

Students as Co-Creators Curriculum Review, final report

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Our project was a curriculum review designed to reflect on the level four and five core modules which form the spine of the BA English Literature programme. At level four, the core modules are Keywords and What is Lit? and, at level five, The Nineteenth Century and The Novel. These modules are also core for students taking English Literature in combination with another subject (Creative Writing, English Language or another language). The aim was to conduct a review that included both staff and students, using focus groups so as to gather data of a subtler nature than that provided by SMEs.

- **Where did the inspiration to do the project come from?**

This project grew from two consecutive realisations. The first of these was that there was a growing sense of dissatisfaction (amongst staff and students) with some new modules designed during the Learning Futures curriculum overhaul and this dissatisfaction was not being adequately explained by the data gleaned from the SMEs and Student Rep forums, which tended to be quite vague. Rather, this dissatisfaction was being more usefully articulated in smaller conversations between students and individual staff members, dissertation supervisors or seminar leaders. Secondly, and in response to the above, conversations amongst staff revealed that there was more work to do in thinking through the pedagogical links between and across the new core modules.

The growing sense of dissatisfaction we identified was, in part, connected with the level six core module, Modernism. This was a 40 credit, year-long module, about which students had been demonstrating a palpable sense of anxiety since it had been rolled out as part of the Learning Futures curriculum. The feedback from students had been three-fold, firstly, they were concerned that a module on a theoretically complex and aesthetically stylised literary period, which many of them didn't connect with, counted for such a large portion of their final degree classification. Secondly, students felt concerned that the structure of the module meant that they were expected to read a number of long and difficult texts in semester two of their third year. Then thirdly, there was a concern that the module was not as diverse as it

could be. Thus, our Students as Co-Creators project was initially conceived in response both to the specific problems associated with the Modernism module but also to investigate if these problems – with weighting, with structure and with diversity – were an issue on other core modules.

Once we had put in our Students as Co-Creators application, and informed our Head of School about the project, it was felt that the issues identified with the Modernism – which we had been able to articulate clearly thanks to writing the SCC application! – needed to be acted on immediately and so the module was redesigned. But this project offered an opportunity to reflect more broadly on Learning Futures, giving us a platform from which to consider what we'd achieved with the new curriculum, to interrogate that possible sense of fragmentation across the new modules, as well as creating a space in which we could come to understand and give space to student complaints/anxieties about some of the new core modules.

- **What were the aims of the project and how did you set out to achieve them?**

Broadly speaking, the aims of the project were to review the core modules both with staff and students. We set out to achieve this by running focus groups, a practice we felt would garner more detailed and nuanced data than the review/feedback processes currently in place. The hope was, and still is, that the very productive details we gathered can be used to strengthen individual modules, to work on communication between modules and to reflect on how staff speak to students about modules and curriculum design.

The focus groups were designed to help understand what was going on with the modules – to understand student and staff anxieties about them, but also to identify both positive practices and to understand practices that could be developed. All team members felt that it was important that this was a conversational space and so both staff and students worked on developing focus group questions and practices to facilitate that. The structured questions we devised started by asking for broad reflections on a given module, before going on to ask about timetabling, workload, the expectations students have for staff and vice versa, as well as the module's relationship with other modules, and whether staff/students felt that the module reflected the department/school. These questions were not placed in linear sequence, rather they were designed as prompts to steer the conversation, as necessary.

- **How did students and staff work together? What roles did people take?**

Overall staff and students worked well together, developing the ideas behind the project, setting up and structuring the focus groups, and then running them.

At the beginning of the project we spent several meetings thinking about equal communication between staff/students and ways in which we could overcome the particular hierarchical relationships between us. (These conversations were based on the work done in the early SCC workshop which only one group member was able to attend.) These conversations were particularly important because students and staff knew each other fairly well and so needed to reframe or rethink existing relationships. But this was also fairly challenging as it is difficult to break down well entrenched, formal relationships and unfortunately not all members of the team were able to attend all meetings, which perhaps produced a rather uneven outcome.

