Students on Tech – an innovative partnership

Mary Jacob, James Ward
Aberystwyth University

Organisational and historical context

'Students on Tech' is an innovative partnership between students and the E-learning Group at Aberystwyth University. One of the students and a staff member co-presented a talk at the Jisc Change Agents Network conference, University of Exeter, 20-21 April 2017. This case study offers a model for partnership with students to bring about effective change.

Like many UK universities, Aberystwyth has a long history of valuing the student voice – via module questionnaires, surveys such as 'Your Voice Matters' and the Information Services User Survey. Staff-Student Consultative Committees and the regular participation of Student Union representatives on University committees are mainstream practices. Such activities as these fall under the 'student voice' end of the spectrum, as described in the model of Dunne and Zandstra (2011, p. 17). Dunne and Zandstra note that a student voice approach can reinforce the idea of students as consumers, rather than partners. They suggest that working with students as co-creators is more transformative (2011, p. 4).

The E-learning Group has a history of running student-engagement surveys, in contrast to such satisfaction-type surveys as the National Student Survey in the UK. In both 2010 and 2013, the group carried out a 'TEL Learning Experience Survey' (Gwella Team, 2011) to gain an understanding of what technology students find useful for study. The surveys yielded information about student attitudes and practices, as well as practices used by the students' lecturers. A key element of the survey included recommendations that students have for their lecturers, which helped to shape advice and support subsequently given to teaching staff by the E-learning Group.

The group chose this approach because it felt that questions to elicit information on behaviour and attitudes would provide concrete information that could be acted upon to improve the student experience. Currently, the group is participating in the Jisc Digital Tracker project (2016-2018), which also maps student behaviour rather than satisfaction.

Building on this experience, the Students on Tech team carried out, in 2017, a student survey primarily aimed at identifying ways of improving the Blackboard site in the summer redesign. The 'Blackboard Refresh' survey focused on student patterns of behaviour, attitudes, and preferences for the use of both Blackboard and the Blackboard mobile app.

Aims of the project

The project aims were to work with students to improve technology-enhanced learning (TEL) provision and raise the profile of good teaching. Since it was clear that the Blackboard site was too cluttered and hard to navigate, a redesign was needed. We wanted to make the Blackboard site easier to use and to help staff understand better their students' needs with regard to technology.

A deeper motivation was to move the University towards a model of co-learning, co-designing and co-developing, as outlined by Healey *et al.* (2014, p. 24). Because the

concept of students as co-creators was not embedded in the Aberystwyth University culture, it was felt that a stepwise change would be more effective than a radical innovation. This project fits into the category of *"student engagement in the quality enhancement of learning and teaching practice and policy"*, as described by Healey *et al.* (*op.cit.*, p. 23). The project aimed to set a precedent for further steps towards transformation.

Implementation

The E-learning Group received support from the University Learning and Teaching Enhancement Fund, which was used primarily to hire four Student Assistants to work with us as partners from December to April, working a few hours per week. Mary Jacob, a staff member in the E-learning Group, served as project lead.

The timeline was as follows:

- **May 2016** – funding allocated
- **Summer 2016** – begin recruiting the team of students
- **Late October-December 2016** – IT training, video blogs and focus groups
- **January-April 2017** – video blogs and student survey
- **20-21 April 2017** – student/staff co-presentation at CAN conference in Exeter
- **Early May 2017** – students write reports with recommendations

The students hired for the project carried out two activities:

1. **What works in TEL?** – They created video blog posts about how they and their peers use technology for learning; they described good practice among their lecturers. The student partners managed social media platforms, including Twitter and Facebook, where they promoted their blog and engaged with followers.[1]
2. **Blackboard refresh** – They organised student focus groups to garner suggestions for redesigning the Blackboard site in summer 2017. The focus groups were complemented by an online student survey. The student partners planned, ran and analysed results, generating recommendations for enhancing TEL provision by the E-learning Group.

We found that this project required both resilience and agility. Initially, it was planned to hire two students for ten months at six hours per week. Owing to unexpected circumstances, there was a late start and it was found that six hours per week was too much for individual students. In the end, four students were employed, over a period of five to six months and at fewer hours per week. We chose to hire current students rather than graduates so that they could blog about their learning as they were learning, rather than relying on memory to reflect on learning after the fact.

