Developing Sustainable Student Communities

While there is a substantial literature on how students engage with and participate in the academic cultures of HEIs (Boud *et al.* 2001, Boud and Lee 2005, Holmberg 2006, Smith 2007) and on factors which affect student retention and quality of life (Wilcox *et al.* 2005, Cartney and Rouse 2006, Christie *et al.*2008), less research has been focused on the relationships between what might be called the formal curriculum and the informal learning opportunities afforded by participation in student communities (Havnes 2008). We became interested in the concept of social learning spaces as developed by Matthews *et al.* (2011) and sustainable ways of realising such actual, metaphorical and virtual spaces to enrich students' and tutors' experiences of life in a university community.

In the context of the creation of a new Faculty of Health, Education and Society at our University, we were particularly interested in exploring ways in which the practice of care could become a significant feature of the life and ethos of students and tutors. While care is at the core of the curriculum in the majority of our programmes we recognise that more could be done to support students in the development of a network of sustainable communities which draw new entrants into a vibrant framework of opportunities to participate, contribute, belong and engage and which provide powerful models of what is available to, and expected of, students in our faculty. Communities provide contexts for the practice of care (e.g. recognising a common responsibility for each other's wellbeing; noticing when people may need support; dealing with conflicts of interests and ensuring that all have opportunities to participate) but they can also help to initiate newcomers into shared cultures which help them to identify what is worth caring about (e.g. professional, ethical and moral standards; social justice and inclusion; diverse ways of knowing and understanding; approaches to the evaluation and interpretation of policies; critical respect for other points of view).   The new faculty provides a clear focus for the development, practice and study of multi-professional discourses and this project will inform efforts to facilitate and support active engagement between students studying on different programmes.

The project steering group (tutors and Year 3 students from three undergraduate programmes) met twice in the autumn term of 2011 to negotiate the role of the group and to explore possible ways of working with Y1 students. In the spring term of 2012 we invited Year 1 students from the three programmes to join us for two focus group meetings. In common with several other projects which have sought student participation, and despite shameless promises of free food, we encountered some difficulties in persuading busy students to give up their time to come to meetings. We

suspect that this disinterest may reflect a degree of 'student voice fatigue' resulting from the recent market driven emphasis on 'the student experience'.

Four students attended the first meeting (2 Y3 and 2 Y1) and five attended the second meeting (2 Y3, 3 Y1). After brief introductions, the tutors involved in the project left and the students spent about an hour talking around a loose framework of topics which had been distilled from earlier meetings. The student focus group meetings were audio recorded and the recording was shared with participating students via a Dropbox folder so that they could identify any sections of the recording which they wanted to be deleted before the recording was posted on a shared web space and transcribed. The final meeting, attended by three students (2 Y3 and 1 Y1) was held in the summer term.

Students' discussions initially focused on three broad areas: provision of social learning spaces on the campus (students felt that they should have more informal places where they could meet and chat without feeling they were obliged to buy food or drinks or that they were occupying other people's territories); use of communication technology to facilitate networking between students (particularly those whose other commitments made it difficult for them to spend a lot of time on campus) and ways in which students who had already 'settled in' and found their way around the campus and life at university could share their knowledge with new students (both entrants to Year1 and Direct Entrants to Y3). Discussion about each of these areas identified the need for a 'third space' between the formal provision, 'owned' by the university and the private domain 'owned' by students. Students felt that what was needed was university support for spaces (both physical and 'virtual') which students would be trusted to manage for themselves (Hockings 2010).

We aim to use this project to bring together students and tutors from a range of schools and programmes to share ideas and to promote the development of links across, as well as within, different programmes. We do not intend to encourage the development of a single, monolithic learning community; we would anticipate, rather, that smaller, more intimate groupings or societies will provide secure bases for students who share common interests while also actively encouraging links and shared activities with other groups (modelling 'multi-professional' approaches to sharing traditions and expertise rather than crude homogenisation). We hope to encourage both students and tutors to consider ways of developing opportunities for 'lived learning' around the curriculum content of particular programmes. The new faculty of Health, Education and Society offers a particularly appropriate context for exploring ways in which students can participate in inclusive, caring and self-sustaining learning communities but we would hope to disseminate interest in this project to other faculties in our university, both through our HE pedagogy community and through the work of the Students' Union. While we share our university's aim to help graduates to be 'active, co-operative and responsible citizens in local and global society' we recognise that strong student communities will also support the

development of confident, challenging, and sometimes subversive voices (Harris 2012).

This paper will be presented by tutors and students from the project steering group.

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