Working with student researchers to understand more about student experience: potentials and challenges (0064)

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Introduction

In the context of higher education, supporting students to conduct research among their peers might be one way to deepen our understanding of student experience. The relationship between the academic researchers who are managing the project and the student researchers is crucial, as well as how students are practically prepared to take on the gaze of a researcher in such a familiar context. We considered these issues in the context of a research project designed to look at the experience of second year students on a BA Education Studies programme who were using Instagram to develop their sociological understanding. In exploring these potentials and challenges, we are in a better position to plan the effective management of student researchers in similar projects in the future.

The Project

Building on research into the multimodal engagement of learners in pedagogic contexts (Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Kress, 2010; van Leeuwen, 2005) and the potentials of visual imagery within critical pedagogic approaches (Beudert, 2006; Duncum, 2008), the project aimed to plot how students could and would use social media (Instagram) as part of their developing understanding and dialogue about topics such as gender, class and identity.

The project was situated in a pedagogic and research tradition that valued students' own 'funds of knowledge' (Moll et al., 1992; Gonzalez et al., 2013) and our orientation was one of action research. We were interested in how students see in their everyday lives the sociological issues that they are learning about, and whether photography shared via social media can be a way of accessing and discussing their lived understanding of the concepts. We were deeply committed to engaging in ongoing dialogue with the student participants in our project. Practically, we felt that we could achieve this through the recruitment of two paid

'insider' assistants from among the student body. We recruited two third year students on the same degree programme as our participants.

The student researchers played a fundamental role in collecting data as part of the project. They observed the module lectures and seminars, making field notes about the students' engagement with the Instagram project and how their participation featured in dialogues occurring during contact time on the module. The student researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with students who had participated in the project about their experiences. Furthermore, their wider involvement on the research team through ongoing dialogue with the academic researchers was essential in how the project unfolded.

In this paper, in order to better understand the potentials and challenges associated with including student researchers on a research team, we explore three types of data:

1) Field notes that the student researchers made throughout the project

2) The interactions between the student researchers and the students on the project in the context of the semi-structured interviews.

3) Conversations with the student researchers specifically about their role and experiences.

Findings

Students could relate to the student researchers differently to the academic researchers. Students were more open, informal and relaxed in discussing the project with the student researchers, and would feel comfortable asking questions about the project that they otherwise might not have put forward. In feeding this back to the research team, the student researchers steered the project on a practical level, since we started to offer students more specific guidance about how to use Instagram. Their insights also prompted us to challenge assumptions we had made about the students' digital literacy.

The student researchers had to fast-track their mastery of particular research skills and at the end of the project commented on the difficulties they encountered. Writing field notes was a completely new experience for the student researchers. They remarked on how worried they were about 'getting it right' and this had stifled their creativity in documenting their observations.

The academic researchers felt that the student researchers were often seeing the experiences of the students very much through their own lens, and that this would cloud the data. For example, the student researchers relayed feelings of frustration with students who were not participating fully in the project. This impacted on whether and how they recorded their interactions with these students; the student researchers were constantly reminded that the negative voices were as important as the positive ones.

Careful preparation is needed to counter some of the difficulties that different people on the research team can experience when academic and student researchers work together. Firstly, student researchers are likely to feel under-confident in methods of data collection and a significant portion of time and resources within the research project needs to be committed to helping student researchers feel comfortable in the role that they are adopting. Secondly, time should be regularly set aside in the research project for explicit examination among the student researchers of their role. For example, the student researchers on this project needed more time to critically examine their feelings of frustration with the students on the project who were not fully engaged, and to consider how these feelings were impacting on the way that they collected and reported data.

References

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