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Collaborative enquiry and democratic fellowship. Developing a scale-able model of student-lecturer research collaboration. (0076)

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Interest in student–staff collaborative enquiry has increased over the past decade - both in schools (Fielding 2004; Bahou 2011) and HE (Seale 2010). The pedagogic potential of such work has attracted particular attention. Bland and Atweh (2007), for example, have suggested that fostering “students as researchers” can lead to enhanced academic performance. In this paper I discuss a student-lecturer collaborative enquiry model developed with colleagues through two research projects in Education Studies – the first involving a small scale study of assessment and feedback by researchers at one institution; the second, involving three partner HEIs in a study of employability and Education Studies. Our interest in developing a model for staff–student collaborative enquiry stemmed in part from a desire to harness such potential and to develop a constructivist educational approach, promoting ‘experiences that require students to become active, scholarly participators in the learning process’ (Windschitl 1999). In addition, we also wanted to explore the political dimensions of collaborative enquiry, taking inspiration from the work of Michael Fielding, who has framed students as “radical agents of change” (Fielding 2001) and argued that one of the most rewarding and valuable aspects of such work is the development of “democratic fellowship” (Fielding 2011).

Findings from the first project were used to adapt the model on a larger scale. In this earlier study, research was conducted by three teams, each consisting of one lecturer and three final-year students. Teams were established following a competitive selection process, following which they carried out data collection and analysis following their own research designs. The three teams then met to further analyse, interpret and disseminate the data. Four distinct patterns of collaboration emerged from findings in the first project: ‘working as equals’, ‘lecturers-as-facilitators’, ‘students-as-leads’ and ‘working in equitable teams’. Beginning with a relatively uncomplicated conception of staff and students as equals in the research process, we subsequently adopted more ‘weighted’ conceptions of collaboration before settling on a more equitable model in which team members were seen as offering very different but very valuable contributions.

The model also contributed to a process of learning together an ‘expanding horizons’ whereby our existing knowledge, skills and perspectives were challenged and extended. The malleability of participant identities allowed students and lecturers to “re-see’ each

other as persons rather than as role occupants” (Fielding and Moss 2011: 79) thus leading to more ‘authentic’ relationships. The project also allowed student to engage with aspects of their HE environment that otherwise may have remained unexplored. They were able to meet and question academic staff, course leaders and deans from other institutions as well as other students on similar degrees. They also gained an insight into ‘hidden worlds’, learning for example that the seemingly objective and scientific assessment and feedback processes were in fact highly problematised.

However, we also identified a number of limitations and considerations for future collaborative work. These included the negotiation of relationship between ‘novice’ and ‘expert’ researchers, and the potential for collaborative enquiry leading to ‘exclusivity’. Hierarchical relationships and expectations often framed interactions in teams. Students tended to perceive lecturers as experts and lecturers found it difficult to maintain dual identities (as class tutor and co-researcher) during and after the project. Also, since involvement in the project was self selecting, only the most engaged and enthusiastic students - or those with an existing interest in collaborative working models - took part. Some students were unhappy about not being involved in writing the bid - as a result, they didn’t feel fully engaged as equal partners. Others would have preferred more interaction across the three teams in the early stages of the project. Time was also an issue, as co-ordinating a diverse range of staff and student with various other commitments within the constraints of funded research was a challenge.

In the second project – being carried out by six research teams based at three different HEIs - we have built on the strengths of the model and tried to address the considerations above. More time and opportunities have been factored in for team development, collaboration across research teams and ‘training’ in carrying out research. A pilot exchange visit between partner institutions was carried out and a whole team project meeting early on in the research helped us frame the questions and overall research design. These changes appear to be having a positive impact in terms of students’ confidence in carrying out research and a sense of shared purpose amongst the whole team. However, a number of new considerations have arisen as a consequence of upscaling the project to include three partner institutions. One has been the existing of different research and teaching cultures within the various HEIs. Collaboration between the different teams and cultures has led to new insights, sometimes leading to anxiety about the content of the respective courses. However, it has also further sensitized students to the research topic in advance of field work. Working on a larger scale has also meant involving students earlier on - at the beginning of their second rather than third year. As a result, existing relationships between students and lecturers were less developed prior to undertaking the research. Collaboration has consequently taken on a more impersonal nature than in the previous study - when lecturers worked with students they knew well.

Reflections on this work suggest that our model has significant potential both for learning, and for the development of democratic fellowship (Fielding, 2011) between students and lecturers. Insights gained through the plurality of views and culture embodied across a range of institutions can make this even more valuable. However, in upscaling the model, it has been important to guard against diluting the valuable, personal element of our work. Regardless of scale, more fundamental issues also remain. In particular, the issue of when and how to include students in research merits further consideration. Although there are structural obstacles to be overcome, involving students in the preparation and submission of research bids could contribute a valuable development to our model.

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