The Penrynopoly Project: empowering students as researchers

Kieran Cutting
Open Lab, Newcastle University

Natasha Evans
University of Exeter

Dean Pomeroy
Falmouth and Exeter Students' Union

Introduction

The gradual marketization of Higher Education (HE) is changing not only the decision-making behaviours of HE Institutions, but also how students perceive their education. Students in countries with less-marketized HE systems, such as Germany, have been shown to experience lower levels of anxiety about leaving university and starting to earn an income from work than fee-paying British students (Pritchard, 2006). To prevent a wholesale conversion to a model of 'students as consumers', we suggest encouraging 'students as partners' throughout the research process, with the potential to ease the pressures of a marketized education. This paper explores an intervention in treating students as partners at the University of Exeter's Penryn Campus, through giving students the resources and support to conduct their own research, analysed and evaluated from the perspective of the student researchers themselves.

Context

Founded in 2004, the Penryn Campus is a shared university campus between Falmouth University and the University of Exeter, host to approximately 5000 students. In comparison to course sizes at larger campuses, programmes on the Penryn Campus are fairly small and specialised, averaging between fifty and one hundred students per year. The University of Exeter Politics department, from which this intervention was carried out, offers a variety of modules covering all aspects of the discipline, such as international relations, environmental studies, political theory and neighbourhood planning. The 'Penrynopoly' project was the culmination of a module spanning these latter two areas, attempting to bring radical democratic theory into practice.

The department offered two linked modules, called 'Radical Democracy in Theory' and 'Radical Democracy in Practice'. The first module provided a toolkit of concepts for thinking about agonistic democracy, in which contestation, rather than consensus-building, is the central mode of democratic participation (Mouffe, 2009). In the second module, students took these concepts and applied them to a live brief in aid of Penryn's Neighbourhood Planning Committee, focusing on the research question 'What futures would residents like to see for Penryn?' Each student group was given a demographic to focus its research – either young people, older people or business owners – and invited to collect data using radical democratic ideas or methods. Over the course of eleven weeks, students were given context-setting presentations from local councillors and were taught about research methods and data analysis through seminars with the module convener; they themselves designed,

carried out and evaluated research in the community, ultimately presenting, in return, their research to the Council.

The development of 'Penrynopoly'

Our group focused on young people aged eighteen to twenty-five, so that we could best utilise our own position as young researchers. Following the module's theoretical framework, our research was characterised by its qualitative and (auto)ethnographic nature. Having been members for at least a year of the community we were researching, we were necessarily entangled in the space and we felt it would not be suitable to attempt to cut ourselves out of the analysis. Instead, we took an active part in the study, filling in all elements of the data collection process as participants, too. Though our presence in the community benefited our research, we became aware throughout the study of a long-term affective atmosphere (Anderson, 2016) that constructed a false dichotomy between students and 'locals'. As such, despite having a great deal of 'insider knowledge' about the dynamics of the community, our status as students partially excluded us from certain habits and patterns of being.

Our research was pursued in the spirit of grounded theory, being iterative, starting without presumption about the community and involving multiple methods to attempt to reach saturation point (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). We initially conducted an exploratory survey (which received 102 responses) to shape our understanding of the dynamics of young people in the community. Distributed primarily through social media, the survey mostly limited participation to the student population of Penryn, owing to our own social networks and the communities to which we had access. Survey questions included:

- *What is the biggest problem Penryn faces today? Why?*
- *Do you spend a lot of your free time in Penryn? Why/why not?*
- *Has Penryn undergone any major changes in the time you have known it? If yes, what was the change? How did you feel about it?*

Though participants were self-selecting, and thus a sample by convenience, this later helped to reveal the presence of the dichotomy between students and 'locals' because of the lack of correlation between perceptions of students and non-students.

