

Action Research as Student Engagement Practice: A small scale case study of an industry focused Higher Education provider.

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Abstract

This action research was conducted in response to National Student Survey (2018) (NSS) comments that suggested 12 out of 87 students studying a BA(Hons) Early Years Development and Learning degree did not feel their voice was represented in feedback gathered by their Higher Education institution (HEI). Due to students' knowledge of the sector for which they are training, andragogical rather than pedagogical principles are considered in relation to student engagement processes. The research used focus groups, online polls and email correspondence to establish how best to ensure that all voices were reflected in feedback and how this could be communicated to students. The ethics of power and collaboration are explored, as well as the issues regarding the capture of representative views. The findings suggested that students wanted explanations for when feedback was not actioned, opportunity to feedback on potential solutions and greater collaboration with staff. It was also found that in participating in the action research, students gained research skills as well as improvement of their student engagement processes. While the scope of this study is small, methods and practices could be used on a larger scale to achieve the outcomes for HEIs seeking to improve their student engagement processes.

Keywords: Andragogy, Collaboration, Action Research, Empowerment, Reflection

Introduction

Students' engagement in the development of their education provision has become a central focus of Higher Education (HE) in the enhancement of the student experience (Guilbault, 2016; Kandiko-Howson, 2017; Parsell, 2000). The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), defines 'student engagement' for course enhancement (rather than with course content) as:

"The participation of students in quality enhancement and quality assurance processes, resulting in the improvement of their educational experience."
(QAA, 2018, p.4)

The Higher Education Institution (HEI) in which this research takes place is known as an Alternative Provider (HEAP) which means student fees are only partially covered by student loans (HESA, 2018) now known as an Approved Provider (OfS, 2018a). It is a small HEI of 281 (approximately 95 per year group) students, thus while it does not approach student engagement differently to larger institutions, student dissatisfaction registers more highly in NSS data which is presented in percentages. The National Student Survey (NSS) and the Office for Students (OfS) places a greater emphasis in Higher Education (HE) generally on quality education that is value for money and whether students feel satisfied with their education and student experience (OfS, 2018b; Parsell, 2000). As highlighted by Guilbault (2016), rising costs of tuition

are giving students a consumerist approach to HE across the sector, which combined with higher fees than other institutions means 'value for money' is regularly mentioned in student feedback at this HEI. In recognising students as consumers, HE institutions become student focused while also being competitive in the HE marketplace (Guilbault, 2016) and as such feedback from current students, and alumni has become instrumental in the shaping and enhancement of HE provision (Kandiko-Howson, 2017). White (2007) found that the rising cost of HE means the students feel they should have more say in their provision, which creates a tension the perspectives of those who teach them. Schön (1983) suggests that across many industries there is a lack of confidence in professional knowledge, a view which is supported by White (2007) who highlights student's perceptions that HEIs are primarily concerned with increasing their financial income. As such, it is important that students not only have a voice when it comes to shaping their provision, but that they feel that they have been heard and their engagement with the feedback process valued (Kandiko-Howson, 2017).

All students at the HEI undertake BA (Hons) Early Years Development and Learning degree alongside a practical diploma that prepares them for a career as a private nanny. The course spans three years fulltime study with a fourth year in fulltime employment to complete their practical qualification. To secure a place on the course, students must demonstrate experience working with children to ensure they have a realistic expectation of work with young children. All will undertake practical placements throughout their training while others will support their studies with paid work babysitting or summer nanny work in addition to this. This practical knowledge of the industry shows that andragogical, rather the pedagogical principles explain both the students' approach to their provision and their contributions to student engagement processes:

1. *Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction.*
2. *Experience (including mistakes) provides the basis for the learning activities.*
3. *Adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance and impact to their job or personal life.*
4. *Adult learning is problem-centred rather than content-oriented.* (Knowles et al., 2005)

This paper will use the term "andragogy" to reflect the characteristics of the students participating, as they are involved in planning and evaluation of the course, use experiential learning, and are undertaking study specifically related to their current and future work (Knowles et al., 2005). The principles of andragogy reflect the emphasis of the QAA (2018) and of the HEI in ensuring that students are developing professional skills for their future careers. The QAA (2014) highlights that there should be opportunities to engage in research as part of early years studies, as alongside knowledge of research processes and ethics it also promotes reflective skills that are a fundamental part of early years practice.

