Taking off the academic 'armour': Exploring notions of co-creation within a selective UK university via a student-staff partnership.

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Abstract

This case study sought to explore notions of co-creation and co-creation practices, from both student and staff perspectives, at a single research-intensive university in central England. The article explores and provides insight into how co-creation is understood and practiced at an institutional level. Students and staff at the University of Warwick co-led the research through a philosophy of partnership. The authors adopted a qualitative approach to the data, conducting twenty semi-structured interviews over several months. Interviewees included students and academic/professional services staff. While noting the benefits of co-creation identified by our research participants, the paper suggests that the co-creation concept needs to be better understood through critical reflection and engagement to cultivate richer co-creative practices. The paper argues that a critical aspect of this engagement is openly acknowledging power implications in co-creative spaces within a Higher Education (HE) context.

Keywords: students as partners; co-creation; Higher Education

Introduction

The concept of students as active participants in their education has gained increasing favour within Higher Education (HE) in recent years (Bovill, 2014), with notions of student-centred learning, staff-student partnerships, problem-based learning and student engagement becoming increasingly part of the HE landscape (Zhou et al., 2017). Co-creation can mean different things to different people (Willis & Gregory, 2016), and notions of co-creation have been related to practices in business and design industries for many years (Degnegaard, 2014; Chemi & Krogh, 2017). There has been a growing interest in developing co-creation practice in HE, with Lubicz-Nawrocka (2020) arguing that this stems from a shift in teacher-led methods in the 1990s to contemporary concepts of 'active learning'. Although there is overlap between co-creation and students being active participants in their learning, Bovill (2020) argues that co-creation requires a 'deeper relationship' where education is recognised as a shared enterprise.

Co-creation practice can be threatening for both staff and students as it can breach the long-held traditional authoritative modes of delivery and subordinate relationships (Tong et al., 2018). A partnership between staff and students requires a transformative approach (Fielding, 2004), with a radical movement across different aspects of the university so that students and staff are seen as colleagues who share similar goals (Matthews et al., 2018). However, it is also critical that co-creation initiatives recognise the need to reach more than a handful of

students as has been a criticism of co-creation in recent years (Bovill, 2020).

While working with student representatives to understand their viewpoints and empowering them to speak about issues that are relevant to them is a valuable way of hearing from students, it is nevertheless selective and can lead to students being 'co-opted into the normative practice of speaking for and about others' (Kandiko Howson & Weller, 2016: 51). This practice reinforces students as one homogenised student body, underestimating the significance of their intersectional and experiential differences. Notions of homogeneity are further reinforced when we utilise terms such as the student voice or body without acknowledging that such a body is made up of diverse collective of voices and experiences, full of similarities and differences. This project sought to move away from understanding co-creation practice from the voices of one or two students to a more extensive conversation with a wider group of university colleagues.

Theories of Constructivism and Co-creation

The development of co-creation practice in (some parts) of the HE sector is often described by constructivist theorists as moving from the ‘sage on the stage, to the guide on the side’ (King, 1993: 30), or facilitator, which can be described as the ‘meddler-in-the-middle’ (McWilliams, 2009: 287). The notion of students as actively engaged in their learning supports constructivist learning theories (Dewey, 1916; Piaget, 1954; Vygotsky, 1978) where students co-construct knowledge, as Atherton (2013: para. 1) states: ‘the learner is much more actively involved in a joint enterprise with the teacher of creating ("constructing") new meanings.’ Doyle et al. (2019) argue that co-creation instantiates constructivism, and by its very nature, co-creation provides opportunities for shared collaborative student and educator experiences.

Constructivist theories ‘demonstrate a student-centred approach with students and teachers working together as opposed to teachers imposing their beliefs and constructs upon students (Homer, 2019: 21). As Saiu et al. (2010: 3) argues, 'co-creation is based on constructivist learning models' where the engagement in this practice enables students to develop their own understanding, both through engagement with concepts and subjects, but also through their interaction with peers and staff, as discussed by Zhou et al (2017: 31):

> Students are not submissive, silent individuals in the learning environment, but rather they are…motivated partners in a collaborative enquiry based on dialogue, experimentation and mutual learning for teachers and students.