Using ideas from the theoretical module concerning the fact that all actions and actors are always materially rooted in a place (Latour, 2005), we decided to investigate actual engagement with the space of Penryn through participatory mapping. Using a blank map of Penryn, a graphics tablet and PaintTool Sai, we asked participants to map their most visited places and frequent routes through the town and layered each of these into a single map (Figure 1), identifying which areas were visited frequently and which were not. Owing to a lack of resources, only twenty sets of data were collected. Alternative, more accurate methods of collecting place-based data, such as apps which use geolocation, would be useful in the future. We also encountered some ethical issues at this stage – our initial intention was to work with secondary school-aged children to diversify the views researched, but it became problematic, for safeguarding reasons, to ask such invasive questions of children without the proper mechanisms to store and handle that data. Nevertheless, the participatory mapping exercise yielded interesting data and first gave us the idea of presenting our research back to Penryn Town Council in the form of a board game.
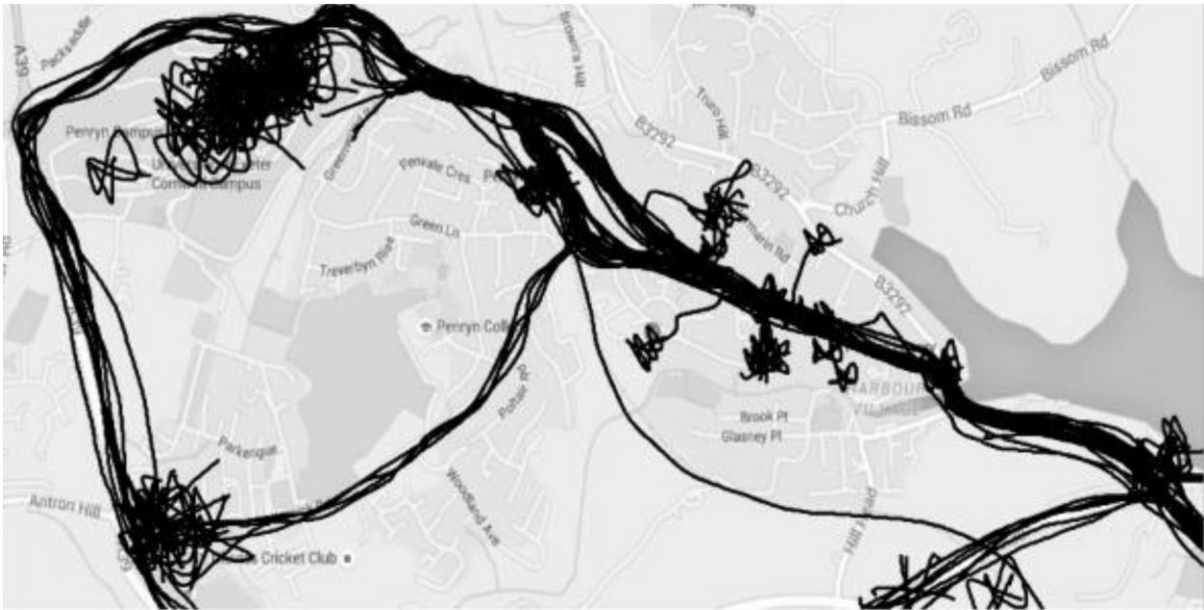
Figure 1. The aggregate routes of interaction identified by participatory mapping

Finally, we undertook semi-structured interviews in order to gain more insight into some of the questions that arose from our prior research and to explore the difference between 'local' and student perceptions. While conducting these interviews, we expanded our focus to include those who interacted with our demographic regularly, such as relatives and retail workers, to deepen our understanding so that potential points of action were better contextualised. We conducted seven interviews altogether, each of them lasting from twenty to thirty minutes, and our being members of the community, with personal experiences of many of the issues raised, helped us greatly. We intended to explore more fully in a focus group what arose from the interview process, but, of the forty people invited, only one attended. Nonetheless, this provided us with an additional interview that explored the perspective of a town councillor in depth, which further helped us in the design process of the board game.

