Incorporating student voice in course development

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Abstract

This paper explores how students start to become co-constructors of their curriculum on a BA Hons SENDI course, using Loe's model of relational proximity (2016) to inform this dialogue. Focused discussion groups served to clarify students' expectations of course delivery and whether the course was meeting their expectations. This provided positive change to participants involved in the research process, encompassing student academic voice to enable a more co-constructed curriculum. Evidence of this was established whilst interrogating formative and summative feedback data which identified the strengths and challenges within a 12-month period. Results of this study include students feeling more settled and supported and being able to voice options to achieve change. The combination of guest lectures, work experiences and external trips helped to enhance understanding of course content and how to implement knowledge into real life experiences. Students have a more positive experience of the course and the use of student voice will continue to be incorporated in future course developments.

Keywords

Expectations, student voice, engagement, curriculum, development.

Introduction

At the time of data collection, the BA Special Educational Needs, Disability and Inclusion (SENDI) course had been running for three years, during which time it has had four course leaders. This potentially impacted on the student's experiences in relation to consistency and transparency regarding course delivery. In 2017/18 course satisfaction was only 28% at level 5. This paper discusses how the researcher (with the assistance of Clifford and Coppin – co-authors and current Level 6 students) used participatory action research (Burton et al, 2014, pp.152-153) to explore the experiences of the Level 5 SENDI cohort, applying Loe's Relational Proximity model (below) as a basis for evaluation and intervention:

DOMAINS *of Relational Proximity*	DRIVERS *of Relational Proximity*	FEATURE *of relationship*	EXPERIENCE *in relationships*	OUTCOME *for organisation*
Those of... Communication Time Knowledge	Greater... Directness Continuity Multiplexity Parity	Creates... Encounter Storyline Knowledge Fairness	Encouraging... Connectedness Belonging Mutual understanding	And producing... Communication Momentum Transparency Participation

Power Purpose	Commonality	Alignment	Mutual respect Shared identity	Synergy

Taken from Loe, (2016, p.12)

This practice is resonated in Seale's paper who identifies that further work is needed in using student voice to inform curriculum development and delivery (2010). As Ramsden (2003) says "good teaching and good learning are linked through the student's experiences of what we do" (p.84). Dinsdale, (2002 cited in Seale, 2010) says that a continual dialogue with students can inform curriculum development and delivery.

The aim of the research was for students to become co-constructors of their curriculum (as explored by Kuh, 2012 and Fung, 2017). This would be achieved through the following objectives:

1) Interrogate formative and summative feedback data to identify strengths and challenges during the academic year 2018/19.

2) Illicit perceptions from students to identify reasons behind student responses and highlight potential improvements to be made.

3) Co-produce an action plan with students to inform programme delivery.

Aspects of Loe's model (2016, above) were used to inform this dialogue as will be discussed throughout this piece. The university strategic plan promotes the 'listening to' students and strengthening feedback and participatory systems (University of Worcester, 2019), however focus group discussions had not been used previously to follow up on Course Experience Survey (CES) data. In fact, there is little evidence to suggest that students were involved in any way with curriculum input. Kuh (2012) discusses the impact that students co-constructing their curriculum can have on their cumulative learning. After introducing focused group discussions, Coppin, and Clifford (student co-authors) felt that they had opportunities to discuss as a cohort what they wanted in terms of programme delivery. For example, they identified that tutors have incorporated topics such as bereavement, bullying and affirmation models in response to students' suggestions.

The themes within both the literature review and the focused discussion groups were around: student/teacher relationships, being listened to/valued and improving student experiences. There was also an underlying theme around motivation/engagement. The prompts for discussion were initially selected from either low or high responses to questions from the CES in 2018.

Literature review

Student/teacher relationships:

Seale identifies the five main roles assumed for students: the stakeholder, the consumer, the teacher, the evaluator, and the storyteller (2010, p.999). Seale (2010) discusses how these different roles raise interesting questions about the nature of the

student/teacher relationship. Marsh (in Loe, 2016) identifies the importance of the quality of the relationship's students have with their teachers, making links to motivation and engagement. Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bunting (2018) identify that teacher's enthusiasm and energy for an academic subject often translate into positive experiences and enjoyment of learning (p.69). Their findings focus on the qualities of excellent teachers that highlight an 'intrinsic motivation to provide high quality teaching and student support' (p.76). Ramsden (2003) also discusses the quality of student/teacher relationships, making connections with the development of interest and commitment to the subject matter (p.75).

