

Partnership in learning: how staff-student collaboration can innovate teaching

Corresponding author:

Nicole Brown

Department of Culture, Communication and Media,

UCL Institute of Education,

20 Bedford Way,

London WC1H 0AL, UK

Email: nicole.brown@ucl.ac.uk

Twitter: ncjbrown

Website: www.nicole-brown.co.uk

Orcid: [Orcid.org/0000-0002-3307-452X](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3307-452X)

Abstract

Within the UK Higher Education setting there is an emphasis on student satisfaction and experience surveys in combination with an increased interest in connecting teaching with research. As a result there is an unprecedented focus on engaging students on all levels within their university experience, from concerns related to governance, policy and administration to considerations of teaching and learning activities. In this paper I explain and analyse two distinct staff-student collaborations. Case study 1 demonstrates how students' personal interest led to the development of innovative, creative methods for reflections. Case study 2 describes how students took on the role of co-researchers in order to investigate and explore student experiences. In the discussion I explore some factors influencing staff-student collaborations: the relevance of purposefulness, the importance of time, the necessity of developing a trusting relationship and finally, the differences in knowledge and outlooks amongst staff and students.

Keywords

staff-student collaboration, creative reflections, research-based teaching, innovative teaching, partnership in learning

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Biographical note

Nicole Brown is a Lecturer in Education and Programme Leader for the Secondary Teacher Education Programme at University College London's Institute of Education. Her research interests relate to advancing learning and teaching within higher education and to improving the generation of knowledge. Contact details: nicole.brown@ucl.ac.uk Web site: www.nicole-brown.co.uk Twitter: @ncjbrown

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Introduction

Policy changes and government initiatives since the 2000s have resulted in many developments within the Higher Education sector. On the one hand, changes to funding structures, increased marketisation and competition resulted in students being seen as consumers of Higher Education and degrees, training and education becoming commodities (Tilak 2008; Gewirtz and Cribb 2013). On the other hand, the incoming Teaching Excellence Framework in addition to the existing Research Excellence Framework has led to renewed debates about the teaching-research nexus (Hattie and Marsh 2004). Whilst teaching and research are still experienced as a dichotomy within Higher Education, calls increase for closer integration of teaching and research and more recognition for teaching staff (Timothy 2015; Robinson and Hilli 2016). It is against this backdrop that student engagement and involvement are becoming more prominent. Student engagement and involvement take many forms, such as student voice, surveys, collaborative learning situations and staff-student collaborations. The common feature in all of these forms is the role students play in taking responsibility for their learning and for shaping their learning experiences. In this paper, I report on two collaborative projects between teacher educator and trainee teachers, which are primarily aimed at developing students' skills, learning and experiences, but also provide the basis for improving academics' practice and the introduction of innovative teaching approaches within the Higher Education classroom. For this particular paper, the staff-student collaboration describes the collaborative work that took place between myself as teacher educator and my students who were trainee teachers. By providing a brief overview of student voice and collaborative learning, I situate collaborations between academic staff and students within the wider debate of student engagement. Next, I describe the context of and describe two different approaches to collaborative work. Case study 1 explores the development of creative methods for reflections and Case study 2 outlines a research project about students' perceptions and experiences. This project is particularly noteworthy for the students' role throughout the entire research process. These two case studies have been selected, as they provide insight into the organic development of collaboration between teacher educator and trainee teachers. In the subsequent discussion section, I share insights into the benefits and

drawbacks of staff-student collaborations and in the conclusion, I provide recommendations for future developments in this area.