The researcher is a Senior Lecturer and the Student Engagement Manager and graduate of this HEI with responsibility for gathering feedback on teaching, learning, social and environmental provision while finding innovative ways to ensure this is consistently effective. This is achieved in collaboration with a group of elected student representatives in the Staff Student Liaison Committee (SSLC) on the principles of 'praxis' (Freire, 1970). Praxis is defined as the process of action and reflection (Freire, 1970) encouraging educators to reflect on their teaching and seek a dialogue with learners so that they can improve education (Freire & Macedo, 1995).

Feedback from students can be surprising to lecturers, because while they may be united by a shared experience of the institution (Carey et al., 2016) they will have personal values and experiences that influence their perspectives (Midgley et al., 2013). Equally, the feedback that is gathered from students means lecturers open themselves to criticism which can feel personally challenging (Marshall, 1999). However, after the emotional reaction subsides, the process of reflection provides opportunities to reinterpret their understanding of the situation and invents a new strategy (Schön, 2001) however it can have the opposite effect where lecturers do not accept the perspectives of the student group and thus resist any potential for change (Hanson, 2013). Schön (2005, p.183) warns against "professionally designed solutions to problems" as they can have unintended consequences due to a lack of understanding of those who use the service, which is important to keep in mind when making changes to Student Engagement processes. Freire (1970, p. 65) suggests "True dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking-thinking" and Bradbury and Reason (2003, p.162) highlight the need for "mutual trust and genuine respect" for collaboration in action research. Through the action research process, a natural blurring of authority can occur as the researcher and participants form a 'lengthy collaborative relationship' (Bradbury & Reason, 2002, p.157), a process which reflects effective praxis (Freire, 1970; Midgley et al., 2013). If successful, engagement with students moves away from the idea that educators view their students as passive receivers of information (Freire, 1970) and creates a mutual respect from both groups.

Thus, objectives for the provision of a high-quality HE experience is threefold:

1. To ensure students are meaningfully engaged in the development of their andragogy (Freire, 1970; Knowles et al., 2005; QAA, 2018)
2. To ensure that the provision is value for money (Guilbault, 2016; OfS, 2018b; Parsell, 2000)
3. To ensure that students are developing the skills they need for their career in early years not only through teaching but also through engagement in research. (Alston & Bowles, 1998; Jones, 2009; QAA, 2014)

The purpose of this action research project is to collaborate with students as co-researchers (Bradbury & Reason, 2003), in finding the best solution to ensuring students feel that their feedback is valued. As noted by Elliot, (1991, p.49):

"The fundamental aim of action research is to improve practice rather than to produce knowledge"

Which means that this research should also improve student engagement practice of the research and the processes for the HEI in which it takes place.

Methodology

Action research is participant led and thus methods employed in the project were suggested by participants (Bradbury & Reason, 2003). The study used focus groups, online polls and email to involve as many affected individuals as possible (Bradbury & Reason, 2003). Focus groups were employed as the preferred method because they provided opportunity for discussion where both researcher and the students could respond to and build upon the ideas of others. They also provided opportunities for the development of research skills such as ethical and methodological considerations, as well as teamwork and problem-solving (Bryman, 2016; Carey et al., 2016; QAS, 2014). The research used a “double-loop” discourse, which seeks to challenge current practice and open it to questioning rather than attempting to stay rigidly with processes that are currently used which would constitute a single loop discourse (Bradbury & Reason, 2003, p. 159).

In NSS (2018) feedback gathered from students in their final year it became apparent that at least 12 students out of 83 believed that their voice is not heard or valued while six believed that there is too much emphasis placed on Student Voice. Not all students have the same opinion of their education and as such cannot be viewed as one entity (Midgley et al., 2013), as is evidenced by 71 students who feel that the Student Engagement processes work. Often, when seeking comments from individuals regarding feedback, ascertaining whether a view is representative can be problematic, particularly when it is anonymous (Goncalves & Chattopadhyay, 2010). The very nature of democracy is that when a population is presented with choice, a decision will be based on the majority leaving a minority feeling unheard; leading to disillusion with democratic processes (Farrer & Zingher, 2018). However, as emphasised by Bradbury and Reason (2003) action research seeks to work with a group of individuals to address issues for oppressed groups to make processes work for everyone, which is why the comments of these 12 students are the focus of this action research project.

