

Setting up a 'special relationship': students as co-creators of a research-based curriculum

Charlotte Tomlinson, Tim Procter, Raphael Hallett
University of Leeds

Introduction: From 'partnership' to 'co-creation'

Alight, as part of your higher education (HE) journey, at any university 'student education' web-platform and you will, more often than not, step off at a destination which boasts some kind of 'student/staff partnership'. The neon signs are now lit up and the station announcements are becoming increasingly shrill: you have "*arrived at your destination!*" and that destination is, you are assured, 'co-built', 'co-created' and 'co-operated' through partnership.

Why such an ubiquitous, booming announcement of 'partnership' at UK universities? It has become commonplace to hear of how universities facilitate an 'authentic' or 'continuous' dialogue with students as they go about their business – an intercourse cultivated as part of the institution's mission statement, values or 'educational ethos'. This dialogue is often presented as a precious opportunity for the co-design of the curriculum. Usually energised by a system of student reps and feedback, and sometimes embedded as part of institutional governance and quality assurance, the student/staff partnership is often projected as commitment to 'student-centred' or (in less frequent cases) 'student-led' curriculum design.

Unsurprisingly, such partnerships have reached a new level of visibility and debate within the UK HE sector. Their prominence is powered in part by a genuine commitment to representing the 'student voice' more effectively in educational design and to re-positioning students as active co-creators (rather than passive consumers) of educational experience. Ground-breaking scholarship by Bovill (2015, 2017), Barrineau *et al.* (2016) and Healey (2014a) has meticulously charted the different modes and levels of participation that students enter into as 'co-creators' of educational enhancement. Currently, there are multiple models and frameworks – depicting 'students as partners' and 'students as co-creators' – which define sub-genres of pedagogy and publication.

Set alongside this is the more strategic need for universities to be seen to offer and nurture student agency. The language of the TEF and the newly-formed 'Office for Students' converges – to insist on the right and power of the student to choose, shape and critique the educational 'product' (or, more palatably, 'process') they experience. In this context, we can better understand the proliferation of university marketing material whose glossy infographics depict clasped hands, feedback loops, entwined pathways and yin/yang-style diagrams that suggest happy and holistic scenes of student/staff mutuality and co-development.

Much of this rhetoric and marketing is indicative of real development, of course, but some of it disguises imperfect systems of student representation and voice. Students are surveyed and 'listened to' endlessly, but their active influence over curriculum design is usually less obvious. Student-led change is still frustrated by conventions and hierarchies that reduce students to 'commentators on' or 'protesters about' the curriculum. Deployed in these rather

detached or negative roles, students can again become marginalised – or even stigmatised – for their necessarily reactive, rather than active, responses to the curriculum.

In the following case study, we shed light on an example of co-created curriculum design that moves beyond some of the surface expressions of partnership to tackle the very real problems and obstacles faced in a research-intensive university. These issues include: the limited awareness of and access to ‘rarefied’ research resources at universities; perceptions and practices of research hierarchy and mystique; sporadic communication between professional and academic specialists; and the always immanent (but not always fulfilled) synergies between archivists, academics and students.

It is a case study that investigates the emerging co-operation between the University of Leeds Library, a team of Special Collections interns and the academic and student communities they reach out to. It suggests, in microcosm, a model for the co-creation of the curriculum which positions the student as co-creator, certainly, but also as mediator, tutor, mentor and communicator.

It adds to our discussion of the hybrid identity that students can occupy and create within the contested territory of curriculum design.

A special relationship: building bridges between a university library’s ‘Special Collections’ and the student/staff community

By its very nature, a ‘Special Collections’ unit should be at the heart of research-based learning within a university. ‘Special Collections’ is the department of the University of Leeds Library that cares for and gives access to unique archives, rare books and the University’s institutional archive. It holds over 200,000 rare books and print items, and over 3,000 individual document, manuscript or paper collections. Five of its collections have been awarded designated status by the Arts Council.

As a specialist unit, it is committed to supporting research and research-based learning; it is ideally placed to realise that commitment. However, as has been experienced across the archival sector, the presence of ‘unique collections’ is, in itself, no longer a guarantor of their use and positive exploitation. Shifting patterns of research and, in particular, the ease of discovery of online materials have often occluded the use of archive collections (Jisc, 2012). Then there are more well-established barriers to access: the need for users to come to the materials; booking requirements; physical location; the intimidating nature of accessing archives; the limited student and educator knowledge about what is held there (The National Archives, 2012). These barriers are affirmed by voices picked up in our surveys of student and staff perceptions: *“I have little idea what Special Collections has to offer”*; *“I have no idea how to navigate it or find the sources I need”*. Like many archival repositories faced with such feedback, Special Collections has rethought its strategies, in order to raise its profile, ensure discoverability of the collections and open them to research and learning.