Student voice

In the changing Higher Education context student voice in the form of national student and experience surveys has become more important to universities. These surveys are used for public accountability purposes but the outcomes of these surveys also guide the choices of prospective students and inform about teaching and learning in institutions and can therefore be used to enhance the students' experience. In Sabri's (2011) view student experience in the way it is executed in surveys does not reflect or relate to educational underpinnings, but is connected with governance, policy and administration. Similarly, Currens (2011) highlights how the inclusion of student voice within Higher Education "lacks conviction" (p. 186), especially if compared to secondary education. Teachers view student voice as particularly useful, as it improves their understanding of students' learning (Boston Advisory Council 2012). Within literature student voice is considered within the context of student retention and achievements (DeAngelo 2014; Murray and Lang 1997), student engagement (Kahu 2013) and student participation (Mariskind 2013). These issues are often considered within broader concepts such as motivation (Warren, 2003), the development of transferrable skills (De Vita 2000; Murray and Lang 1997; Roehling et al. 2011) and enhancing students' experiences within the higher education setting (Grebennikov and Shah 2013). Most importantly, however, embedding student voice into programme structures means that students can begin to take responsibility for their own learning (Campbell et al. 2009; Boston Advisory Council 2012; Toshalis and Nakkula 2012). As such the students' feedback needs to be seen as a positive development. However, student voice and feedback are not only connected with engagement and learning, but are closely linked to the students' ability to develop a sense of belonging. Masika and Jones (2016) for example discuss how students' sense of belonging and levels of engagement can be fostered through the development of a community of practice and collaborative work.

Collaborative learning

Collaboration is understood as group work, active learning, getting students involved and making students take responsibility for their learning. This is largely due to publications such

as that by Bruffee (1984) and Wiener (1986). Bruffee (1984) argues that collaboration is necessary within education as certain knowledge and skills can only be acquired through conversations and the work with others. Whilst the theory appears rational, the teaching practice and the practical context of a classroom do not necessarily follow rational and organised rules. So, Wiener (1986) suggests that many factors need to be considered carefully when learning activities are structured with a collaborative approach in mind. The instructor's role and position, the levels of difficulty and designs of tasks and the outcomes expected for example all influence collaborative work and its effectiveness. Although collaboration is a social form of learning it should not be confounded or synonymised with cooperative or interactive learning, the principles of which are related to one another but still different. Collaborative learning according to Panitz (1999) is based upon the following assumptions and principles:

- "1. Working together results in a greater understanding than would likely have occurred if one had worked independently.
2. Spoken and written interactions contribute to this increased understanding.
3. Opportunity exists to become aware, through classroom experiences, of relationships between social interactions and increased understanding.
4. Some elements of this increased understanding are idiosyncratic and unpredictable.
5. Participation is voluntary and must be freely entered into." (Panitz 1999, 12)

With this definition in mind it becomes obvious that many interactions within education may not truly represent collaborative environments after all. In any case, the exchange of ideas and sharing of thoughts that constitutes collaboration is quite a public event of constructing and co-constructing knowledge (Prince 2004). More recently the acknowledgement of this public element of collaboration has led to an increased interest in those students who may not necessarily be used, willing or able to participate in collaborative environments (Remedios et al. 2008). For example, students may be introverted or shy, or their cultural backgrounds and upbringing may not allow for them to participate readily and openly in collaborative environments or learning communities.

Staff-student collaborations

Due to the increased interest in developing students' research skills and employability staff-student collaborations are fostered and enquiry-based learning, problem-based learning and research-based learning (Brew 2003; Healey 2005) initiated. Students increasingly become partners in the learning and teaching process (Cook-Sather et al. 2014; Dickerson et al. 2015). However, collaboration is a complex process and must be considered as heavily contextualised and context-dependent and collaborations require a common knowledge base and common language among those working together (Harju and Åkerblom 2015). As the work by Harju and Åkerblom (2015) demonstrates supervisors and students may base their insights on different frameworks, so that collaboration becomes problematic and requires negotiation. Dickerson et al. (2015) report concerns about the time required to ensure that collaboration is fruitful, an aspect that Henneman et al. (1995) also referred to. Henneman et al. (1995) and Shuman (2006) highlight that in order for collaborative practice to be successful a clear structure and high levels of competence, confidence, commitment, respect, trust, patience, nurturance and time are required.