Ethics and Tools

As students were familiar with Student Engagement processes, they had some understanding as to what to expect from the research process (Hanson, 2013). However, due to the way the action research is shaped by the participants as co-researchers, informed consent was challenging since the researcher could not know what would happen beyond the initial focus group (Midgley et al., 2013). The invitation to participate in the focus group was sent via email (Appendix 1) with the information sheet attached (Appendix 2) which outlined the purpose of the research and why the process is yet unknown (Arthur, 2017).

The data was anonymised, and pseudonyms were given to those who chose to participate, responses were paraphrased and agreement sought that this was an accurate reflection of the comments (Arthur, 2017; Bryman, 2016; Hanson, 2013). Data was collected qualitatively and analysed collaboratively to find the group-constructed view. This means that the research followed an interpretivist paradigm as

it recognises that one experience might have multiple interpretations (Arthur et al., 2012) such as that the researcher as a lecturer and the participants as students that will interpret the discussions differently (Hanson, 2013). Equally, the processes discussed are ones that the research has developed and as such potentially inviting criticism (Marshall, 1999) however as Freire (1970) notes that educators cannot truly dialogue if they are “offended by the contribution of others” (p.63). During the focus group the research used reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983) to withdraw personal feelings and instead tried “non-intrusive collaboration” (Bradbury & Reason, 2003, p.162) by asking questions to encourage elaboration or to offer facts that might develop group understanding (Hanson, 2013). Though Bradbury and Reason (2003) emphasise that emotions should be recognised in action research, it was imperative that the feelings of the students were expressed as wholly as possible and not influenced by the researcher (Freire, 1970).

There were two issues that arose: the first is that the student comments that had prompted this study were anonymous; therefore, it was not possible to ascertain if they then chose to participate in this research. While all students had the right to participate, it is possible that those who feel they do not have a voice cannot express it in this forum, compounding the challenge of not knowing how representative the involvement was (Farrer & Zingher, 2018). Secondly, positive working relationships should be developed with co-researchers, in this case a lecturer and students (Bradbury & Reason, 2003). This means the researcher has “insider status” (Hanson, 2013, p.388) therefore known to the participants, however it could also mean students feel unable to withdraw due to the power a lecturer might hold over students (Midgley et al., 2013). Of the original participants who responded to the email invitation, however, just one came to the focus group: many did not attend because of an academic deadline, which on reflection the researcher should have considered as a barrier to participation for students (Hanson, 2013). However, the one who did arrive invited nearby students to participate, and four others did so from her friendship group. While this meant that they may feel more open to discuss their ideas and opinions (Taylor, 2011) it did mean the group was not representative (Arthur et al., 2012).

Focus Groups

The focus group explored many tangents as discussion developed which can cause difficulties when time is limited (Bryman, 2016), however the participants took ownership of the developing process (Fern, 2010). They made comments such as “We’re going off topic” and “We should photograph this [mood board] before we move on”. It was also evident when points had consensus as others would nod their agreement or give a measured response if they did not agree which appeared to be aided by the familiarity and friendship they have with each other (Carey et al., 2016; Taylor, 2011). However, there is also a possibility that in this familiar peer group there would be more pressure to agree (Bryman, 2016). The discussion pulled apart current processes and respectfully explored solutions, which meant that consensus could be gained not only for how to take the research forward but also what should be included in doing so and gain a better understanding of the shared values and understandings afforded by focus groups (Bryman, 2016). Each participant was given sticky notes so that they could write down any ideas if others were talking and stick them to a mood

board. These acted as prompts for further discussion and meant that it was harder for one voice to dominate (Arthur et al., 2012; Carey et al., 2016).

