

## CHAPTER 1

# Rethinking quality and excellence in teaching and learning in higher education

*Matt O'Leary, Tony Armstrong, Victoria Birmingham, Amanda French, Alex Kendall, Mark O'Hara and Katy Vigurs*

Centre for the Study of Culture and Practice in Education, Faculty of Health, Education and Life Sciences, Birmingham City University, Birmingham, UK.

### **Abstract**

'Quality' and 'excellence' are omnipresent terms permeating all areas of higher education, particularly in the context of teaching and learning. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has further intensified debates about conceptions of quality and excellence, particularly regarding universities' ability to adapt from face-to-face teaching to virtual provision and to respond to the growing mental health needs of its students. In this chapter, we draw on evidence from three distinct projects undertaken in one university in England, each involving academic staff and students co-researching and collaborating on areas of curriculum, pedagogy and mental health. What links these projects is our participatory approach to rethinking notions of quality and excellence in practitioner education, which empowers students and staff to work collaboratively to improve the quality of teaching and learning experiences.

### **Keywords**

higher education – teaching and learning – quality – excellence – collaboration – inclusive practice

## 1. Introduction

In this chapter, we share a series of innovations in practitioner education with the aim of opening up critical conversations about 'quality' and 'excellence' in higher education (HE) and interrogating what these terms might come to mean in the ruins of humanism and the aftermath of Black Lives Matter. We acknowledge the contested, contingent and heterogeneous nature of these terms and how they are subject to widely differing conceptualisations across HE (Harvey and Green 1993). Collini (2012, 109) argues that there is a 'vacuity' associated with words like 'excellence' as there is 'no such thing in the abstract'. We also maintain that such terms have become 'colonised by an accountability agenda' in recent years, which can have 'disempowering consequences for those interested in understanding and improving HE teaching further' (Wood and O'Leary 2019, 113). With this in mind, we refrain from providing static definitions of 'quality' and 'excellence' and instead invoke our readers to explore new ways of conceptualising them. Added to this, we reflect on the implications of what real institutional change around the student experience could mean if educators were able to embrace more inclusive and democratic approaches in their practice. The three illustrative vignettes included in this chapter all focus on dimensions of practice development within our own HE setting, the Faculty of Health, Education and Life Sciences (HELS) at Birmingham City University (BCU) in the Midlands of England.

The UK HE sector has seen rapid growth over the past 50 years, with participation levels increasing from around 10% of the population in the 1970s to 50.2% by 2017/18 (Kershaw 2019). Against the backdrop of this expansion, the HE policy and regulatory environment in the UK has grown increasingly competitive and marketised (McCaig 2017; McGettigan 2016). During this period, there has also been a shift away from student grants to student loans to cover tuition fees and living expenses, which has resulted in a repositioning of students as consumers. As a result of all these huge changes, HE managers and academics have found themselves under constant pressure to demonstrate 'quality' and 'excellence' in their provision, principally through various top-down government exercises such as the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), the Research Excellence Framework (REF), the Knowledge Exchange Framework and the National Student Survey (NSS). These frameworks have distorted teacher-student relations, positioning students as passive consumers and consolidating a pernicious hierarchy within and across universities. We argue, moreover, that they obscure the complexity of actual relations and

interactions between students, their peers and staff as they participate in their learning and teaching.

The projects discussed in this chapter all emerged out of the Centre for the Study of Practice and Culture in Education (CSPACE), the education research unit in the Faculty of HELS. A distinguishing feature and commitment of CSPACE's work is its focus on 'near to practice', participatory research, starting with our own staff, who are supported to become research-engaged, enabling them to interrogate and challenge dominant HE paradigms and ideologies. Practitioner research is the 'golden thread' that connects our research groups, specialisms and projects, impacting education policy and practice internally and externally across sectors. The work discussed in the three vignettes in this chapter exemplifies some of the practitioner research undertaken in CSPACE, along with the research interests of its staff.

## **2. Contextualising Birmingham City University**

Birmingham, the UK's second city, sits at the heart of the region and is the largest metropolitan authority in Europe. Birmingham City University (BCU) is a large, urban institution in the heart of the West Midlands. It is a 'post-1992' or 'modern' university, a term commonly used in English HE to refer to former polytechnics, institutes or colleges of higher education that were granted university status through the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. The diversity of BCU's local demographics is embraced by the University, which describes itself as 'the University *for* Birmingham'. The emphasis on the word 'for' here relates to a core commitment that underpins BCU's overarching mission as a locally engaging university that serves the needs and interests of its communities in the region. BCU's ethos reflects its position as the provider of choice for students from so-called 'non-traditional' backgrounds. This includes students who are often characterised in current policy discourses as first-generation, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds as well as students of colour, disabled and mature students.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in BCU's largest faculty with nearly 9,000 students, the Faculty of Health, Education and Life Sciences (HELs), in which the authors of this chapter all work. The HELs Faculty at BCU specialises in practitioner education in nursing and midwifery, teacher education and social work, along with a wide range of professions allied to health (e.g. speech and language therapy, physiotherapy, radiography

and paramedic science). Our courses are endorsed by professional bodies, were co-designed with employers, and have professional work placements built into them. It is also worth noting that most teaching staff have dual professional identities, coming from professional/practitioner backgrounds in health sciences, social care, nursing, midwifery and education. Some of them remain active professionals in these sectors as well as being university teachers and researchers. The majority of the students in the faculty study vocational courses to qualify them to become the health and education practitioners of the future.

