

The Impact of Empowerment in Teaching and Learning and Innovative Assessment. (0125)

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Background/Context:

This project evaluated the impact of using teaching and learning methods which empower students and involves them as partners in the design and delivery of a module. The aim was to explore the impact of student involvement and partnership working on engagement, retention and achievement. In addition, students were involved in designing their own assessments. The project evaluated whether empowering students and giving them a sense of greater ownership of their work and involvement in the design of the module impacts upon their engagement and perceptions of the work as 'theirs'. This project therefore looked to shift the power dynamics in the module in order to empower the students and involve them more fully in the teaching and learning process.

Theoretical underpinnings:

The theoretical framework underpinning this project arises from both Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Pedagogy (CP). Both these theories consider the relationship between power and oppression. In the case of CRT, the focus is on the role of white supremacy in furthering the interests of white people and ensuring the continued oppression of Black people. CRT also emphasizes the importance of the voice and experiences of people who are disempowered by institutional racism, and so giving people from disempowered group the opportunity to tell their stories is a vital part of the empowerment process.

CP focuses on the relationship between power and oppression in a teaching and learning environment. The oppressed are denied a voice due to the teaching and

learning practices which are employed and which are controlled by those with power. CP advocates teaching and learning methods which empower the oppressed and those groups who often lack power and control in the learning process, thus impacting on issues such as engagement, achievement and so on. It is argued that tutors have the ability either to empower students who are oppressed by the structures of society, or they have the ability to reinforce such power dynamics.

Method:

Semi structured interviews were conducted with a sample of students who attended the Discrimination Law module, during the 2015/2016.

Open ended questions were asked to assess the impact of empowerment in the overall learning experience. 5 students, all from BME backgrounds, volunteered to take part in the interviews and were given an incentive. A research assistant was employed to undertake the interviews. The module had a total of 30 students.

The issue of empowerment came up in relation to 3 items of assessment:

- 1) A 2000 word essay – students were able to choose their own essay titles based on the topic areas which had been covered in workshops in term 1.
- 2) A Group project - Students were in self-selecting teams and were given a task to complete in term 2 which was based on an experiential learning model. The whole of term 2 was devoted to this task and the workshops were used for this purpose. Students would present their results at the end of the term. The way the teams addressed this task and the knowledge they needed in order to do so was identified by the teams, with some limited guidance from tutors.
- 3) A 1000 word self-reflection essay where the students could reflect on the group project and the process as well as their skills development.

Findings:

Overall, there was a significant positive impact in the learning process.

The key themes and issues which emerged from the qualitative data were:

Project:

Intellectual development/Confidence:

- The exposure helped to broaden student horizon on the subject matter.
- The project work motivated them and challenged their intellectual ability.
- They were all motivated to be more open minded.

Teamwork:

- There was great sense of cohesion.
- There was positive competition amongst peer, which contribute positively to good outcome.
- The project created team spirit, whilst allow using own initiative.
- There was a great opportunity to "peer- learn".
- A very small minority felt/suggested that the group should be" policed", in order to get every member up to speed.

Skills development:

- The project work helped to fine tune attitude towards time keeping and taken responsibility
 - "I felt responsible to play my part, punctuality, timing and contribution etc.etc".

Module Feedback: A number of students specifically mentioned the group project in their feedback and said how much they enjoyed the process and that they felt that they had learned a lot through the 'doing' of the project (experiential learning). They also liked the fact that the workshop time was used to enable them to complete the project.

My reflections: These comments do demonstrate an element of control and empowerment. Students are in very different situations and this means that group work and meeting up with group members is not always possible outside of timetabled sessions. This often means that students who work or have caring and other responsibilities are disempowered through the group work process and those who are more 'privileged' tend to take control and therefore disempower other group members.

Essay

Self-confidence/Engagement:

- Empowerment challenged learners to change perception about themselves.
- The overall impact of empowerment was excellent and helped students' engagement.
- It later motivated them to be challenged and give the best they can.

Autonomy and Control:

- Empowerment creates sense of being in control of task, and also makes the task worthwhile.
 - " I felt I was in [the] driving seat"
 - " My destiny [was] in my own hands"
- There was a huge amount autonomy , in terms of time management, deliverables, and responsibilities

- They felt that the ultimate control and outcome still lies with the Teachers (in terms of Grades).
- Choosing own essay encouraged learners to be "critical thinkers"
 - " I turned to a critical thinker in flash"
- Learners felt that empowerment despite momentary anxiety

Module Feedback: Students commented about the essay and choosing their own question in the module feedback. About 4 students said that they did not like choosing their own question and would have much preferred to have been given one.

My reflection: This may have been because of how I managed that process and the students required much more guidance than I had anticipated in relation to choosing an appropriate question so that the question allowed for analysis and discussion rather than just description. Because of the inadequate guidance students received, this meant that they were disempowered in this process to some degree. Obviously, as the module feedback is anonymous I do not know which students felt this way about the essay.

In conclusion the experience of the students seems to suggest that they did feel more empowered through the assessments in this module and that this did translate into motivation and engagement. They liked the fact that they had the independence to choose their own task and the group work was popular, but it clearly needed to involve some management from the tutor where there was a breakdown in group dynamics. However, on the whole disputes were resolved among group members and they enjoyed the autonomy which the task gave them. It will be interesting to see whether these positive comments about the assessment on this module translates in to better achievement, but certainly the engagement on this module was significantly improved. The view that shifting the power dynamics in terms of learning and teaching as advocated in critical pedagogy appears (within the limitations of this research), seems to have had some impact on empowerment in this module. This clearly has wider implications for learning and teaching.