Online Polls

Sandra (a participant) suggested that following the focus group the next stage of the research project should be to ascertain whether others outside the group agreed with their suggestions. This demonstrated the engagement with the research and ethical principles that would be beneficial for early years professional development (QAA, 2014). Using shared knowledge of the institution and the students within it (Hanson, 2013) the Student Engagement Facebook page was considered to be most accessible for this due to its regular use in student engagement processes. While not anonymous, the results of this were anonymised for the purpose of the study (Golder et al., 2017). Bryman (2016) suggests that it can be difficult to gain informed consent on internet forums, however by reminding students that the poll was for research when it was posted as well as the improvement of their student experience, this meant student could choose whether to participate. This meant being able to gauge how representative the discussion in the focus group was and also to provide opportunity for those to participate who did not join the focus group (Carey et al., 2016).

Email

The third stage involved consulting the SSLC on the potential changes. Due to the workload of students, they were sent an email outlining the process in summary so far (Appendix 3). There were two responses to this email, however students from all sets had deadlines that week. Freire (1970) emphasises that educators should be “attuned to the concrete situation of the people they address” (p.69) and thus no deadline for a response was given as this would add unnecessary pressure, however this is usually a recommendation for correspondence with participants accessed at distance (Arthur et al., 2012). As Knowles et al. (2005) suggest, adult learners are most interested in learning things that are of the most relevance to them personally, and while making improvements to the course will be relevant it will not take priority over their personal learning. Email did allow SSLC members the options on whether they would participate without pressure or concerns for repercussions while respecting their current academic work pressures, a fundamental part of praxis and action research (Bradbury & Reason, 2003; Freire, 1970).

Findings:

Focus Group:

Question	Answer
<i>What do you think works well in the current feedback process?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informality of Facebook group • Follow up on NSS comments with Principal and Vice Principal

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anonymous feedback box in common room with email response to feedback but to remember that comments come from one person. • This research shows that you take our voice seriously and that we are being heard. • Senior Leadership Team are approachable and clearly care • Every lecturer is so approachable
<i>What do you think needs improvement in the feedback process?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistency of communication • Asking for too much feedback. • We give you feedback, and you don't double check the solution. • We would like greater collaboration with lecturers and for lecturers to have a stronger voice. • Defensiveness of staff when feedback is provided sometimes limits feedback. • Ensuring representativeness. • We think the SSLC election should be a bigger thing • Feedback is too negative. • Students casting multiple votes in student elections • There is a fear that if students give negative feedback the staff will have a negative view of them.
<i>From Set [#] 53 students believe their voice is heard, 12 believe their voice isn't heard and 6 believe that we listen to students too much. What can we do to improve the processes for these students?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Once feedback is collected, put it to a vote as to whether it was a majority or not either online or group sessions in college. • Making it clear when we cannot address feedback or take actions • Polling days with paper voting • Accept that you cannot please everyone • Focus groups with different people face to face • Chats in the common room • Facebook polls

The discussion in the focus group was summarised collaboratively and then posted as a poll on the Facebook Group to ascertain whether the views we shared with the wider student community.

Facebook Poll of solutions for improving Student Engagement processes:

69 participants including alumni, current students from all sets and of both genders. The poll was placed on the Student Engagement Page. These are the results:

View expressed in focus group	Vote Count
<i>Making it clear to students when feedback can't be actioned with explanations.</i>	54
<i>All feedback should be shown to students so that they can confirm they agree.</i>	51

<i>Staff should feel empowered to offer their viewpoints and reasoning</i>	41
<i>Informal Common Room Chats</i>	18
<i>Students need to give feedback to their SERs when it is requested</i>	14
<i>There should be a Polling Day for student elections.</i>	13
<i>Facebook Polls</i>	8
<i>More focus groups and opportunities to give face-to-face feedback</i>	4

Participants could select more than one answer and in the top three results, every participant had at least one of the top three responses selected. Although the response to the poll by no means included every student in the HEI, it did provide opportunity for those to participate who did not have time to attend focus groups to provide a response (Bryman, 2016). The four students who voted for focus groups all participated in the one for this study (the fifth did not vote in the poll), and this highlights the value that both the researcher and the students had in the use of dialogue (Freire, 1970). However, it is of note that the top three results do not reflect tangible methods as they could all be achieved either in person or online depending on the situation and the action required, and thus the SSLC needed to be consulted in order to ascertain what these could be.