It was decided to hire students, rather than ask for volunteers or use departmental student representatives, in order to empower them as equal partners with other staff. They were treated as valued colleagues, rather than as subordinates, and were able to use staff video facilities. Healey *et al.* (*op.cit.*, p. 32-33) discuss the importance of reward and recognition,

---

[1] The address of the blog is http://wordpress.aber.ac.uk/sotstaff/; the Twitter account is @StudentsonTech; and the Facebook page is https://www.facebook.com/studentsontech/.

noting that to pay staff and not students creates an imbalance of power. We aimed for an equal balance.

Rather than being given set tasks by the project lead, the student partners suggested activities and took responsibility for carrying them out. They had full control over their written reports and recommendations, which were passed without modification to staff who made the changes to Blackboard. Although this was a small step towards co-designing learning, it provided the students with a direct path to implementing their recommendations.

Technology choices

Technology was used to empower the students. When the students started the project, they had very little prior experience in video-editing or blogging and so training was provided.

They used **WeVideo** for online video-editing. The licence was provided courtesy of the CADARN Learning Portal. We chose WeVideo because it allowed the students to create and edit their videos from any computer they wished. It is easy to use and features 'how-to' guidance online. This made it easier for them to learn and develop transferable skills.

For the most part, they used their own devices, such as mobile phones, to capture video footage. Some also used camcorders, available through Information Services Equipment Loan.

The blog was created by means of the University's in-house **WordPress** installation. Again, this allowed students to develop transferable skills, as WordPress is a popular blogging platform outside the University.

Social media such as **Twitter** and **Facebook** were familiar to the students and required less training. As one team member was studying Marketing, she took the lead in using social media as a promotional tool for the blog entries. The students fell naturally into roles that suited their interests and prior skills.

Blackboard redesign

To collect information for the Blackboard redesign, the student partners ran focus groups using a method based on the nominal group technique (NGT) developed by Andre Delbecq and Andrew H. Van de Ven (1971). Kurian (2013) describes it as follows:

> "Each member of a group is asked to write down ideas without consulting colleagues. These ideas are then discussed, without awareness of the origin. Similar ideas are grouped or merged, and the remaining ideas are ranked on the basis of potential. The individual rankings are combined mathematically and the ideas at the top are adopted. NGT avoids the distortions associated with Groupthink, caused by deference to authority, peer pressure, office politics, and personal idiosyncrasies."

The NGT approach was chosen because it helps prevent accidental influence by the leader of the focus group and it allows all members of the group to have an equal voice, minimising the influence of peer pressure. This reinforced the ethos of students as partners with an equal status, rather than a hierarchical model in which students might be tempted to give the answers they think the focus group leaders expect.

The Students on Tech team implemented a light-touch approach to the NGT, with less emphasis on ranking but preserving the initial idea generation phase. When enough students came to the focus groups, this method worked well. They found, however, that students didn't always come along in sufficient numbers, even though incentives were offered. It was therefore decided to run an online survey, which yielded useful information and had a high return rate.

The student partners used 'Bristol Online Survey' and promoted the survey through posters, which they designed and put up around the campus. They staffed a table in the University's main library, to encourage students to fill out the survey using an iPad designated for the purpose. This activity alone generated fifty additional survey responses within four hours.

The partners wrote reports based on the survey and focus groups to inform the Blackboard redesign. As Martyna Pominkiewicz writes in the final report:

> *"This report was commissioned to analyse the answers from the Blackboard Refresh Internet survey and focus groups conducted among different departments at Aberystwyth University in the academic year 2016/2017. In the survey we asked students ten open-ended and closed-ended questions to find out how they access the Blackboard platform and to discover their opinions and suggestions. In the focus groups, we had a chance to watch and observe students accessing the Blackboard and converse with them about the ideas and what do they think could be improved and what aspects of Blackboard they like."*

What works in TEL

The video blogs were not fully active until semester 2, owing to the late start. The students shared both their own ways of using technology and also the good practice of their lecturers.[2]

Student assistant James Ward says of the experience:

> *"As it was my first year at university, I didn't imagine myself being involved in something this big, but I was thrilled when Mary asked me to write something towards this article. My input into this project was to use my knowledge of technology and social media to better meet our aims through the implementation of several focus groups and 353 participants in the Blackboard Refresh Survey at the end of the year. When it was found that most students couldn't attend the focus groups due to either academic or personal issues, we decided to take a more open approach. In the end, we were able to obtain the data we needed to refresh the Blackboard system to something the staff and students would find easier to use for the next academic year, 2017/18. After certain issues were addressed, the project was rewarded with success."*

The Students on Tech project afforded an important opportunity for personal and professional growth. The quotation above shows that the students increased in confidence

---

[2] A clip of the students talking about their experience can be found here: https://www.wevideo.com/view/884325315.

and took ownership of the project as they adapted to challenges and ultimately achieved success.