HELS is one of the largest providers of teaching and nursing education in the UK and the majority of our students come from the West Midlands and continue to live and practise in the region after graduating. Our student population closely reflects the highly diverse communities we serve, with over half of our undergraduate students from black and minority ethnic (BAME) communities (55%). The majority of our students (84%) come from and continue to live in the region. They are also from areas with high levels of deprivation, as well as many being the first in their family to attend university (65%). We also cater for a large population of mature students (46%). In addition, 11% are disabled (self-declared) 1.4% are care leavers.

BCU's diverse student body is largely due to the success of the widening participation initiative, which was originally created to promote an ideal of greater inclusiveness and accessibility in UK HE. The majority of widening participation students in England attend 'post-1992' institutions like BCU where there is consequently a much more diverse HE student population, (Waller, Ingram and Ward 2017). However, there is evidence to suggest that the expansion of HE has given rise to the use of new deficit labels – such as the 'non-traditional student' and the 'commuter student' (Holdsworth 2006) – which are connected implicitly to social class (Reay, Crozier and Clayton 2010) and ethnicity (Alexander and Arday 2015; Donnelly and Gamsu 2018).

In this chapter, we challenge those student-based deficit discourses, seeking rather to explore how innovative institutional change can be adopted to meet the needs of this more diverse student body. Specifically, we focus on how particular difficulties adapting to the demands of HE arise because widening participation students have to fit into an education system not designed with their learning and development needs in mind (Ahmed 2012; Reay, Crozier and Clayton 2010). This is precisely the issue that the institutionally based projects described in this chapter seek to address in different ways by opening up new, discursive spaces and opportunities for different ways of thinking, being and doing

about teaching and learning in HE. This chapter therefore adds to the important debate about how universities like BCU can meet the needs and positively address the issues of a political economy of difference in their student body. More positively classified as ‘post-traditional’ (Aquino and BuShell 2020), these different categories of students are ‘complex individuals with multifaceted and multi-layered identities’ (Kasworm 2010, 16) which engrained binary labels such as ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ fail to reflect. An illustrative example of this in relation to student-hood is the idea that the ‘traditional’ undergraduate student is someone who studies full-time and lives away from home. In contrast to this entrenched orthodoxy, the so-called ‘non-traditional’ student (i.e. studies part-time and lives at home) at BCU is actually the ‘marginalised majority’ (Fulford 2020).

### **3. Introducing our vignettes**

Our vignettes, which explore our commitments to building a more diverse community, paying attention to the mental health and well-being of our students, and reorientating the purpose and dynamic of observing teaching and learning, are shared as triggers for discussions about power, positionality and identity in the modern university. We reappropriate ideas about ‘quality’ and ‘excellence’ as opportunity spaces for rethinking the being and doing of practitioner education towards the urgent project of reimagining more diverse, inclusive and democratic possibilities that better equip practitioners and students for alternative futures. This reimagining conceptualises development in teaching and learning as an ongoing, dialogic process that emerges from a situated understanding of the complexity of teaching and learning environments.

Our central provocation is that rather than indexing a priori metrics and indicators of so-called ‘quality’ (through the TEF, REF and KEF), excellence ‘in the ruins’ (MacLure 2011; St. Pierre & Pillow 2000) is about acknowledging and embracing the more complex, nuanced work of ‘staying with the trouble’ (Haraway 2016). Haraway makes a call to arms for us to learn to think together to open up the possibility of a more ‘response-able’ present: ‘learning to be truly present ... as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings’ (Haraway 2016, 1).

We draw on the illustrations of our practice below to explore what ‘response-able’ practice might begin to mean in our context. For Bayley,

these sorts of pedagogical questions are urgent ones, ‘no longer simply an “if” or a “why” but how. Simply HOW [sic]?’ (2018, 243). And we situate this chapter as a response to that ‘HOW’. We challenge ourselves to begin to reimagine practitioner education as an everyday, negotiated practice that resists traditional binaries, identities and positionalities (i.e. student/teacher, researcher/participant, observer/observee) of dominant humanist paradigms that have the effect of reproducing inequalities towards more ‘entangled modalit[ies] of co-laboring [sic]’ (Franklin-Phipps and Rath 2018). We conceptualise practice as reciprocity, or the kind of ‘odd-kin-making’ that Haraway (2016) imagines, a becoming together beyond binaries. We have argued elsewhere that this may be particularly important in the context of education in countries like England that have entangled, present but often silenced and suppressed histories of empire and colonialism (Kendall et al 2021). In our context in Birmingham, this may be particularly urgent - making kin with post-humanism argue Franklin-Phipps and Rath (2018, 270) refuses humanist stories of white exceptionalism ‘that center [sic] certain kinds of human subject and destroy others’ and to stay with the trouble as ‘a sustained consideration of ideas that challenge us’ in an ‘ethical encountering of and becoming response-able to and for suffering, dispossession, histories that hurt.’ (Franklin-Phipps and Rath 2018, 271).