Further discussion on the impact of student/staff dialogue and partnership on teaching excellence is raised in Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bunting's paper (2018). They identify that students appreciate and focus on the quality of student support including communication, quality of resources and information, good organisation and encouragement from teaching staff, as main factors of teacher excellence, with an emphasis on collaborative practice. Shaffi (2017) identifies that 'students had little understanding of the value of engaging with their voice in matters relating to their education' (p.11).

Being listened to/valued:

Bryson (2014) describes the collaboration between student and teacher as a democratic relationship where the teacher becomes a facilitator and co-learner. Bryson also looks at student voice in a broader, collective nature such as student unions and representatives, and recognises that these can also be effective in influencing curriculum and student experience (2014, p.236). Fung says that these dialogic encounters test our assumptions and extend our knowledge. She recognises that curriculum content needs to be interrogated to see whether our knowledge base is fully representative.

The literature explored discussed the use of surveys in evaluating Higher Education practice. Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bunting's paper (2018) identify that the National Student Survey (NSS) measures student's perceptions of teaching quality but highlights a lack of research on student's perceptions of teaching excellence. Yorke (in Bryson, 2014) also critiques the NSS, saying that in order to 'measure' student engagement and perceptions more accurately, we must engage more closely with student's 'lived experiences in higher education'. Fung (2017) identifies the tensions and opportunities regarding the 'audit culture'. She discusses a movement away from 'quality management' towards a development of a shared 'quality culture'.

Krause (in Stefani, 2011) examines how student survey data may be used to shape priorities and approaches of academic development units. Krause argues for a systems approach where student survey data is interpreted, building synergies between and among elements of university to bring about sustainable change, improving learning, teaching and student outcomes (p.61). Ramsden (2003) discusses the importance of responding to student feedback, identifying 'clear standards and goals (as) an important element of an effective educational experience' (p.123). Bryson (2014) concurs with this view, saying that only by entering a dialogue with students, do tutors get the opportunity to clarify expectations and pedagogical rationales (p.178). This research intended to clarify student's expectations of course

delivery, to what extent we are meeting those expectations and most importantly, what actions we should take next. Shaffi (2017) identified that students concentrate on needs or complaints rather than using this dialogue as a means of 'participation, inclusion or rights' (p.13). This links to the status of student as consumer, 'getting what they have paid for' (see Fung, 2017, p.11).

Improving student experience:

Gunn (in Stefani, 2011) explores the continuous evolvement of evaluation methods to address design questions, assess impact and identify other influences (p.86). This can be demonstrated through High Impact Educational Practices as discussed by Kuh (2012).In her concluding chapter, Stefani identifies that these methods will enable academic developers to demonstrate the contribution we make to enhance the student learning experiences (2011, p225). Seale (2010) highlights the importance of articulating the expectations of transformative impact, identifying the necessity for a framework to link aspirations to implementation. However, the researcher would need to be aware of not making any 'false promises' if student's arguments are not tenable or aspirations not attainable. Seale goes on to say that as well as potentially influencing future course development, participants (in the projects she explored) appeared to value and use the opportunity to develop their own studies. This was the intention of the research project, that the discussions from focus groups will help to inform future course development. Level five students were purposefully invited to participate so that they could use the opportunity of being part of a focus group to reflect on research methodology and thus inform their current studies. Fung (2017 pp.5-7) explains how a connected curriculum involves students making connections with research, which is built into the programme, and makes links to academic as well as workplace learning.

Methodology

The methodology is participatory action research which *'sees research as a collaboration between researcher and the population that is the focus of the research, with a core aim being to enact positive change for those involved in the research process'* (Ritchie, Lewis et al, 2014, p.67). With reference to Loe (2016), the domain of communication, driven by greater parity, creates alignment, encourages mutual understanding, and produces transparency (as a worked example). The chosen method for data collection was focussed discussion groups. Ritchie, Lewis et al (2014) describes this method as data generated by interaction between participants, who present their own views and experiences and hear from other people. The participants listen, reflect and consider their own standpoint further, triggering additional material. It should not be perceived as a collection of individual interviews; the researcher becomes a facilitator/moderator of the discussion presented. Hutchings and Archer (2001) suggest that a key advantage of this method 'lay in the opportunity they afford to tap into jointly constructed discourse [and] interactions with each other' (p.72.). This can be taken further where interaction elicits 'data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group' (Morgan, 1997, p.2).

