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Title Participant Experiences of Students Reviewing Teaching Practice

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Introduction

In the spring term 2017, UCL piloted a scheme whereby pairs of students and staff discussed their different perspectives on the staff member's teaching practice. None of the students were on the module under consideration and most came from a different but related discipline. The student perspective was informed by three hour's worth of classroom teaching observations, reviewing the module-related VLE site and the module assignment brief.

31 staff volunteered to take part. 33 student participants (4 of the students worked in pairs) were selected from 200 student applications. Final year students were prioritised and selection occurred on the basis of statements about why they wanted to participate and what they brought to it, and their disciplinary match to staff participants. Where applicants still could not be separated, selection was by random allocation. Student participation was incentivised by £150 stipend.

This paper investigates the perceptions of both staff and students who took part in the scheme. In particular it focuses on the benefits and challenges of participating; for staff this included the benefits of working with students rather than peers in this way; for students it included the benefits to them and their learning, not just the benefits they saw for enhancing educational practice. We also asked participants about the relative merits of observing the classroom teaching compared to the VLE site and assignment brief.

Literature review

The pilot scheme was based on the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program at Bryn Mawr College in the USA. Cook-Sather (2014) studied staff participant perceptions of that scheme and found that staff could find the partnership threatening, disappointing, productively disruptive, or transformative. Cook-Sather and Luz (2015) discuss how from the student perspective it can be disconcerting, but as students continue in the role they start to see learning as a partnership between the teacher and themselves. Schlosser and Sweeney (2016) reflect on the benefits of their partnership in the SaTL scheme for the module, the development of the student's confidence and the staff's enjoyment of teaching.

In the UK, students work as teaching consultants at the University of Lincoln. Crawford (2012) discusses how some of the staff who participate are concerned as to whether the student observations will be used managerially.

Student reviewers of teaching practice schemes are not well established, particularly in the UK. This paper thus adds to our understanding of the benefits and challenges of taking part for both students and staff. It also considers the merits of students feeding back on VLE sites and assignment briefs as part of their reviewer role.

Methodology

This paper is based on the perceptions of both the students and the staff who participated. All participants were asked to complete a questionnaire on their experiences; all the data collected from this was qualitative. We received responses from 12 staff and 25 students (58% overall response rate). In addition we conducted separate focus groups with 5 students and 8 staff and 3 interviews have been scheduled for those who could not attend the focus groups.

Findings

Initial analysis of the questionnaire and focus groups shows that all participants were positive about the scheme. Staff spoke of how valuable it had been to gain a student perspective on their practice, as the reviewers were closer in age to their students and could give valuable insights particularly about the clarity, level and how engaging the teaching was. Staff also said that students were more invested in the process than peers and they gained a more honest opinion. The staff focus group discussed how the scheme did not reach the staff members who really needed it. Nevertheless, the consensus was that it was still a valuable opportunity that should be welcomed.

When students spoke about the difference they had made to the course they observed, some said they could identify concrete things that had been changed or would be next time round, while others said that the difference they had made was more subtle but they argued none the less valuable, as such changes were likely to have widespread effects. Overall the students in the focus group felt that the classroom observations had been the most valuable. This did not agree with the staff view, who felt that having all three elements (classroom, VLE and assignment brief observations) was a crucial part of the scheme as it helped them to judge the alignment and how apparent this was.

In terms of personal gains, the students spoke of learning the importance of the learning aims and said that previously they had skipped over these, as they were busy. Now they said they would use them to help direct their learning and make it more efficient. Of the VLE observation, they said that they had learnt that while they had expected the VLE to be organised like a webpage most were actually organised like books. This had greatly helped them to find resources on VLEs for other courses they were taking. The students also stated that they had gained a greater respect for lecturers.

The major challenge to the scheme was scheduling for the student reviewer to attend the classes. A number of suggestions were made to further enhance the scheme. Students were aware that they were only providing their own perspective and wanted to consult students taking the course. Students also advocated extending the time that they observe, as they felt that they needed longer to really make an impact. This contrasted with staff concerns that the scheme may be too demanding on the students' time. Students also wanted to work in pairs, partly so that they could check their views with another student before presenting them to an experienced member of staff and partly to reduce any sense of intimidation of working with senior staff. The staff members suggested that the students could meet up at various points throughout the

program to compare their findings and to enable them to act as a conduit for sharing best practice.

References

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