We therefore invite readers to interact with our three vignettes as starting points for re-imagining quality and excellence in the aftermath.

#### **4. Vignette 1 – Reimagining teaching-learning relationships in higher education: towards the development of a radical and inclusive ‘Practitioner Learning Community’**

##### ***Introduction***

This vignette outlines one project’s attempt to open up a new practitioner-researcher space for thinking differently (more inclusively and ‘care-fully’) about learning and teaching in HE. This involved a collective re-thinking about relations within academic learning communities and developed a process for creating a collaborative research team, comprising both undergraduate students and undergraduate teaching staff, of and for one faculty. This was an internal faculty research project, commissioned and supported by the faculty’s leadership team in 2020-21, which stemmed from the UK National Student Survey (NSS) data that provided messages about the way that students experienced studying and everyday life in the faculty. Moving

forwards, the faculty wants to foster and sustain an explicitly welcoming and supportive 'Practitioner Learning Community' amongst students and staff. It is hoped that the development of this concept will inform different ways of thinking about and practising learning and teaching and address the concerns illustrated in **Figure 1**.

< Insert Figure 1: 'Rationale for the research' here >

### ***Conceptualising the aims and theoretical focus of the project***

The main aim of this project was to recruit ten undergraduate students and ten undergraduate lecturers (along with two research facilitators) from across the faculty to create a diverse team of practitioner-researchers and to explicitly build a working example of an inclusive practitioner learning community over a period of six months. Many of the team members were new to social and educational research. Everyone within the team was considered and explicitly encouraged to identify as a co-researcher rather than as a member of staff or student, thus disrupting conventional roles and identities in HE. It is also important to acknowledge the wider context of the COVID19 pandemic, as during the project's life, members of the team variously experienced personal loss and grief, loneliness and isolation, the pressures of juggling work, study and caring responsibilities and many were also working on the frontline in clinical health and education settings. It also meant that the entire project was conducted remotely using an online platform. We never met face-to-face.

In order to get to work as research facilitators, we started by considering our roles and how they differed to the co-researchers. As research-facilitators, we were positioned as having knowledge and skills to facilitate the research process but emphasised the importance and value of the knowledge which would be gained from our participant practitioners and students who were not researchers themselves. We were thoughtful about the philosophy and values that might need to underpin the development of this new and differently relational HE space, particularly during a global pandemic. We found it helpful to use a range of connected and overlapping theoretical ideas to set the project's intentions. These included the concepts of critical pedagogy (Freire 1972; Apple 2011, Crean and Lynch 2011), 'doing risk' (Kitching 2011), 'ethics of care' (O'Brien 2011; Breeze and Taylor 2020), border crossing and 'little stories' (Cotton and Griffiths 2007).

Critical pedagogy is a democratic process of education which encourages critical consciousness as the basis for transformative collective action. Here we invoked Paulo Freire's calls for justice and transformation *through* relationship, reflective dialogue and responsive practice. This required us to be aware, responsive and attuned to the conditions that we and others were experiencing. Weekly meetings and a flexible approach to the running of the project functioned as a 'care-full' research community which adapted to the context of the researchers rather than being confined a traditional working pattern. There was also the concept of 'doing risk' which acknowledges that this sort of work is not neutral, rather it is critical and political and this can often be uncomfortable. It was possible that the practitioner-researchers would need individual and collective courage in order to think, feel and act differently. For example, by immersing themselves in new areas of literature, practitioner-researchers might encounter research which contradicted or made them question tacit assumptions of their practice.

The concept of 'ethics of care' foregrounds the significance of emotions and relationships to the process of education. Emotional responsiveness and affective practices are crucial aspects of pedagogy. However, care and relationality are often not visible, recognised, valued, or given discursive space within the academy (Breeze and Taylor 2020). The significance of border crossing is an idea about becoming critical through the act of seeing life from an altered perspective and building alliances across difference. And finally, the concept of 'little stories' means situating an individual's voice within collective narratives, making a connection between deeply personal, everyday stories and the profoundly political. In this project, it was in these theoretical threads that we felt 'radical' possibilities lay; by 'radical' we refer to moving away from conventional delineations between lecturers and students, replacing the 'them' and 'us' with just an 'us' as an inclusive learning community. These theoretical ideas raised some key questions for the project. Some of the key ones we were immediately faced with were: How would we build trust and rapport between co-researchers? How would we create a supportive and safe space? What conditions would we need to create to build meaningful dialogue? What would we need to do to ensure a critical, reflective and reflexive environment? How would we identify and tackle issues of power and privilege? What needs to be in place to stimulate collective activity? Our feeling was that if we raised and tackled these questions, we would have a good chance at co-creating an inclusive practitioner learning community. We did not know whether it would work and at times it felt uncertain and risky.