Results and evaluation

Table 1 shows statistical data as of 11 April 2017. The facility in WordPress for gathering statistics was enabled only in February, so the statistics do not count views prior to that. As can be seen, focus group participation was low.

What works in TEL	Blackboard refresh
WordPress video posts • 12 posts • 219 views Twitter • 41 tweets • 3,300 impressions Facebook page • 13 posts • 90 reach per post	Focus groups • 17 participants Online survey • 353 responses

Table 1.

There were many benefits for University staff and students, beginning with an improved design of the Blackboard interface. The primary messages from the report were that students want less clutter on the screen; they use Blackboard mainly to view their modules and so would like to see the modules listed on the welcome page; they prefer a more visual interface over a text-heavy one. They did not use the branded 'AberLearn Blackboard' name, so the Blackboard Team has now branded the site simply as Blackboard.

Most of the information unrelated to modules was removed and the site streamlined. The 'before-and-after' screenshots (Figures 1 and 2) illustrate the difference. The new Blackboard interface has been well-received, according to feedback from the Information Services User Survey.

**Figure 1.** Original Blackboard interface
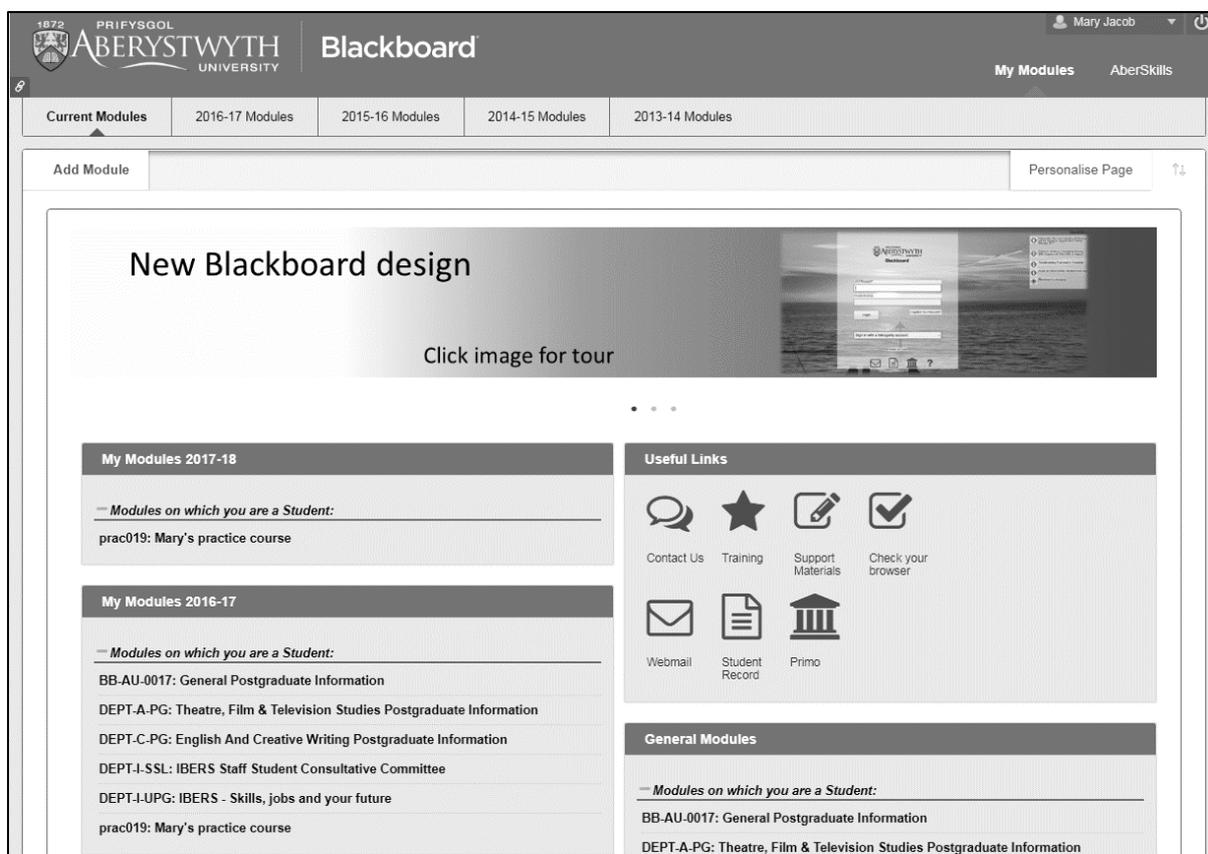
Figure 2. New Blackboard interface

Another benefit was an increased awareness of the Blackboard student app. Many students said that they would use the app, now that they knew about it.

Further benefits include the skills, confidence, and experience that the student partners gained. They learned how to make videos and WordPress blog posts, how to use social media to promote a campaign, how to write effective reports and analyse data, and how to design posters and promotional material. Giving them the opportunity to represent the project themselves with both staff and students reinforced the message that students are valued as partners in helping shape University activity and not just regarded as consumers.