Having reached saturation point with our data analysis, we chose to present our research findings to the Council in the form of a board game. Inspired by a guest lecture about creative research methods and by an offhand remark that the pattern of travel in the participatory mapping looked 'like a Monopoly board', we decided to give the idea concrete form and so, within the final two weeks of the research process, created 'Penrynopoly' (Figure 2) – a twist on Monopoly – which transformed our data into a playable form that would challenge residents' preconceptions about the town.

Figure 2. First physical version of Penrynopoly

Using the familiar Monopoly format, we hoped to evoke past memories of playing the game: we wanted to conjure up a familiar community environment in which individuals could engage with local problems and achieve positive outcomes with less confrontation over their conflicting opinions and more constructive discussion about their alternative ideas for solutions. The game's design and rules, therefore, were altered slightly to fit our needs more precisely. Community Chest and Chance cards were tailored to issues participants experienced in the town, complete with direct quotes and statistics from the dataset (Figure 3). Additionally, we made picking up a card compulsory after each turn, to sustain discussion and allow players who might otherwise struggle to voice their concerns to have an equal place in it. In this way, Penrynopoly acted as a point of amplification for residents' views, engaging under-represented voices in the planning process.
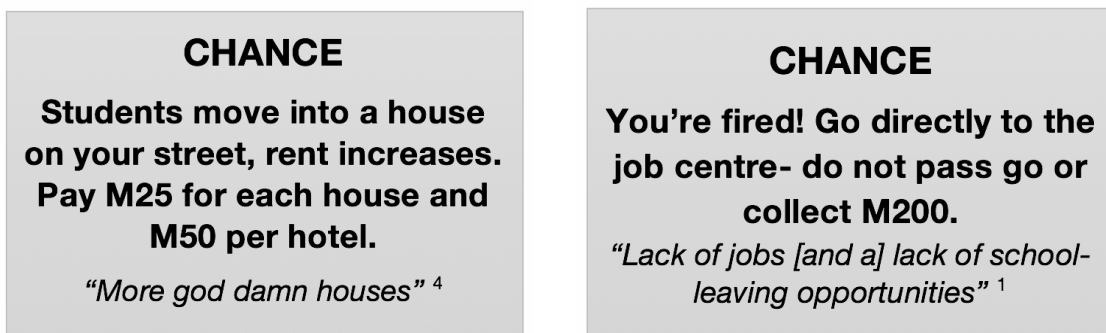

Figure 3. A selection of Chance cards from the original Penrynopoly game

Impact and 'real research'

Perhaps the key value in our work was that it used elements of most of Dunne's modes of student engagement (Dunne, 2016). In the theoretical module and the earlier part of the practice-based module, our work generally fitted into mode C - our critical faculties were engaged and there were gestures to things outside the academy, but work was still 'degree-focused', so to speak. In the latter part of the module, we slipped more into mode A as we conducted primary research, engaged with members of the community and felt supported enough to take risks in our methods of analysis and presentation. Yet our being student researchers had benefit not only for us, our outlooks on life and our career prospects, but also for our communities and our institutions. It was at this stage – after the initial, module-based research – that our work began to move into mode B. After the positive feedback on the Penrynopoly game, the module convener used her contacts at the EU Association of Local Democracy Agencies to encourage us to submit it to the Association's Democratic Compact, a toolkit of methods for democracy-building. Being asked to contribute to something so significant changed our outlook on our work; we were all aware that the presentation had gone well and that there was, perhaps, some novelty to it, but suddenly our research seemed very real. The process of becoming an authentic agent of change was thus scaffolded for us, with the movement into mode B in large part spurred on by our own belief in our work. Though students are always encouraged to create interesting, innovative work, even when it involves primary research, it is normally construed merely as 'coursework'. Truly to feel as if we had done 'real research' broadened our horizons.

