

Newcomer to Expert Practitioner: Identifying emerging communities of practice in extra-curricular student engagement activities in art and design

Kate Dunstone, Manchester Metropolitan University, k.dunstone@mmu.ac.uk

Summary

This study reports on research exploring student experiences in supporting the Saturday Club programme within Manchester Metropolitan University's Arts and Humanities faculty, demonstrating the value of a communities of practice model in understanding student engagement in extracurricular art and design activities. The study was informed by Lave and Wenger's communities of practice model, and the process of "legitimate peripheral participation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and explores how this theory can illuminate student experiences in supporting Saturday Club. Results of the study show that student experiences coalesced into a journey common to each participant, beginning with nervousness, followed by a sense of increased confidence, through which an expert practitioner role begins to develop, leading to sense of confidence in one's knowledge, and an ability and willingness to share this with an audience. This journey can be understood as a move from newcomer to established practitioner situated within a network of relationships and dialogic methods, which map to Wenger's community of practice model.

Background

Context

The Saturday Club programme within the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at Manchester Metropolitan University is part of the wider National Art and Design Saturday Club programme delivered by the Saturday Club Trust. Through this programme universities and colleges across the UK provide Saturday morning classes in a variety of subject areas for 13 – 16 year olds, with the aim of "inspiring creativity in young people" (Saturday Club Trust, n.d.) through access to quality learning resources and industry professionals. To encourage wide engagement clubs must be offered free of charge.

Beyond the general aim of "inspiring creativity" the Art and Design Saturday Club at MMU was intended to encourage a greater level of engagement with art and design courses at HE level, and to establish the arts as a viable career path for young people. As such the club sat within the faculty Outreach team and functioned broadly as a recruitment tool. However, the recruitment strategy for enrolment of young people was so broad as to position the project outside of Widening Participation strategy, including, as it did, young people from independent schools who were encouraged towards more 'academic' subjects, and young people considered to sit within Widening Participation frameworks.

From the inception of the club undergraduate students were involved in supporting the delivery of workshop sessions. Their involvement in the project functioned practically to support the small team of two teaching staff responsible for planning and delivery of sessions, whilst also providing an extracurricular activity to deliver hands-on

experience of working with young people to students interested in pursuing teaching within their careers.

Shaped by changes in staffing and the shifting priorities of the wider university outreach strategy Saturday Club has developed year on year, with changes being made to recruit strategies, locations and resources, and the ways in which university students are involved. At the time of this study undergraduate students supported the delivery of Saturday Club through the Faculty's Art and Design Student Ambassador scheme. This scheme is presented to students as an opportunity to gain experience working with young people in a variety of informal roles across outreach projects, in a support capacity. Students applied for this scheme from a variety of courses, attended a brief interview with a member of staff, and were paid hourly for their involvement. Previous to this year students had been involved in a variety of ways, both paid and voluntary, with a variety of methods of reimbursement, with recruitment numbers hovering around 12 students involved per year. These students occupied a unique position as a middle ground between university staff and Saturday Club members, and anecdotal evidence suggests this position was instrumental in developing their learning and teaching practice in art and design.

As Project Leader I developed and delivered the Saturday Club programme from 2015 – 2018. During this time the project was delivered spontaneously and dynamically, reacting to student and management needs, the availability of teaching resources, and the availability of staff and students involved.

Extracurricular Student Engagement

As paid work taking place within the university, but separate from formal curricula, Saturday Club sits within Thompson, Clark, Walker, and Whyatt's definition of extracurricular activities (ECAs) as "activities and events that students engage in, which are not part of their formal degree classification such as... voluntary or paid work" (2013, p. 136). As such it is valuable to understand the benefits and potential limitations of student engagement with ECAs.

Thompson et al. (2013) highlight that, as students may well pursue careers outside their academic discipline, the "generic attributes and skills" associated with ECAs will be valuable across a range of career pathways. This could be said to apply to an even greater degree to art and design students, who often anticipate a portfolio career across varied sectors upon graduation.