Finally, working on the project was a fun experience for the student partners, as can be seen by the image (Figure 3) of Jack Rendell, staffing the stand in the library, with posters that he designed himself.

Figure 3. Student Assistant Jack Rendell, staffing library stand

James Ward has these observations about the results of the project:

> *"After reviewing the new Blackboard system on the university website, I was thrilled and excited to see how similar it was to what the focus groups requested. Compiling the results from staff meetings, focus groups, the refresh survey along with my own independent research, I found how tidy and focused the new system was. I showed it to a few colleagues and they were impressed with how well we had followed through with our aims."*

"In evaluating the project, we have seen many other benefits come out of it as well. For example, as students were recruited to assist in this project, they have grown a mutual respect for staff and vice versa as they have shown they can work with the same knowledge and know-how as the staff themselves, which I feel will help in future careers. The vlogs have also improved our self-confidence."

The design of the new Blackboard interface demonstrates that the students' recommendations were taken seriously and had impact.

The artist hired by Jisc (through Meeting Magic Ltd.) to record impressions at the Change Agents Network conference responded to our talk with the following sketch (Figure 4). The Students on Tech team was very pleased that she captured the ethos of our project.
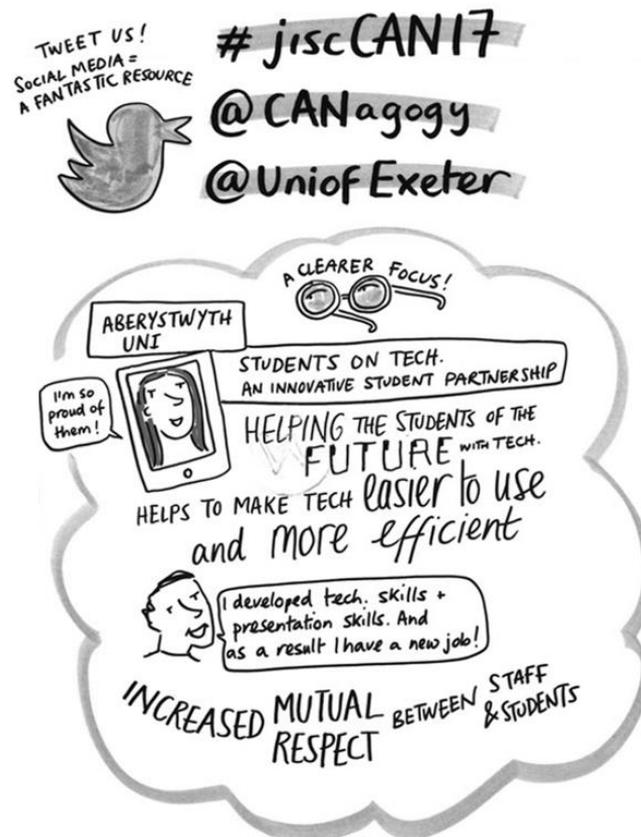
Figure 4. Jisc CAN17 conference picture wall extract (Knight, 2017)

Cook-Sather *et al.* (2014) lay out three guiding principles for student/staff partnerships: respect, reciprocity and responsibility. As can be seen from James' quote above, these principles formed a cornerstone of the Students on Tech project and were central to its success.

Lessons learnt

As might have been expected, there were challenges, but the team overcame them.