Later in the year, the module convener successfully applied on our behalf for funding from the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC's) Festival of Social Science, enabling us to continue our project after the module's conclusion and to run the event again in aid of the Neighbourhood Plan. As a result, we improved on our initial designs and worked out some of the issues of play that emerged in the initial presentation, using this time to hone our organisational research skills. In this iteration, we could give more consideration to the intended outcomes of our research, meaning that playing the game became the central focus of data collection. It is also important to note that, this time, we were paid for our work. Though we are unwilling to over-ascribe importance to being paid – not wanting to suggest that merely paying students is the solution to the negative impacts of marketization – it once again contributed to the feeling that we were doing 'real research'. In addition to giving us further experience, the more formal expectations placed upon us as a result of being paid helped to enhance our capabilities and increase our confidence in our work.

After this initial support, we felt comfortable submitting proposals ourselves, able to believe in the strength of what we were about. Initially, we submitted our work to The Student Engagement Partnership's (TSEP's) Enhancing Student Engagement Conference 2017 and, although unsuccessful, we were invited to prepare our work for inclusion in the conference programme. A short while later, we submitted our work to the Jisc Change Agents' Network (CAN) and successfully ran a workshop at the CAN Conference in April 2017 at the University of Exeter, focusing on the benefits of empowering students as researchers. Applying to these conferences and showcasing our research to institutions and individuals from across the HE sector empowered us to pursue both institutional and personal changes.

We were also able to make changes within our own university. One member of the group successfully used data collected from the game to advocate for and form a 'Community

Committee', composed of students and residents, aimed at mediating some of the issues uncovered by the research. The presence of a 'local'/student divide was identified as a particularly problematic point and, this indeed being the case, the group advocated for a change in terminology in an attempt to reframe debate. We began to emphasise the importance of referring to 'locals' as 'long-term residents', enabling students to feel like active members of their own communities rather than a discrete and separate element. This change in discourse was adopted by the Students' Union and has been useful in reframing problems in the community as shared issues. Alongside impacts on the wider community, the project had substantial influence on the authors' own lives. As well as generating the previously-mentioned feeling in all of us of having done 'real research', the project featured heavily in one member's successful PhD application, inspired a career change for another and gave a third deep, contextual knowledge of local issues that allowed him to be successfully elected to a Sabbatical Officer role.

The experience itself was incredibly positive; it also presented us with some of the problems and difficulties of 'doing research' that we would not otherwise have encountered during our undergraduate degrees. It showed us that carrying out research can be a messy process: methodologies need to be altered because of issues with ethics, timescales, failure, or the specific dynamics of the area or community being researched. What was most important throughout this, however, was that we had a space in which to get things wrong without significant consequence. Though we were doing 'real research', no significant expectations were placed upon us at any stage and the support of the staff around us allowed us to be bold in our decision-making. Above all, gaining experience of such advanced academic situations as applying for funding, submitting to conferences, planning presentations for external stakeholders and delivering to crowds of different ages and expertise levels was invaluable to us and to our personal development.

At this point, it could also be said that, to some extent, we had moved from being 'students' in Dunne's model of engagement to being 'teachers' to other students, thus starting the movement across modes C, A and B with students in earlier years of their degree. This was particularly notable within the 'Flexible Combined Honours' (FCH) subject, which two of the authors studied and for which one author was chair of the Staff-Student Liaison Committee. The flexibility of the subject, the small course size (of around twenty across three years) and the authors' knowledge of the value of student engagement from this project led the authors to cultivate an open and supportive atmosphere in the subject, often encouraging members to stand for positions of leadership within the Students' Union and become involved with other representation or change agent initiatives. Since then, two out of four of the Students' Union presidents have been FCH students for two years running and many others have been involved with student leadership more generally. This very well may not have happened had it not been for the valuable experiences gained from Penrynopoly.

Recommendations

In the light of our experiences as 'students as researchers', we suggest some recommendations which helped us to believe in the strength of our work and played a significant role in helping to prevent viewing our experience of HE as purely instrumental. There are three central categories: the use of inter-disciplinary, innovative research methods, the presence of supportive, encouraging staff and the need to think beyond the classroom in relation to courses and assessments.

