

T9 Conwy 2 Friday 7 December 10.30 - 11.00

Connecting students with research: an analysis of six 'Meet the researcher' activities at a large UK research-intensive university. (0538)

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Research Domain: Student Experience (SE)

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'Meet the researcher' is an activity in which students interview academic staff about their research. Anecdotal evidence suggests it is widespread, in different forms, in UK universities. It was first described by Denis Cosgrove who explained how students could engage more effectively with complex subject matter if they talked to a researcher about how they had found these issues relevant to their research (Cosgrove 1981). Subsequent study showed that the activity 'enables students to better understand their lecturers as individuals, to explore how university research is undertaken, and to appreciate how research and teaching may be linked together' (Dwyer 2001, 359). The articles by Dwyer and Cosgrove have been widely cited by scholars looking at ways of establishing links between teaching and research (Jenkins, Healey, and Zetter 2007, 26, 29). More recently it has been suggested that PhD students could usefully take the role of faculty, and researchers have argued that the activity's success lies in the way it brings students in to a community involving staff, students from different years of study, and students enrolled in several common programmes (Downie 2010, Evans et al 2018).

Since 2014 'Meet the Researcher' has been promoted at a large research-intensive university in the UK, as part of a wider initiative aimed at placing students in a more participatory stance in relation to their professors' work, and of shifting their focus from research outputs to research processes and problems – to 'lift the veil' of research and demystify the research environment, as one senior faculty member put it (Fung 2017). Whereas previous studies of 'Meet the researcher' activities have focused on isolated examples, this paper compares the rationale, aims, implementation, and outcomes, of six different 'Meet the researcher' activities in different degree programmes at the university.

The paper uses detailed descriptions of the activity's organisation and rationale, provided by the module and programme convenors, to compare the different contexts in which the activity takes place, the range of motivations for initiating it, and the range of different ways in which the activity takes place. This is joined with an analysis (using NVivo) of reports from 469 students about their experience of the activity, to identify key themes about what students learned by working together to interview a researcher and present their findings. The aim is to survey a wider range of examples and present a broader range of findings than earlier studies to draw some preliminary conclusions about effective ways of connecting students with research.

Findings from the study suggests that the task puts the students in an inquiry-based relationship to subject-specific knowledge, and offers a unique exposure to research processes. The evidence also shows that difficult learning, when carefully structured through the interrelationship of a specific output-based task (eg. producing a written summary, or giving an oral presentation), subject content that is above the level of the students' current understanding, and a group work environment, all help to promote interest and engagement. The paper shows that the task's scope and difficulty has a significant influence on students' perceptions of group work. Finally, the evidence presented in the paper counters objections that first-year undergraduate students are not able to engage with research-level publications.

This paper is the first comparison of different 'Meet the researcher' activities, and the first analysis of data from multiple cohorts of students. It is hoped that paper will be good source of data for others who are looking for ways to connect students with their institution's research, and that it will make a significant contribution to the growing literature on both 'Meet the researcher' activities, and on inquiry-based learning more generally. Finally, the paper's findings should raise further questions about how the activity can be tailored to support development of skills and attributes in specific fields, such as writing skills and feedback literacy.

References

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