

Universities as spaces for inclusive co-creative dialogues rather than activism

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Abstract

While activism plays an important role in raising awareness of marginalised voices and topics, its challenge remains beginning from a position of power imbalance and an effort to change it. Activism can therefore lead into offence-defence mechanisms of communication rather than an open dialogue. In the current university market-driven environment, student voice sought in the format of customer satisfaction feedback disempowers lecturers, devalues their pedagogical contribution, and threatens their wellbeing. In contrast, co-creation offers a proactive solution for all members of the community to be involved in and to contribute to what matters to them. Co-creation is a partnership of equal power and transparently negotiated goals. Self-experience of inclusive practices is key in continuously maintaining the implementation of inclusive values. Co-creation facilitates successful fostering of inclusive communities of practice by offering a meaningful dialogue between a variety of the university community members rather than supporting activism of one.

Full paper

Universities address a wide range of global societal and environmental issues in the outside world. However, their focus resides also on looking inwards in order to re-invent their own purpose, ways of being and working. Activism starts from a position of inequality, from a standpoint where some voices were overlooked for a time long enough that it became a norm to ignore them.

Activism aims to challenge power. It assumes that power needs to shift. It can however overlook where power really lies and can result in producing fear. Activism lobbies for agendas that highlight one specific issue and can in turn marginalise others.

For example, student voice is campaigned for in order to tackle lecturers' power in directing the university learning experience. The initial assumption is that the power rests with the tutors. In the activism discourse, students are positioned (and/or position themselves) as powerless recipients of education being done to them in ways they might not feel comfortable with. Student voice, however, acts as an evaluation mechanism in a market-driven performative environment. Lecturers may feel threatened by the judgement of their work purely through the lens of momentary customer satisfaction rather than learning gains or pedagogical reasoning. Student voice activism reveals the clash between expectations of different stakeholders about what university is for and about. Student voice activism can therefore instil fear in lecturers and feel demoralising. Managerial-style leadership insists on making students happy and devalues pedagogy and mechanisms of learning and wellbeing. Activism of one group attacks another group. Such offensive approach produces defence, not a dialogue. While activism as a fight should be a last resort option, activism as raising of awareness has the potential to open conversations about hidden needs of the community. However, instead of relying on activists to shed light on marginalised voices, there exist proactive ways of assuring mechanisms of listening,

empowerment and sharing as a standard practice in higher education. Co-creation offers the opportunity for all members of the learning community to be involved in shaping what matters to them in the university life, curricula and policies.

Co-creation of educational practices in higher education is an invitation for inclusive practice and listening to all voices from an early stage. The beginning of the conversation refrains from a position of power imbalance, but rather embraces the contrary. Stakeholder engagement is facilitated as a partnership of equal power in the conversation and transparently negotiated goals.

The paper discusses a question of what facilitates successful fostering of inclusive communities of practice. It is proposed that self-experience of inclusive practices is key in continuously maintaining the implementation of inclusive values. Being involved in a co-creative community offers such self-experience. It allows members of the learning community to gain a lived experience of how inclusion feels and what makes it happen. It provides an opportunity for being involved and to reflect on the social and physical spaces and communication formats that cherish collaboration and create equality in a dialogue. Co-creation acknowledges the contribution of each member to the added value of the co-created product, suggesting that co-creation is goal-oriented with a clear purpose and agreed outcomes.

The paper draws on several projects exploring how inclusive practice and co-creation were modelled and intentionally used as a pedagogical approach in training members of the learning community for inclusive practice and further co-creation. First, a qualitative study with eighteen therapeutic pedagogues, whose role it is to promote inclusion, revealed the importance of modelling inclusive methods as well as values demonstrated in lecturer behaviour and their relationships with students. Further, a co-creative project between university lecturers, schoolteachers and student ambassadors focused on co-creating outreach programmes demonstrated the value of co-creation for widening the repertoire of possible selves of pupils in schools as well as student ambassadors involved in the co-creation. Finally, a university-wide project on co-creating learning hubs as spaces for development of transversal skills in online and blended spaces resulted in defining and operationalising co-creation as an equitable inclusive practice, embracing the diverse knowledge and experience of individual members of the university community.

Co-creation offers a meaningful dialogue between a variety of the university community members. It is inclusive, because it values each individual for their contribution and provides them with a sense of belonging and wellbeing. While activism amplifies previously silent voices, it is susceptible to promoting one-sided agendas. Co-creation is focused on achieving a collectively purposeful output; it is productive, creative, and fun.

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