While the literature often notes the benefits for students of co-creating with staff, as noted by Zhou, co-creation offers an opportunity for ‘mutual learning’, and thus it is important not to underestimate the learning that takes place on behalf of teachers when given the opportunity to co-create with students. Several staff participants in the interviews noted that they had underestimated the students they had worked with, who were able to take the co-creative practice further than the staff could have seen possible, as will be discussed in our analysis.

This article seeks to explore how different stakeholders, within the same institution, experience and understand co-creation practice, and to what extent the learning environments, modes of teaching and project work were consistent with the constructivist paradigm whereby students and staff work together towards the ‘active construction of knowledge’ (Doyle et al., 2020: 1).

Methodology & Procedure

This research project has used a single case study approach to better understand how co-creation practice is 'experienced' at the University of Warwick. The case study drew upon discursive research methods (semi-structured interviews) to explore the lived experiences of staff and students who study and work in the same institution. Ethical approval was sought and gained from the University of Warwick ethics committee before the research study commenced.

This research paper has been co-authored by students and staff working together as a research team, rather than positioning students as research assistants who provide 'supporting appendices' (Sharp et al., 2012: 201). Partnerships and co-creation practice can be challenging and, as colleagues, we have learned from one another during the process of co-research and authorship. Such learning includes humanising one another and seeing beyond the assumptions of what it 'means' to be a staff member or student. Furthermore, it took time for a partnership to grow. The ethos of co-creation that we aspired to in this research, was a co-creative relationship, not just a co-created output. Therefore, it was significant that time was given to get to know one another as humans, not just co-workers, which involved building trust and familiarity as well as being open-minded, respectful and creating space for everyone to contribute. Thus, it is important to recognise, as in any relationship, that a co-creative partnership is not an immediate given, but rather requires time and care in order to be cultivated.

The research took place at the University of Warwick, which is a large Russell Group institution in the Midlands, UK. The university itself is a relative newcomer in the UK HE sector (established in 1965), and has established itself within the top 10 universities in the country and top 100 world-wide (Samuels, 2021). Whilst co-creation is practiced within some parts of the university, similarly to many other large HE institutions, there is still a distance to travel with its adoption and promotion across the whole university. However, the university is putting notions of co-creation at the heart of its Education Strategy (University of Warwick, 2018) and internal departments, such as the Warwick International Higher Education Academy (WIHEA) and Institute for Advanced Teaching and Learning (IATL) seek to embed an ethos of co-creation as a way of engaging students and staff to work together. This research sought to explore how this focus on co-creation was being experienced by staff and students.

This study sought to use a purposive sampling strategy, which involves a deliberate search for participants (Morse, 2004). The participants who took part in this study were recruited from the University of Warwick and volunteered to participate. They all self-identified as having been involved in co-creation curricula or pedagogical approaches or had an experience(s) of co-creation projects or initiatives. Consideration was given to a variety of different 'roles' that participants had at the University. For instance, staff were interviewed from across a variety of different subject disciplines, but also from academic and professional service roles. Similarly, students were recruited from different parts of the University, many of whom had experience within the University that was external to their studies, including roles in societies, projects, volunteer work and employed positions. While the participants were recruited purposefully, the mix of backgrounds including ethnicities, gender and degree subjects, all allowed for similarities and contrasting differences (Creswell, 2007). Over three months, a total of twenty interviews took place. The interviewed staff and students represented a range of backgrounds including differences in age, gender, ethnicity, and educational experiences. There were nine staff and eleven student participants. A Participant Table has been included below; participant names have been pseudonymised in order to uphold anonymity:

Table One: Approximate location

There are limitations to the data in regards to the sample size (twenty), but also the 'open call' to interview, which may attract those with an interest in co-creation, rather than those who are more resistant to notions of partnership working with students. It is hoped that this account will demonstrate the strengths, but also challenges, around working collaboratively with students, so that those staff who may avoid these practices become more comfortable with them in the future (Bovill et al, 2016).

