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Published Version

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Davies, M. (2019) Engagement parties: staff-student partnerships in the department of English Literature at the University of Reading. *The Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change*, 5 (1). ISSN 2055-4990 doi: 10.21100/jeipc.v5i1.984 Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/80859/>

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Identification Number/DOI: 10.21100/jeipc.v5i1.984
<<https://doi.org/10.21100/jeipc.v5i1.984>>

Publisher: Educational Development Unit, University of Greenwich

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Engagement parties: staff-student partnerships in the Department of English Literature at the University of Reading

Madeleine Kathryn Davies
The University of Reading

Abstract

This case study outlines a series of student-engagement activities between 2016 and 2018 in the Department of English Literature at the University of Reading. The discussion which follows connects with consistent strands within pedagogic literature that position 'student engagement' within institutional discourses and connect it with student attainment; it suggests that the term becomes most meaningful when it escapes these boundaries. This case study departs from much published material in this area in that it incorporates the views of the students who were involved in the activities discussed – in analyses of 'student engagement', students are surely the experts, yet they tend to be excluded from them. The discussion also connects with the contemporary fee-paying landscape of higher education institutions (HEIs), where fundamental re-evaluations of pedagogic principle, institutional policy and staff-student relationships are urgently required.

Organisational and historical context

At the University of Reading, as with most United Kingdom (UK) universities, student engagement through staff-student partnerships is embedded within discourses of student employability and experience. The Department of English Literature has recently focused on engaging students in projects outside the classroom; reflecting on this work, this discussion connects with the broad body of research literature assessing 'student engagement' and outlines the series of activities involved in one interpretation of the term.

The teaching model in the Department of English Literature at Reading is gradually transitioning from what Trowler terms a "*traditionalist model*", where "*teaching is about transmitting information*" in an "*information transfer/teacher-focused approach*", to "*progressivist*" and "*enterprise*" models: the former understands teaching in terms of a "*conceptual change/student-focused approach*", where "*students need to be engaged in, and with, learning – both in and out of the classroom*", and the latter views teaching as being involved in "*giving students the skills to thrive in their careers*" and engaging them in "*work-based/vocational learning*" (Trowler, 2010, p. 41). Having to adapt to a fee-paying landscape and to a saturated graduate job market largely accounts for pedagogic reassessment, particularly within non-vocational subject areas. Together with an emergent recognition that students view themselves as 'customers', the rhetoric of 'student engagement' has become the locus of School-level and institutional strategy.

'Student engagement' is, however, a contested concept and some definition of it is required to orientate this discussion. Hardy and Bryson demonstrate how the term shifts in meaning according to national higher education (HE) contexts. In the UK, following the Open University's report to HEFCE in 2009, the emphasis has been institutional: Hardy and Bryson (2010, p. 5) explain that, for the purpose of the OU study, student engagement was taken to refer to "*institutional and student union (SU) processes and practices, such as those relating to student representation and student feedback*". Statements such as the Leeds

Case Studies

Trinity University Student Engagement Strategy 2015-19 work within similarly institutional boundaries, locating ‘student engagement’ as a term that “*can mean many things to many people*”, but resolving into the following definition: “*in this context, we mean the active and informed participation of students in shaping and developing their student experience*”. The Curriculum Framework at the University of Reading works within similar perimeters of partnership and dialogue.

Discussion of pedagogy

The discussion presented here supports Harper and Quayle’s position, as cited by Trowler (HEA, 2010: p. 5): “Engagement is more than involvement or participation – it requires feelings and sense-making as well as activity [...] Acting without feeling engaged is just involvement or even compliance; feeling engaged without acting is dissociation.” The activity outlined in this case study suggests that understanding ‘student engagement’ principally within the framework of institutional discourse may well under-estimate the importance of engagement activities that rely on innovation, enterprise and partnership and that are capable of connecting ‘feeling’ and ‘sense-making’ with active ‘participation’.