The research used an interpretivist paradigm, valuing experiences and perspectives as important sources of knowledge (Nagy Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). The primary researcher (course-leader) identified her positionality and potential bias within the

application for ethical approval and the potential power-relationship between the researcher and the participants was discussed. This was negated by the existing relationship established with the students and course leader where they already had open and honest discussions and any potential negative comments about the course are discussed. Fung (2017) says that power dynamics needs to be revisited if we are to maximise the possibility of meaningful dialogue, ensuring every voice is heard. Students were kept informed and involved with the research and the writing of this piece, becoming co-producers of the outcomes. Initially this meant that immediate adaptations to the curriculum were made, including amendments to modules and the introduction of a new module in Mental health, the following academic year. On a longitudinal basis the course-leader has incorporated focus group discussions with students before and after CES input and uses the course representation system as a tool to 'close the circle' with student feedback. This is explained in more detail in the concluding paragraph.

Limitations of the focus group were the time it took to transcribe and analyse. During the transcription phase, missed opportunities in the discussion were identified where it would have been useful to probe further and develop points made. Therefore, the researcher consulted Coppin and Clifford for further clarification and input. When evaluating the data, personal bias and standpoint was considered in that responses could have been framed to meet the research objectives. Nagy Hesse-Biber & Leavy (2011) identifies that validity in qualitative analysis is not easily achieved, the researcher can only aim to convince the reader that our findings are 'true'. As Coppin and Clifford were participants in the research as well as co-producers of the final evaluation, this serves to strengthen the validity of the findings.

The researcher piloted the use of focus discussion groups with nine level 6 students, based on four themes that had scored below 60% satisfaction in their CES scores. The researcher took the opportunity to explore their experiences of level 5 curriculum to contribute towards the discussions with the main sample group. The sample group consisted of two focus discussion groups; all participants were level 5 students on the SENDI programme. All 18 students at level 5 were invited to participate and 12 volunteered. Initially the intention was to hold two groups of six participants, however at the time of data collection, the second group only had two participants, which potentially changed the dynamics. All participants were white British females, aged between 20-35, with a variety of work and life experiences. The participants were a true representation of the homogenous student group at level 5 and 6. Therefore, as reflected in the conclusion, the course-leader would need to consider any further curriculum developments based on the current findings, as the demographic of students is likely to change from one year to another.

Ritchie et al (2014) discusses the efficacy of heterogenous vs homogenous groups, saying that if participants have a shared experience, they may assume others know what they mean rather than articulate it fully, thus diversity helps to generate richer discussions and insights. However, a very heterogenous group may feel threatening to participants making it difficult to cover key topics in depth (p.231). Fung (2017, p.14) argues that these encounters with others enables us to share what we see, enabling our horizons to broaden and merge, creating advance knowledge through intersubjectivity.

To access the student/participants for the purpose of research, consent from the 'gatekeeper', (Head of Department) was obtained through e-mail contact. The research was introduced after a taught seminar with the level 5 students by providing them with the information sheet detailing the research. The students had time to consider whether they wished to participate, and it was communicated to them that it is their choice to opt in or not. Potential participants were made aware that they could withdraw from the research up to the point of data analysis and were provided with a date of when this would occur. Participants were asked to ensure no names were spoken during recording of the discussions to ensure anonymity. When transcribing the recording each participant was allocated a number.

Morgan (1997) recognises that focus discussion groups enables rapid comparisons between responses. Group discussions provide direct evidence about similarities and differences in participants' opinions and experiences as opposed to reaching such conclusions from post hoc analyses of separate statements from each interviewee (p.10). The discussion enables the group to control the focus of the discussions and so potentially facilitating material otherwise unanticipated. This has advantages in terms of 'idea generation' and again can produce a rich source of information. This method offers a degree of control to the researcher to steer responses towards research questions, whilst also allowing group interaction that can be a 'valuable source of insights into complex behaviours and motivations' (Morgan, 1997, p.15).

There was a potential risk due to group dynamics in the sense that the students are in a peer group. Participants may not agree with each other's response or be offended by what they say. This was mitigated somewhat by the participants devising their own 'rules of engagement' before the discussion started and agreeing to show mutual respect for each other's responses in line with the University values (University of Worcester, 2019, p.7). Smithson (2000) identifies the limitations of focus groups saying that there is a tendency for socially acceptable opinion to emerge or for dominant participants to take over the research process (p.116). This needed to be handled carefully by the researcher in facilitating the discussions, to probe and challenge responses and find a balance of varied voices. Coppin identified that there were dominant voices within Focus group 1 and on revisiting the transcripts recognised the facilitator's attempts to move the conversation forward.