This rethink also needs to be seen in the light of static staff resources and of a reappraisal of how archival resources previously served the needs of teaching and learning. ‘Regular’ users who used Special Collections material in specific modules had come to expect a certain level of personal service, including direct instruction from Special Collections staff. However, the lack of profile of the collections and the dubious clarity of working relations with

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Special Collections meant that many academics to whom those resources were relevant were not exploiting them. The increasing demands of the management, public outreach and exhibition schedules of the collections also meant that the conventional model of archive staff support for teaching provision was not sustainable.

However, it is indisputable that Special Collections' primary audience is the staff and students of the University of Leeds. Opportunities for its impact on learning and teaching are only growing, given the research-intensive nature of the University of Leeds, the mandatory research-based final-year project and the Leeds Institute of Teaching Excellence¹ (LITE)'s project theme of 'co-created learning'. The challenge for Special Collections, then, is to increase the broad use of the collections with its primary audience, but in a sustainable, structured and measurable way – agile enough to respond to opportunities presented by the developing curriculum. These objectives are recognised in the University Library's current five-year strategic plan (University of Leeds, 2016).

This strategic shift has led to improvements in metric-gathering at the point of service, and development of the collections' management database to capture and store data about which schools users are from and which modules have booked sessions in the teaching spaces. A Student Support Policy (University of Leeds, 2017) has also been introduced, to ensure a consistent service offer to all academics and students. This policy deliberately avoids directly involving Special Collections staff in module teaching, but supports the deployment of those staff to assist with teaching session development and research material selection, as well as to offer training sessions in using the collections. The driving ambition is to increase the number of taught modules drawing on the collections and to establish annual cycles of use with a wider range of academics beyond our traditional client base in English, History and Classics.

We start from a strong foundation. Special Collections has a long tradition of 'inviting students in' through internships and placements. The challenge now is to turn that tradition into a coherent strategy with maximum benefits, to ensure that the students are contributing to a wider programme of co-creation and learning resource enhancement, rather than carrying out rote collections' management tasks. As part of this, Special Collections now offers project support to both the undergraduate and MA level research-based modules, 'Arts Research Placement'², and 'Making History'³. The projects deliver outputs for partners outside the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures and often outside the campus, with outputs ranging across exhibitions, research consultancy projects and public engagement activities.

For example, undergraduates are currently using Special Collections' business archives to create a display for the *Northern Monk Brewery's* taproom in Leeds, while MA students have looked at digital visualisations of archive collections and crowdsourced transcriptions as part of their involvement in Special Collections' strategy. It is essential that the students are involved in live projects with impact and that they shape meaningful outputs. It is increasingly important, too, that students are able to shape the direction and management of the projects,

¹ <http://teachingexcellence.leeds.ac.uk/>

² <https://arts.leeds.ac.uk/ugresearch/facultyugresearch/foar2000/>

³ <http://webprod3.leeds.ac.uk/catalogue/dynmodules.asp?M=HIST-5020M>

acting as instigators as well as agents of research, negotiating the form of the research and output as they progress.

Such research internships and scholarships as these are energised by a range of University initiatives, including the *University's Footsteps Alumni Fund*, the *Undergraduate Research & Leadership Scheme* (which embeds undergraduates in established academic projects) and the University-wide *Campus Internship* programmes. The emphasis in each scheme is on the involvement of students in live research projects, generating outputs to enhance future learning and research, as well as on developing archive and library experience. Students work on the digitisation of archive materials for teaching, cataloguing a variety of collections to update their usability for specific research projects. Postgraduate students have also created a range of resource packs for teaching staff new to using our original archive material. Special Collections also hosts internships attached to major research projects: for example, two interns were hosted in the summer of 2017 as part of the AHRC-funded 'Living with Dying'⁴ project.

These schemes are extremely valuable, but often target and benefit cohorts that are already aware and motivated. In order to achieve a significant increase in student and staff use of Special Collections, a different approach was needed. This led to the development of the 'bridging' internship, piloted in the School of History and with LITE support. The aims of this internship, which has been funded for three years, were deliberately broad: to increase student use of Special Collections; to raise the profile of Special Collections within the School; to match specific resources to special subject modules.

This flexible brief allows the intern to co-create the developing role and its activities. The internship aims to mediate between Special Collections and academic schools, and to stimulate activities within the school that the University Library does not have the resource to deliver. The internship is hosted within the school and so the intern is part of the academic cohort rather than of the library staff, but the intern reports to, and draws from the expertise of, a Special Collections manager.

The development of the internship programme has very much been a three-way partnership between intern, school and Special Collections: in essence, a triumvirate form of co-creation.

Students as co-creators, mediators and communicators: the role of the student intern

During the first eighteen months of the internship, the student intern has led a wide range of activities that support research-led teaching in the School of History, either 'mapping' relevant collections to module content or working directly with staff to design and deliver new teaching elements.