These attributes appear to be wide ranging, and on the whole beneficial. Kuh (1995) links ECA engagement with "gains in such areas as social competence, autonomy, confidence, self-awareness, and appreciation for human diversity" (p. 124) and a "productive, satisfying life after college" (p. 125), while Thompson et al. (2013) suggest that engagement may even be "central to happiness and well-being" (p. 144). Further, Bensimon (2009) emphasises additional benefits including "a sense of connectedness, affiliation, and belonging, [and] rich opportunities for learning and development." (as cited in Trowler, 2010, p. xxii-xxiii).

However, the overwhelmingly positive outcomes reported for ECA engagement are tempered by Kuh (1995), who cautions that positive outcomes are often

overemphasised in literature, with negative experiences reframed as opportunities for growth. Kuh also comments on the identities of students involved in ECAs, and the exclusion of some sectors of the student body, and the differing approaches to ECAs across genders, ethnicities and other groups are explored further by Stuart et al., (2011). Further, Lizzio and Wilson (2009, as cited in Trowler, 2010) link the benefits students experience from ECAs to their motivations for taking part, be they financial, social or educational.

In my role within the club I felt confident that students were indeed experiencing these benefits, based on my own observation of student activity over the year. The design of this study allowed myself and students to reflect on the experience, and determine if Saturday Club had indeed been a beneficial experience for undergraduates involved.

Communities of Practice

Working closely with student ambassadors throughout their involvement with Saturday Club I began to discern a difference in the ways in which they fulfilled their roles, with increasing confidence and greater autonomy. From my point of view, it seemed that a community of practice was emerging, through which students were learning to become expert practitioners in their chosen discipline. This study was designed to explore that possibility.

The concept of communities of practice has its roots in social learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and provides a framework for understanding the ways in which learning can be socially situated. Simply defined, a community of practice represents a group formed over time through a common interest in development of a specific skill or interest (Wenger, 2008, p. 45), with a desire to develop in this interest through joint participation. Drew (2004) demonstrates that the communities of practice model is widely embraced in art and design teaching, alongside Information Transmission modes, as students work in 'real world' skills-based teaching to develop as practitioners.

Developing the community of practice model further, Fenton-O'Creevy et al. suggest that looking to "landscapes of practice" (in Wenger-Trayner, Fenton-O'Creevy, Hutchinson, Kubiak, & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 43), within which multiple communities of practice overlap, provides an opportunity for varied paths through communities, and makes space for participants who view themselves outside Wenger's periphery to centre model (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015).

Description of project

This study was designed to determine if the community of practice, and attendant benefits, that staff members believed to be developing, was in fact taking place among undergraduate students involved in Saturday Club. The expansion of the Club year on year, and increasing interest from management, meant that having a clear indication of any benefits of involvement for enrolled undergraduates placed the club in a strong position to maintain paid employment for undergraduates, and demonstrate its wider value to the university community.

Participants for the study were drawn from students who had been employed to support the 2017/18 cohort of Saturday Club, and would be graduating from the university in summer 2018. These participants allowed for reflection on the impact of their engagement following graduation, as well as their experiences within Saturday Club. This yielded a small sample size of three students, all of whom took part in the study.

The primary method of data collection within this project was through semi-structured interviews, providing data to form an understanding of potential improvements in practice. Analysis of interview data took place through thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and identification of patterns and themes. Broad themes were analysed in relation to the data set as a whole, named, and the relationship between identified themes mapped. Through subsequent writing up of findings data was reanalysed and supporting extracts selected.

Evidence of effectiveness and impacts

NB All participant names have been changed.

Initial motivations for each participant were established through questionnaire responses prior to interview. Their responses [see table 1] were supported by interview responses, such as those below, which demonstrated the interest participants had in furthering their teaching practice, as well as the drive they showed in developing their professional profiles as creative practitioners.

