Co-creation for collaborative curriculum design: An exploration into a staff-student partnership in co-creating an academic development activity

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Introduction and Literature Review

Staff-student partnership has been described as a process of engagement, where students and academics work together on educational efforts to enhance the experience of higher education (Healey et al, 2014). It is widely recognised as having many benefits for students, staff and universities themselves. It can promote feelings of belonging, grow student confidence and develop employability skills for all partners involved (Healey et al, 2014; Matthews and Dollinger, 2023). Furthermore, collaborative learning environments where students are active contributors to the educational process is a valued aspect of partnership working as it promotes a more inclusive learning environment. By recognising students as agents of change, partnerships with staff can contribute to a positive cultural change in higher education institutions, promoting a sense of community and a shared commitment to excellence in higher education (Cook-Sather et al, 2014).

Staff-student partnership in academic development activities, however, is less widely researched. In this context, academic development is understood as activities focused on improving teaching practices with the aim of subsequently enhancing student learning and experience (Sutherland, 2018). Traditionally, within UK universities, staff working in these areas as academic developers act as intermediaries between faculty and students rather than active partnership participants themselves (Roy et al, 2021; Felten et al 2019). In academic development practices, students are therefore seen to occupy one of three positions; objects, consumers or actors (Felten et al, 2019). The most common position, objects, involves students acting as data sources to be used by developers and academics to inform their actions. This role leads to little practical involvement in development activities

as students are positioned as passive recipients of practice rather than active agents. Similarly, as consumers, students are perceived as passively receiving transactional learning provided by universities. From this neo-liberal perspective, the purpose of academic development is therefore to maximise the efficiency with which students acquire graduate attributes, while simultaneously earning high satisfaction metrics.

The least common position for students is as legitimate actors in, and agents of, academic development (Felten et al, 2019). In this position, students alongside academic staff 'have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis' (Cook-Sather et al, 2014, pp 6–7). This framing of students as active co-agents rather than beneficiaries, positions students as authoritative sources of knowledge around learning and teaching and suggests that partnership working between students and academic staff can lead to insights that are unobtainable when working in isolation.

Positioning students as co-agents in the design and facilitation of academic development activities reframes the traditional ways many academics learn about learning and teaching. This paper delves into a unique application of co-creation principles within the realm of academic professional development, focused on a development course tailored for academic staff who concurrently adopt the role of students. It explores the motivations for these changes and reflects on the redesign process from the perspectives of both academic developer (Wakerley and Wilson-Rochford) and student partner (Dales). Additionally, it describes the partnership approach usedin this case study and provides recommendations for other academic development professionals who are looking to embed staff-student partnerships within their own educational practices.

Throughout this article, we use 'new academics' to refer to individuals employed in higher education and who are concurrently undertaking the development course, and 'students' to refer to fee paying students undertaking undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in higher education.

Introduction to Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

Academic developers at Birmingham City University (BCU) were keen to embed a co-agents partnership approach in the redesign of the development course for all new academics involved in learning and teaching, Introduction to Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ILTHE). This accredited course by the professional association for staff and academic developers in the United Kingdom – the Staff Educational Development Association (SEDA) – enables new academics to develop their practical teaching skills and research-based teaching in an open and inclusive educational community by covering five core elements of learning and teaching:

1. Assessment and Feedback
2. Learning and Teaching Theories
3. Values Identities and Philosophies
4. Curriculum, Classroom and Course Design
5. Research and evidence-based practice

ILTHE is a long-standing development course at BCU. Introduced in 2002 and delivered over three days, it is designed to serve as an introduction to general learning and teaching principles and specifically those applicable to learning and teaching at BCU. It is embedded in the Postgraduate Certificate for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education for all new academics and runs as standalone training for new staff involved in learning and teaching activities such as postgraduate researchers, overseas partners, student mentors, visiting tutors, professional services staff etc. Historically, positive feedback has been received from participants undertaking the course, with many claiming it has supported their developing identities as learning and teaching professionals. However, with the changing climate of higher education since 2020, a course redesign was undertaken to bring its content up to date.

This redesign provided an opportunity for academic developers to rectify the historical omission of student partnership by employing a student partner to consult, reflect and produce course content to authentically represent the contemporary student voice at BCU. Our student partner was recruited as part of BCU's wider Change Makers as Curriculum

Partners staff-student partnership scheme. As a Level 6 undergraduate student she was actively involved in wider university activities such as course representation and student ambassadorship. She showed an interest in developing her own skills in critical analysis, as well as contributing to the improvement of staff learning at the university, utilising her own experiences to shape her recommendations. All members of the project team were keen to further embed the student perspective to develop ILTHE in an innovative way to reflect some of the challenges facing higher education in the post-pandemic era.