Data analysis

The research utilised a thematic analysis to interpret the data. The initial coding of the interviews was done by the researchers independently before further review and discussion to agree on overarching themes to be cross-referenced. Through coding the narrative text of the interviews, repetitive themes were developed from words spoken by the interviewees (Saldana, 2015). In the latter stages of analysis, a consensus was agreed with the most reliable themes (Moustakas, 1994). From the analysis sixteen sub-themes were identified which were then clustered into five overarching themes which were: *Collaborative gains*, *Perspectives on co-creation from staff and students*, *Communication*, *Creating Space*, and *Principles of co-creation.*

Results and discussion

The article will now present the results of the interviews with an emphasis on the participants views. At times students and staff illustrated differing stances and sometimes 'disjointed' responses, but this underlines the nature of participatory processes, such as co-creation practice, where the experience of the individual is key to understanding the process from different viewpoints. The views of participants are at the forefront of (and drive) the research. For reasons of brevity, it is not possible to include all of the issues that the participants discussed. However, a selection will be presented to illustrate some of the most cited points raised by the participants:

Collaborative gains

Throughout this research project staff and student participants both espoused the inherent opportunities and benefits that working co-creatively had for them as individuals, but also the wider University. Some participants appeared to appreciate effective dialogic engagement. This included 'being able to think' (Tara - student), feeling 'energized' (Bennett - staff) or, finding the practice interesting because of the collective effort (Shrayn - student).

Staff participants also noted feeling as though they had underestimated the students they co-created with and noted how co-creation allowed for particular projects to excel 'further' than they 'would have thought of' (Grace - staff), 'achiev(ing) beyond what staff expected' (Valentina - staff). Hence, another benefit to co-creation is that it opens a project or practice to potential that can exist beyond initial proposals or interpretations of what is possible. As noted by Ruth (staff):

> I would be ashamed of saying that, but well, I thought they (the students) were more like the legs of the project….I realised that the most efficient and good ideas were coming out of the dialogue between us, not by my idea and

> their execution, it was going to be a dialogue – that they could see what I couldn't.

The benefits of co-creation practice have been argued by other authors in the field (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017; Bovill, 2020), and the participants within this research project have reinforced these benefits, articulating their experience of obtaining skills, knowledge, and competencies which may help them in their future lives, both in line with, and additional to, existing studies on co-creation.

Bill (student) suggested that the 'effort between people' allows collaborators to 'make something bigger than themselves' and, hence, more than what is possible individually or without the collective effort. As was highlighted by both staff and students during the interview process, working in a co-creative manner enables individuals to: 'get to work with new people, with different perspectives, and with big ideas' (Henry, staff). The notion of co-creation empowering individuals to 'bring different attributes and perspectives' (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2019: 39) was shared by the participants in this research. In many respects the staff and students who took part in this study felt that the wider, reciprocal benefits, needed to be better articulated amongst the broader university community.

Perspectives on co-creation from staff and students

The initial conception of co-creation projects, and the initiation of staff and students working together is of paramount importance, and this was noted by both staff and students during the interview process. Participants stated concerns about how co-creative relationships were initially formed when staff and students first met and groups came together. Some participants noted that, at times, students are not given the opportunity to express what co-creation means to them. Projects were 'labelled' as co-creative, but demonstrated the imbalance where staff, not students, initiated projects and 'co-opted' (Tara - student) the term, possibly using co-creation as a 'slapstick' word (Laura - student) or 'buzzword' (Ruth - staff). As Bovill (2015) notes in co-creation practice, there can be a disconnect between the espoused values and lived experience of co-creation.

For students, there was a perception that staff had to sometimes 'take off' their academic 'armour' through opening up, sharing and being able to demonstrate they were 'on the same level' (Abigail & Beth) as students. This is demonstrated by Laura (student), who stated that:

> If they (staff members) were able to take off that armour, like trying to be the ones in charge, and just sort of integrated themselves in the group as they were themselves rather than themselves acting as that figure of power. I think sometimes people tend to fall into their natural roles if work isn't put in, in the first place, to attempt to diminish the natural hierarchies.