Emailing the Staff Student Liaison Committee (SSLC)

	<i>Preferred method of gauging representation</i>
<i>Delilah (New Rep)</i>	Shared document for students Staff have input at committee meetings
<i>Celia (Experienced Rep)</i>	Shared document for students and staff so everyone can see and respond to comments, online surveys will not work because they are anonymous and we cannot see the responses of others.

The email sent to the SSLC can be seen in Appendix 3. As there are only two responses, they cannot represent the views of all 21 SSLC members (Bryman, 2016). Due to the use of email, neither respondent could see the others preference, however as noted above, one participant is new to their role while the other is in her third year in this role. Bradbury and Reason (2003, p.156) note “Action research is grounded in lived experience” and while both respondents have valuable experiences to contribute, the broader the experience the individual has the more information they can bring to a solution (Schön, 2005). As such, the SSLC were consulted at their next meeting as to the best course of action, to ensure that the experiences of everyone can be used to address the issue in a focus group format through meaningful dialogue (Carey et al., 2016; Fern, 2010; Schön, 2005).

Key Ideas for Improving Student Engagement

Communication from Staff to Students

The most common theme was that communication between staff and students needed improvement. Reflecting on SSLC meetings, the researcher realised that students will sometimes bring feedback that cannot be actioned for logistical reasons or that it reflects a previously unsuccessful solution. The feedback is noted like this in the meeting minutes but is not taken to the Programme Committee like the feedback that needs action. Betty questioned this in the focus group prompting reflection that despite the value that the researcher holds of student feedback, practice suggests repeated or previously actioned feedback is not valued in the same way. In opening up the double-loop discourse to receive this criticism, action can now be taken to make improvement to the process (Bradbury & Reason, 2003; Marshall, 1999). This can be achieved by ensuring that all comments are noted with the response and ensuring this is in the final report to ensure this has been communicated to the students.

Ensuring Representative Feedback

While students recognise the value of anonymous feedback, a challenge is that it is not always evident how representative of the student body it is (Goncalves & Chattopadhyay, 2010). Equally, comments can be misinterpreted because elaboration cannot be sought which could be achieved through constructive dialogue (Freire, 1970). This was also reflected in comments such as “We give you feedback, and you don’t double check the solution”. Frustration was expressed by participants that there is a focus on “negative feedback” both provided by students and acted upon by staff. Betty expressed that most feedback reports did not mention any positive comments at all. While Knowles et al. (2005) suggests that a key principle of andragogy is to focus on problems that need addressing and to learn from mistakes, Betty emphasised the necessity of learning from success and to ensure that as an institution these comments were not forgotten in the pursuit of problem solving. By ensuring that comments are representative, solutions can be checked, and the group felt this could be achieved by presenting feedback to students beforehand to ensure the percentage of agreement and this could be achieved in an online forum such as the Facebook page or online surveys. However, the format needed to be accessible by smart phone and be dialogic to gain qualitative as well as quantitative data as highlighted by Celia. There needs to be further discussion with students as how best to achieve balancing accessibility, recognition of pressures on students and wider staff involvement to create a truly collaborative and effective feedback process (Freire, 1970; Hanson, 2013; Schön, 1983).

Even in the SSLC election, it became apparent that the students’ representatives were not all the preference of the majority because the online voting system was being abused by some candidates who borrowed logins from other students to give their preferred candidate multiple votes. This shows that even from the outset there is not only disillusionment with the democratic process but that this is a major flaw in the Student Engagement process (Farrer & Zingher, 2018). Doris (a rep) highlighted that on occasions where she received no feedback, she was sometimes tempted to include only her own comments, moving the process further away from accurate representation. However, it also became apparent that she was not aware she could use alternative methods to gather feedback such as online forums. It is apparent that the reps need support with ensuring they find the best method for collecting feedback

from peers, and this could be achieved through dialogue and collaboration between the researcher and the SSLC (Freire, 1970; Midgley et al., 2013).