In outlining one iteration of student engagement at the University of Reading, this discussion connects the contentious term with what is, perhaps, an unspoken subtext of institutional ‘engagement’ rhetoric – that is, the ‘feel-good’ factor so important to relationships within HE. The feel-good factor, however, is not market-neutral: recruitment, retainment and reputation rely on it. The discussion presented here suggests that pinning ‘student engagement’ to participation in institutional decision-making may tick various boxes, but cannot reach ‘hearts and minds’; nor can an equally chilly rhetoric that connects student engagement with academic achievement. Pedagogic literature returns consistently to this trope: Gunuc (2014, p.225) is representative in detecting “significant relationships between the students” academic achievement and student engagement “as well as between their academic achievement and especially the dimensions of cognitive engagement [and] behavioural engagement”. Most HE teachers would agree that they also identify a link between student engagement and academic attainment, but it is worth asking whether this is because ‘engagement’ is largely demonstrated by already high-achieving students who have the pre-existing disposition and incentive to participate actively in their education: from this perspective it becomes less a matter of engagement creating attainment than of attainment creating engagement. Further, as the work outlined in this case study demonstrates, student-engagement activity need not find sole meaning within this scale of virtues: of his involvement in the activities outlined in this discussion, for example, one final-year student comments, “Everything I’ve done has only been for the enjoyment and passion for doing it.”

Student-engagement literature tends to view the student to whom ‘engagement’ is ‘done’ as a classifiable, uniform and knowable entity and this is curiously at odds with a culture increasingly modelled on values of diversity. Trowler (op.cit., p.49) takes a dim view of such unreflective assumptions: “Much of the literature demonstrated reductionist or essentialised views of “the student”, with assumptions about sameness among ‘Y Generation’ students or ethnic minority students or older students as distinct from some essentialised view of ‘the traditional student’”. The discussion that follows remains mindful that ‘the student’ is a term encompassing a range of identities, perspectives and experiences and the methodology adopted here, where individual students comment on the impact of engagement activity, indicates a desire to avoid making claims to a ‘category’.

Case Studies

The pedagogic literature in this field works within a discursive field of 'strategy' and finds meaning within an 'agenda' geared towards institutional benchmarking and student 'success'. The activities discussed in this case study gained traction precisely because they did not originate in institutional 'targets': they developed through active collaboration between staff and students working on projects with which they felt connected and about which they cared. The value of the resulting feel good factor should not be minimised.

Specifications of 'the Project'

It is important to note that the project outlined in this study did not begin as 'a project': the activity began when a colleague and I organised a one-day symposium in 2016, entitled 'Postmodernist Biofictions'. The symposium connected with a final-year module on this topic and five students enrolled on it were drawn into event organisation. My colleague and I noticed how much these students thrived during this period – they subsequently volunteered to present papers at the symposium (discussing the work of Susan Sellers, Maggie Gee and David Lodge while the authors themselves sat in the audience). The event created extensive dialogue and suggested that the unstated exclusion of undergraduate students from research-led events, based on the assumption that they would have little interest in this activity, implicitly expressed troubling stereotypes of student identity. I decided to ensure that more students were brought into our work from that point on.

The subsequent events and activities took a variety of forms and they are summarised in Table 1, which also indicates the number of participating students and measures of 'impact'.

Event/activity title	No. of participating students (and depts)	Impact
Jess Phillips MP visit (November 2017)	76 students; 48 staff (auditorium capacity). Led by English Lit and Politics, the audience was drawn from across the University.	In seminars, excited student conversations relating to social justice; article in <i>Spark</i> , the student newspaper (student-authored); intense social-media activity.
'Celebrating Forgotten Women' (February 2018): a series of talks given by staff and students about women whose names had been erased from the historical record; the event included a student-led Suffrage exhibition and a party.	74 students; 45 staff; 6 student presenters (auditorium capacity). Led by Dept. of English Lit, Dept. of History, Dept. of Classics, Dept. of Politics, and 'Special Collections' (University library).	Significant university-wide publicity; the student organisational lead spoke on BBC Radio Berkshire about the event. The project won a Teaching and Learning Prize for Collaborative Excellence.

