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Developing mutuality in research and practice: Reflections on a student-lecturer collaborative enquiry into assessment feedback (0075)

This paper reports on findings from a 2011 ESCalate funded project. Three research teams, consisting of students and lecturers from Education Studies programmes at De Montfort University, engaged in collaborative enquiry with similar programmes at six other Higher Education institutions in the UK. Research took place between the spring and autumn of 2011. The focus of enquiry was assessment feedback – the strengths and weaknesses of current practice and the potential to develop more collaborative feedback models.

Underlying this project was the conviction that effective and empowering 'teaching should promote experiences that require students to become active, scholarly participators in the learning process' (Windschitl, 1999). To this, we added the requirement for collaboration: between students, and between students and lecturers. Michael Fielding and John Heron are at the forefront in advocating student-lecturer collaboration – Fielding with his notion of 'students as researchers' (Fielding & Bragg, 2003), Heron with his work on 'co-operative inquiry' (Heron & Reason, 2006) and his influential paper revisiting assessment (Heron, 1988). Likewise, Bland & Atweh (2007) suggest the fostering of 'students as researchers' as a strategy to improve learner engagement. Drawing from these works, our project develops a collaborative student-lecturer enquiry within the contexts of assessment feedback.

The project was developed around the following two aims:

1. To engage students and lecturers in meaningful collaborative enquiry concerning the characteristics of effective assessment feedback practices

2. To stimulate discussion, reflection and action regarding assessment feedback between and within Education Studies subject areas at seven HEIs (including DMU).

Each research 'team' was semi-autonomous – responsible for developing its own research design to address the *assessment feedback practices* research questions:
- What good practice in assessment feedback currently exists on Education Studies programmes?
- How do students and lecturers in different HEIs feel about the assessment feedback practices on their courses?
- How might more collaborative forms of assessment feedback be supported and developed?

While working independently, each team adopted a broadly exploratory and inductive approach, making use of emerging findings to guide the direction of the research as it progresses (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). This provided a space for participating students and lecturers to work together across institutions to think and talk about the potential for more collaborative forms of assessment feedback. Discussions and strategies for decision making, and the distribution of roles within the research teams, constituted an important element of the project. Each team built in strategies to document this dimension of the research, thus examining the nature of collaborative enquiry itself. Following the implementation of the research, the teams met to discuss both their findings and the research process.

The research adopted an interpretative approach, recognising that both the research and object of study form part of the ongoing process of meaning-making that constitutes social reality. Because of their capacity to offer thick description (Geertz, 1973), we used qualitative methods both to access participants' existing interpretations *and* to generate further meaning in relation to both assessment feedback and collaborative enquiry. In making use of such methods, we recognised in particular their relational character (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995) and viewed the data not as uncomplicated reports of an underlying reality, but rather as important and meaningful constructions generated in interaction between participants and researchers.

The aims of the collaborative enquiry strand of the research were:

Collaborative enquiry
- How might student and lecturer collaborative enquiry be most effectively organised?
- What opportunities for pedagogy and research can collaborative enquiry offer?
- How far is it possible to facilitate genuinely symmetric relations between students and lecturers in a collaborative enquiry?

Our analysis indicated that 'mutuality' is the central characteristic of effective student-lecturer collaborative enquiry. Through conversations within and between the research teams, we identified a number of strategies for developing 'mutuality' in student-staff collaboration. The paper discusses these strategies through three interconnected themes:

- *Making and remaking research teams*
    - Negotiating and reconciling different voices
    - Navigating fluid group dynamics

- *Learning together*
    - Teachers as students, students as teachers (Freire, 1996)

- o Making connections – students and staff across HEIs
- o Nurturing effective and sustainable research communities

- *Expanding horizons*
  - o Empowering students – greater confidence, knowledge and understanding beyond the locale
  - o Transforming learning identities – as active, engaged co-producers

The paper concludes by considering the rich possibilities inherent in student-lecturer collaborative enquiry. Mindful of the limitations of this exploratory study we tentatively suggest that the scope for such practices reach far beyond our project. Opportunities for students to be 'co-producers' of knowledge, meaning and experience are likely to 'fit' more closely within redefined twenty-first century HE structures and identities. Student-lecturer collaborative enquiry might usefully form the basis of future educational research, and also course/programme/institutional evaluation, curriculum design and pedagogic practice.

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