Staff and Student Collaboration

As highlighted in the Student Engagement Handbook “Student Engagement is about collaboration between staff and students” while Elliot (1991, p. 48) suggests that in education institutions:

“the major problem...[is] failure of the innovators to free themselves from the fundamental beliefs and values embedded in the culture they want to change”.

The suggestions of the participants in this study should not be considered radical. Yet, it is evident that although 73 students expressed some satisfaction with Student Engagement, collaboration still requires improvement. In the focus group, one participant suggested that “Every lecturer is so approachable” however there were several comments about some staff being defensive in response to feedback. While both viewpoints gained agreement, it seems that some staff are more open to dialogue about their professional practice than others. Just in the same way that students should not be considered as one unified group, it may be that the concept of engaging with students to bring about institutional change could be perceived as threatening to individual staff members (Freire, 1970; Hanson, 2013). When discussed in the focus group, it was mentioned that there was fear about how staff might perceive students who give negative feedback which means that some students are reluctant to do so. Freire (1970, p.65) suggests that “True dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking” and that for successful transformation, no one should fear the risks that criticality involves. Thus, to meaningfully change the processes of Student Engagement, students need to be empowered to have a voice with staff engaging on equal terms, both must listen and reflect before collaborating to decide how or whether to act (Freire, 1970; Kandiko-Howson, 2017; Schön, 1983).

Conclusion

Students as consumers

While sometimes considered negatively by educators, viewing students as consumers in this context, HEIs can ensure that they are not only engaged in providing feedback but also in seeking collaborative solutions rather than professionally designed solutions that can have unanticipated consequences (Guilbault, 2016; Schön, 2001; White, 2007). It is evident that this is not occurring consistently across the institution, and this will require a fundamental change because of challenging currently held institutional values (Arthur, 2017; Hanson, 2013). This could be achieved through more opportunities to engage staff and students on equal levels such as is afforded by the process of action research (Bradbury & Reason, 2013; Freire, 1970).

Dialogue as fundamental to true Student Engagement

An unintended finding of this research is that genuine reflective practice where educators are prepared to open themselves up to the criticism can improve the practice of the individual and the whole organisation (Bradbury & Reason, 2003; Marshall, 1999). Freire (1970) emphasises that:

“Dialogue cannot exist... in the absence of profound love for the world and for people. The naming of the world, which is an action of creation and re-creation, is not possible if it is not infused with love” (p.62).

This is achieved through collaboration, genuine respect, solidarity, mutuality, and recognition of the emotional as well as the professional factors that both educators and students bring to the education environment (Bradbury & Reason, 2003; Hanson, 2013). As Sandra pointed out “This research shows that you take our voice seriously and that we are being heard” and the focus group format provided the opportunity to open a “horizontal dialogue” (Freire, 1970, p. 64) in order to question current institutional processes and values through double-loop discourse (Bradbury & Reason, 2003).

Action Research as Student Engagement Practice

Throughout this paper it has been emphasised that the process of student engagement and action research both rely on close collaboration to inform institutional improvements (Bradbury & Reason, 2003; QAA, 2018). Reflective practice, among other skills are important for early years students in becoming reflective practitioners that provide innovative and engaging care and learning for the children (QAA, 2014). If students are provided with opportunities to collaborate as equals to their educators, they can improve their professional practice as well as their higher education experience (QAA, 2014; Schön, 1983). As Elliot (1991, p.52) suggests:

“The time may have arrived for facilitators of reflective practice to stop using the term ‘action research.’”

This means those who collaborate in reflection challenge current practice and seek to improve either personally or institutionally are modelling the fundamental value of action research (Alston & Bowles, 1998; Bradbury & Reason, 2003; Marshall, 1999; McNiff, 2002). However, this should be embedded meaningfully in the student experience, avoiding tokenism, and ensuring that those participating are both valued and empowered to voice their concerns (Bradbury & Reason, 2003; Freire, 1970). Though student engagement in this HEI is by no means tokenistic, it is apparent that improvements need to be made. Though the number of students who feel unheard is a minority, it is equally fundamental that institutional change must be made to ensure that feedback is both representative and how many might disagree (Elliot, 1991; Freire, 1970; Hanson, 2013).