Research context and approach

The work reported here is in the teaching context of a master's level teacher education course delivered at UCL Institute of Education. Students enrolled in the course modules and elements are all international students, whose previous degrees may or may not be within education. After completion of the course the students return to their home countries to teach in voluntary, faith-based education centres. The case studies describe how teaching practices were changed in collaboration with students and refer to two cohorts of students. Case study 1 shows how students' engagement led to the development of creative methods for reflections, while case study 2 describes how students became so involved in the course they took on the roles of co-researchers. Brought together, the case studies demonstrate how students gradually become more involved in the development of teaching practices and increasingly take responsibility for their learning.

The research approach aligns with the philosophical underpinning of communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and modelling best practice. As part of their master's level education course the student teachers are required to carry out a practice-based enquiry in their classrooms to explore how changes to their practices impact their pupils' learning. This

approach to learning from and within practice is commonly applied in initial teacher education programmes, but seems to be particularly effective where this "research-informed clinical practice" is supported by effective collaboration in productive partnerships (Burn and Mutton, 2015). As for many students, this is the first time where they encounter and carry out practice-based enquiries lecturers on the course attempt to model best practice and also engage in action research processes to lead by example. Consequently, the conceptual environment within the teacher-education classroom is one of openness to new ideas and experimenting with different practices in a teaching community (Pareja Robin et al. 2014). Collaborative work is therefore often not formally agreed upon or entered into, but develops gradually from students' engagement with the curricula they learn and they train to teach. The organic evolution instead of an intentional approach to collaboration means that new ideas emerge and are tried out in practice rather than formally studied or investigated. The process is very much one of trial and error, where new practices are evaluated in informal conversations and feedback discussions. This conceptualisation of the teaching environment is the practical response to calls for connecting theory, practice and research within teacher education in order to improve initial teacher education practices (Marcondes et al. 2017).

In practice, students are provided with information around the practice-based enquiries and are asked to opt in to the research process. Irrespective of their choice regarding participation in the research, all students experience the activities and practices in the classroom and take part in the evaluative reflective processes. However, only data from students who provide consent is recorded and then used for analytical purposes. Case study 1 exemplifies the practice-based approach to research, in that data was constituted of written reflections and the responses to questions in the classroom. For case study 2, formal interview settings were combined with the written reflections and responses to questions in the classroom. Data was formally collected through the written reflections (case studies 1 and 2) and the interviews (case study 2), and informally via field notes of the classroom responses and observations (case studies 1 and 2). Triangulation in Case study 1 was methodological in nature (Denzin 2006), whereas in Case study 2 triangulation followed the principles of methodological and investigator triangulation (Denzin 2006). In both case

studies data was analysed thematically, whereby the specific focus lay on concepts of reflective practices and collaborative work.

Case study 1: developing creative methods for reflection

The student teachers on this programme are required to keep learning journals and reflective diaries as part of their development to become effective teachers. The curriculum the students are trained to teach requires engagement with reflective practice, as some tasks for secondary pupils are reflective in nature. In the first stages of the course, students use specific models of reflection and follow the structures provided closely. Initially, students are asked to apply the models by Rolfe et al. (2001) and Brookfield (1995), which both start out from simple descriptions and narratives to considerations of deeper meanings of these narratives. Later, students are introduced to the models by Gibbs (1988) and Kolb (1984), which they often find less accessible, as they require a deeper engagement with theoretical frameworks. Over time students experiment with all of these models and learn to apply them more naturally, so that ultimately, they would become reflective practitioners, rather than merely mirroring the slogan (McLaughlin, 2015). In one reflection session Farah (pseudonym) asked, "*Is there a way to make reflections more exciting?*". She felt that the repetition of the same models became less interesting for her and at the same time these models were too advanced for her teenage pupils. She was trying to find a more appealing way to reflect in order to foster engagement amongst her peers and the pupils in her care. This resulted in a lengthy discussion within the session about the benefits, challenges and practicalities of reflections, and how reflections could potentially become more attractive, particularly, as many teenagers do not enjoy writing activities. The students were trying to find ways of including artistic expressions and creative methods but struggled to systemise the reflective process. This led to the idea of a river reflection, which was strategically implemented at the crossover from one module to the next. Students were asked to see their programme as a river with a range of features, such as the source, stepping stones, rapids and meanders, dams, estuaries, and anything else they would be able to think of. Students drew that landscape scenery based around a river from source to sea, and inserted any features they felt relevant to reflect their learning journey, such as achievements, failures, obstacles or challenges. This activity was carried out as a group reflection task where four students worked together to make the connections between and

across modules, but also connected the physical features of the river to their metaphorical learning journeys and experiences.

