

Encounters of mattering in co-creation

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

Co-creation in higher education has been highlighted as a mechanism for involving students in influencing higher education curricula, enhancing student engagement and experience (Healy & Healy, 2019). While such conceptualisation helps disrupt hierarchies, it continues to perpetuate the student-lecturer hierarchy. At the University of Suffolk, a group of students, lecturers, librarians, educational designers and academic skills advisors experimented with gathering a learning “community of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to achieve a common purpose in a ‘commission’ (Trowsdale & Davies, 2024) to co-create ‘Learning Hubs’ – interactive digital resources for skill development situated in subject knowledge areas (Lessner Listiakova et al., 2024). Impacts of co-creation evaluated through a variety of qualitative reflections, highlighted that co-creation re-generated and invigorated a sense of purpose. Co-creative encounters allowed people to experience a deep sense of belonging, connection and mattering. Co-creators felt empowered as they the opportunity to be creative and to contribute meaningfully.

Full paper

Introduction

Co-creation in higher education has been an established concept with a focus on student – lecturer partnership and promoting student engagement in the classroom (Bovill, 2020). It represents a different way of working that disrupts more traditional staff/student relationships. Co-creation has been adopted as an approach in promoting student engagement (Healy & Healy, 2019). However, relationship-building requires a change in attitudes that promotes trust and cooperation (hooks, 1994) not only between lecturers and students but among other stakeholders in the community of practice. The paper draws on a chapter written as a triangular case study between lecturers, educational designers and students reflecting from their perspectives on the experience as well as the qualitative data generated by the learning community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) that was

commissioned to co-create (Trowsdale & Davies, 2024) a product of digital educational resources that matter to them (Lessner Listiakova et al., 2024).

Methodology

The study was designed and conducted as an iterative process of defining, conceptualising and reflecting on experiences of co-creation. The community of practice involved undergraduate students (n=6), postgraduate students (n=2), academics (n=5), learning designers (n=3), and an academic skills advisor (n=1). Several tools were used throughout the process, including reflective log entries of co-creators after group meetings (n=50), written notes from SWOT analysis of co-creation in the project, written notes from collaborative conversations on a shared online platform, written notes from workshops in shared documents, and an impact questionnaire (n=9) completed after intensive four-month period of project delivery. The methodology followed a fluid concept of co-creation evolving and flexibly adapting as new members joined, and new perspectives were integrated. The conceptualisation of co-creation continued to develop and grow with each iteration of the analysis. Therefore, applying a participatory and co-creative approach in thematic and phenomenological data analysis.

Findings

Co-creation is not an intervention to improve student engagement, but rather a whole-community approach supporting community learning and wellbeing. Multiple stakeholders need to be involved in co-creation in order to create an equal and diverse space.

Co-creation was defined by this community of practice as a demonstration of an inclusive space and as a tool for creating inclusive spaces. It is characterised by a strengths-based approach related to members' individual qualities and experience related to their role without generalising them as representatives of coherent groups. It involves democratic leadership, transparency, actively de-constructing hierarchies by the use of physical space, variety of creative engagements, communication channels and signalling partnership through trust in accountability, common problem-solving, humour, and nourishing comforts such as hot drinks and snacks.

It is about being allowed to have ideas, to express them and to have the ideas accepted by the community. Multiple people actively work together in an open environment, sharing their ideas and experiences with each other. In this process they collaboratively develop a particular thing which prioritises learning with and from others who have diverse perspectives and expertise.

Discussion

As a practice, co-creation produces unique encounters between people, facilitated by creative prompts. Members of learning communities become immersed in self-experience of playfulness, collaboration and enactment of respect to each other's contributions. Such encounters have a profound impact on individuals' sense of being valued and valuing – feeling that they matter and that what they care about matters.

It resonates with Freirean (1996) notion that no one knows everything, and no one is void of knowledge. Co-creation means building on and valuing everyone's knowledge and understanding, creating exciting places that generate interest in people and their ideas (hooks, 1994).

Co-creation re-generates and invigorates sense of purpose. Through co-creative encounters people experience a deep sense of belonging and connection. Discovering and affirming oneself as creative, competent, valued, trusted and relied on powerfully transforms individuals. Co-creative encounters thus facilitate inclusive practice and simultaneously require it. Self-experience of inclusion generates trust in such practices and re-establishes hope through mattering. In conversation with Fitzpatrick's (2021, 2024) generous thinking and leadership, pockets of co-creative practices through their encounters of mattering carry the potential to heal disengaged, competitive, stressed, over-worked campus communities.