This means that this action research project cannot be complete. The next steps for research is to engage staff and students together to improve the student experience through reflection and collaborative action and for all to be part of the development of andragogy (Freire, 1970; Knowles et al., 2005; Schön, 1983). As emphasised by Farrer and Zingher (2018) students must feel like a valuable part of the democratic process which can be achieved through employing the androgogic principles of

problem solving and seeing the value for in participation for their current learning (Knowles et al., 2005). While this will not mean *acting* on every voice, it will mean ensuring that *acknowledgement and value* of every voice to create an Andragogy of the Oppressed (Freire, 1970).

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Appendix 1:

Participant Invitation to Participate (Sent via email)

Dear All,

I hope you are all well and having the time of your life!

I am emailing you in regard to a little bit of Student Engagement and a little bit of my Masters study; please do read it as it is response to your comments!

The Rationale

While I was away last week, [Principal], [Vice Principal] and [Head of Teaching and Learning] consulted [the Third Year Students] with regard to comments made by [The students who just graduated] on the National Student Survey.

On Student Engagement, it seemed that at least twelve people believed that when [College] acts on Student Engagement we sometimes listen to the loudest voice.

[College] is committed to engaging students in the development of their provision. As the Student Engagement Facilitator, it is my mission and my deeply held belief that everyone should feel valued and heard in regards to their student experience, and I'd like to get to the bottom of why some people don't and how we can address it. This is not an effort at interrogation but a genuine movement to improve Student Engagement Processes. As [College] Students and [Graduates of the College], we should always strive to improve so that we are providing the very best for ourselves and for those for whom we care, which leads me onto my study.

'How has this got anything to do with your MA?' you may ask. Well, my next assignment is an Action Research Project. Action Research identifies issues that needs addressing and works collaboratively to provide a workable solution for them. This is essentially how the Staff Student Liaison Committee (SSLC) works, and as such it would be great opportunity for you to participate in research and to be guided through the process. This is also part of [the College's] enhancement plan.

What would it involve for you?

The thing about Action Research is that its direction will be heavily influenced by those involved. As such, I am proposing that we begin with a focus group to discuss the issues raised, debate some workable solutions and see where it goes from there. The focus group will take place either after college or on a Friday, depending on who volunteers.

I will ensure that when I write up my project I will maintain anonymity of participants through the use of pseudonyms (a name that isn't yours) and keep any hard copy information in a locked filing cabinet and electronic data on password protected devices.

The collection of data will end on the last day of the trimester (14th December, 2018) at the very latest, and you can withdraw at any time up until this date.

Who should consider participating?

In an ideal world, I would love the participation of some students from all three sets, whether you have a Student Engagement role or not. Equally, because it will begin

as a focus group, I think no more than 8 participants at this point in time, but it may be necessary to expand as time goes on.

If you would like to be involved, or would like more information, please reply to this email!

I would really appreciate your participation in this research.

With very best wishes,

[Researcher]

Appendix 2:

Attached to Invitation Email

FORM EC6: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

1 Title of study

Andragogy of the Oppressed: Ensuring All Voices are heard in Student Engagement [Working Title]

2 Introduction

You are being invited to take part in a study. Before you decide whether to do so, it is important that you understand the study that is being undertaken and what your involvement will include. Please take the time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Do not hesitate to ask us anything that is not clear or for any further information you would like to help you make your decision. Please do take your time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. The University's regulations governing the conduct of studies involving human participants can be accessed via this link:

<http://sitem.herts.ac.uk/secreg/upr/RE01.htm>

Thank you for reading this.

3 What is the purpose of this study?

As part of the requirement for the Masters Degree in Integrated Working with Children & their Families in the Early Years through the University of Hertfordshire.

4 Do I have to take part?

It is completely up to you whether or not you decide to take part in this study. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. Agreeing to join the study does not mean that you have to complete it. You are free to withdraw at any stage without giving a reason. A

decision to withdraw at any time, or a decision not to take part at all, will not affect any treatment/care that you may receive (should this be relevant).