Course Redesign

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the course was redesigned to embrace the call for hybrid learning and incorporate recent regulatory changes brought about by the Office for Students (OFS). The OFS acts as the regulator for higher education institutions in the United Kingdom and its main role is to ensure that students receive a high quality education and learning experience. With the OFS becoming ever more important in the realm of teaching, learning and assessment, universities, including BCU, have turned their focus to co-creation and how this can enhance the learning experiences of students. Whilst there is recognition within the existing literature that co-creation is often a nerve-wracking process due to shifting power dynamics and perceived capability (Slates and Cook-Sather, 2021), by involving and incorporating the student voice into curriculum content and assessment, students are able to act as agents of change to ensure their peers are receiving an education that is coherent and effectively delivered (Blake, 2022).
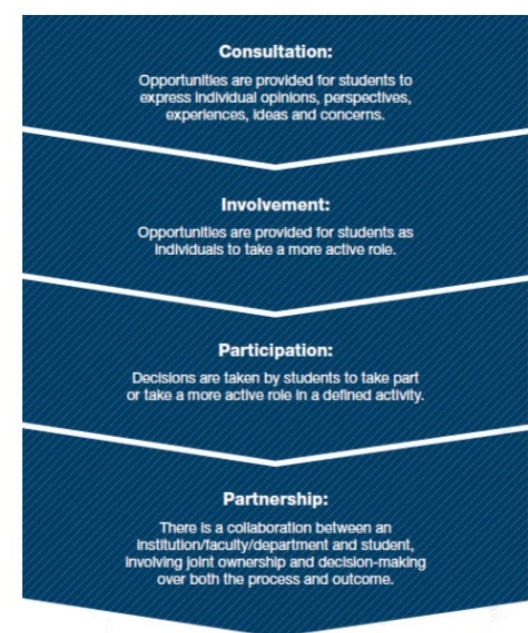
Another motivator for redesign was the lasting changes to teaching methods brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite initial concerns by academics regarding the capability of themselves and their students within an online learning environment (Zhou and Wolstencroft, 2020), the post-pandemic era has seen the success of online teaching enter a hybrid format, with many higher education institutions integrating live lectures with pre-recorded content and resources. However, as with all educational change, it is important that the student voice is embedded within discussions of new teaching methods, with both students and staff playing an equal role in the design, execution, and inspection of successful projects (Nichol et al, 2023).

Thus far, research into education post-pandemic has centred more on digital teaching strategies and less on student partnership (Whelehan, 2020). However, proposals made by Mercer-Mapstone et al (2021) suggest student participation in the development of the post-pandemic blended curriculum may increase motivation and engagement, promoting a stronger and more cooperative learning environment. Applying this to post-pandemic-era academic development activities, participants could benefit from an increased level of student-staff partnership to improve the quality of education provided and to ensure that all actions are in the best interests of both staff and students. Partnership projects in this area can therefore set the foundations for beginning a move towards a more collaborative era with both academics and students renegotiating their roles within higher education and making meaningful change (Whelehan, 2020).

Methodology

For this co-creation project, our approach to staff-student partnership reflected the four stages of student engagement cited in Healey et al (2014):

Consultation:
Opportunities are provided for students to express individual opinions, perspectives, experiences, ideas and concerns.

Involvement:
Opportunities are provided for students as individuals to take a more active role.

Participation:
Decisions are taken by students to take part or take a more active role in a defined activity.

Partnership:
There is a collaboration between an institution/faculty/department and student, involving joint ownership and decision-making over both the process and outcome.

Consultation: In the first stage, the student partner was invited to consult on the existing course documentation and resources of ILTHE. She was given manager access to the course's Virtual Learning Environment page and reviewed the course content as it was presented to participants. She was provided with specific questions of areas to consider including:

·   Does the course make sense for someone new to this information?

·   Does the content flow in a logical order? If not, what would you change?

·   Does the content align with the purpose of the course?

·   Is there anything you feel is missing from the course?

·   Do you feel the content aligns appropriately with the SEDA values?

This scaffolding aimed not to limit her observations but to support her identification of strengths, areas for development and lack of clarity across the course. They also served to set project expectations, which Barrineau et al (2016) describe as crucial for students who are embodying a 'betwixt and between' position between student and staff member.

Involvement: After reviewing the course content, our student partner adopted a critical friend approach (Costa and Kallick, 1993) to feedback her observations and comments. Measures were undertaken to address the inherent power imbalances between our positions as student and staff members with our student partner leading the discussions and academic developers acting as notetakers. As a project team we then collaboratively identified changes for future delivery of the course.

