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The Use of Co-design Approach in Learning and Teaching: A Case Study of Two European Universities

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Abstract: There has been a drive within higher education to engage creative and participatory approach in various aspects of learning and teaching to enhance practice. This paper evaluates such an approach, the co-design approach, adopted in a French and an English university. Co-design involves participants co-creating ideas and concepts in the design process where their common goal is to improve learning and teaching practice. In this study, the English university uses the co-design approach for its curriculum design and enhancement; whereas the French university engages this approach to help staff develop innovative teaching practice. The study explores academics' views on the value offered by the participatory co-design approach to their academic practice. We contend that a careful well planned use of co-design in various teaching and learning process creates a social environment that engages the various stakeholders (academics, students, employers, etc.) in a creative dialogue that helps promote learning and teaching excellence.

Paper: Co-design is often referred to as participatory design, co-creation or open design process. Sanders and Stappers (2008:6) used the term co-design as the "collective creativity as it is applied across the whole span of a design process." The co-design process involves "experts in their domain" coming together to creatively address key questions/problems that they are facing. The collaboration is not about tapping into what they know individually, but about "discovering their unique, and collective perspectives on the systems in which they live, which makes it vital to create together" (Weiler, Weiler & McKenzie, 2016).

Although the co-design approach has been around for many decades, it has recently made its way into academia (Sanders & Strappers, 2014). Drawing ideas from staff and students, Bovill (2013:463) suggested that "co-creation [of curricula] implies a mutual process that is imaginative, inventive, and resourceful". There has been an increased focus within higher education over the recent years to seek input of various stakeholders in the various teaching and learning (T&L) processes to help address various T&L challenges or facilitate innovative outcomes to enhance T&L practice. The co-design process inspired by these very values of collaboration for creative suggestions for T&L issues,

attempts to bring together students and teachers along with other stakeholders so that they can better understand the outcomes of the T&L interactions and have greater ownership of these outcomes. This paper intends to highlight the value offered and limitations of the co-design approach in seeking creative and collaborative ideas and concepts to enhance T&L processes.

The study

This paper draws on the empirical qualitative data collected using an anonymous online survey at the English university and focus group interviews at the French university. Of the 34 participants (in various roles, positions of authority and experience) involved in the study, 19 participants were from the English university and 15 were from the French university who had participated in a co-design event in their respective institution.

Key findings and preliminary analysis

An exploratory inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013) of the interview and the survey data was undertaken. The data from the survey and the interviews was examined systematically to identify meaning and patterns, which highlighted the value and limitations of the co-design approach.

Value of the co-design approach

Participants viewed the approach as a way of engaging multi-stakeholders' perspectives, that of the academics, students, external subject specialists, and employers in the study context. In participants' view, the co-design events aim to draw in non-academic insights, and to find a way to encourage innovation and 'thinking outside the box'. The participants acknowledged that co-design approach encourages open-mindedness and respect for different voices in a secure environment.

More specifically in the English context, the approach was seen as an attempt to create a degree programme with external stakeholders input to ensure it is fit for purpose and produces employable graduates. The co-design activities adopted a collegial approach by promoting an open discussion of areas of interest that could then inform the creation of a rigorous curriculum. The approach was regarded as highly valuable and relevant for developing and promoting the institutional agenda for achieving teaching excellence.

I think teaching excellence comes from adaptive, reflective and flexible practice, which this kind of event helps to promote. Being alive to changing external contexts is also important and this can be best grasped with the multi-stakeholder approach. (Participant E-36535297)

The participants also acknowledged the benefit of the approach in relation to students' learning experience.

This means the students get a better deal, too, as they get a curriculum that results from open-minded reflection on what a good curriculum looks like, rather than simply my own view which, while would deliver a good curriculum that students would learn from, is constrained by my own training and related blind-spots. (Participant E-36497801)

Limitations of the co-design approach

Although majority of the participants were in favour of the approach, they had concerns particularly

around the time and resource intensiveness that the approach demands. Some indicated collaboration as not being fit for everyone, and that there was a perceived lack of structure and preparedness for the co-design events.

I also thought that coming into the room with a blank slate was particularly unhelpful. The external stakeholders needed more explanation of what we wanted to do and how the curriculum works at … (no minors, no modules, no choice, compulsory dissertations, etc.) (Participant E-36496675)

Some participants indicated the challenges in translating the creative 'blue-sky' thinking into actual practice.

The worst part of the event was the encouragement towards blue-sky thinking without considering resourcing issues. This meant we planned a curriculum that we knew we couldn't staff and then had to produce something more realistic afterwards… (Participant E-3649667)

While many participants valued the multi-stakeholders' perspective in the curriculum development, they also questioned their ability as students and non-specialist advisors in making meaningful contributions to the process. There were concerns raised as to how the co-design approach might de-professionalise academia or remove the 'ownership' of the curriculum design from academics.

In relation to the impact of co-design event on the final degree programme design, some participants expressed uncertainty on how far the co-design approach contributed to the final design the course.

After the event you never get to see how the new programme has been shaped or to see if the input from participants has been reflected or impacted at all. It is not that I am not sure about this but it would be useful to see or hear about. (Participant E-36497096)

Concluding thoughts

The use of co-design approach democratises T&L processes in higher education as it aims to genuinely engage a multi-stakeholder's perspective by creating a social environment that is conducive to participatory approach. However, for effective and meaningful outcomes, the approach needs to be contextualised and scaffolded. The study highlights the importance of the facilitators as 'directors of this creative approach' who need to pragmatically orchestrate the process by providing a clear brief, structure yet flexibility for optimal outcomes from the process.

References

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