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Students as co-constructors of the curriculum (0261)

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As a CILASS-funded project, part-time mature undergraduate students were involved in collaborative curriculum design to help reshape their learning and teaching experiences. Instead of being positioned as consumers of their learning, they were the active producers, taking a role in determining how they would learn, interact, and be assessed. This work allowed the students to bring their experiences from adult life into an academic context, thus changing their experience of higher education, and taking their investment in learning far beyond the classroom.

CILASS is an inspiration for this collaborative, participative work; a support network, in terms of people and resources; and a facilitator for helping it go further, connecting it with published research and with colleagues' interests and activities. The vision of collaborative knowledge construction it promotes was crucial for recognising the potential of the project, and in providing a meaningful context for the students to develop their autonomous learning.

TH SRHE symposium outline - "Students as co-constructors of the curriculum"

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CILASS has been an *inspiration* for this collaborative, participative work; a *support network*, in terms of people and resources; and a *facilitator* for helping it go further, connecting it with published research and with colleagues' interests and activities. The vision of collaborative knowledge construction that it promotes was crucial for recognising the potential of the project, and in providing a meaningful context for the students to develop their autonomous learning.

The work I'll be discussing mainly took place in 2008-9, in a university department working with mature part-time students in a range of disciplines. Twelve of these students, along with six hourly-paid tutors and ten full-time staff, took part in a collaborative module development panel, where the content and structure of new modules was discussed, and revisions to existing modules suggested. The overall frame for this work was a project with CILASS, the Centre for Inquiry-based Learning in the Arts and Social Sciences, and the aim of the collaboration was to produce a version of inquiry-based learning (IBL) in these modules that matched the needs and skills of our students and tutors. The project was

also successful in challenging conventional educational orthodoxies about what contributions students and marginalised staff should make to processes of curriculum development.

What happened was that, following an away day exploring IBL with staff and students, all departmental students (some 350) and tutors (c. 70) were invited to take part in the panel, with a particular invitation extended to those who would be interested in being involved with the new modules. Everyone would be paid for their participation, and meetings would be arranged at their convenience, and supported by a Virtual Learning Environment to post resources and continue discussions. The panel met in July and August 2008 to discuss the new modules beginning in September; and then in February 09, to reflect on those modules where they had finished; then in July 2009, evaluating the first year of the project, and looking ahead to the next academic year and longer-term lessons for the department.

Evaluation of the work gathered by questionnaire suggested significant impact on the student experience, and tutor and student senses of identity. One student participant said:

The tutors were incredibly honest in their discussions, and speaking about their doubts and seeing how they struggle (sometimes) in putting together the courses was enlightening and made me realise that we are all in this learning journey together.

This was matched by a tutor reporting that:

I got a lot of help in understanding the student viewpoint on IBL and assessment.

The experience for students helped shift the grounds for their learning directly within their studies, and more broadly in their university practices:

On a personal level, I think it actually said to me "you're doing okay, you're doing the right things" in relation to my studies.

The experience has given me more confidence and helped me feel more at ease in the Uni setting and communicating with tutors, but in particular with other students.

Staff and students took part equally as experts in their separate fields of teaching and learning, and contributed to the overall dynamics of the new and revised modules. A greater sense of collegial identity emerged, which is significant in a department with sizeable numbers of part-time tutors and students. A concomitant understanding of different disciplinary practices and habits was also noted, and a movement towards understanding academic practices within wider intellectual and social contexts.

The project drew inspiration from recent literature on staff-student collaboration and the potential this opens for changes in the student experience. Lizzio and Wilson explore staff-student collaboration through formal structures of representation and governance, and note the identity-work that goes on throughout the collaborative process (Lizzio and Wilson, 2009). Fielding's work analyses some of the theoretical complexities of staff-student collaboration, and indicates difficulties in embedding collaboration that were extremely prescient for this project (Fielding, 2004, Fielding, 2001). And closer to Sheffield, Sabine Little, one of the CILASS Learning Development and Research Associates, offers an overview of the theory and practice of staff-student collaboration (Little and Fiennes, unpublished, Little, forthcoming). Little's work underscores the connection to inquiry-based learning, where students are encouraged to take greater autonomy in the learning process, and to act as co-producers rather than consumers of knowledge. This project moved the departmental application of IBL to a higher level, and created a space in which the different forms of knowledge brought by mature students and tutors could be set in dialogue.

Alongside Sabine's work, CILASS offered many other supports for the project. The basic model of staff-student collaboration was based on the university-wide Student Ambassador Network organised by CILASS, which carries out evaluation, dissemination, new media, and academic publication activities (CILASS, 2009). Funding for the panel's activities – in other words, recognition of the importance of the participants' time – came from CILASS, as did administrative support for the practical workings of the panel. Encompassing all of this was CILASS as a community who understood, cared about, and supported the work on which the panel was engaged. This gave their efforts relevance and context, and offered a safe space in which staff and students alike could go beyond their traditional identities.

The staff-student module development panel significantly enhanced the student experience for those who took part, and arguably for all those who have taken and will take the modules that were discussed. By providing traditionally marginalised partners in the learning process with a platform to share their experiences, discuss their ideas, and realise them in practice, the project questioned traditional academic preconceptions and roles. To achieve this, it relied on CILASS as a resource and a community, and furthered their local and national impact through successful collaboration.

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