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Developing HE and school student interaction to improve widening participation – a new model

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Using a particular project, 'Becoming Eco-artists', developed following principles and guidelines for excellent Widening Participation practice (Gartland and Negrea, 2022) and using a tested model for real-world, democratic, interdisciplinary learning design (Trowsdale and Davies, 2024), this paper outlines a model for improving equitable access to and success in Higher Education (HE). The project positions HE students as role models for and collaborators with 11–13-year-old school students, focusing upon those under-represented in HE. Together with their HE peers, school students are commissioned to create artwork which communicates biodiversity loss in a particular local setting through art-making processes.

We argue that this task-focused, experiential, real-world situated nature of learning activity is significant to both the access and success agendas of Widening Participation, and in recognising and maximising the diverse riches of young people. The model invites HEIs to consider developing bespoke course iterations using this model.

Full paper

'Becoming Eco-artists', a particular project, is an example of a model for addressing Widening Participation agendas, with additional potential value for course modules. It connects several decades of research, firstly into real-world, democratic, interdisciplinary learning design (Trowsdale, 2020; Trowsdale and Davies, 2024) and secondly into the role of Higher Education student ambassadors (Gartland, 2015), both focused on improving equitable access and success. The project positions Higher Education (HE) students as role models for and collaborators with 11-13 year old school students, with a focus upon those from under-resourced backgrounds and / or less likely to consider or succeed in HE.

The underpinning curriculum model, the TAME, designs interdisciplinary learning in an authentic real-world context (Trowsdale and Davies, 2024). Participants (school and HE students) act as members of specified 'community of practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991) tasked to achieve a particular 'commission'. The TAME model, which advances the educative value of art-making practices (Dewey, 1914; Eisner, 2002; Ingold, 2017) foregrounds more active, embodied and situated forms of learning, and ones that require meaningful interactions between different participants. Such interactions, Lave and Wenger argue, emphasise the democratic and empowering nature of horizontal, peer to peer learning and the dynamic of shifting expertise and participants learn from one another. In this particular iteration of the TAME model, such democratic interactions are between school and HE students. This 'Becoming Eco-artists' project positions university students in art and in ecology disciplines firstly as collaborators co-designing a series of half-days sessions, and then as facilitators leading such sessions, inducting school students into their new and emergent community of practice of 'eco-artists' with the task to create artwork which communicates biodiversity loss in a particular local setting through art-making processes. Together school and HE students investigate, document, and communicate ideas about biodiversity through expressive visual and technical means.

Research into the significance of Higher Education students as ambassadors (or champions) in accessing and supporting younger peers from under-resourced areas (Gartland, 2015; 2021; 2022), is woven into the project design. Here possible selves theory (Markus and Nurius, 1986; Harrison, 2018; Gartland and Smith; 2018) and sociological, Bourdieusian theories of capitals, habitus and doxa are at play in generating relationships and contexts which recognise the existing contexts and beliefs of potential school students whilst generating opportunities for younger students to envision possible futures. Gartland et al's (2022a) approach and the TAME reflect the importance of practice which values differently experienced young people and facilitate valued interactions. We argue that the task-focused, experiential, real-world situated nature of learning activity is significant to both the access and success agendas of Widening Participation and in recognising and maximising the diverse riches of young people.

'Becoming Eco-artists' offers an example for HEIs interested in developing modules for their current students that address access and success WP agendas and enable more equitable development of the kind of capitals that will enable students to succeed in their lives. In undertaking a particular project commission, school students gain the benefits of older peers' insights into what studying particular subjects at university (here art and ecology) involves, how these subjects signify socially and politically and indirectly what purposes and futures such study might herald. The project enables Higher Education students to share where, why and how the arts and sciences complement each other, as well as providing personal insights and learning opportunities that can support the younger students in developing a palette of possible future selves as university students (Harrison, 2018). The project offers employability / professional experience for Higher Education students in communicating their field of study to others beyond the field and in facilitating learning for others, particularly others like themselves. As such this experience, supported by appropriate reflection, potentially constitutes a robust and academic module, rich with employability qualities. The model is not limited to the subject areas of art and ecology but is adaptable to other subject foci. The model offers an opportunity for HEIs to develop bespoke course iterations in particular fields which breaks down barriers that exist for

underrepresented students with respect to possible selves, futures and the value of HE for both those young people who have not yet considered and those who are currently engaged in higher education.

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