Case Studies

<p>‘Debates and Doughnuts’ (Jan – May 2018): student-led debate forum: staff arrange room bookings and doughnut acquisition: students manage publicity, decide on the topic and chair the debate.</p>	<p>100+ students; approximately 30 staff drawn from across the University.</p>	<p>Revival of the Reading University Student’s Union Feminist Society; renewed energy around diversity and inclusion conversations.</p>
<p>Staff-student presentation at the CAN conference, Winchester, April 2018.</p>	<p>2 co-presenters (English Lit); 1 staff member and 1 final-year student.</p>	<p>Student experience; positive feedback; student authored a University blog article on the event.</p>
<p><i>Second Sight: The Margaret Atwood Learning Journals</i> (May/June 2018): the production of a University of Reading book presenting edited student learning journal entries reflecting on the work of Margaret Atwood for a final-year module.</p>	<p>28 student contributors; 1 student editor; 1 student typographer (working with the ‘Real Jobs’ employability scheme in the Department of Typography).</p>	<p>This enterprise initiated a new student engagement model that is now being adopted by other departments in my School.</p>

Table 1. The project’s events and activities

These events involved students in collaborative work with staff on project management, event management, publicity, budget control, design, journalism, scheduling and presentations (a significant range of graduate skills). The activity has drawn in substantial numbers of students from across the University, established new partnerships and developed skills in both staff and students. The impact on student experience has been evident: one student who participated in several of the activities outlined above comments: *“Looking back at my university experience as a whole, the extra-curricular activities I’ve taken part in are what have shaped me most.”* Had the endeavour begun as ‘a student engagement project’, it is doubtful that it would have achieved this impact on students or gained the momentum that it did. Rather than constructing artificial mechanisms that ineffectively conceal institutional drivers, ‘student engagement’ may be a matter of following our students’ enthusiasm for working with us on projects with which they intellectually and imaginatively connect.

Implementation

Each activity or event was perceived as an individual opportunity rather than as forming part of a ‘master plan’ and each was funded from a different source (£3200 in total): the ‘Diversity and Inclusion Fund’ supported feminist events, the Vice-Chancellor’s Endowment Fund

Case Studies

funded public-facing events and our Teaching and Learning Deans funded the Learning Journal book project.

Partnership has been crucial to the success of each of the activities. Because the initial 'Postmodernist Biofictions' conference clearly demonstrated that engaging students in our research-led work benefited us all, I was eager to draw students into the next event, which involved the visit of Jess Phillips MP. I had invited her to the University because her book, *Everywoman* (2017), connects with ideas centralised on the modules I convene and I wanted our students to have the opportunity to hear her. I recruited second- and third-year students from the Departments of English Literature and Politics and worked with them to coordinate the event. Once again, the students' engagement and organisational efficiency was evident and the MP's talk created significant levels of publicity and conversation. This event itself spawned a third and then a fourth activity, neither of which I had anticipated. The third event, 'Celebrating Forgotten Women', was the initiative of a second-year English Literature student enrolled on a work-placement module; colleagues gladly contributed their time to delivering papers, taking their direction from a team of students motivated by passionate engagement in the issues that the event prioritised. The success of this affirming evening generated a new student-led staff-student partnership when two final-year literature students subsequently decided to revive the Student Union's Feminist Society which had lain dormant for three years. Staff and students worked together to host a fourth event called, 'Debates and Doughnuts: Is Feminism Dead?' which again involved the students in event organisation, public speaking and promotional activity. For this work, the students won a departmental prize and they have now also successfully re-launched the Student Union Feminist Society. One of this initiative's lead organisers comments: "*as well as improving my communication skills and confidence, which in hindsight prove to be invaluable CV-worthy skills, these events opened up an opportunity to enact important change*". Here, 'CV-worthy skills' are an effect rather than a motivator of participation, and 'change' is understood in terms of initiating debates about institutional practice rather than merely participating in them.