“[The] first reason why I came was the interest in teaching.” Steph

“I thought that [working as an Ambassador] was something really interesting to do and it just got, sort of, kickstart me in a career kind of thing.” Georgia

	Jess	Steph	Georgia
Select which of these reasons contributed to your interest in being an Art and Design Ambassador. (Select as many as necessary)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Earn extra money <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Gain experience in teaching <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Gain experience in art and design <input type="checkbox"/> Supplement taught subjects <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Expand professional network <input type="checkbox"/> Other, please specify:	<input type="checkbox"/> Earn extra money <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Gain experience in teaching <input type="checkbox"/> Gain experience in art and design <input type="checkbox"/> Supplement taught subjects <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Expand professional network <input type="checkbox"/> Other, please specify:	Questionnaire not returned

Student Journey: Nervousness

Common to all participants was an initial feeling of nervousness, as they moved into a role they had not inhabited before. In some cases, the mentoring nature of the role was specifically mentioned as a cause for nerves, for example by participant Jess,

who added to these concerns an understanding of her responsibility towards the young people involved in the Saturday Club project.

“I’m a naturally shy person and an introvert and having to talk and talk to kids especially you have to just set all of that aside and don’t be afraid of saying anything wrong or, like, failure just because you want to teach the children not to be scared either when being creative.” Jess

Further, participant Steph draws on the specific nature of the role change enacted by ambassadors involved in the Saturday Club project by highlighting the move from taught to teacher.

“In the Saturday Club nobody is teaching me and it’s actually me who can give some ideas as well.” Steph

At this stage it seems likely that the enthusiasm and personal interest that contributed to students taking on the Student Ambassador role played a part in encouraging them to continue, and develop into the second phase of their journey.

Student Journey: Increased confidence

Following this period of nervousness, each participant then reported a sense of increased confidence as a practitioner, both in their own discipline and in the wider teaching space. In some cases this was mentioned explicitly, and the link between disciplinary and teaching practice clearly drawn, as with this example from Georgia.

“I think [in] both Saturday Club and my course you gain more confidence in yourself and then once you start building that relationship with the people anyway it becomes easier.” Georgia

For other participants this increase in confidence came from discovering and developing skills in teaching and mentoring which had not yet been explored.

“I never really thought of myself as a person who would be good at teaching people but I kind of found that when I was put in that situation it felt right and it felt like I could do it.” Jess

Student Journey: Expert practitioner role

It is then through this increase in confidence, and ongoing involvement in Saturday Club, that an expert practitioner role begins to develop. This role is typified by a sense of confidence in one’s knowledge, and an ability and willingness to share this with an audience. For participant Georgia the value of this expert role was in the ability it allowed to move between roles as expert and learner.

“After about two or three sessions I just really got into it and it was almost like I was, yeah I was that middle person, where I could get involved with the activities and I could learn stuff with the students as well as if they needed help from me, I could actually give that and have the knowledge to be able to do that for them.” Georgia

For other participants the value of this move from learner to expert was shown by their responses to the question “What is your fondest memory of working on Saturday Club?”

“I don’t think there is one specific one but whenever I got to sit with the kids and draw with them and talk to them in smaller groups and get to know them and they’d ask me questions and I’d be able to help them that was the most rewarding part of the whole of it.” Jess

The highlighting of these aspects as the “most rewarding” or fondest remembered of Saturday Club indicates their importance to participants, and further elaborates the expert identity as one which includes not just knowledge, but the sharing of this with an audience.

Navigating Student Partnership Roles

All participants reported feeling unsure as to what involvement with Saturday Club would entail, and how their role would sit within it. However, it is apparent from the examples below that this feeling soon passed.

“I think it was really nerve wracking because I’ve never done anything like that before where I was mentoring someone else... I think that was the initial feeling when I went in. And then after about two or three sessions I just really got into it ...” Georgia

Georgia’s response also illustrates the ambiguity of the role inhabited by ambassadors, sitting between Club tutors, who may be their tutors in other teaching activities, and Club members. Examples below show responses to questions around challenges in Saturday Club, indicating the ambiguity of the ambassador role with regard to Club members:

Were there times at Saturday Club when you felt that, when you’d felt uncomfortable?