Participation: In addition to reviewing existing material, opportunities were identified to create original content to further embed the 'BCU student perspective' throughout the course. These were designed to reflect an authentic student voice and provide an additional perspective for those who are new academics at BCU. Collaboratively, we identified activities in which practical application and embedding the student voice would add significant value.

Partnership: In order to enact true partnership, funding has been sought to co-deliver the next ILTHE course alongside student partners. This will add true value to the experience of new academics at BCU and promote staff-student partnership as a valuable curriculum

development technique to adopt in their own practices. Additionally, co-authoring this article has provided further opportunities to reflect on the ILTHE project and its positive impact on our personal practices. Our partnership as a project team has expanded from focusing on the positive outcomes of this case study to advocating staff-student partnership as an essential practice in the wider higher education sector.

Results and Reflections

Course Redesign Outcomes

Through this staff-student partnership project, it became evident that there was a significant gap when incorporating the student voice in ILTHE, not only in the teaching content, but also in the core course documentation. For example, there was a lack of accessible language, and acronyms and industry jargon were used throughout without explanation. Working with our student partner as a critical friend (Costa and Kallick, 1993), our partnership provided insight into how important this foundational understanding is for anyone embarking on an introductory course such as ILTHE.

We also identified missed opportunities to embed the student voice throughout the course. For example, learning and teaching activities such as classroom management and setting student expectations were theoretically explored but practical application was not fully considered. Our student partner therefore recorded informational videos for the project to provide engaging supplementary content. These videos were utilised instead of text to provide better explanations and an increased understanding of the topics. Bovill (2019) suggests there can often be a discrepancy between what is deemed important by academic staff and what is required by the student body, so being able to embed a student perspective throughout introductory development courses is especially important for new academics who may not have previous teaching experience to draw from. It encourages exploration of and reflection on why they implement certain principles into their teaching practices and provides an insight into the practical application of their work.

Table 1 summarises the many outputs that came out of our project. These outputs apply to a number of course-specific changes we will make for future cohorts.

Outputs	Course Specifics
Revisions	Course Handbook - e.g., clarifying language to describe course participants, BCU students and staff members
Clarifications	Jargon throughout material and documentation
Changes	Ordering of content to highlight BCU strategies at the start of sessions
Incorporation	'Student perspectives' for each learning and teaching activity highlighted during the course
Development	New content around mental health support and inclusivity of academia based on student feedback
Brainstorms	More authentic assessment ideas

The most significant output from this project was the identification of several elements that are deemed to be essential for students which were not covered within the existing content of ILTHE, such as mental health support, mutual respect and accessibility. As a project team we are therefore working to include this content in the course by co-creating content with student partners. This aligns with one of the key reflections on the project, that it is important to incorporate the perspectives of multiple students to reflect the diversity of the university's student body. Moving forward, these changes mean that the course is more aligned with the professional body's core values as well as acting as an effective case study for students as agents of change in curriculum development. The project has been a catalyst for a wider cultural shift in academic development activities at BCU to include more transformative staff-student partnership activities and we plan to continue this in ILTHE by co-delivering sessions in collaboration with student partners.

Academic Developer Reflections

Reflecting on the outcomes of this project, we have successfully worked in partnership to co-create a staff development activity which suitably reflects the post-pandemic needs of new academics at BCU. The course content is reflective of the current higher education climate and was significantly enhanced as a result of our co-created redesign. Although formal feedback is yet to be collected, anecdotal comments from new academics suggest that ILTHE has been transformative in their approach to learning and teaching. Introducing new academics to innovative methods of influencing change such as co-creation, has successfully developed their understanding of who their learners are and encouraged them to adapt their practices to accommodate diverse student needs. Additionally, sharing the

co-creation process throughout the course has inspired many academics to now undertake their own staff-student partnership projects.

At the start of the project, we were both apprehensive about undertaking a co-created partnership. It is widely discussed within existing literature that discomfort may be felt in staff-student partnership projects as identities shift from expert to co-creator (Slates and Cook-Sather 2021; Mercer-Mapstone et al, 2021). However, we as academic developers have embraced this practice as a development opportunity for ourselves. Having never embarked on a partnership project before, we were keen to adopt the partnership practices advocated by the academic literature and cultivate a true partnership approach devoid of some of the traditional challenges of partnership work, such as undefined roles and power imbalances (Healey et al, 2014). Careful consideration was given to this at every stage of the project and open and honest discussions were held throughout. Through this, we feel that as a project team we have cultivated a professional relationship that has addressed the power imbalances which can be inherent in staff-student partnership work.