Data analysis

The analysis of the qualitative data used a general inductive approach as described by Thomas (2006). Rather than coding individual responses the group's responses were analysed as a whole; this is more appropriate for drawing out themes from focus group discussions (Ritchie et al, 2014, p340 & 341). After scribing generic topics that came from analysing the focus group transcripts, links were made to the themes emerging from the literature review. These themes were then reviewed by Coppin and Clifford and developed into a thematic map (figure 1, below).
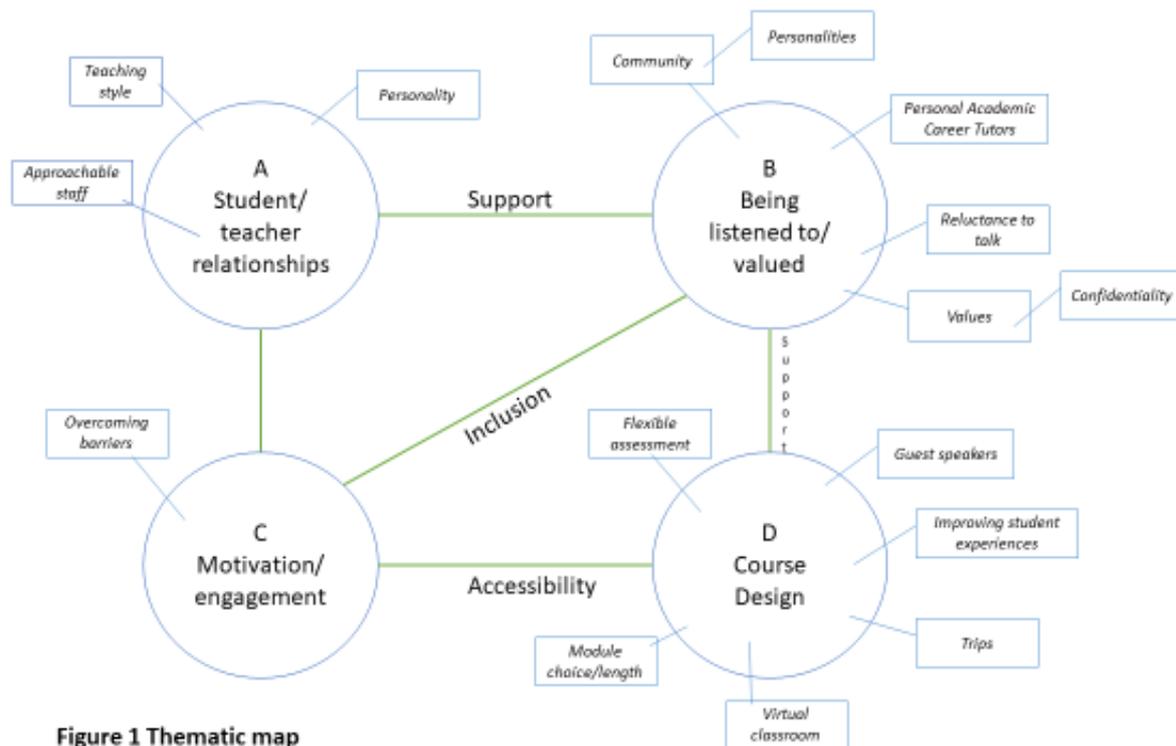
Figure 1 Thematic map

Discussion

The first theme explored was that of student/teacher relationships (as discussed by Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bunting, 2018, and Seale, 2010). The participants raised the importance of staff skills and attributes when exploring the modules that they enjoyed the most, commenting on how they (tutors) facilitate discussions, treat the students as equals, that staff are approachable, helpful and supportive.

"The lecturers are really passionate and knowledgeable about their subjects" (participant 6).

"Some staff I feel you can approach, are really helpful and supportive" (participant 4).

Negative comments regarding staff attributes were those who had more of a 'Primary school' teaching style which students found patronising. Although students recognised staff knowledge and expertise, they also discussed how this can occasionally be perceived as 'biased' towards a single perspective for example.

The links identified between theme A and B were that of 'support'. Participant 7 commented that "*in the beginning maybe make it known who we need to go to for support, so it doesn't encroach on lecture time*". This could also be linked to Loe's domain of communication (2016).

Theme two focussed on feeling valued/ listened to (Bryson, 2014 and Lubicz-Nawrock & Bunting, 2018), and linked to Loe's features of storyline and knowledge

(2016).Participants identified the plethora of advice and support available, especially tutorial and PACT (Personal, Academic, Career Tutor) support, linking to theme one. Participants said they felt more settled this year because they know who their PACT is, and recognised the support provided by the course-leader.