As a staff member, Blake (staff) recognised it was important for staff to 'step back' and enable the students' time and space to take equal roles within a co-creative project. To build co-creative practice is not necessarily easy, as Valentina (staff) explains: 'co-creation takes all of that prestige economy down and that's why it's so uncomfortable and hard, that's why academics find it so difficult.' The notions that staff have to give something of themselves, not just see their role as being 'an expert on all of these things' (Joseph - staff), can take courage but may make a significant difference when working in partnership (Darso, 2017).

Coupled with the more obvious notions of relationships between students and staff within co-creative projects, there were also intersectional considerations. As Kehler et al. (2017: 5) state, 'we need to be mindful of the multiple sites of power in our practices'. Ruth (staff) discusses some of the issues of equality between different group members in co-creative

practice:

> There is a hierarchy between students and staff, but there is a hierarchy between staff as well… often the young members of staff are as oppressed as students are in the… departmental dynamics and I think that's something we don't talk about.

Hence, it is significant that, in a co-creative practice, it is not assumed that relationship imbalance exists solely between students and staff, but active effort is made to recognise the significance of intersectional differences in the production of power. This can be between students-staff, students-students and staff-staff.

Other students spoke about the 'much more privileged and respected position' (Oscar - student) that they encountered through being involved in multiple co-creation projects or initiatives. This led to them feeling like they were experiencing a different type of university experience to others. This can be an inherent problem with co-creation practice, where some students form a 'super elite' band of collaborators, and other more marginalised voices are pushed to the side (Marquis et al, 2018).

It is clear from this research that there were multiple perspectives on the same situation, but for co-creation practice to be effective there needs to be a recognition of hierarchies within HE settings. This is not just in the most obvious staff and student relationships, but also within the communities of staff and students. The issue of selective student (or staff) privilege in co-creation is one that (Bovill, 2020: 1025) discusses as she calls for a greater emphasis on 'whole-class approach(es)' to co-creation. It is arguable that this model could be further explored within HE sector to avoid issues of (perhaps unconscious) bias in co-creative practice repeatedly involving the same staff and students.

Communication

Dialogic communication was seen by participants as critical to the capacity to cultivate co-creative relationships, processes and practices. Not only was active effort to engage dialogically experienced positively by students, as evidenced by Sam (student), but developing the capacity to communicate effectively was considered critical to 'understanding' one another 'better' and thus understanding each other's viewpoints, as noted by Alison.

In order to communicate effectively, Blake and Henry (both staff) emphasised the need for the group to mediate one another to ensure that everyone has the opportunity for equal contribution:

> To really have effective co-creation, I think you need to be very sensitive to group dynamics. I think you need to be really sensitive to voices within groups. Kind of identify who in the group, whether student or staff, is speaking more than others, and to try to make sure that voices are all equal. (Blake)

> Have an open discussion and empower the people with less power...or people who don't tend to just share their views candidly. (Henry)

It appears that co-creation was most often rooted in the building of equal and dialogic relationships. Therefore, co-creation became something that was felt in motion and required active reflection. Consequently, whether or not a practice was experienced as co-creative seemed to depend on how the relationships 'felt' for the parties involved – this is useful as it offers a platform to examine where contested understandings of co-creation arise, even

between members of the same project. This consideration is also where power exists in those who are 'authorised' to decide whether a project is or is not deemed to be co-creative.

However, to understand if co-creation has happened – that decision also needs to be dialogic, collective, relational, and generally made while it is occurring or reflectively. Hence it is arguable as to whether or not a project can pre-emptively be called co-creation, before the co-creative relationship has been built. For example, participants at times discussed projects in which students and staff worked on the project at different points in the timeline (Ruth - staff) or 'asynchronous(ly)' (Blake - staff). The difficulty is that co-creation requires dialogue and often needs students and staff to interact with each other, which need to be validified by both parties – it is arguable that if these pre-conditions have not been met, then it is difficult for the process to be 'labelled' as co-creative. This consideration allows questions and reflective consideration to be given to the key differences between producing co-created outputs and building co-creative relationships which can be applied to several projects or outputs.