***Developing our researcher community and collaborative methodology***

Once the 20 co-researchers were recruited, building trust and rapport between the facilitators and each individual co-researcher was prioritised. The facilitators set up initial email conversations with each co-researcher to get to know them as individuals by asking questions like 'What should we do to make sure the project is accessible and engaging for you?', 'Is there anything about your involvement in the project that you are worried about?', 'What main communities or groups do you feel you belong to?'. These interactions were then incrementally followed up with individual one-to-one online meetings to welcome them to the team. Everyone was then asked to create a personal 'fact file' as a written document, picture or video to introduce themselves to the rest of the team. We then co-created a set of team values and communication ground rules. Everyone was asked to put forward their top three principles for achieving an inclusive and positive team experience. The 60 responses were transformed into 22 principles, which grounded our own bespoke, team micro-culture. Everyone also wrote and shared a reflexive position statement at the beginning of project, which was reviewed and updated at the end. This relational groundwork was crucial and allowed trust, understanding, empathy and rapport to be built quickly within the team.

We used Microsoft Teams to co-create an online team space to organise our work and communications. An inclusive and engaging digital space was achieved, with regular interaction encouraged and modeled by the facilitators. The facilitators set out to actively acknowledge and validate each person's contribution to the team space. Each week there was both a formal team meeting (recorded for those who could not attend) and an informal drop-in session. This approach ensured that participation was flexible and acknowledged the competing pressures and priorities being juggled by each person. As a research team, we conducted a collaborative international literature review on the following topics: students' experiences of time and space; student belonging and sense of identity; dynamics and communications between students and staff (themes that emerged from an analysis of the NSS data).

The team read and critiqued over 60 research papers and chapters. Research-informed PowerPoint presentations were created for each topic area to communicate what the team had learned and to identify questions that had arisen from the collective reading exercise. On the back of the literature review, the team then identified three areas for further research within our faculty: What does it feel like to walk in our

students' shoes? Exploring what meaningful relationships look like between staff and students and investigating diversity and inclusion praxis. The team co-designed interview questions for undergraduate students. This was a supportive and iterative process. We piloted the student interview questions within our team during a formal meeting, which was a valuable research learning opportunity. On gaining ethical approval the team members conducted 25 in depth interviews by email with undergraduate students in the faculty to find out what it is like to walk in their shoes as a student. Our next steps are to present our findings back to faculty to explore ways this data can be utilised to move the student experience towards being more collaborative.

### ***Conclusion***

This vignette suggests we were successful in modelling a radical practitioner-researcher community in/for our faculty, by foregrounding positive relationships for practitioner learning, by explicitly striving for collaboration that is 'care-full', and by moving from a culture of 'them and us' to simply 'us'. Success also comes in the form of how this research will be used in the future. It raises the question of what might happen if relations of care (and its associated labour) between staff and students were visible, valued, resourced and equitably distributed within our universities? What would change? How might the quality of teaching and learning be affected? All these questions will be considered when working with faculty senior leadership to integrate the findings into future staff development. Additionally, from a methodological perspective, we anticipate that collaborative research between students and staff could be considered part of the continued journey on the path towards a culture of 'us'.

## **5. Vignette 2 – Postgraduate Mental Health Research Project**

### ***Introduction***

This second vignette is an account of a research project that explored the quality of doctoral students' (both PhD and EdD) experience as it specifically related to mental health whilst undertaking their doctorate at BCU. In addition, the research also intended to contribute, through student and staff engagement, to institutional knowledge making and the imagining of new ways in excellent doctoral practice including alternative futures for doctoral students within the university. The research project took place between September 2018 and July 2020. The main period of

data collection and analysis intriguingly captured the experience of the participants just before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and well before its mental health implications for students became apparent. The research therefore identified what was 'normal' in the pre-pandemic phase rather than doctoral students' mental health challenges in *extremis* under the atypical pandemic conditions.

### ***Research Aim and Context***

The overall aim of the research was to examine and evaluate the mental health of doctoral students via a mixed methods approach which included an online survey for students and focus groups with both students and supervisors. Initial informal reconnaissance work was carried out by the research team before the research started. This informal fact finding and scoping exercise consisted of listening to student concerns and taking field notes within the everyday context of supervisions, seminars and at social learning gatherings. The reconnaissance work indicated that a significant number of students, probably around a third, were experiencing mental discomfort during their doctoral journeys and this was often triggered by milestone type events and periods of writing and assessment intensity, in addition to the pressure from longer term institutional policies, processes and procedures. However, these circumstances were far from unique to BCU students, as recent studies identified an emerging trend of disconcerting levels of psychological distress among postgraduates with 32% of PhD students at risk of having or developing a common disorder (Levecque et al. 2017).

