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Students as co-developers of learning and teaching: Conceptualising 'student voice' in professional development (0093)

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Abstract

This paper will report on a pilot study that evaluated a model of student-engaged academic development. Despite widespread commitment to student engagement across many institutional activities, student participation in teaching and learning enhancement as partners with staff has been identified as a "threshold concept" for academic development. Although there are more examples emerging, professional development models often operate without engaging students as active participants. This study seeks not only to establish a student-engaged model of teaching observation but also to critically examine the ways in which staff, student and developer participants conceptualise expertise and student voice. Concept-map mediated interviews with participants in humanities and healthcare subjects contexts have been used to elicit conceptions and comparative knowledge structures over a four month period. The outcomes of the pilot will be considered in relation to the theorisation of student engagement and student voice with particular focus on performativity, authority and representative identities.

Introduction

As a counter to the rhetoric of "student as consumer", the student engagement agenda has sought to articulate other relational metaphors that characterise alternative relationships between students and academic staff at university. There are emerging examples of ways in which students can be successfully integrated into educational change as participants and experts as well as partners and agents for that change (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011). For example, students have assumed collaborative roles in curriculum design and development (Bovill *et al.*, 2011, Mihans *et al.*, 2008), strategy development (Healey *et al.*, 2010) and pedagogic evaluation (Bovill *et al.*, 2010). It has been noted, however, that many models of professional development continue to operate on the basis that students do not have an active role in informing the learning of academic staff despite the centrality of such activities for enhancement of the learning experience (Cook-Sather, 2011). This paper will report the outcomes of a currently ongoing pilot study that aimed to develop and evaluate a model of student-engaged academic development.

Student engagement in academic development

The deficiency of student engagement in academic development practice is beginning to be addressed in a number of recent examples in the UK (Alsford, 2012; Freeman *et al.*, 2013). It has been suggested, however, that student participation in enhancement activities with staff is a "threshold concept" for academic development because "it contradicts prevailing notions that students do not have understanding or experience to inform teaching practice and that faculty developers or colleagues are best positioned to inform and guide faculty" (Cook-Sather, 2013: 4). Student-engaged academic development, therefore, is a key site for the exploration of questions of expertise, authority and the professional role of academics and academic developers in the enhancement of the student educational experience.

Previous research on student participation in observer and consultancy roles, predominantly in US contexts, has suggested that the principal outcome of such activities is teacher access to new student insights on teaching to inform reflective practice as the basis for facilitating transformational professional learning (Cook-Sather, 2008).Where student-staff collaborations have taken place, it is argued that being engaged as consultants "catalyzes a revision of students' relationships to their teachers and their responsibilities within their learning" (Cook-Sather & Alter, 2011, p. 37). Outcomes that are seen to accrue to students participating in such change initiatives include the development of skills, knowledge and values as well as increased agency in shaping their learning experience and a reconfiguration of the power relationships between lecturers and students in the classroom (Barnes *et al.*, 2010). In the context of enhancement, the evaluation of such activities must therefore acknowledge the complex realities of power, expertise and authority in the classroom when locating staff-student dialogue at the heart of student engagement practice (Taylor & Robinson, 2009; Seale, 2010).

While there has been research into the impacts of such engagement on reflective practice, therefore, there has been limited investigation of participants' conceptions of student expertise, voice or role within the enhancement of learning and teaching. This paper seeks to respond to that gap in our understanding of the multifaceted nature of student-engaged professional development.

The study

We undertook this study with the explicit intention to respond to Trowler's (2010) suggestion that, to-date, research in this area has been predominantly normative and uncritically based on the assumption that engagement is unequivocally positive. Likewise, Zepke and Leach (2010) have noted that student engagement work can focus on the operational aspects of practice to the neglect of critical explorations of the participatory and dialogic aspects of engagement as it informs student and lecturer identities and their responsibilities as active (educational) citizens. In this study we explore the following research questions:

* What are the perspectives of students, new lecturers and development programme tutors of learning and teaching "expertise" in the context of professional development?
* How do students, new lecturers and development programme tutors construct the concept of "student voice" in the context of a professional development programme?
* How might staff perspectives on students as co-developers inform the future design and delivery of professional development interventions?

We recruited three undergraduate students to undertake developmental teaching observation of new teachers in a Russell Group UK university and over a period of four months explored their attitudes and perceptions of the collaboration. The pilot study commenced in March 2013 and is ongoing. Final participant interviews were completed in June 2013 with the reporting of outcomes due in December 2013.

This study began from the hypothesis that the conceptions of the actors involved (teachers, developers and students) of student voice, expertise and power relationships would inform the transformational potential of these encounters in academic development. Recognising that the language of empowerment and agency underpinning student voice work in higher education is not neutral, such activities pose important methodological and theoretical questions for advocates of student engagement. For example, drawing on Fielding's work on student voice in schools (2004), it can be argued that by seeking to engage and validate a few students to function as representatives of all students, student pedagogic consultants are potentially co-opted into the normative practice of speaking *for* and *about* others as subjects rather than as agents that challenge existing beliefs about students in the classroom.

The pilot study

We recruited three student consultants in two discipline fields (Humanities and Healthcare subjects) as co-developers to undertake the following activities:

* Students each led a teaching observation with a new teacher facilitated by an experienced academic developer with the aim to engage in collaborative dialogue about observed teaching practice (Bell, 2001; Cook-Sather 2011).;
* All participants developed concept maps at each stage of the process to elicit conceptions of teaching and learning "expertise" and the role of "student voice" in learning and teaching enhancement (Wheeldon, 2009; Wheeldon & Ahlberg, 2012);
* All participants individually participated in a concept-map mediated interview drawing on the concept map data to explore perspectives of student engagement in professional development (Kinchin *et al.*, 2010).

In the oral presentation of the paper we will report the outcomes of thematic analysis of interviews alongside comparative analysis of knowledge structures developed within the

concepts maps. On the basis of this analysis we will discuss implications for "student voice" work in professional development.

Conclusion

This paper seeks to address a gap in the critical accounts of student-staff partnerships in the context of professional development. It will present the outcomes of a pilot study of student-staff collaborations in teaching observation focusing on conceptions of expertise and voice in relation to enhancement. It will consider this analysis in relation to the theorisation of student engagement and student voice with particular focus on performativity, authority and representative identities.

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