

Exploring student empowerment for community-engaged sustainability education

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Introduction

The research project described here attempts to build bridges between several distinct research and development paradigms extant in the University of Otago, New Zealand, and likely in universities worldwide. A diverse team comprised of university teachers, researchers and students have collaborated to enable students to develop a not-for-credit learning opportunity (or 'course') on sustainability in 2014. To inform our approach, we drew upon our backgrounds in community-engaged learning, student-centred pedagogies and higher education's sustainability mission. Collectively we intended to explore the parameters involved in empowering students as they learn how to change the world, working within and between student, academic staff and town communities. Mann (2008) might describe our research theme as exploring institutional "*forces of differentiation*" (p137) while Rogers and Freiberg (1994) address these issues as 'the student's freedom to learn'.

The project received institutional funding to facilitate an exploratory and scoping exercise. Such was the interest amongst those involved that we decided to additionally investigate what students chose to make happen when offered the opportunity. A steering group initially agreed a series of loosely defined objectives each identified as a research question. This presentation and article describes the methodologies involved in and results from just one of our research questions; *will we be able to adequately support our students to develop, coordinate and teach a 'course'?*

Methods

This project incorporates both development and research aspects, and was conceptualised as action research. Researchers regularly feed interim findings back into the project's design. A core group of researchers and students took responsibility for the initial day-to-day activities. Increasing involvement meant student groups subsequently took on this role and reported back to the steering group. The project's evaluative data and outcomes are currently being processed using an evaluative matrix described by Stake (1967) in his 'Countenance model of evaluation'. Descriptive or quantitative data is divided into 'antecedents', 'transactions' and 'outcomes'. Separate descriptions of 'intentions' and 'observations' are made for each, and congruence between them is ascertained. This approach to data analysis emphasises processes as well as outcomes, and constitutes many forms of communication as data. Our data includes notes from discussions, emails, communications via online fora, and various meetings. This data is supplemented by semi-structured interviews conducted by the project's research assistant involving both staff and students as research participants.

Results

As this short article is being written, some students are planning three sustainability-focussed community discussions and have taken leadership of all aspects of planning.

One other student has interacted with the university volunteering coordinator to bring together volunteers for a hands-on sustainability activity at a local conservation reserve. Results presented here focus on the question of our ability, as an institution and as a group of individuals, to support our students in realising these informal learning opportunities. Two facets have been uppermost in our conversations; are we adequately motivating students to be involved and are we adequately providing structure within which motivated students can find outlets for their creativity and empowered status?

On the first, our attempts to motivate by holding drop-in sessions and by encouraging teaching colleagues to enable students involved in credit-bearing courses to focus assignments on activities in this project have not yet been interpreted by students as motivational. Interviews with students who have so far been motivated to be involved suggest that these students have intrinsic motivation.

On the second, at every stage the core group of researchers and students has been confronted by the dichotomy of either making suggestions for activities for students to consider (on the grounds that without some structure, or organisation, students encounter only vague possibilities) or simply creating space within which these suggestions could emerge from students. Data suggest that, for some in the project, the vagueness of being too open has plagued our progress. For others, this vagueness is the essence of empowerment. Triangulated data from student interviews suggests that some students appreciate not only the structure presented to them for their consideration, but also the legitimacy added to their activities by institutional representation.

Discussion

Our inspiration came primarily from the Centre for Environmental and Development Studies (CEMUS) at Uppsala University, Sweden, where the Centre maintains a student-led learning and teaching programme on sustainability (Hald, 2011). Within CEMUS, undergraduate and postgraduate students develop and co-teach courses that students and community members can take for academic credit (Hald, 2011). Our research group set out not to replicate CEMUS, but to explore what might be possible at Otago. We aimed to research the opportunities and barriers to establishing a student-led sustainability programme at our university.

We started with many potential advantages. Otago has a vibrant student body with significant interests in sustainability, whose members are involved in local and national activities. There were strong links to Otago's institutional interests in continuing education, community engagement and volunteering. Otago has a developing reputation for providing opportunities for students to be involved in our teaching; the Peer-assisted Study Support (PASS) programme is particularly relevant here. Members of two active research groups (Community-engaged Learning and Teaching [CELT] and Education for Sustainability) led the development of this project. On an institutional level, Continuing Education provides the institutional space in which to explore these synergies.

Implicit within the project's origin, design and progress were assumptions that some students would participate in planning, developing and teaching a programme of activities around sustainability. We proposed that their interests and successes would

be enhanced by the involvement of the university. These assumptions do appear to be well founded, but nonetheless this collaboration has not lessened the challenges encountered by the project. As members of our university explore ways to empower students to develop a sustainability course, and to take responsibility for supporting the learning of fellow-students, academic staff and the wider community, issues of institutional power and related expectations have emerged within our research findings. At present our collective outcomes may be better represented by 'staff/student partnership', rather than 'student empowerment'.

References

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