

The case for the 'usual suspects'

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Many times, in the context of student engagement, we come across the idea of how we should include the entire population of students when encouraging staff-student partnership initiatives (Bcap.jiscinvolve.org, 2015) and not limit ourselves to including the so-called 'usual suspects', namely the students who always get involved in co-curricular activities and who have a high level of motivation and engagement with their course (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2011). This short piece of writing aims to contradict this view and show how focusing on a limited number of highly-motivated students can end up having a domino-effect and bringing in the students who would normally not engage in such activities. This is a story told from the perspective of a novice student change agent that will, I hope, give staff and students equally a new perspective on how to build successful staff-student partnerships.

The first project I took part in was one I personally initiated. Being part of a representation scheme within my university, I am the link between staff and students and must represent students' views on meetings and mediate complaints. This has been a very satisfying role for me in my first year and I am happy to be able to build on it next year, this time as a Faculty Representative. What I learnt as part of this role is that student feedback comes in all forms and shapes. It is simply a matter of receptivity on the part of Student Representatives to be able to bring it all together in such a way that it can be presented succinctly at a meeting and dealt with accordingly. Sometimes, however, the best way to deliver feedback is to come forward with a direct solution.

It was during the first term that I realised that many students were dissatisfied with the virtual learning environment of our university. Information was hard to find: lecturers had completely different ways of laying out the content. This encouraged me to put forward a proposal for a new Blackboard structure. The resulting project went very well. Staff were supportive and eager to listen to the student perspective. While still in the initial phases of the project, I was able to attend an amazing Networking Event organised by Jisc in Birmingham (Can.jiscinvolve.org, 2015). It was there that I was introduced to this concept of 'the usual suspects' and how change agents should avoid including only them in their initiatives. At that time, this idea did not seem right and, as I later discovered in the following stages of the project, those 'usual suspects' proved to be more than enough to start a new 'engagement revolution'.

To prove why we as change agents should actually focus on these usual suspects in order more effectively to engage the entire student population, I shall refer to an idea taken from the field of marketing.

Marketing professionals recognise the impact of the so-called 'Alphas' (Ahonen *et al*, 2004) or, as Rogers (1962) refers to them in an innovation theory context, innovators or early adopters. These are individuals who, because of their reputation, manage to influence other individuals into either joining a trend or buying a new product. They are the ones whom a well-known brand will often integrate into the launch of a product in order to gain the trust of customers. Examples include celebrities, bloggers or 'popular' personalities and friends. Based on the psychological idea of social learning (Bandura, 1977), the field of influencer marketing recognises that targeting these individuals has a broader impact than trying to communicate to the entire population of potential customers. Identifying their motivation and making them passionate about the product results in a domino-effect, where others wish to be integrated in that new social trend and therefore acquire the product. Marketers learnt to aim narrow in order to impact widely.

Equally, the idea of change projects should be centred on those students who easily get involved in new projects, simply because their passion and commitment will be the main factor influencing others to join. From my experience, students much more easily get involved in new projects that are informally promoted by other students than they do through a general promotion strategy. As part of my first project, students joined our team after finding out about the initiative and seeing how passionate we were as student change agents.

Of course, there are many more reasons why we should encourage the motivated students to join projects. They are the best ambassadors of change, through their motivation to succeed. In addition, new skills are given to those students, skills that they will later implement in new projects. And finally, encouraging the entire student population has the risk of being an untargeted action that does not take into account individual needs. We, as change agents, should aim narrow, rather than wide. It is through a focused approach that positive change can happen and that staff-student partnerships will become the new educational trend.

Reference list

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