

Towards authenticity and inclusivity in scholarship: Staff–student partnerships in the research and practice of e learning ((0152)

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Research is typically restricted to particular categories of people within universities, and influenced by the hierarchical relationships between academics, students and support staff which suffer from a kind of ‘academic apartheid’ “where some people (students and also general or support staff) are denied access to certain kinds of power and resources” (Brew, 2007. P6.). Similar arguments could be made for teaching and learning, where students are increasingly positioned within institutions as passive consumers in a managerial model of higher education (Johnson & Deem, 2003; Selwyn, 2007).

Barnett (2007) argues students need to be engaged in a search for authenticity in learning where being critical and enquiring are key elements and where “such criticality is achieved in the spirit of research” (Barnett, 2007, p. 126). Brew (2006) has suggested ‘inclusive knowledge-building communities’, in which we reconsider who the scholars are and how different groups might work in partnership (Brew, 2007). Those engaged in the development of e-learning are part of this landscape where hybrid (academic and support) roles necessitate involvement in scholarly activity which is not always recognised or acknowledged. Furthermore, recent policy is also calling for students to “be active partners in shaping their learning experiences”(HEA, 2010). Similarly the National Union of Students is arguing for a rethinking of higher education values away from consumerism towards a more relational view where students, staff and managers operate in a changing, dynamic relationship (Streeting & Wise, 2009).

The concept of ‘relational agency’ involves a shared and distributed notion of agency and “a capacity to align one’s thought and actions with those of others in order to interpret problems of practice and to respond to those interpretations” (Edwards, 2005, p.169) enabling a dynamic realignment of thought and action between different actors in response to particular problems and challenges. This paper draws on the idea of relational agency in considering a research and educational innovation within the undergraduate medical programme at the University of Bristol and discusses the developing relationships between students, e-learning development staff and academics. We argue that such models can offer a more inclusive, relational approach to scholarship and more authentic forms of student inquiry.

This initiative involves an extension of the SSC (Student Selected Component) programme which students undertake as an open module within the undergraduate medical curriculum. Since 2003, this programme has offered the opportunity to undertake the development of e-learning materials on a clinical topic of their choice as another option within the SSC, with the intention that these are made available to other students within their peer group and those who will follow in later years. Students identify an area of need, based on existing educational resources, their own experience and from research with their peers and tutors. E-learning materials can be in any media or designs, using tools chosen and frequently learnt from scratch by the students. Typically, the e-SSCs will involve 20 to 25 students per year. The initiative has been running for 7 years, with increasing interest from students in this option year on year. The e-SSCs are similar to other student initiated

projects¹ but place more emphasis on situated learning within the students' existing programme of study.

As part of the assessment for this component, students write a reflective account of the project and the process of development. A sample of these reports (25 from 2007/2008) were analysed using a grounded theory approach (Glaser, 2001; Kennedy & Lingard, 2006). Reflective accounts from former students and e-learning staff have also formed part of the analysis. The analysis has shown that through this initiative, students develop a range of skills (literature searching, developing a personal inquiry, IT skills, project management, collaborative team working) and different approaches to identifying and resolving problems. The analysis of reflective accounts also showed that ideas about educational theory and design principles were developing over time as one cohort builds upon the experience of those who have gone before.

Learning to be a doctor is akin to an apprenticeship, where knowledge is applied to real problems combining theory with practice. Students on the e-learning initiative could be said to be beginning their apprenticeship in education. Apprenticeship involves changes to both newcomers' and masters' participation and practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Academic and e-learning development staff also reported that the students' work can offer new insights into novel and existing knowledge, design of e-learning materials, choices of technological tools and accepted modes of working, so that both newcomers and 'oldtimers' are evolving and developing educational practice co-extensively (Williams et al, 2010). This demonstrates relational agency where students are contributors of new approaches to knowledge and expertise in higher education and e-learning staff are able to embrace a new knowledge building model.

Additionally, the pressures of being a student in a workplace setting where the primary goals are about patient care and not education of students, place additional demands on medical students. There are identity conflicts in moving from being a student to a doctor, where different kinds of practices (e.g. professional standards) are needed but where problems of power relations make it very difficult for students to challenge and make representations even when their professional knowledge tells them they need to. Medical students, therefore, need increased opportunities to develop relational agency to prepare for the professional requirement to mediate between different groups and competing interests.

In conclusion, the staff-student partnership model outlined here presents opportunities for realignment in roles and contributions to scholarship, the development of criticality and a capacity for relational agency, amongst (medical and other) students. This can also lead to the development of new knowledge and expertise, where the roles of educator and educated are transposed or redefined, and the opportunities for authenticity are increased, as one of the previous student educators noted:

'I was learning by interacting closely with the topic myself, following paths of intrigue and unanswered questions that could not have

¹ See for example - <http://as.exeter.ac.uk/support/educationenhancementprojects/change/>

been generated through studying lecture slides or reading through a book.'(Will Duffin, in Williams et al,2010).

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