The students on this course live in the same student accommodation and belong to the same cultural community, and so the river reflection activity soon became disseminated amongst all cohorts. The novelty of the river of learning wore off quickly, which led me to rethink the task and try to find another approach. A chance conversation with students revealed the joy some experienced with model-making, such as the LEGO architecture series. Together, the students and I contemplated the possibility of creating a journey, similar to the river reflections, but in a less structured way. So, some students built a model of their learning experiences.

The role of reflection in the first year of the course is pivotal. Due to the specific context of the course, the students are international students and many lack experience within educational settings, reflective processes are a priority. Reflective practice is not common to all cultures (Davis 2003), is notoriously difficult to teach (Korthagen 1999; Çimer 2011; Mena-Marcos et al. 2013; Toom et al. 2015) and requires regular engagement (Cowan and Westwood 2006; Kuit et al. 2001; Toom et al. 2015; Zeichner and Liston 1987, 1996). Within teacher education, reflections and reflective logs are commonly used to encourage teachers improve on their practice within the classroom (Cochran-Smith and Zeichner 2005; Loughran 2002) despite criticism around its relevance and impact (Beauchamp, 2015). Whilst student teachers are capable of deep reflections going beyond simple narratives (Toom et al. 2015), for some students reflecting and critical exploring of one's own or others' practices are not a simple task (Körkkö et al., 2016). When the river reflections and LEGO reflections were developed students were very focussed on their tasks and engaged in their reflections on their learning. Some students experienced a Eureka moment where their personal learning journey suddenly seemed to make sense.

Reflections may not necessarily lead to changes in practitioners' work and approaches (Mälkki and Lindblom-Ylänne 2012). For reflections to be useful, worthwhile and effective as a tool for professional development, certain circumstances need to be met: reflective practice needs to be systematic and embedded in the programme structure (Toom et al.

2015); learners should be able to consider their successes and failures in equal measure (Ellis et al. 2014); and learners need to be able to see relevant purpose in the actual reflective tasks set (Herrington et al. 2014). In module evaluations students mentioned that the "River of Learning" was a lasting experience, as they had a clear purpose for their reflection and were able to make sense of the individual modules and their entire programme. For example, Farah was very quick to apply the river reflection in her own teaching with similar success, and other students followed her example. Students identified the LEGO reflections as particularly enjoyable and worthwhile. *"I liked building with LEGO. And what I found interesting was that I had to really think what I am building because you only have these bricks and a few people. The limited resources made me more creative and resourceful"* (Alykhan). In both activities, students were required to work in a group and to reflect on their experiences jointly, which some students raised as an issue *"I enjoyed the task, but I would have liked it more if I'd done it by myself. When you work in a group you have to compromise all the time"* (Aliyah).

It is evident that students were keen to innovate reflective processes. They recognised the value of reflective practices and their benefits in relation to personal and professional development. The students' interest in this aspect of their course ignited my own commitment to creating new, meaningful and enjoyable learning experiences. Due to my responsiveness to their particular needs, students realised that they were able to influence learning activities and methods, which in turn increased their enthusiasm for and willingness to take responsibility for their learning.

