

Let's Talk: Staff and Student Experiences of Dialogue Days, a Student Engagement Activity.

Bohm (1996) suggests that for something new to emerge from communication, people must listen and be prepared to change views and opinions; otherwise "the problem of communication" just becomes exacerbated. Dialogue should therefore be conducted through "connected knowing" as a means to understand, another individual's perspective (Brockbank and McGill 2007). A growing tradition of using, what has been locally termed, "Dialogue Days" to facilitate shared understanding between staff and students has grown over the last five years. The days have iteratively developed to provide different spaces to engage with students in environments separate from that used for everyday teaching and learning. Dialogue Days are structured into activities that create sparks to promote "talk". They provide educational development for staff and students to prompt their thinking which is then purported to lead to changes in thinking and sometimes in the curriculum at either a micro or macro level.

Identifying that there is limited research within the UK in the area of student engagement (Trowler 2010), this study aimed to provide better understanding of the effectiveness of dialogue days, their perceived value for staff and students and to inform future practice.

Methodology

Using a qualitative methodology we explored the lived experience of the individuals involved. A purposive sample of staff and students was selected by inviting those who had attended a dialogue day to participate in the research project. Eight students and six members of staff, from a range of disciplines (theatre, counselling, physiotherapy, sports science and occupational therapy) participated. The data was collected through semi structured interviews and transcribed to allow for closer examination of the findings. It was subsequently analysed in two different ways, thematically to consider commonalities and differences, and secondly, interpreting meaning in interaction.

Findings

The analysis used a phenomenological approach exploring individual experiences through the lens of the lifeworld as divided into fractions, “not as independent categories but as mutually entailed with interpenetrating meanings” (Ashworth 2003, p27). These fractions include *selfhood*, *sociality*, *embodiment*, *temporality*, *spatiality*, *project* and *discourse* (four of which are reported briefly here).

Sociality considers the relationships between staff and students during this event and the impact it had on their view of each other. Dialogue days were reported by students to break down barriers brought about by issues of power and expertise through students describing staff as behaving in different modes to that they had experienced in class.

“I do remember, there was one chap who was fairly high up in the University, he was very friendly and very engaging”. (Sam Occupational Therapy)

Spatiality considers the physical environment of the day and the window of opportunity that it created in the teaching calendar. It became space to behave and do things differently. It raised the importance of unfamiliarity of surroundings and how this influences behaviour by association within “other” spaces.

“And I just wanted to take things off my mind of things for a while as well, coz obviously when you’re in the middle of third year you’ve got everything going on. So it was kind of nice to go and not worry about those for an afternoon, and chat about where we’re going and stuff, so it was nice for us to chat I think” (Tom, Theatre)

Project explores how the dialogue developed over the day prompting reconsideration of views by both staff and students. It represented the initial uncertainty that students had about the day, initially feeling as outsiders but who through their engagement gradually become part of the community.

“I felt relieved, had lots of things burning up inside me that I just wanted to get off my chest”
At the end of the day we are all here to mix and mingle and make work together. Everyone is an adult and should be treated in that way.” (Michael Theatre student)

Discourse interpreted the use of the direct and indirect meaning conveyed through attendees' utterances. The possibility of participants generating conveyed meaning when questioned is an attempt to preserve (and not threaten) Face – the act of keeping one's (or another's) self-image intact (Goffman, 1967). The two significant ones explored were "disclaimers", saying something problematic in a polite way in order to build desirable identities, and "brown nosing", being excessively positive towards a question in order to gain approval (Tracy, 2002)

"there was someone from psychology and someone from occupational therapy, and this particular person had, I don't know, was so frustrated that things weren't anonymously marked" (Clyde Academic, Physiotherapy)

Clyde described the actions of a student participant, but not necessarily in a positive sense, and through his meaning modifies the student's state. "Frustrated" can convey self-disappointment, or dissatisfaction, although the subject could in fact have been "annoyed, or "furious" at the delay in receiving feedback. He also remarked "I don't know" (beforehand) adding vagueness in order to modify their description.

"the tutors' attitudes were really nice, they were lovely, they were extremely pleased to have our point of view and wanted it to be a two-way process" (Vicky, Counselling studies)

Vicky made three points of emphasis, "really", "lovely" and "extremely". Taking the meaning literally, the day promoted positive attitudes that were satisfying for Vicky. On the conveyed front though, the use of these terms can suggest that tutors are not this way all the time so brown-nosing in this sense back-fires for them.

Summary

This student engagement activity had, overall, a powerful effect in building different relationships between staff and students and was an effective means to prompt self-reflection for both. Interpreting meaning in interaction allowed the researchers to explore the unsaid aspects of the conversations and consider what individuals really thought about

the day. The findings support the effectiveness of providing spaces for “dialogue” in a way that is wider than the usual student representation system, so that all students can develop their academic identities and become more connected to the institution and to each other (Axelson and Flick, 2011) in a way that positively influences learning.

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