When it came to the focus groups, we drafted questions and structures as a group but decided that it would be better for students to run groups with other students and staff to run the staff groups. This decision was taken for two reasons, firstly the students felt that their colleagues would be more comfortable explaining how they felt about the modules to their peers and, secondly, the same was felt about staff, especially those whose modules have been rather bluntly criticised.

One interesting difficulty for our student team members related to our struggle to get participants for the student focus groups. The lack of student focus group participants meant that the team members running those groups reported being less able to maintain a distinction between them as group coordinators and them as students. Thus, they then tended to join in with the criticism without pushing the student participants in their reflections on the modules under discussion.

Finally, despite the work we did to reflect on how we communicated with each other, and to break down hierarchies connected with that communication, overall the project still felt like a staff driven one. There are several reasons for this worth reflecting on, the first is that the

project grew out a set of concerns that the staff involved have been discussing for some time. There thus already existed a clear sense of what needed to happen, and, in turn, that perhaps meant that the students in our group didn't necessarily get an equal input into the creation and structuring of the project. Secondly, the students involved were not really aware of the broader Students as Co-Creators project until they were recruited by staff and weren't able to attend to the opening workshop, which meant that they didn't have as much agency within the project as they might have. Thirdly, the project was conceived as a reaction to, and reflect on, Learning Futures, a project that was difficult for staff. Students had no context for this, and very little context for some of the other (difficult) structures staff operate in, and at times this made conversation around curriculum design quite difficult. That said, for staff these were hugely important moments in terms of how they asked us to think about communicating the curriculum (at both the course and the module level) to future students.

- **What kind of impact your work may have on learning and teaching going forward?**

As well as the issues around communicating the curriculum mentioned above, in terms of the conversation between teaching staff there's excellent range of things to develop moving forward. In particular, there was an important realisation that modules have been working in isolation and that developing a clearer sense of what each module does both individually and as part of the spine of the degree programme is vital. Staff who took part in the focus groups reported feeling energised by the conversation and hopeful that we would be able to make some productive and impactful changes. Across the next two academic years, the staff involved in the project would like conduct similar focus groups for the option modules.

The focus groups also raised some interesting questions about how we run the Student Reps system, specifically questions around how we speak to students who take up those roles and how we offer challenges to the hierarchies implicit between staff and students. (Also of importance, is to consider how much we are asking of students in these roles.) If those hierarchies were important for us to interrogate as part of this project then they must also be important to challenge in the context of the student rep system.

- **What lessons were learnt from working in partnership?**

One difficulty we faced with the project was that the students we worked with were also the Course Reps for the BA English Literature. During the 2018-2019 academic year the Student Rep system changed multiple times and there was an increasing pressure on Student Reps to attend multiple meetings at various levels (degree programme, School, College, University, etc.). This led to a fairly intense sense of ‘feedback exhaustion’, with students attending meetings almost weekly. Given this, we perhaps could have done more to distinguish the Students as Co-Creators project from the Student Rep system, given that both staff and student participants were the same.

Two of the students working on the project were final year students which meant that as we were running the focus groups, and pulling final information together, they were under a huge amount of pressure and so found it difficult, at times, to be available.

Finally, one of the major things learnt from working in partnership, and from the results of the project, has been the need for us all to have a clearer sense of each other’s experiences. So, for staff to work more to understand the circumstances, expectations and position of the students and vice versa. In some ways, this seemed easier for staff because there are structures in place to let us access this information about students. It was much harder (as mentioned above) to get students to understand the position staff are in – partly, this has to do with how we communicate the structures of the University to the students, but also at play are issues around the positioning of the student as a consumer and the consequent (implicit) positioning of the lecturer as the service provider. Moving forward this something for us all – staff and students – to reflect on and to address.