Case Study 2: researching students' perceptions and experiences

As part of their programme, students also attend teaching placements in mainstream secondary schools. Due to the students' diverse cultural and educational backgrounds and the variability of school organisations, the experiences in school placements are equally mixed. In order to unify and improve the experiences students of one specific cohort felt they needed to investigate the reasons and causes for the reported variability. A group of students was keen to explore the issues, but it was felt that the full stories would perhaps not be told to a member staff, as the answers would not be anonymous. The subsequent collaborative project was therefore more formally designed. As a result, six student

volunteers took on the role as co-researchers and with my guidance investigated the teaching experience, once ethical clearance had been granted. As a first stage, students were provided with guidance on how to collect data using physical representations and interviews. The co-researchers asked their peers to find one item to represent their personal experiences in the placement schools. The idea behind this was to find out whether the placements were overridingly positive, neutral or negative. In informal interviews with their peers the co-researchers asked about the items and their significance. To limit the power differential between the co-researchers who acted as interviewers and the students who were interviewees, the interview questions were not formalised but only discussed briefly so that interview outcomes would emerge as conversations. The co-researchers were required to record their peers' initial answers although no formal instruction was provided on how this recording should be done. During the data collection stage, the co-researchers and I met in order to discuss the progress and identify potential issues in relation to and the subsequent way forward for the research. Once the data had been collected and after another guidance meeting, the co-researchers engaged in a guided data analysis process, during which they identified common themes and arrived at relevant interpretations.

While the students exhibited enthusiasm and willingness to investigate the issues with placements, their lack of knowledge of research processes and key concepts pertaining to research was problematic. Therefore, this project turned into a true collaboration according to Panitz's (1999) definition. The students and I entered this work voluntarily and together, as individually we would not have been able to arrive at the relevant understandings. We communicated regularly with one another in face-to-face meetings, but also in writing, especially during the coding and analysis phase. The learning from this experience was "idiosyncratic and unpredictable" and demonstrated the relationships between social interactions and increased understanding" (Panitz 1999, 12). The outcome of the students' research was surprising to those that had initiated it, in that the experiences proved to be multi-dimensional and more complex than the students had anticipated. Even within the same school and the help of the same school-based mentor and university tutor, the experience of the placement could be widely different. "*I thought that we'd find one or two things that could be changed to make it better for everybody*" (Farzana). As the tutor who

guided students through this joint research project I discovered that by providing the right tools students will rise to challenges set for them.

Discussion

In the following, the projects are considered from a more holistic viewpoint in order to describe specific outcomes and understandings as they occurred and relating to the success, benefits and challenges. This will lead into the consideration of implications for future practices within teacher education.

The projects were successful in that they responded to specific needs of the students and were initiated by the students. The fact that the projects were purposeful and close to students' heart meant that students were invested and interested in pursuing the topics and chasing peers for meetings and answers to research questions. Had these collaborations been imposed on the students as a learning experience, they possibly may not have demonstrated the same level of engagement and enthusiasm (Panitz 1999).

The biggest challenges that had to be overcome related to time and differences in knowledge base. Due to the students being enrolled in two full-time master's courses and being obliged to attend two different teaching placements, they struggled to allocate time and space needed for work that is additional, extra-curricular and not immediately related to any elements within their courses. In a way this probably reflects the consumerist attitude amongst students (Tilak 2008; Gewirtz and Cribb 2013), as the achievement of the postgraduate degrees takes priority over learning research literacy-related, transferrable skills. Beyond the immediate issue of attitudes, time was a crucial factor during the reflection processes of the projects in case study 1 and 2. In order to be able to develop potentially new methods for teaching and researching, students needed time to read, reflect, explore, make mistakes, review and recommence this cyclical process.