Inter-disciplinary, innovative research methods

Though practitioners might be anxious about engaging in inter-disciplinary collaboration, the potential for innovation significantly increases when students can draw upon experiences in distinct areas of HE. In the module that Penrynopoly arose from, we were given guest lectures by academics specialising in performing arts alongside more traditional 'politics' academics. This was a formative moment for us, as it helped to reframe how we imagined doing research, opening up approaches perhaps not normally considered valid in traditional politics research. The idea to use a board game as our method of presentation, for example, came from a guest lecture in which we were encouraged to imagine the use of creative materials in our work, such as Lego, music, and games. Though all of us had considered 'research' as a career pathway before the lecture, expanding our definition of what research was through inter-disciplinary collaboration enriched our appetite for doing research. Moreover, conducting research with innovative, creative methods helps to ensure that the research is relevant to its community – between the first and second playing of the Penrynopoly game, for example, the content of the board changed to reflect the shifting condition of the town. This would not be possible with more quantitative methods, for example, as a change in conditions would necessitate running the study again.

Supportive, encouraging staff

The role and influence of staff within student-led research projects is of the utmost importance and has a significant influence on the success of a project. We owe a great deal to supportive staff, such as the module convener, Dr Joanie Willett, who provided practical guidance and gave us the intellectual freedom and encouragement to pursue alternative methods. The module this research originated from had only twelve students, separated into three groups of four; the convener was thus able to dedicate more time to each group, creating a more personal relationship in which both lecturer and student could form more meaningful bonds. Smaller course sizes, then, allow for greater access and support and within this more supportive environment, creative methods are perhaps more acceptable and 'safe' to broach as all parties treat each other as colleagues. Our recommendations hinge on a state of mutual respect and encouragement in the student/lecturer relationship, as this works to unpick the culture of management-style, results-driven teaching within HE. This pedagogical shift benefits the student immensely, developing both practical skills and competency.

Thinking beyond the classroom

Thinking beyond the classroom when designing and delivering courses and assessments can help to change how academic work is framed. For us, being presented with a project with external stakeholders provided an opportunity for 'real research', and conceptualising projects in this way may encourage students also to think beyond the confines of academia. Being a part of the data production process for Penryn's Neighbourhood Plan had a noticeable impact on our personal development because the outcomes of our work were visible within our community. Including real-life scenarios or engaging with external stakeholders thus has the potential to improve the confidence, skills and reputation of students within the community and is infinitely valuable to the student, her/his institution and the wider community.

This method of thinking beyond the classroom applies not only to thinking of opportunities with external stakeholders, but also to developing skills that students might have after graduation. Providing the opportunity for 'real research' provides a basis for better understanding the application of research methods in a professional setting and provides vital work experience. Such practical skills are invaluable to graduands who are yet to enter the labour market and may act to reduce the previously-mentioned anxiety felt by students after graduating. A reduction in this anxiety helps to reassert education's role as a public and social good, as students become active members of their communities with essential skills that encourage a socially-innovative outlook. Institutions which endorse this model of 'students as researchers' can be assured of the positive values they have taught their students.

The benefits of thinking beyond the classroom can also stretch to the changing of university structures themselves. Whilst not solely attributed to Penrynopoly, the 'Community Committee' was heavily inspired by this project and its findings in relation to the need for the inclusion of students within discussions of the community. The creation of this structure is continuing to influence University-community relations in a positive way and would not have been possible if external stakeholders such as the Town Council and the Neighbourhood Planning Committee had not been involved. The ability to implement practical recommendations successfully, to the benefit of society, has immeasurable value and is of great credit to student-led projects.

Closing thoughts

Having related and evaluated our own experiences of being student researchers, we invite you to consider the following questions in the context of your own institution:

- How can you integrate innovative research methods into existing work?
- What problems might student involvement directly tackle?
- What skills might students gain as a result of this?

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