BCU is a teaching intensive university with a focus on employment in the regional economy. As a former polytechnic, BCU also inherited a small and underdeveloped doctoral research culture and community. However, it is worth acknowledging that in the three years prior to the project, BCU experienced a 100% growth rate in its doctoral student numbers, reaching a total of 542 at the time of the research. Perhaps significantly though, this surge in recruitment was not matched by accompanying investment in provision and/or infrastructure. Indeed, with the noted surge in student numbers, the distribution of doctoral students across the institution had also become increasingly uneven with the majority of part-time students, in particular, located in one of the four Faculties, which also had the lowest number of supervisors available. Full-time students tended to predominate in two of the four Faculties with a greater availability of supervisor capacity.

### ***Theory and methodology***

On the theoretical and methodological level, the research project consciously focused on the ordinary lived experience of the everyday for the students in space and time, deploying the approach of Henri Lefebvre (2002, 2014) and rhythmanalysis. This theoretical and methodological stance was a deliberate swerve away from the more conventional psychological approaches that are often applied to the investigation of doctoral students' mental health and focused instead on the doctoral rhythms of the participants. The rationale for the choice of a rhythmanalytical approach was twofold. Firstly, it reflected the research interests of the research team. Secondly, it allowed the research team, all of whom were practising doctoral supervisors, to adopt an innovative lens through which to explore the student experience and doctoral rhythms as both an object for research and a mode of analysis.

The online survey deployed at the outset used a Likert-type scale of questions and free text responses, which was distributed to all registered BCU doctoral students. The survey produced a typical response rate of just over a third (34% - n= 186). This constituted a useful baseline for the data and stimulated further investigation. Following the survey, focus groups were carried out and facilitated by members of the research team, with a total of four sessions for students and two sessions for supervisors, all of which produced a substantial amount of qualitative data. The focus groups were conducted across the University's two main campuses at different times to enable attendance from both full-time and part-time students and supervisors.

### ***Key findings***

It is perhaps worth saying that the research team certainly anticipated at least some troubling data from their early reconnaissance work but they were quite unprepared for and indeed unsettled by the poignancy and cathartic dynamics of much of the data, particularly from the focus group stage and accompanying evidence. The data identified the everyday rhythms of the doctoral student experience, including their negative embodiment for students, the pulse of unresolved relationship tensions with supervisors and others, and the relentless cycle of institutional antagonisms. For example, it was both concerning and surprising to the researchers that 65% of students felt anxious prior to supervision sessions. Students were also insistent that supervisors were poorly prepared or unresponsive to the growing level of mental health issues they experienced. In some cases, students experienced debilitating levels

of anxiety expressed in terms of bodily pain, sleep deprivation, self-harm and eating disorders.

Another concerning and perhaps surprising finding was the seminal importance given to space for the students particularly those undertaking full-time doctorates. Some respondents claimed that the recent institutional removal of a dedicated student space at the central campus of the university had had a detrimental effect on student mental health as it had completely undermined any sense of belonging or community which had been carefully and slowly built up over the years. In short, some students felt that their specific needs, space and contribution were not a priority within the University. In a similar way, it was also felt that the internal university systems presented significant barriers to research development and tended to be disablers rather than enablers to progress. For example, this was particularly the case it was claimed with the research integrity and ethical review processes and the institutional pulse and pressure of progress assessment panel events which were requirements for all doctoral students.

What emerges from the research is therefore a certain rhythm of pained resentment from those who felt marginalised and trivialised within their own organisation. However, this was not simply a consequence of growing student numbers but also related to the increased diversity of needs. For example, 81% of students found balancing other pressing commitments in their lives, such as paid work and family responsibilities with their doctorate either difficult or very difficult. This was a particularly noticeable issue with part-time students who were often employed in all education sectors locally. Indeed, those part-time students employed at BCU itself felt that they did not have the quality and depth of appropriate time made available by the institution to dedicate to their research and their researcher development. Furthermore, this group regarded themselves as being caught up and entangled in a particularly pernicious doctoral rhythm which impacted on their everyday. This rhythm consisted of anxieties around rising career expectations in HE of doctoral engagement within a context of heavy and unsustainable teaching workloads and a low functional level of institutional sensitivity or even awareness about their position.

### ***Recommendations***

The research explored the quality of the doctoral student experience at BCU as it related to a growing concern with mental health and

undertaking a doctorate. The research was also an example of and a contribution towards institutional knowledge making and the rethinking of excellence in doctoral practice within a particular post-92 context i.e. a 'modern' university, similar to technical universities in Europe. Therefore, as a result of the research, four substantive recommendations were produced for BCU to take forward. The first was that all students should be allocated a physical space to carry out their work at the city centre campus, which positions them clearly as a community member and a working priority within the organisation. Secondly, training should be available and made mandatory for supervisors regarding student mental health needs and basic mental health literacy. Thirdly, supervisors should have the opportunity for debriefing outside of their own supervisory teams to discuss student issues, concerns and progress. This would help to 'thicken' the layers of practical support for students and the related institutional learning, knowledge and expertise as part of a broader process of distributive supervision. Finally, it was recommended that a dedicated doctoral student mental health specialist should be recruited to provide training, development and support to both students and supervisors and this should be treated as an immediate institutional employment priority.