Creating Space

For co-creation to be successful, there is a recognition that shared learning spaces (either physical or online) need to be created for people to feel like they can contribute equally (Bovill, 2020). The desire of some members of the university community to provide more open spaces to 're-imagine' traditional physical spaces on campus (Hill et al., 2016) was demonstrated by some participants as they discussed the significance of acts as simple as the physical layout of the classroom.

When it came to constructing facilitative spaces for co-creation, participants also often focused on spatial design. For example, Abigail and Beth (both students) talked about the use of outdoor spaces in creating a relaxed environment for co-creating, while Oscar (student) and Ruth (staff) mentioned the symbolic significance of the 'long table' or the 'end of the table (and) head of the table' (Oscar) in reinforcing power structures. Students Tara, Laura, Beth and Claire all mentioned the power and weight of 'sitting...in a circle', thus emphasising how a small change to the design of a room can have massive implications on how empowered students feel when contributing.

Participants expressed the need to be able to bring their 'whole self' and 'experience' to the space (Bill – student, & Ruth - staff). While Abigail (student) and Tara (student) emphasised how making a space safe goes beyond 'just say(ing) a space is a safe space' and that it needs to be 'shown' (Abigail). This view is shared by others in the field (Horvath & Carpenter, 2020), with an acknowledgement that is not sufficient just to provide spaces for co-creation to take place. It needs facilitation, reassurance, and an acknowledgement that this may, at times, be challenging, but that the group is committed to respecting one another so that power differences may be better mitigated (Rodrigues & Horvath, 2020).

The recognition that many university spaces are not structurally 'built' for co-creation and student engagement is well understood (Cheryan et al, 2014), and has been exemplified by the participants in this research project. The traditional university lecture theatre can often be seen as the antithetical to classroom partnership pedagogy, but simple, small changes such as seating positions, shared responsibility for leading discussions, and a desire for staff to develop 'active learning spaces' (Sawers et al, 2016) may be conducive to better engagement.

Principles of co-creation

Through working in the field of co-creation, there is an implicit understanding of a more egalitarian education system, where staff and students work together (Godbold et al., 2021).

However, understanding is needed from all parties involved in the process that co-creative partnerships have to be formed on underpinning principles (Matthews et al., 2018). The participants within this research project spoke about the principles they felt needed to be in place to enable effective co-creation.

Participants consistently emphasised the need for staff-student relationships to be deconstructed, where the status of individuals was not seen as a barrier to forming relationships. Ruth (staff) discussed the importance of how we facilitate spaces for cultivating relationships, making sure to pay attention to details such as:

> Learning names, to certain gestures, to how we set this space. How we arrange the furniture. Really there are many, many ways, from the small things to the larger things, that they can really enable this space to become hospitable.

Alison (student) equally suggested that befriending one another supports co-creation:

> I always build relationships with people when I'm working with them. I wanna know who you are, what you're about, your interests, where you're from. I think that makes the process of co-creation easier as well.

As other authors have demonstrated, trust between students and staff when working together is vital if the relationship is to be considered collegial (Lubicz- Nawrocka, 2020). Bennett (staff) discussed how students need to feel that 'trust' in order to feel as though they can share their genuine thoughts and perspectives on the University; whilst other participants, including Henry (staff), also argued the need for 'mutual respect and trust and appreciation of the different people involved.'

