

# 378 The generative power of co-creation: lessons from a blended learning co-creation project

Ivana Lessner Listiakova, Jo Trowsdale

University of Suffolk, Ipswich, United Kingdom

## Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

## Abstract

Higher education is being shaped by the increasing demand of the labour market for transversal skills of graduates, while the massification of Higher Education results in changing student populations and their needs. Co-creation seeks to improve student engagement, empower students as active learners and establish a partnership between students and lecturers. The University of Suffolk has embraced block and blend format learning and teaching with strengths in immersive learning and challenges in disconnect between skills. As a response, the Learning Hubs as spaces for individual development of skills were piloted. To increase engagement with these resources a co-creative consortium of students, professional and academic staff was established. The community created an exemplar of the practice of co-creation in higher education that can be adopted across the university and inform the sector.

## Full paper

The massification of Higher Education and associated foci on widening participation has had significant impact on universities. Related, but additionally, cost-benefit accountability measures, related to the efficacy of courses for all learners, in terms of developing employability, has had significant impact on how learning and courses are conceived, designed and realised. Increasingly evident in literature and policy is a drive to design Higher Education not just for but with students, towards co-creation. Bovill (2020) argues co-creation is a term closely connected with, and part of a continuum which begins with seeking to improve student engagement, employ active learning and is journeying more toward the notion of partnership between students and teachers. As a young university entering the field not long before the pandemic, the University of Suffolk embraced the necessity of online learning to further develop engaging and efficacious designs for learning asynchronously and in blended form. Courses have been redesigned into intensive five-week blocks, characterised by a blended format of on-campus sessions, tutor-led asynchronous online activities and independent work. Evaluation data suggests this has improved student-tutor relationships and students' ability to immerse themselves in one thing at a time. However, students and tutors have identified the challenge in developing the range of academic, employability skills and wellbeing at enough depth to ensure good outcomes. In response, tutors in one course piloted their own design for 'Learning Hubs'. This was a resource pool of online interactive activities, designed and developed with examples curated and created by the staff to ensure the relevance of the resource for learners on this course. They were conceived to support the holistic development of students' academic, transversal, employability skills and wellbeing. The concept and the resources were received with excitement from staff and appreciated by the students who made use of them, however, the engagement with using and evaluating the Learning Hubs remained low. Therefore, a co-creative consortium (n=15) was gathered to identify best practice in blended learning and teaching and to design a research study that would further inform the implementation of the Learning Hubs. Undergraduate and postgraduate students (n=6), learning designers (n=2), academic skills advisors (n=1), and academics (n=6) were involved in a series of workshops co-creating the Learning Hubs.

Following participatory (research) design (Kindon et al., 2007; Sanders and Stappers, 2008), the study unfolded in several phases and layers. The involvement in co-creation was reflected upon using several traditional and creative methods (impact questionnaire, SWOT analysis, reflective logs, online collaboration tools, visual metaphors, lego) some of which were included in the original research design and some of which were added by the community members.

The shared commission (Trowsdale and Davies, 2022) of the community intensely focusing on what matters to them sustained and deepened their engagement. In this case it was a shared interest in designing high-quality online resources for skill development that brought the group together, kept them focused on task and individually

motivated. Making things together created a sense of belonging, and a value for diverse skills as the 'expertise' in the room was dynamic and affirmed people's sense of capability.

While co-creation could be perceived as time-consuming and 'messy', it addresses current challenges of higher education from its core.

Co-creation serves as a means of achieving inclusion through valuing diversity which is demonstrated by breaking down hierarchical structures in relationships between those who constitute a university. Each member of the community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) is genuinely valued for their contributions to the collective as the commission takes shape as a direct result of their interaction with the community.

Co-Creating the Learning Hubs resulted in co-creating the product of a resource pool of online activities, but equally importantly enabled us to formulate the principles of good practice in blended learning. Moreover, the community created an exemplar of the practice of co-creation in higher education that can be adopted across the university and inform the sector. At a time when Higher Education is under intense scrutiny to deliver on multiple fronts, as civic hubs, culturally, professional and industry attuned, accessible and inclusive, co-creation may have particular significance. Our experience emphasised how collaboration can generate the momentum for ongoing re-inventing (here of content and methods) in response to current and future needs; our process revealed personal, community and professional value for all involved. Practising and honing the principles of co-creation in our universities may be important in their evolution as places where academic good outcomes and employability is reliant on and interwoven with personal and community growth.

## References

Bovill, C. (2020) *Co-creating learning and teaching: Towards relational pedagogies in Higher Education*. St Albans: Critical Publishing.

Kindon, S., Pain, R. and Kesby, M. eds. (2007) *Participatory action research approaches and methods: connecting people, participation and place*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press.

Sanders, E. B. N. and Stappers, P. J. (2008) 'Co-creation and the new landscapes of design', *Co-design*, 4(1), pp. 5-18.

Trowsdale, J. and Davies, R. (2022) 'A new approach in the making: reinvigorating engineering education in UK schools', in 8th International Symposium for Engineering Education, The University of Strathclyde, September 1-2nd 2022, UK. <https://doi.org/10.17868/strath.00082024>