“Sometimes maybe when the kids start trying to figure out the boundaries between the kids and you, so that, and that was more [other outreach project] because I was there with them every week. Saturday Club definitely that happened as well.” Jess

and the ambiguity of the ambassador role with regard to Club tutors:

“I would say yes and no because I don’t feel like, you don’t teach me, but I for example, by meeting Tutor A, and like I’m third year I wouldn’t speak with her as with mates in a classroom, but at the same time on Saturday Club I kind of can speak with her in a different way you know mean.” Steph

It was further felt by participants that this ambiguity would continue into their professional lives, with Saturday Club setting them up to navigate professional identities, as in the examples below.

“I don't think teaching, I think teaching is such a broad thing whether, I mean if it is going into teaching and I go round different schools and teach kids the whether I'm going to institutions and that kind of different thing...” Georgia

Discussion

Overall participant responses indicate that many of the benefits outlined in literature on student engagement in ECAs were apparent in involvement with Saturday Club. The development of teaching practice, and skills associated with this, were mentioned frequently as participants discussed their broader experience with the Club, predicted, as suggested by Lizzio and Wilson (2009, as cited in Trowler, 2010) by their personal motivations for taking part.

The gains in autonomy and confidence found by Kuh (1995) are the most clearly exhibited in participant responses, with the journey from newcomer to expert practitioner defined at each point by a lessening of nerves and increased self-assurance in personal abilities, and the independence to utilise these in teaching.

Participant responses suggest that the increase in confidence occurring through Saturday Club maps to the legitimate peripheral participation model theorized by Lave and Wenger (1991), with the student journey outlined above demonstrating a move from newcomer to established practitioner.

Within the legitimate peripheral participation model the sense of unease and nervousness participants report on joining the project could be understood as the newcomer identity described by Lave and Wenger (1991), as students experience peripheral engagement with the project and begin to understand the requirements of their role. Participants then report an increased confidence in their own abilities over their involvement in Saturday Club which, crucially, is accompanied by a sense of satisfaction in sharing their knowledge and interests with Saturday Club participants. This can be understood as the full participation, established practitioner role described by Lave and Wenger (1991). As students inhabit this role we see Saturday Club participants, and in some circumstances staff members, then moved into the peripheral role. This shifting of roles suggests the dynamic nature of the community of practice at work here.

However, it is important to note that while participants experience a development of their role as they move from peripheral to full participants in the Saturday Club community, participant responses indicated this involvement may well be temporary, and the Saturday Club community one of many to which the participant belongs. This experience of multiple community membership could be understood through Fenton-O'Creevey et al.'s 'sojourner' identity (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015), as participants move at the peripheral level through several communities in a landscape of practice, and are substantially changed by their involvement. However, participant responses indicate this could be taken further as, while participants did experience involvement in multiple communities of practice, it was felt that full participation in one community did not preclude participation in other communities, but rather augmented it.

Reflections on the project

Challenges

Within this study the nature of researching one's own practice in education presented a range of challenges. Careful reflection on the process was required to avoid assuming understanding of issues at hand, defining where research began and ended, and challenging researcher and participant preconceptions. The challenges of power dynamics within insider research were also carefully considered, although while I had directly managed interview participants, none of us worked together at the time of the study.

Recommendations

This study demonstrates that utilising pedagogical theories, such as the communities of practice model, allow better understanding of what is already taking place in the teaching space. Viewing practice reflectively, and embracing pedagogical theory to better illuminate this reflection, is valuable in articulating the particular learning and teaching approaches within art and design which appear to be happening spontaneously, and identifying how successful approaches might be expanded. Further, findings demonstrate that informal, extracurricular activities yield benefits for students, and can embed teaching practice development in disciplinary contexts, emphasising the value of extracurricular student engagement activities within art and design subjects.

Follow up and future plans

Demographic surveys within this study indicated that participants all identified as female, and viewed their ethnic origin as white. The results of this small sample are in line with anecdotal experience of working on the project, with the majority of participants in line with these identities. Conducting further research around these characteristics may provide insights on the students who take part, and how a broader cohort could be supported in engaging with the project and benefiting from the learning taking place.

Related publications and resources

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