5 Are there any age or other restrictions that may prevent me from participating?

The study is looking at how students feel their voice can be better heard as part of Student Engagement at [College Name]

6 How long will my part in the study take?

If you decide to take part in this study, you will be involved in it for *the duration of the first trimester 11th October 2018 to 14th December 2018.*

7 What will happen to me if I take part?

The first thing to happen will be your participation in focus group with your peers regarding your values and personal experiences of Student Engagement. From there we will decide collaboratively whether further participation is needed and from who, as this is Action Research you are very much a part of shaping the study.

8 What are the possible disadvantages, risks or side effects of taking part?

The risks are minimal, if all procedures are followed.

9 What are the possible benefits of taking part?

It will help us to enhance your HE provision in that we can better understand how to involve all students in Student Engagement processes.

10 How will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

All information gathered will be stored in locked files, or on a password protected computer system. We will agree who your information will need to be shared with. If

this is likely to change throughout the process of the study we will seek further permission from you.

12 What will happen to the data collected within this study?

Data collected will be used to inform reflections and subsequently the practice of the individual carrying out the study.

Personal data will only be kept for the duration of the module. On completion of the module, the student will arrange with the participants to hand back all data collected, including images of children and video clips. All assignments are returned to students after the marking process, It is the responsibility of the student to ensure they adhere to the arrangements made with the participants in regards to how long they are able to keep the personal data. All work stored on the computer systems at Pen Green are password protected for safety – if it has been agreed with participants that copies cannot be kept electronically by Pen Green then we will delete them as soon as the module and programme boards have taken place. This will be written into the agreement with the participant.

12.1 The data collected will be stored electronically, in a password-protected environment, for the duration of the study, after which time it will be destroyed under secure conditions;

12.2 The only hardcopy data will be the consent form which will be stored in a locked filing cabinet.

12.3 The data will be anonymised prior to storage.

12.4 The data will not be transmitted or displayed.

13 Will the data be required for use in further studies?

13.1 The data may be used to inform further studies within the institution for Student Engagement purposes/

14 **Who has reviewed this study?**

14.2 The University of Hertfordshire Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities Ethics Committee with Delegated Authority

The UH protocol number is acEDU/7FHE1039+/PEN/02004(2)

15 **Factors that might put others at risk**

Please note that if, during the study, any medical conditions or non-medical circumstances such as unlawful activity become apparent that might or had put others at risk, the University may refer the matter to the appropriate authorities.

16 **Who can I contact if I have any questions?**

If you would like further information or would like to discuss any details personally, please get in touch with me, by email:

[email address]

Although we hope it is not the case, if you have any complaints or concerns about any aspect of the way you have been approached or treated during the course of this study, please write to the University's Secretary and Registrar.

Thank you very much for reading this information and giving consideration to taking part in this study.

Appendix 3:

Email to the SSLC

Hello All,

I hope you are all well.

I am emailing in regard to SSLC things; reminding you that feedback must begin to be collected please! If you are unsure, please pop and see me or email me.

Action Research Stuff

Also, as you may have seen on the Student Engagement Page, I have conducted a poll on ways of moving forwards with the Feedback Process to ensure everyone feels that the feedback is representative; and the top three results were:

Suggestions	Tot
Making it clear to students when feedback can't be actioned with explanations.	57
All feedback should be shown to students so that they can confirm they agree.	54
Staff should feel empowered to offer their viewpoints and reasoning	44

The first will come from the committee meetings where responses to the feedback are decided as this is something I need to improve on with my Student Engagement Practice.

The Second bit creates a stage between collecting the feedback and then taking it to committee; and this is what I need to consult you guys on. The options are:

- 1) We create a shared document to which you can add the feedback you have collected and then show this to the students
- 2) Create a Padlet that does the same thing.
- 3) Use some kind of online tool such as survey monkey or similar to poll the students on agreement.

If you can think of another way to collate the information to present, please do let me know! If not, please select what you think is the best option moving forward and we will give it a go and then see if it's manageable and useful moving forward.

The third is tricky, because we could ask staff to contribute at the stage above, or they are consulted anyway at committee; which would you prefer?

I'm sorry for all this stuff when I know you have a lot on, please let me know if I can support you with anything.

Best Wishes,

[Researcher]