The participants often spoke about the need for transparency, particularly over the possible limitations of what students can control during some co-creation projects. Also, that the process of co-creation is not perfect. It is a learning process that may not always work out as intended. Much can be learned from both the positive and negative experiences, as long as there is transparency about this reality, as highlighted by Bennett (staff), the most important factor is to have 'honest conversations' and to take a 'warts and all approach'; as previous authors have stated, co-creation can often be a complex and messy process (Walmsley, 2013). However, care and attention do need to be given to foregrounding partnership work and co-creative practice (Godbold et al., 2021) with clear expectations and plain language so that the core principles of co-creation are agreed and understood by all parties preceding classroom practice, pedagogical interventions, or projects.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated some of the benefits, challenges, and structures needed for effective co-creation to take place. The participants in this research have highlighted that the co-construction of knowledge, skills, and working in partnership is not without its difficulties: it can be uncomfortable and challenging. But this is not to belie the advantages of this mode of practice, nor to undermine the obvious benefits for both students and staff who work and study in universities. However, there does need to be an acknowledgement that we cannot unquestionably 'badge' or name all practice which involves working with students as co-creation. Activities which do not have the ethos or principles of co-creative practice can be mistakenly named as such, simply because it is a 'buzzword', or seen as the latest 'thing to do'.

It is hoped that the findings of this study will help to inform the decisions of individuals and

institutions who are considering adopting co-creation practices in several ways. Firstly, this study found that more democratised learning environments have benefits for both staff and students, but this may involve connecting with students by 'removing academic armour'. Secondly, there can be feelings of risk and vulnerability (from both staff and students) when moving from more traditional modes of hierarchical staff-student relationships, but by giving up 'control', there can be a deeper sense of cohesion. Lastly, co-creation is built on trust, communication, and collaboration – the creation of safe spaces for these elements to happen is essential if partnerships between staff and students are to be effectively facilitated.

Although this study has shed new light on how co-creation is operationalised in a University in the UK, it has been limited to a single institution. Furthermore, the participants cannot speak for the entire University population or other groups who were not involved in the study: the research was conducted within a situated participant group and was a snapshot in time. We would support further research into student and staff understandings of co-creation within their institutions as a way of better understanding how the practice works in principle, and in reality. It is hoped that those that are new to working with students as co-creators will consider this research as a 'stepping-stone', by which they can reflect on where it may be applied to their own practice or institution. The authors of this research would encourage more research in this field to gain a better understanding about those who are more resistant to co-creation and an exploration of how we may best challenge these orthodoxies, whilst demonstrating the significant benefits which can be gained by putting students at the fore of our educational environments.

The staff and student researchers who led this research project advocate that all partners working in this field recognise that effective, co-creative practices require critical and reflective engagement, support, time, and space. Without these structures, the opportunities afforded to staff and students through co-creation, can be lost to frustration, reinforced inequalities, and the power structures that prevail within the university ecology.

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Table One

Participant Pseudonym	University Role	Characteristics
Abigail	Student	Female, undergraduate studying History
Alison	Student	Female, undergraduate studying International Business
Alex	Student	Male, undergraduate studying History
Beth	Student	Female, undergraduate studying Philosophy
Bill	Student	Male, post-graduate in Institute of Advanced Study
Beau	PhD Student, part-time staff member	Male, PhD candidate and Senior Graduate Teaching Assistant
Blake	Senior Teaching Fellow	Male, Liberal Arts
Bennett	Academic Services	Male, Library
Claire	Student	Female, undergraduate Hispanic Studies
Caroline	Academic Services	Female, Library
Grace	Professor	Female, Life Sciences
Henry	Academic Services	Male, Community Partnerships Officer
Jenny	Academic Services	Female, Library
Joseph	Senior Teaching Fellow	Male, Mathematics
Keira	Senior Teaching Fellow	Female, Chemistry
Laura	Student	Female, undergraduate studying English
Oscar	Student	Male, undergraduate studying Global Sustainable Development
Ruth	Associate Professor	Female, Institute for Advanced Teaching and Learning
Shray	Student	Male, undergraduate studying Philosophy
Sam	Student	Male, undergraduate studying Law
Tara	Student	Female, undergraduate studying History

Valentina	Deputy Pro Vice Chancellor	Female, Education
Willow	Academic Services	Female, Community Engagement Manager
Zara	Student	Female, undergraduate studying Film Studies