Our other partnerships have taken alternative forms. In April 2018, a final-year student travelled to the CAN conference at Winchester to co-deliver a paper with me; the student had been central to a series of student focus groups that I had convened to explore diversified assessment within my department, a project that connected with the forms of student engagement in institutional policy and 'problem-solving' flagged in the Leeds Trinity statement and also in the University of Reading's Curriculum Framework (*op.cit.*). Certainly, this student valued the sense of inclusion that participation in the focus groups produced: "*As a student, being asked for my thoughts on a topic that is so integral to the university experience was both pleasantly surprising and incredibly encouraging; it allowed me to feel as though I could really shape the programme for myself and others and it enabled me to engage in my degree in a way that I never had before.*" This institutionally focused interpretation of 'student engagement' is clearly significant but that this student was also able to participate collaboratively in the CAN presentation suggests that a more creative extension of what is usually a fairly functional term is possible. Furthermore, the learning experience that this conference participation gave the student was invaluable: "*The conference was a great learning opportunity, as it allowed me to listen to what other universities are doing and reflect on that from the student's perspective*". Additional benefits are less quantifiable: "*It was also lovely to spend time with one of my lecturers outside of the*

Case Studies

seminar room and I think it allowed for a very natural, open dialogue to take place about a whole range of things, which is harder to come by in formal contact hours."

Students were again central when I won funding to convert the online Learning Journals on one of my final-year modules into a University of Reading book. The journals had produced outstanding work and I wanted to create a memento for the students whose writing and art would be showcased; the book has also become Open Day material, a demonstration to colleagues of the value of diversifying assessment and a 'good practice' resource for future students on the module. Working with a Typography student, who is involved in the 'Real Jobs' employability scheme run from this department, my students edited and produced a book of which we are proud: everything in it, including the cover image art-work, has been created by our students. One of them comments: "*I know from speaking to the students featured within the book that they're genuinely thrilled and proud that their work is being celebrated in this way.*"

The events and activities have all required significant staff time-investment, but they have broken down perceived 'us-and-them' boundaries and forged new forms of understanding and support. One student involved in three of the projects discussed here expresses a similar point: "*Having the opportunity to work closely alongside a member of academic staff disrupts the conventional lecturer-student hierarchy and it was really gratifying to feel that we were equals in the delivery of the projects.*" The activities each confirm Hardy and Bryson's proposition (*op.cit.*, p.6) that "*it is not sufficient just to create relationships, it is trust relationships which make a difference*".

Evaluation and lessons learnt

The activities outlined here have produced numerous opportunities to reflect on assumptions about what 'student engagement' may mean. The events we generated will inevitably become involved in institutional discourse but, had they begun this way, it is unlikely that they would have achieved significant momentum: students recognise an agenda when they see one.

There remains, however, a substantial challenge involved in drawing students into engagement activity, which tends to be a self-selecting affair: many remain excluded – and exclude themselves – from the opportunities it brings to both staff and students. Research has been undertaken to attempt to understand students' hesitation to engage with staff on an extra-curricular, programme or institutional activity: Krause, for example, suggests that 'inertia' is a term appropriate to "*the state of being for a group of students*" who "*do not choose or see the need to waver from their familiar path to engage with people, activities or opportunities in the learning community*" (quoted by Trowler, *op.cit.*, p.4).

Our challenge is to tackle 'inertia': the survival of traditional humanities disciplines may depend upon tapping into our own enterprise and working with our students in partnerships that enrich our mutual knowledge. The experience in the Department of English Literature at the University of Reading suggests that student-engagement initiatives are capable of making a positive impact on students' engagement with issues within and beyond the classroom in terms that escape the usual perimeters of 'attainment', benchmarking, and institutional self-interest.

Case Studies

Acknowledgements

With thanks to third-year English Literature students, and recent graduates, at the University of Reading – Bethany Barnett-Sanders, Imogen Snell, Vicky Matthews and Jack Champion – whose views are quoted in this discussion.

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