## **6. Vignette 3 – Improving Teaching and Learning through Collaborative Observation**

### ***Introduction***

Debates about quality and excellence in teaching and learning in HE have featured prominently on the education policy agenda of governments worldwide in recent years. In the UK, for example, HE providers are increasingly required to demonstrate how they monitor the quality of teaching and what measures they are taking to improve it. However, much policy focus has tended to promote an instrumentalist model of teaching and learning, with teaching staff often perceived as the 'deliverers' of knowledge and skills and students as the 'consumers'. As a counter narrative to this conceptualisation of the teacher-student interrelationship, this vignette discusses the development of an innovative partnership between academic staff and students in a recent project, where students' inclusion is reconceptualised from passive consumer to active collaborator through the shared lens of observation. It explores the conceptual and theoretical framework of a cycle of

collaborative observation (CoCO), explaining its rationale, how it differs to conventional observation approaches, along with the methodology devised to introduce and prepare staff and students for working with this approach to observation in an English university.

### ***Conceptualising the focus and methodology of the project***

*Improving teaching and learning through collaborative observation* was an innovative project undertaken at BCU from 2016 to 2018, funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. The project comprised five case studies of undergraduate courses across a single faculty, with each case study including two academic staff and two student participants for each observation cycle. The five case studies included in the project were: 1) Adult Nursing; 2) Child Nursing; 3) Early Childhood Studies; 4) Primary Education and 5) Radiotherapy.

The project used the shared lens of classroom observation as a reciprocal reference point for exploring teaching and learning at course level. The primary aim of the project was to create a sustainable and collaborative model of observation, which would empower students to play an active role in shaping their learning experience and result in the development of a framework for continuous improvement in teaching and learning practices across the programmes involved in the study. As part of the project, we therefore developed our Cycle of Collaborative Observation (CoCO) (**Figure 2**). CoCO provided a common frame of reference for staff and students to collaborate, as well as embodying the thinking and methodology that we wanted to in our approach to improving teaching and learning. We drew on the latest research and practice in the field of observation, learning from the pitfalls of how it has been previously misappropriated as a punitive performance management tool in education systems (e.g. O’Leary and Wood 2017).

< **Insert Figure 2: ‘Cycle of Collaborative Observation’ here** >

The project was underpinned by the belief that improving student learning requires teachers and students to develop an awareness and understanding about learning collaboratively in the context of their programme. Shaped and informed by current research and cutting-edge practice in the field of observation, we proposed an innovative and collaborative model of observing teaching and learning, involving students and staff. Our model was driven by shared values around

developing and promoting excellence amongst staff and students. A key feature of this innovative and experimental project was the way in which it aimed to reconceptualise and reconfigure the use of observation as a method to enhance teaching and learning.

The conceptual and methodological framework of our project design started with us reconceptualising and reconfiguring the way in which we planned for the project's participants to engage with observation as a method for studying and enhancing teaching and learning. Severing the umbilical link between observation and its use as a method of assessing teaching and teacher performance was central to this process. We were convinced that unless we were able to remove observation from the assessment context, this would jeopardise our efforts to capture situated examples of authentic teaching and learning and in turn to create a safe, trusting and collaborative environment for reflection and dialogue between staff and students (e.g. O'Leary and Savage 2019). Similarly, when it came to student involvement, our approach put student voice and their active involvement in informing and shaping teaching and learning at the heart of this innovation. As a counter narrative to the instrumentalist model of teaching and learning with academic staff perceived as the deliverers of knowledge and students as the consumers, this project re-conceptualised teaching and learning as reciprocal social practices that require the involvement of both students and teachers to build a shared contextualised understanding in order to make meaningful improvement.

### ***Data collection and key findings***

Over the course of the two iterations of CoCO (**Figure 1**), students and staff worked through closely alongside each other to co-investigate areas of practice pertinent to their respective programmes. Each case study produced a large volume of rich data, which included initial reflections from all student and staff participants, recordings of the pre- and post-observation meetings, observation field notes, individual reflective write-ups and recordings of evaluation meetings with the project researchers at the end of each cycle of observation. We employed a two-phase approach to the data analysis for this study. Phase one involved each case study team and the project researchers working closely to familiarise themselves with the discrete data generated in each case study and to make sense of each case study's situated data. This was an important step as the data recorded were produced *during* the project in authentic and organic oral exchanges between participants, including observation notes



and personal reflections. Phase two involved the project researchers extending the data analysis across all case studies to develop a set of common themes. The two researchers initially analysed the case study data independently, identifying overarching themes that collectively reflected key aspects of student-staff collaboration, which were shared with the staff participants.

