Collaboration Matters: student mobility, schools and higher education international partnerships (0286)

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Background

The imperative placed on Higher Education Institutions to provide international experiences for students is framed within discourses surrounding potential benefits (HEFEC, 2010; go international, 2013; UK Strategy for outward mobility, 2013; May and Spalding, 2014), particularly in relation to prospective employability. There is also recognition that international experiences as 'an asset….should be available to all students' (go international, 2013: online). Whilst it is not within the remit of this paper to examine participants by social class orientation, it should be noted that by its very nature, engaging in international experiences could be a class based endeavour that is limited to particular social class groups. However, for this project, we were particularly interested in the way in which an international partnership that involved staff and students across two universities in England and Denmark, and pupils and staff from local schools, could be developed, implemented and evaluated.

Researchers (Barker, 2011; Clifford, 2009, 2013; Mellors-Bourne et al., 2015; Atkin, et al, 2016) argue that developing an understanding of different cultural contexts enables the growth of global citizenships amongst graduates. When placed within a curriculum context, international collaborative projects should enhance international perspectives of students both personally and professionally (Leask, 2001, 2012; Atkin et al., 2016). In addition, discussions concerning curriculum developments and collaborative projects should enable students to develop

> … understanding of global perspectives and how these intersect and interact with the local and the personal; intercultural capabilities in terms of actively engaging with other cultures; and responsible citizenship in terms of addressing differing value systems and subsequent actions.
>
> (Clifford, 2009: 135)

Within this context, and an institutional drive towards increased internationalisation, this collaborative project was developed alongside Danish colleagues. The aim of the project was to give higher education undergraduate students, and school pupils in the respective countries the opportunity to work with, learn about and investigate issues of citizenship.

Methodological Approach

Undergraduate students from both institutions worked collaboratively to develop a project to share with school pupils around the theme of 'developing citizenship education and enquiring minds'. The project also incorporated a research thread which we also report in this paper.

The following research questions guided the project:

- ➤ To what extent can international awareness be achieved for higher education undergraduate students through engagement in a shared project?
- ➤ How do higher education students understand 'internationalisation'?
- ➤ What are the cultural opportunities and challenges of working with international educational partners?
- ➤ How do higher education students participate in, and respond to working collaboratively with international partners, and what lessons can be learned?

Using an interpretivist action research approach (Carr and Kemmis, 1986), we developed a multiple intervention project. Participants in the project included HE students (England 5, Denmark 10), HE academics (England 2, Denmark 3), school leaders and school pupils (England and Denmark). Students spent a week in each participating

country and with the support of the university academics and close liaison with the participating school staff in each country, developed a programme of events to deliver to pupils aged 14 in each school. Addition considerations regarding health and safety had to be factored into the UK phase of the project. Students spent a whole day in each school, working with pupils and engaging them with the activities linked to the project theme of 'developing citizenship education and enquiring minds'.

Full ethical clearance was requested in line with BERA (2011) guidelines and obtained from institutional Higher Education Committees; appropriate ethical consent was sought from participants as they became engaged in the project. Data was collected through shared discussion, participant observation, focus groups and photography.

Following the first phase implementation in Denmark, analysis was undertaken to inform the development of the second phase in England. Data sets were then analysed separately by each academic researcher, and then collectively, to confirm key emerging themes and findings. Themes that emerged from analysis include:

- Understanding the school and its context
- Understanding eachother
- Building networks
- Developing personally and professionally

Using a Bourdieurian lens (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) we explored the landscape of transnational practices and the different attitudes and approaches towards citizenship education – economically, socially and culturally. Through the deployment of Bourdieu's conceptual tools we were able to determine the benefits to students from lower socio-economic backgrounds in terms of additional acquirement of the differing forms of capital and their emergent secondary habitus (Reed-Danahay, 2005).

Preliminary Findings

Preliminary findings suggest that whilst there are both challenges and opportunities for collaborative projects amongst higher education undergraduate students and institutions, the investment of time and emotional energy was considered to be worthwhile. Specific opportunities included developing understanding of cultural difference and diversity; the creation of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) between both HE students and academics. Social media played an important role in developing professional relationships amongst participating students prior to them meeting face to face to commence the development work. Students valued and appreciated the opportunity to engage with students from a different country and co-develop a programme of events for school pupils and were reflective on the differing cultures within the host schools, which they had not been prepared for. In addition, issues of funding, travel, communication, cultural understandings and sensitivities arose as perceived barriers but did not prohibit participation according to socio-economic status.

Implications

Whilst the findings from this study contribute to a growing body of knowledge on the role, purpose and value of international activity for HE undergraduate students through student and staff mobility it is important to note that analysis of student participation in particular is limited due to the self-selected nature of the participants. However, these findings do illuminate ways in which institutions can come together and develop programmes that encourage student mobility and involvement with institutions beyond their own higher education institution.

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