this project). The latter innovation will be beneficial to the research project. Thus, SRs may not just have insights around the content of the research project, but also around the form that the research takes. While student researchers need to be on board with the basic principles to which the research team subscribe (e.g. reliability, validity, generalisabilty, ethics), they should also have the time and space to innovate in how they go about the research process.

When it comes to the power-dynamic within the research team we found the student researchers were eager to please the other researchers in the team. This had the potential to impact negatively on the research project since the student researchers tended to avoid sharing their observations of non-participation in the Instagram project,

feeling perhaps that this would be disheartening for the research team. This situation highlights the need for open and honest conversations between the entire research team both about the trajectory of the research project and feelings that exist between members of the team. Helliwell (2006) has developed reflexive questions designed to guide postgraduates in negotiating and navigating their positionality as researchers. Could these questions be modified so as to be appropriate for undergraduate student insider researchers working as part of academic research teams? Or, in order to generate a more impactful dialogue around power-dynamics within the research team, perhaps questions could be designed that facilitate discussions at research team meetings around relationships, not just those between researcher-participant, and also those between the researchers contributing to the project. To prompt discussion around practical issues that are likely to arise, discussion could focus on particular scenarios that might occur during the course of the research project rather than abstract questions.

A critical analysis of the tensions articulated in this paper suggest the future importance of building into the project design conditions which equip and enable the student researchers to achieve a greater sense of ownership. These can range from direct involvement in the research proposal and writing up together with more regular formalized meetings

It should be noted that the ideas and findings that we have shared in this paper are not intended to be generalizable to other contexts and experiences. Following from Trowler (2011), we are keen to develop more, rather than less, complex understandings of insider research. Our experiences highlight some of the potentials and challenges that *may* arise when working student researchers as insider researchers. These issues may not occur in other research projects of a similar nature and other themes that have not been discussed here may be relevant. While we cannot generalize from this research experience, we hope that the perspective put forward here and the illustrations and examples we have shared can act as a starting point for those setting up projects that involve undergraduate student researchers doing insider research.

In the future, research into student experience would benefit from more contribution by student researchers. We are eager to see more projects of this kind emerging, perhaps trying out some of the recommendations mentioned above for designing projects that celebrate the unique contribution of student researchers while developing a reflexive research team who make themselves aware of the various relationships and power-dynamics at work in the research process.

Recommendations

Below we list a series of recommendations which are intended to be practical and enhance future student researcher experiences:

- That when working with student researchers' academics critically reflect on the extent to which we control the student researcher agenda and therefore their voices. A way of managing this may be having a second mentor which is outside the research team who can be more objective and act as a 'critical friend' to the project team. This might be another academic however might equally be a post-

graduate student or an elected officer from the Student Union. Clearly this is dependent on the willingness of the academics to receive open feedback.

- Exploring further the unique nature of Instagram for research and the issues this threw up aligns well with issues being addressed with learning and teaching as well as previous work covering social media insider research and its attached ethics.

- From the onset student researchers should have their skills developed in a structured way relating to individual needs and research context which is enough to increase their confidence whilst not so much that it stunts their unique and prodigious contributions. This is particularly important if their curriculum does not integrate research skills and knowledge early on in their degree.

- In order to counter some of the difficulties that emerge when academics and students come together as co-researchers it is important to discuss ways in which to best support student researchers in the relational aspects i.e. power dynamics between themselves and academics along with data gathering aspects.

- To make their input most significant student researchers should be involved in the entire research cycle. This means not simply restricting their role to data gathering and analysis but including being involved in the study design. This might mean when embarking upon collaborative endeavors students are encouraged to select the research topics or at least in developing their own research questions whilst guided by academics.

- Considering to the fact that engaged and successful students, those likely to want to please, were validation groups consisting of other students should be built into the research design.

- To make explicit and transparent in the design and project timeline ways of working with academics which give student researchers a sense of ownership and an equal voice. From the project inception this mitigates against the risk of students feeling they can't express their views and the need to please academics.

- To consider how student researchers may be actively involved in the dissemination and writing up of the research. This was problematic in our case as the students completed their studies and left the university just after the project ended however careful planning might overcome this.

- In order to counter some of the difficulties that emerge when academics and students come together as co-researchers we explore ways to best support student researchers in the relational and data gathering aspects.

- Finally, it is essential that further research is conducted into how the experience of student researchers and hearing from them directly and openly how the experience might be strengthened. This would benefit all stakeholders – the student, academics and the university bringing about the positive change that all action researchers seek.

Conclusion

Arnold and Norton (2018b) remind us in a collection of case studies from higher education practitioners that 'messiness' is part of the learning process. Our experience

of undertaking this work was valuable and accorded us many insights which we hope others find useful. Such insights enable us to undertake similar projects forearmed with valuable knowledge and mitigate against some of the inevitable complexities which will occur.

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