Our involvement in this project has inspired both of us to incorporate co-creation in other areas of our academic practice. Since beginning the project we have been able to collaborate with colleges within our four faculties on addressing BCU strategic initiatives around learning, teaching and assessment, bringing in co-creation as an effective method of making change and involving the student voice. We have also co-created podcasts with students to share their learning experiences and promote courses to wider audiences such as prospective students.

On reflection, the project could have been developed further by inviting our student partner to observe live teaching sessions rather than review ILTHE lecture materials. This would have provided deeper understanding of the intended content and allowed for discussion of delivery methods and student in-class interaction. Unfortunately, this was not possible due to the time constraints of the project. However, if we were to complete the project again this would be something we would include. Additionally, in future partnership projects, we would aim to include a wider variety of student perspectives to reflect the diverse student population at BCU. We recognise the need to transform the way in which we think about and approach the improvement of learning, teaching and assessment from multiple

viewpoints, and one of the core ways to do this is through staff-student partnerships (Matthews and Dollinger, 2023).

Student Partner Reflection

Being involved in staff CPD has been an enlightening experience which has allowed me to gain a deeper knowledge of the processes behind the training of academic staff. It has been a useful tool to help me understand why my lectures and seminars have been delivered in the way that they have, empowering me to engage with them more effectively. Such increased awareness has encouraged more critical thought concerning my role in my own learning, through suggestions I have offered to the course directly linked to my own educational experiences. In the same way, I am also beginning to approach the lecturers on my own degree with new ideas surrounding student partnership and collaboration on my course. This collaborative project has given me the confidence to accept new challenges and to adopt a critical stance when assessing new situations.

At the beginning of the project, it was difficult for me as a student, to relax the constraints created by the rigid roles of staff and student, despite being reassured by my colleagues that this was a space for collaboration. The imbalance of power present during all staff and student interactions was finally lessened from my perspective when I could witness first-hand that my ideas were being incorporated into the project. I was always encouraged by my colleagues to critique their work, and their genuine acceptance and appreciation of my judgement decreased any lingering power bias present from our roles.

My experience of this project could inform academic staff's undertaking of partnership projects in the future. If staff were to work with students more collaboratively throughout their education, it could increase the insight students receive into the processes that inform their learning, boosting transparency and respect. Staff could use this project as guidance for how to approach effective student partnership, leading to new research initiatives in various fields within higher education. The ways in which we conducted this project could be mirrored in future collective endeavours between staff and students to ensure that positive outcomes are achieved, where all parties feel valued and supported.

The student perspective is extremely important when delivering this course to new academics. I think it is vital that student voices are heard in order to inform their own learning and get the most out of their higher education experience. It is important to hear from those most affected when making decisions around change, so I feel the exclusion of students in the training of new academics is unwise and impractical. Such successful collaboration could also demonstrate best practice and encourage future combined projects between prospective staff members and their students, potentially creating valuable and varied research initiatives across all disciplines in the future.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Staff-student co-creation as a process needs to ensure all parties are working collaboratively to create meaningful learning opportunities (Dollinger and Lodge, 2020). Research has shown that interaction between staff and students is important in developing an effective relational community as well as mitigating inherent power balances (Slates and Cook-Sather 2021; Mercer-Mapstone et al, 2021). Positioning students as actors in the design and facilitation of academic development activities reframes the traditional ways many new academics learn about learning and teaching and promotes staff-student partnership as a meaningful tool to be embedded in their own developing practices.

Throughout this project, it has been noted that incorporating the student voice into course content is an important tool in ensuring learners are receiving a high quality education. As educators, we cannot have meaningful discussions around student expectations without including students themselves. This project has opened up opportunities for student-led academic development in the realm of curriculum and assessment design and has led to content creation with students in the future, not only for new academic development, but for wider learning and teaching staff development activities at BCU. For any practitioners looking to co-create staff development opportunities in their own higher education institutions we provide the following recommendations:

- Approach the student as early as possible in the project to ensure they have enough time to familiarise themselves with course content and any relevant documentation

- Maintain regular, open and honest communication with your student partner(s). This will help with any changes to content and will also allow for any concerns to be flagged and addressed as early as possible

- Recognise that students may be nervous in contributing to, or making, large-scale changes to programmes, so it is important to scaffold any tasks with clearly defined expectations and roles

- Support students to develop confidence when giving feedback to academic staff. This can be done by being open to feedback.

- Compensating students can address some of the inherent power imbalances in partnership work

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