The intern is involved in co-teaching at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, providing a series of research skills sessions drawing on both archival material from Special Collections and sharing the experiences of being a student at Leeds. This has included the leading of independent teaching sessions within the module seminars, up to two hours in length and focused on archival and primary source skills. Following the call to action of 'What I wish I had known then', the intern has delivered three teaching sessions in the MA

⁴ <https://livingwithdying.leeds.ac.uk/>

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core module, 'Research Methodology in History'⁵, focused on developing students' effective location of material for dissertation projects. Using knowledge of Special Collections and a varied student experience, the intern has been able to offer targeted guidance within those modules which students have found (in their own words) 'engaging, relevant and informative'. Students commented that traditional teaching had not given them such a clear understanding of the relationship between archives and historical research: almost all felt that they would 'very likely' use Special Collections in the future.

Many of these students have since gone on to use Special Collections material in their research projects; by the end of the second quarter of the 2017-18 academic year, the School of History accounted for the highest percentage – at nineteen per cent – of collections' requests in Special Collections, overtaking the School of English for the first time. The success of these sessions has led to invitations from other staff members for contributions to similar teaching in further modules, such as two skills sessions co-taught within the level two module, 'History in the Media'⁶. To have a student intern deliver the sessions, drawing on her/his own experiences, heightens the sense of empathy, engagement and relevance between educator and student, blurring hierarchical lines while drawing on considerable expertise and experience.

Alongside delivering training, the intern was able to identify immediately a significant barrier to collaboration with Special Collections: staff and students had limited knowledge of the collections held in the archives and Special Collections staff had little knowledge of the particular staff and modules ripe for collaboration. As a former undergraduate and current postgraduate student, the intern quickly spotted areas for collaboration and recognised the strong links between undergraduate teaching and the early modern education archives held by Special Collections. Working closely with teachers of early modern topics, the intern facilitated student visits to the Special Collections reading room, where students not only viewed pre-selected archival material, but were also able to integrate this into their independent research and assessments.

In some cases, as in a new undergraduate module, 'Teaching and Learning in Early Modern England'⁷, students have been offered the opportunity to curate (with guidance from the intern) their own reading lists, by requesting primary material from Special Collections ahead of seminars; tutors have reported a marked increase in the use of primary source material in assessed essays. Invitations to contribute to further modules across the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures have multiplied during the year, placing the intern as a node of influence within a network of module designers and tutors keen on enriching their research-based teaching. From its relatively broad initial brief, the internship now offers a significant and specific role in the design and delivery of teaching across the Faculty – and cross-service partnerships and student-led tutor development have added flourishes to the success of the scheme.

The position of the intern as a student in this School has been critical to this partnership. As a previous undergraduate student and current research student, the intern has been able to take on the hybrid role of student, educator and archivist, benefiting from a much more

⁵ <http://webprod3.leeds.ac.uk/catalogue/dynmodules.asp?Y=201718&M=HIST-5000M>

⁶ <https://leedsforlife.leeds.ac.uk/Broadening/Module/HIST2570>

⁷ <http://webprod3.leeds.ac.uk/catalogue/dynmodules.asp?Y=201718&M=HIST-3388>

intimate knowledge of modules in the school than any staff member within Special Collections and from a much broader knowledge of the collections than any single staff member within History. The value of this perspective in matching collections with tutors and researchers at Leeds has been integral to 'bridging the gap' between scholars and archivists. The position of the intern as a hybrid student-educator embedded within the subject school, rather than a specialist and discrete staff member in the archive, is a key strength of the internship design, one which has fostered productive and collaborative relationships between academics, students and the archive.

Flexibility of role has allowed the intern to target issues commonly highlighted in student feedback in the School and collected in a cross-School survey. Students reported to the intern that they felt they wanted to encounter primary sources and archives earlier in the undergraduate programme, in order to build confidence in using such material, and it was quickly recognised that sources could be appropriately integrated into the first-year module 'Primary Source Skills for the Historian'⁸. As new strands of this module are developed annually, the intern is involved in co-designing the curriculum to embed visits to Special Collections and, in one case, to design a new model of assessment. Designed for first-time archive users, the assessment was scaffolded by advice provided by the tutor and intern, with the result that twenty-eight new users from the School of History visited Special Collections and many of them reported back that they had become 'engrossed' with the material.

The internship experience has looped fully back into the intern's own development as a postgraduate tutor and researcher. Opportunities emerged: to become a partner in module design; to design learning and teaching resources; to deliver teaching sessions to students; to train staff unfamiliar with Special Collections. The developing hybrid identity of the intern as archivist, student and teacher has enriched her own transition from taught student to PhD researcher, allowing her to co-teach and co-design modules as part of her research-based progress. In itself, the internship role has become an innovative new element of the School's commitment to training the next generation of academics and tutors and thus the cycle of staff and student development has come full circle.

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⁸ <http://webprod3.leeds.ac.uk/catalogue/dynmodules.asp?Y=201819&M=HIST-1300>

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