

Students as co-creators of curricula: changing the relationship between tutor and student in higher education.

Dr Catherine Bovill,
Lecturer, Academic Development Unit, University of Glasgow



- ◆ Background to research
- ◆ Relevant literature
- ◆ The research process, the cases studied and the research methods
- ◆ Findings
- ◆ Focus on the tutor-student relationship
- ◆ Some questions to consider

- ◆ Students as co-creators/co-producers of their learning (ESU, 2008; McCulloch, 2009; SFC, 2008)
- ◆ Silence about curriculum within HE (Barnett & Coate, 2005)
- ◆ Students passive in the curriculum (Mann, 2008)
- ◆ Most refs to ASP - student feedback informing curricula (e.g. Rumpus, 2009; University of Warwick, 2006)
- ◆ Literature calling for ASP in curriculum design from critical pedagogy and popular education (Darder et al, 2003; Dewey, 1916; Fischer, 2005; Freire, 1993; Giroux, 1983; Rogers and Freiberg, 1969)

- ◆ HE Literature calling for ASP in curriculum design limited
- ◆ Active participation in university, representation & learning
- ◆ Implied in Fraser & Bosanquet's (2006) curriculum definitions
 - a) Structure and content of a unit
 - b) Structure and content of a programme of study
 - c) The students' experience of learning
 - d) A dynamic and interactive process of teaching and learning (p272)
- ◆ Specific ASP in curriculum design
 - Breen & Littlejohn (2000) Language teaching
 - Samson & Scandrett (1999) Environmental justice
 - Fischer (2005) Education

Research process

- ◆ Carnegie Research Grant – Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland
- ◆ 3 examples purposively sampled from an earlier study on first year curriculum design (Bovill et al., 2008)
 - Geographical spread – Scotland, Ireland, USA
 - Subject spread – environmental justice, geography, education,
 - First year focus
- ◆ Case study methodology suggested by:
 - 3 cases provided obvious ‘bounded’ sample (Jones et al., 2006)
 - lack of previous in depth information about ASP in curriculum design
 - need to gather contextual info to explain methods and experiences

The cases: interview 1

University College Dublin, Ireland (February 2009)

Geography, 400 students

Retrospective and current design



The cases: interview 2

Elon University, North Carolina, USA (March 2009)

Education, 50 students

Retrospective and future design



The cases: interview 3

Queen Margaret University Edinburgh, Scotland (March 09)

Environmental Justice, 16 students

Current and future design

(Thanks to wikimedia commons for image of QMU)



- ◆ Semi structured interviews with tutors
- ◆ Document analysis
- ◆ Researcher journal

- ◆ Informal meetings with students
- ◆ Observed classes



- ◆ Focused on the factors influencing the nature of active student participation in curriculum design

- ◆ Key themes
 - Risk
 - Tutor – student relationship
 - Individuals
 - Institutional context
 - Familiarity/unfamiliarity
 - Expectations



The tutor-student relationship

- ◆ Tutors as gatekeepers to curricula design
- ◆ Relationship as litmus test to motivations of tutor & students
- ◆ Students as experts in student experience
- ◆ Tutors have expert knowledge & control over assessment
- ◆ Tutor and students as learners in joint inquiry (Freire, 1993)
- ◆ The importance of the nature of dialogue (Fischer, 2005; Haggis, 2006)
- ◆ Exposure to rich pedagogical variety - experimentation
- ◆ Liminal moments – key to convincing students of sincerity
- ◆ Is there a curriculum without students? (Barnett & Coate, 2005)
- ◆ Tutors operate within the constraints of a market-driven university system (McLean, 2006; Parker, 2003)
- ◆ Legitimate concerns about handing over control and loss of expertise

- ◆ Increase in collective and individual responsibility
- ◆ Enhanced collaborative learning
- ◆ Enhanced group cohesion
- ◆ Increased autonomy and self-directed learning
- ◆ Improved confidence and motivation
- ◆ Enhanced student performance in assessments
- ◆ Changed views of curriculum design as a complex process
- ◆ Enhanced understanding of role of tutor
- ◆ Enhanced understanding of place of theory within curriculum content

students "...wanted freedom to participate as much as they possibly could". (UCD)

Staff outcomes

- ◆ Nerve-wracking
- ◆ Intense / demanded a lot
- ◆ Rich experience from genuine dialogue with students
- ◆ Transformatory

“So actually it’s really transformed how I think about teaching and how I teach. And the buzz I get from teaching in a way that’s interactive like this that gets people involved is so much more...I’m thrilled I’ve been involved in it and it’s really changed how I work.” (UCD)

Opening up boundaries between tutors and students

“You work in a university and you get surrounded by people who should like teaching but who really don’t like teaching and don’t like students...’they’re so stupid’, ‘they don’t do any work’, ‘they’re so lazy’...and I think actually, it’s our problem, because they’re not, they’re smart, they’re engaged, they’re interested.” (UCD)



Genuine participation or tokenism?

- ◆ Danger of participative methodologies being adopted in instrumental ways - tends to result in alienation (Cleaver, 2001; Mosse, 2005)

- ◆ Participation has become a 'grand narrative'
 - Lyotard (1984) warns that we should demonstrate *'incredulity towards metanarratives'*.

- ◆ Possible to be methodologically radical but politically conservative (Kane, 2005)

Future directions

- ◆ PRIME paper (Bovill et al., 2009)
- ◆ Further research needed
 - more examples from practice
 - research asking about students' experience
 - evaluation studies

Some questions...

- ◆ What kind of dialogue do you have with your students?
- ◆ What level of active student participation would you be comfortable with?
- ◆ Would student participation in curriculum design work in some of your courses or programmes and not others?
Why?