Also, collaboration between staff and student turned out to rely heavily on the reconsideration and reframing of existing knowledge and the adjustment of the knowledge differentials between academic staff and students. Anyone entering a collaborative project does so with specific skills and a particular knowledge base, values, assumptions and

principles. This aspect of collaborative work is not considered in Panitz's (1999) work, but played an important role within the reality of the research described in case study 2. As is the case with many interdisciplinary research projects those taking part in collaborative work do not necessarily have the same understanding of key concepts and differ in their language describing such key concepts (Leibowitz et al. 2014). Within staff-student collaborations this differential may be even more pronounced, as academics will be more settled in their identity and approaches than students whose previous experience with research will be limited. Academics entering the collaborative relationship therefore need to be very aware of their position within the projects. By taking on the role of a facilitator the academic must be providing some framework and structure to the project. At the same time, academics must step back and let the students get involved and engaged in the processes, which includes letting students make mistakes. The academic must decide clearly on where and when to intervene. Although there cannot be any definitive approach to this, the main concern must lie with the welfare of those involved. And as long as the participants' wellbeing is not compromised students must be allowed to make errors, which may impact data collection or analysis in the short-term. If given the time to see through the reflective cycle, students correct their errors. This enhances students' research literacy skills and insights into research processes, risks and challenges and thus they will have learnt more in the long-term, which reflects Panitz's (1999) fourth principle of "idiosyncratic and unpredictable understandings" (p.12).

One other element that Panitz (1999) does not refer to in enough detail, but which is discussed by Henneman et al. (1995) and Schuman (2006) is the relevance of trust within the collaborative environment. Students and staff need to have developed a productive and constructive relationship that allows for criticism and critical feedback to be exchanged. If the relationship is not trusting enough students will not be forthcoming with requests such as the one described in case study 1; and staff will not be comfortable in taking these requests further. The collaborative relationship changes the dynamics between staff and students, which may lead to improved understandings on everybody's part, and which, in turn, will lead to improved trust amongst the collaborators. Ultimately, it is this trusting relationship that has led to the teaching innovation.

Relevance, implications and limitations

What the two case studies have shown is that students genuinely embrace the opportunities to take charge of and responsibility for their learning. Within the context of teacher education such opportunities must include the collaborations with teacher educator, if trainee teachers are to become risk-takers and to experiment with new approaches to their teaching. The collaborative relationship described in the two case studies here is in itself perhaps not uncommon, however, in literature around staff-student collaborations within higher education the discourse is somehow different. The collaborative work commonly described relates to definitive projects that are purposefully set up and entered into. And yet, here, it is the organic, dynamic development of a trusting relationship and community of practice that enabled the trainee teachers and teacher educator to experiment. This positive aspect may at the same time well be difficult and a limitation, in that the case studies are not a typical research project that would lend itself comfortably to a traditional research report. Instead, there is a certain element of messiness and uncertainty in relation to data collection and analysis, which stems exactly from the practice-based and practice-focused approach to research. To all those who were part of the projects the roles and responsibilities were obvious, the aims were clear, the processes were transparent and methodologically sound and the outcomes were transformative: teaching practices around reflections were developed and improved; and all participants learned from the collaborative process. The implications for teacher education are twofold. On the one hand, the experience described in this article means that teaching educators need to be willing to take more risks in relation to exploring their personal practices in collaboration with their trainee teachers. The risks include handing over the reins of collecting and analysing data, and opening themselves up to criticism. On the other hand, it is equally important to create a community of practice and an environment of coproduction, where collaboration may not fit into neat existing categories, and research may be more developmental and organic than traditionally organised research.

Conclusion

This article described how the collaborative environment between students and staff has led to changes to teaching methods and therefore to more innovative teaching approaches. The question that arises at this stage is: "Would these innovations have occurred anyway?".

Considering the organic development of teaching methods as described in case study 1, and the students' burning desire to make changes to their programmes as outlined in case study 2, it is safe to say that the innovations would not have occurred without these projects and more specifically without the students' involvement. These case studies highlight how student voice considered within the right context, one of educational advancement rather than governance, is valuable not only for the students' experience but also for the academics' professional development. Similarly, staff-student collaborations are a learning process for the academic staff involved. All forms of student involvement and engagement require a clear framework within which all stakeholders operate. Time commitment and the development of a trusting partnership are also of utmost importance. In future projects and papers, the relationship and pre-existing knowledge base amongst staff and students need to be considered in greater detail in order to advance our understanding of staff-student collaborations further.

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