Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

0265

Tue 07 Dec 2021

17:00 - 17:20

The Missing Piece of the Puzzle: Practitioner Reflection in Supporting the Robust Evaluation of Strategically Funded Outreach Programmes

Naomi A. Clements[1], Alex Blower[2]

[1]*University of Southampton, Southampton, United Kingdom* [2]*Arts University Bournemouth, Bournemouth, United Kingdom*

Research Domain: Higher education policy (HEP)

Abstract:

Outreach practitioners enact Government widening participation policy (Rainford, 2020). This group are held increasingly accountable by the regulator through Access and Participation Plans (APP). Yet reflective practice is not included within currently established protocols of accountability. Practitioners remain un-challenged in critically engaging with approaches to the outreach programmes they provide (Gazeley *et al.*, 2018).

At a practitioner level, criticality challenges us to engage with previously concealed assumptions of our own lived experience. Self-reflection is itself an evaluative act. By combining this with standard methods of evaluation (OfS, 2019), we can move towards a more holistic understanding of what works, why and for whom.

This paper explores how one Uni Connect partnership engaged practitioners with reflective practice (Schwartz and Schon, 1987). We outline key questions on the purpose of reflective practice to support transformative outreach (Jones and Thomas, 2005) and how self-reflection could be included in programme evaluation (Belvis *et al.*, 2013) .

Paper:

The Missing Piece of the Puzzle: Practitioner reflection in supporting the robust evaluation of strategically funded outreach programmes

Why is reflective practice in outreach important?

The Office for Studets (OfS) places widening participation as a cornerstone to their regulatory framework (OfS, 2018). Often understood as 'outreach', those who deliver this work, are seldom engaged with critical reflection of the work they undertake (Gazeley et al., 2018).

A key element of effective professional practice, as seen with youth work, careers guidance and teaching, is reflective practice. The global pandemic has highlighted the importance of self-reflection in education as argued by Roy and Uekusa (2020) who outline the use of self-narratives "as a rich source of qualitative data for further delving into the socioeconomic, political and cultural impacts of the pandemic" (p383).

However, within outreach, there is no regulatory requirement to adhere to any existing frameworks. For outreach practitioners, knowledge is created 'on the spot' and such knowledge is based on individual experience such as race, gender, and class position (Wilkins and Burke, 2015; Burke et al., 2019). This 'tacit knowledge' is difficult to evidence and if left unengaged could prove problematic in achieving widening participation outcomes.

From an evaluation perspective, current methods focus solely on the outreach activity and participant. Practitioners are positioned as a neutral actor – providing a service but without agency. Yet, evaluation literature suggests that activities that include 'role models' for marginalised groups increase the likelihood of HE progression (Burgess et al., no date; Bettinger and Long, 2004; Bowes et al., 2019; Formby et al., 2020).

Reflective artifacts created by practitioners can add nuanced detail to predominantly positivist methods of evaluation championed by the regulator. The lived-experiences of outreach practitioners, their approach to planning and delivery, and how activities are adapted 'on the spot' provide additional contexts to understanding what works.

Putting theory into Practice

In 2020, the Southern Universities Network (SUN), a Uni Connect partnership, provided workshops for outreach practitioners responsible for the delivery of student-facing outreach activity. Practitioners were from various roles including staff in Further Education colleges, Local Authority careers advisors and outreach practitioners employed by SUN partner universities.

Workshops were led by members of the SUN team engaged in research and evaluation. They provided space for practitioners to reflect on their own lived experience and to develop knowledge on how to use reflective practice when planning outreach activity. We also wanted to explore how

practitioner voices could be included in wider programme evaluation.

Taking a participatory approach, the workshop prompted discussions between practitioners relevant to their roles and lived experiences and, most importantly, how this influenced their practice. Practitioners confidently critically assessed how their lived experiences influenced practice and were able to identify opportunities to include other voices in planning of activities. Such assessment forms an important role in ensuring the collaborative nature of Uni Connect supports a transformative approach to widening participation which, given the persistent challenges in access we face, is sorely needed.

The discussions that took place during sessions, and the reflective writing produced from workshops, suggest practitioner reflection has a significant place within the wider impact evaluation of the programme. Specifically, an opportunity to evaluate the development of professionalism within the outreach workforce and if/how this, in turn, impacts upon students' progression to HE.

Future plans

Uni Connect is soon to enter Phase 3. At a time when funding has been cut by a third, there has never been a greater need to work smarter. Our partnership is doing this by identifying appropriate projects where the inclusion of reflection is an essential part of evaluation.

In our pilot project we will be evaluating coaching '1:1' sessions of target students led by SUN members of staff in FE Colleges. The reflective artifacts will be triangulated with student data via a mixed methods approach with the purpose of understanding if this activity supports target learners in their decision making on progression to higher education (or not). This will support our understanding of what works, why and for whom. It will also identify gaps in our knowledge based on our own experiences and combat assumptive practice.

This approach to evaluation contributes a small piece of a much larger jigsaw puzzle which constitutes a professional framework to widening participation practice. To complete the puzzle, we will need to engage in an exercise as a sector to understand more deeply who works in outreach, why, and how their lived experiences contribute to the overarching objectives of the regulator.

References: Bettinger, E. P. and Long, B. T. (2004) *Do Faculty Serve as Role Models? The Impact of Instructor Gender on Female Students*.

Bowes, L. *et al.* (2019) *The National Collaborative Outreach Programme End of Phase 1 report for the national formative and impact evaluations*.

Burgess, S. *et al.* (no date) *Role models, mentoring and university applications-evidence from a crossover randomised controlled trial in the United Kingdom 1*.

Burke, P. J. *et al.* (2019) 'Policy Implications for Equity, Gender, and Widening Participation in Higher Education', in *The Oxford Handbook of Higher Education Systems and University Management*. Oxford University Press, pp. 431–452. doi: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198822905.013.29.

Formby, A. *et al.* (2020) ' "A presence in the community ": developing innovative practice through realist evaluation of widening participation in West Yorkshire ', *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*. The Open University, 22(3), pp. 173–186. doi: 10.5456/wpll.22.3.173.

Gazeley, L. *et al.* (2018) 'Under-tapped potential: practitioner research as a vehicle for widening participation'. doi: 10.1080/0309877X.2018.1441386.

OfS (2018) *OfS 2018.01 Securing student success: Regulatory framework for higher education in England*.

Roy, R. and Uekusa, S. (2020) 'Collaborative autoethnography: "self-reflection" as a timely alternative research approach during the global pandemic', *Qualitative Research Journal*. Emerald Group Holdings Ltd., 20(4), pp. 383–392. doi: 10.1108/QRJ-06-2020-0054.

Wilkins, A. and Burke, P. J. (2015) 'Widening participation in higher education: the role of professional and social class identities and commitments', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 36(3), pp. 434–452. doi: 10.1080/01425692.2013.829742.