The first was getting the project started properly. Although funding was allocated in May, University procedures were in a state of change, causing delays. Two students were hired, but then one had to drop out for personal reasons, leaving the project with only one student.

By December, the team was increased to four students with fewer working hours each. The project timeline was adjusted and its planned outputs scaled down slightly. The team's advice is: 'to build in resilience by planning for a larger team than you think you need'.

The second challenge was getting students to join the focus groups. The student partners were disheartened when they organised groups and had few attendees. Working more closely with the teaching staff helped ensure more participation, but the focus groups alone proved insufficient. The addition of the survey yielded enough responses to make the data useful. The team's advice is: 'to plan for multiple channels of data collection'.

James Ward comments on the lessons learnt:

> *"My experience in how my university systems worked has developed my technical knowledge, which has in turn increased my abilities at producing an end of year result of a 2.1 in my academic studies. I have also learnt that focus groups do work as I have viewed the new and improved Blackboard and it fits precisely with what the students I reviewed requested. The most important lesson I learned was how confident and relaxed I've become since the project was completed. Meaning I feel better in myself to face problems with a calm and level-headed personality which has proven useful both inside and outside the lecture hall. Above all, the Blackboard Refresh Project has improved my personality for the better."*

As James' remarks show, the Students on Tech team gained a great deal in terms of skills, confidence and personal growth. We undertook this project with the intention that it would be a collaboration and learning experience for both the staff and student team members. We believe it has achieved this aim.

As Kelley Matthews points out (2016, p. 2), *"If we shift our thinking about student engagement toward students as partners, the emphasis is on the relationship between students and academics/staff – positioning both as being essential players in the learning enterprise."* The resulting mindset demonstrates *"an institutional culture that values the collaborative interaction between all members of the university community"* (*op.cit.*, p. 3).

The Students on Tech team believes that even a small-scale project such as this can have value as a step in moving a university culture towards a more collaborative mindset and a transformative implementation of the students-as-partners ethos in future.

Reference list

Cook-Sather, A., Bovill, C. and Felten, P. (2014) *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching: A Guide for Faculty.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Delbecq, A.L.; VandeVen, A.H. (1971) 'A Group Process Model for Problem Identification and Program Planning.' *Journal Of Applied Behavioral Science.* 7, 466-91. Available at: doi:10.1177/00218863710070040 (Accessed: 18 September 2017).

Dunne, E. and Zandstra, R. (2011) *Students as change agents - new ways of engaging with learning and teaching in higher education.* Bristol: A joint University of Exeter/ESCalate/Higher Education Academy Publication. Available at: http://escalate.ac.uk/8064 (Accessed: 28 February 2018).

Gwella Team (2011) 'About Nexus.' *Nexus.* Available at: http://xwikinexus.aber.ac.uk/xwiki/bin/view/Main/About%20Gwella (Accessed: 23 October 2017).

Healey, M., Flint, A. and Harrington, K. (2014) *Engagement through partnership: students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education.* York: Higher Education Academy. Available at: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/resources/engagement_through_partnership.pdf (Accessed: 28 February 2018).

Jisc Digital Tracker. Available at: https://www.Jisc.ac.uk/rd/projects/student-digital-experience-tracker (Accessed: 1 March 2018).

Knight, S. (2017) 'Change agents: students driving curriculum innovation.' *Efficiency Exchange.* Available at: http://www.efficiencyexchange.ac.uk/11699/change-agents-students-driving-curriculum-innovation/ (Accessed: 19 March 2018).

Kurian, G.G. (2013) 'Nominal Group Technique (NGT).' In: *The AMA Dictionary of Business and Management.* New York: AMACOM, Publishing Division of the American Management Association, 209-210.

Matthews, K.E. (2016) 'Students as Partners as the Future of Student Engagement.' *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal.* 1(1). Available at: <https://journals.gre.ac.uk/index.php/raise/article/view/380/338> (Accessed: 16 February 2018).

National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Available at: http://nsse.indiana.edu/ (Accessed: 1 March 2018.

Sample, J.A. (1984) 'Nominal Group Technique: An Alternative to Brainstorming.' *Journal of Extension.* 22(2). Available at: https://www.joe.org/joe/1984march/iw2.php (Accessed: 18 September 2017).

UK Engagement Survey (UKES). Available at: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/institutions/surveys/uk-engagement-survey (Accessed: 1 March 2018).