Analysis of the rich data gathered during this project revealed that teachers and students learn about teaching and learning by interacting with their peers and with each other, by sharing their insights and experiences in collaborative, cooperative forums. In other words, teaching and learning are inherently socially situated practices. As Strom and Viesca (2020, 13) argue, 'research activity needs to be situated and local, with a focus on the particular'. It therefore makes sense that any attempt to enhance understanding of and improve these practices is best served by allowing its key participants to be part of a collective community in which they are encouraged to engage in a process of dialectic pedagogical knowledge and relationship development. Creating the conditions in which teachers and students have the opportunity to examine their understanding and experiences of teaching and learning and open them up to dialogic exchange is fundamental to developing greater awareness of the strengths and areas for development in their practices. In the context of teaching and learning, approaches like CoCO can help to create the shared spaces in which teachers can come together with their peers and equally with their students to engage in reflexive pedagogical dialogue on their classroom teaching and learning. In turn, this can lead to collective sense making, which can make a valuable contribution to both students and their teachers in understanding and developing their practices.

To conclude this vignette, we ask readers to consider two questions. How can we challenge and replace metrics-based approaches to monitoring and assessing the 'quality' of teaching and learning? How can we create and nurture authentic and sustainable practice that involves students and staff collaboratively generating meaningful teaching and learning experiences?

## 7. Discussion and concluding thoughts

To foster inclusivity and sense of belonging, HE practitioners must be committed (and supported) to create opportunities for sustained and meaningful engagement with difference in their teaching. Our projects into the student experience and mental health suggest that modern universities, with their diverse student cohorts, need to work harder to make new spaces for all students, which allow them to feel more that they belong within and can relate more positively and agentively to HE demands and expectations. Our work on teacher observations challenges the culture of performativity and compliance demanded by the current neoliberal landscape by creating a more collaborative and collegiate system around 'quality' and excellence' in teaching for the staff who actually deliver it. Taken together, these projects offer any university a chance to reconsider how best to deliver quality and excellence for their students in meaningful and practical ways.

As we begin to reclaim our lives from the stranglehold of the pandemic that has regulated how and what we have been able to do over the last two years, we do so with the anticipation of being able to regain a sense of 'normality'. Yet, at the same time, we are even more cognisant now than ever of how the pandemic has created the conditions for us to interrogate and to reassess who we are, how we think and what we do as educators and researchers. Put simply, despite the upheaval and uncertainty, the pandemic has presented us with an opportunity for rethinking and reconfiguring our sense of 'being' and 'doing'. It would be an opportunity missed if we were simply to return to our dependence on the linear systems of metrics-based performance data and the reductionist approaches to learning about and improving teaching and learning that have dominated education internationally in recent decades. Such systems and approaches merely serve to perpetuate the status quo of Western humanist traditions and/or the 'what works' movement in education, which in turn closes down alternative ways of knowing and doing. If we are to embody what it means to be '*response-able*' and '*care-full*' educators and researchers, then we would argue that we need to begin by challenging, resisting and reconceptualising some of the traditional binaries, identities and positionalities of dominant paradigms that exacerbate the status quo.

## References

- Ahmed, S. (2012). *On being included: Racism and diversity in institutional life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Alexander, C. and Arday, J. (2015). *Aiming Higher: Race, Inequality and Diversity in the Academy*. London: AHRC: Runnymede Trust, (Runnymede Perspectives).
- Apple, M. W. (2011). 'Paulo Freire and the Tasks of the Critical Educational Scholar/Activist', in A. O'Shea, A. and M. O'Brien (Eds) (2011), *Pedagogy, Oppression and Transformation in a 'Post-Critical' Climate*, London: Bloomsbury, 36-50.
- Aquino, K.C. and Bushell, S. (2020). Device usage and accessible technology needs for post-traditional students in the e-learning environment. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 68 (2), 101-116.
- Bayley, A. (2018). Posthumanism, Decoloniality and Re-Imagining Pedagogy, *Parallax*, 24(3), 243-253.
- Bell, L. and Stevenson, H. (2006). *Educational Policy: Process, themes and impact*. London: Routledge.
- Bolton, P. and Hubble, S. (2019). *The Post-18 Education Review (the Augar Review) recommendations*. House of Commons Library. [The Post-18 Education Review \(the Augar Review\) recommendations - House of Commons Library \(parliament.uk\)](https://www.parliament.uk/research-and-factsheets/2019-07-18-the-post-18-education-review-the-auغار-review-recommendations).
- Braidotti, R. (2013). *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Breeze, M. and Taylor, Y. (2020). *Feminist Repetitions in Higher Education: Interrupting Career Categories*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, Switzerland.
- Colebrook, C. (2002). *Understanding Deleuze*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin.
- Collini, S. (2012). *What are universities for?* London: Penguin.
- Cotton, T. and Griffiths, M. (2007). Action research, stories and practical philosophy, *Educational Action Research*, 15(4), 545-560.
- Crean, M. and Lynch, K. (2011). Resistance, Struggle and Survival: The University as a Site for Transformative Education, in A. O'Shea and M. O'Brien (Eds) *Pedagogy, Oppression and Transformation in a 'Post-Critical' Climate*, London: Bloomsbury, 51-68.
- Donnelly, M. and Gamsu, S. (2018). *Home and away: Social, ethnic and spatial inequalities in student mobility*. London: The Sutton Trust.
- Franklin-Phipps, A. and Rath, C. L. (2018). 'How to become less deadly: a provocation to the fields of teacher education and educational research', *Parallax*, 24(3), 268-272.
- Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, translated by Myra Bergman Ramos, Middlesex, UK: Penguin.