"Having regular tutorials has really helped me understand what I need to do to improve my grades" (participants 7 and 4).

"I feel like the course-leader is there to support us because she got us the mental health module, which I was happy with…we voiced our opinions and something came out of it which hasn't happened before" (participant 4).

The third theme around motivation and engagement (identified by Loe, 2016 and Bryson, 2014) was mainly highlighted through participant's discussions on group size. They identified that being in a smaller class group (18 students) meant they knew everyone; they could support each other, and discussions were open and honest. Links were made to an emerging sub theme of 'community' where participants talked about the Facebook group they had created, a study group they had started and a real sense of identity within the course, saying that the students all had similar values and views, were patient and polite with each other and respected each other's opinions.

"I think we have the same kind of values; we are all here because we have the same kind of views" (participant 6).

"I feel like even watching everyone else's presentations we can all see how much better we're all getting on with presenting and we cheer each other on" (participant 1).

Areas of support continued to be discussed within theme four (course design). When discussing 'Improving student experiences' (Ramsden, 2003) the participants focussed on services such as the Library and 'Writer in Residence'. Participants placed real value on Work Experience, Guest lecturers and external trips, demonstrating how these had enhanced their understanding of course content but also how they could apply knowledge and skills gained on the course, to real-life experiences. Participants identified that the course focuses on Education, and they would like more elements of Health and Social Care in relation to SEND. The participants also discussed having more module options and although they recognised their course was specialist, they would like to have more shared modules within the department of Education and Inclusion. This links with Loe's outcomes of transparency and participation (2016).

"I've enjoyed the trips we've done like going to the Blind College" (participant 7)

"These visits helped with the assignments" (participant 6).

Participant 5 said *"I think it's definitely helpful to have all the lectures on Blackboard"* (the university's Virtual Learning Environment). Participants 1 and 7 identified that it would be useful to then have the lecture audio recorded over the slides for those who are absent or if students wanted to revisit and make links. Participant 6 said *"It was*

useful having a choice of assignment questions, so you chose which one and worked to your strengths".

There were some negative comments that came out of the discussion around course design:

"Some of the materials are not accessible, the links don't always work" (participant 7).

"Feedback is frustrating because it is not based on your ability it's just based on not having been taught on how to do something properly, which is the fault of the uni not really preparing people" (participant 1).

Participant 5 said *"more support with references from the start".*

"I leave assignments until the last minute as I'm waiting for more content from the lecture, but nothing comes up" (participant 3).

Conclusion

The aim of the research was for students to become co-constructors of their curriculum. This was achieved through identifying strengths and challenges from CES data and focused discussion groups. Student representatives and the course-leader then co-produced an action plan to inform programme delivery. In 2019/20 the course team implemented these recommendations, such as module consistencies including online content, assignment alignment and variety, improved timings, and links to content. Student's were informed about these developments on the course communications page and course year group representatives attend regular meetings with the course-leader to 'close the circle' and ensure continuous communication.

Future implications and considerations for course development into 2020/21 are further study skills support, induction activities at level 5 and 6 and the development of health and social care perspectives of SEND within modules. These have been incorporated into next year's enhancement plan. Returning to Loe's Relational proximity model (2016) the research has demonstrated the following (highlighted):

DOMAINS *of Relational Proximity*	DRIVERS *of Relational Proximity*	FEATURE *of relationship*	EXPERIENCE *in relationships*	OUTCOME *for organisation*
Those of... **Communication** **Time** Knowledge Power **Purpose**	Greater... Directness Continuity **Multiplexity** **Parity** Commonality	Creates... Encounter **Storyline** **Knowledge** Fairness **Alignment**	Encouraging... **Connectedness** **Belonging** **Mutual understanding** **Mutual respect** **Shared identity**	And producing... **Communication** Momentum **Transparency** **Participation** Synergy

Open dialogue with the students to enhance the use and understanding of course feedback is continuing to be used as a framework for curriculum development. The second iteration of CES data showed increased satisfaction rates with teaching, personal academic tutoring, organising and management, and most importantly course feedback. Course satisfaction rates have gone from 28% in 2017/18, to 78% in 2018/19 and now 95% in 2019/20. This demonstrates that students have a positive experience of the course and will continue to inform further practice in this area. Reflecting on this exercise, the course-leader will continue to work with the students on future course developments including a re-validation event in 2020/21. Incorporating student voice in course development has become an integral part of department developments within our undergraduate courses.

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