- Fulford, L. (2020). *Stories from a marginalised majority: an exploration of local live at home students and their experiences of 'student-hood'*, Unpublished EdD thesis, Faculty of Education, Health and Life Sciences, Birmingham City University, UK.
- Haraway, D. (2016). *Staying with the trouble*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Harvey, L. and Green, D. (1993). 'Defining Quality', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 18(1), 9-34.
- Holdsworth C. (2006). "'Don't you Think you're Missing Out, Living at Home?'" Student Experiences and Residential Transitions'. *The Sociological Review*, 54(3), 495-519.
- Kasworm, C. (2010). Adult learners in a research university: negotiating undergraduate student identity, *Adult Education Quarterly*. 60 (2), 143-160.
- Kendall, A., Puttick, M-R., and Wheatcroft, L. (2021). "'I don't want them to feel like we're part of the establishment": teachers' learning to work with refugee families as entangled becomings'. *Professional Development in Education* 47(2-3), 510-523.
- Kershaw, A. (2019). 'More than half of young people now going to university, figures show', *The Independent*. Article published online 27<sup>th</sup> September 2019. Available at: [More than half of young people now going to university, figures show | The Independent | The Independent](#). Accessed 27.11.2021.
- Kitching, K. (2011). Taking Educational Risks With and Without Guaranteed Identities: Freire's 'Problem-Posing' and Judith Butler's 'Troubling', in A. O'Shea and M. O'Brien (Eds) *Pedagogy, Oppression and Transformation in a 'Post-Critical' Climate*, London: Bloomsbury, 102-119.
- Lefebvre, H. (2002). *Critique of the everyday life vol. 2: Foundations for a sociology of the everyday*. London and New York: Verso.
- Lefebvre, H. (2014). *Rhythmanalysis*. London: Continuum.
- Levecque, K., Anseel, F., De Beucklaer, A., Van Det Hayden, J., Gisle, L. (2017). 'Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students', *Research Policy*, 46(2017), 868-879.
- McCaig, C. (Ed). (2018). 'Continuity and Discontinuity on the Road to Risk and Exit: Stages of Marketisation in Comparative Policy Analysis', in *The Marketisation of English Higher Education (Great Debates in Higher Education)*. Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited.
- MacLure, M. (2011). 'Qualitative Inquiry: Where are the ruins?' *Qualitative Inquiry*, 17(10), 997-1005.
- McGettigan, A. (2013). *The Great University Gamble: Money, Markets and the Future of Higher Education*. London: Pluto Press.
- NNS (2021) *National Student Survey*, Available at: <https://www.thestudentsurvey.com/about-the-nss/> [Accessed 01/12/2021]

- O'Brien, M. (2011). 'Towards a Pedagogy of Care and Well-Being: Restoring the Vocation of Becoming Human Through Dialogue and Relationality', in A. O'Shea and M. O'Brien (Eds) *Pedagogy, Oppression and Transformation in a 'Post-Critical' Climate*, London: Bloomsbury, 14-35.
- O'Leary, M. and Savage, S. (2019). 'Breathing new life into the observation of teaching and learning in higher education: moving from the performative to the informative', *Professional Development in Education*, 46(1), 145-159.
- O'Leary, M. and Wood, P. (2017). 'Performance over professional learning and the complexity puzzle: lesson observation in England's further education sector', *Professional Development in Education*, 43(4), 573-591.
- Reay, D., Crozier, G., and J. Clayton (2010). "Fitting in" or "standing out": working-class students in UK higher education, *British Educational Research Journal* 32(1), 1-19.
- St. Pierre, E. and Pillow, W. (2000). (eds) *Working the Ruins: Feminist Poststructural Theory and Methods in Education*, London: Routledge.
- Strom, K. J and Mitchell Viesca, K. (2021). 'Towards a complex framework of teacher learning-practice', *Professional Development in Education*, 47(2-3), 209-224.
- Waller, R., Ingram, N. and Ward, MRM. (Eds). (2018). *Higher education and social inequalities: University admissions, experiences, and outcomes*. London: Routledge.
- Wood, P. and O'Leary, M. (2019). 'Moving beyond teaching excellence: Developing a different narrative for England's higher education sector', *International Journal of Comparative Education and Development*, 21(2), 112-126.