Higher Education Academy

TRANSFORMING TEACHING
INSPIRING LEARNING

HEA Action-Research: Sector Case Studies (2018)

Contents

Foreword

To complement the exploration of action research given in the *HEA action research practice guide* (Arnold and Norton 2018), we offer a collection of case studies to provide a snapshot of the types of action research being undertaken across the higher education (HE) sector. These case studies were submitted by colleagues following a single request on a mailing list.[1] The cases incorporate diverse themes including curriculum development, interactive teaching methods, use of technology in teaching, students as researchers, teacher education, student transition, and inclusive practice. These issues offer a glimpse into the concerns of higher education practitioners.

Each case study provides an individual's story of their action research journey. These accounts are not full research reports. They provide personal insights into the work that was undertaken, assessments of the impact that their research has had on practice, and a summary of any lessons learnt in the process.

As we read these accounts, we were struck by the way that action research is providing a vehicle for established and new staff alike to develop, explore, question, and evidence their practice. Some of the accounts provided are from experienced pedagogues, and others are from those researching and writing publically for the first time.

[1] A call for contributions went out via the Staff and Educational Developers Association (SEDA) list.

We were struck by the way in which action research is being used to resolve and understand 'wicked problems' of many kinds, from the micro-challenges of the classroom (e.g. those experienced in Jean Egbegi's case study on getting her students to read, and Helen Scanlan's case study on forming in-class groups), to the dilemmas of the course team or discipline area (e.g. Helen Bedford's work to internationalise the midwifery curriculum in her institution), through to institutional dilemmas (e.g. Chris Little's challenge of engaging students in research and Sue Watling's drive to increase digital competence among staff). It is clear from the case studies that the balance of action and research varies according to the context and the intentions of the researcher; this illustrates a point emphasised in the accompanying practice guide (Arnold and Norton 2018) about action research taking many forms. The cases also show that action research is taking place in many parts of the higher education sector with contributions from colleges and universities, and from both professional service staff and academic colleagues. This is particularly pleasing.

It is heartening to see the benefits of action research being articulated by colleagues from their personal experience. Again, this brings to life some of the points made in the practice guide. The personal testimonies share details of individuals: building closer relationships with students through the research process; refreshing their own research skills and becoming more confident to support students with research; deepening their understanding of a particular topic of importance; developing networks of colleagues and communities of practice as the research is undertaken; developing a better understanding and appreciation of those that they work closely with; and, critically, enhancing aspects of practice. Some projects appear to have a multiplier effect too, for example, Helen Bedford's work on internationalising the curriculum is informing a review of standards and expectations beyond the university, while Wendy Garnham's work on using interactive technologies has spread beyond her own discipline area.

It is also pleasing to see that action research is being used to disrupt existing practices and challenge existing practices, beliefs, and assumptions. Two separate case studies bring challenge to the locus of power around research: Geof Hill challenges the traditional dissemination channels for research, and Chris Little constructively disturbs the norms on students taking a leading role in research. There is also some quiet disruption to curriculum norms; to conceptions of how students should be supported; to the way that staff development is organized; to attitudes and beliefs about disability, technology, student engagement; and to possible hidden elitism in student opportunities.

Many of the contributors provide useful tips to others who may be undertaking, or considering, action research. Their advice provides useful reminders for new and experienced action researchers alike. Key reminders include the calls to remember the power and practical importance of working with others, a note to recognise that being objective may not be necessary, remembering that 'messiness' is all part of the process of sense-making and that it will pass, and a suggestion that a learning journal can be a helpful means of supporting reflection. A favourite piece of advice, though, comes from Keren Coney who advocates that colleagues just "go for it." It is clear from this collection that colleagues have at some point made the decision to just *go for it*, with fruitful results emerging.

We agreed that it is delightful to read set of case studies such as this since it encourages and inspires personal reflections in the reader. As we considered these accounts, we separately made mental notes of new things that we might do as a result of the spark that is inevitably lit when the practice of others is made visible. Having a window into the work, priorities and approaches of others through the lens of action research can shine a new light onto personal practice.

Pulling these case studies together has shown us that there is a great need for us to continue to share our experiences of action research and lessons learned, whether these are from first-time researchers undertaking very small projects, or cross institutional teams making seismic shifts in the status quo.

We would like to thank all contributors to this compilation and acknowledge the assistance of colleagues on the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) mailing list for encouraging submissions.

Lydia Arnold

Lin Norton

1. Investigating the impact of work placements for individuals with an autistic spectrum disorder at Keele University

Keren Coney, Keele University (k.a.coney@keele.ac.uk)

Description of the case study

During the academic year 2016-17, an action research study that explored the impact of work experience placements on students and a graduate with an autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) was carried out at Keele University.

The issue: work-related challenges for individuals with an ASD

This study relates to the learning and teaching issue of student engagement. There is substantial background literature that suggests graduates with an ASD have poor employment outcomes (e.g. Whitehouse *et al*. 2009; Hendricks 2010; Bancroft *et al*. 2012). It is also recognised that universities have a key role in enabling individuals to successfully progress to employment after graduation (e.g. BIS 2016). There is much evidence (e.g. National Centre for Universities and Business 2016; Redmond 2010), as well as anecdotal indications obtained in my professional role as a Careers Adviser, that work experience can increase the likelihood of a graduate obtaining employment. In addition, gaining experience of work can increase confidence and help individuals to discover strengths and career interests. In light of this, I implemented a new work experience programme at Keele University for individuals with an ASD, with the aim of helping these individuals improve their preparedness for work and their employability skills.

Method

I chose action research as a methodology due to its potential to be a "powerful tool for change and improvement at a local level" (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011). I had taught a careers programme for students with an ASD for a number of years, but was eager to explore the impact of the students learning through engaging in work experience. In addition, McAteer (2013) notes that a particular strength in action research is that the practitioner is at the heart of the research process. Using action research enabled me to have a combined focus on examining my practice *as I did it*, while also seeking to develop related knowledge.

Six individuals (five students and one graduate) participated in the work experience programme, attending the work experience sessions between three and ten times. A mixed-research methods approach was used. This included administering participant questionnaires before and after the programme, which examined the learning gain from the placements (with questions based on criteria relating to knowledge, skills and personal development in the HEA's UK Engagement Survey 2016); a focus group with the participants; and semi-structured interviews with staff from the employer providing the placements and a disability support worker.

The project consisted of one main cycle (Cycle 1), which comprised of three mini cycles (occurring within a short period of time of each other), each focusing on the perspectives of a different person or group of people involved with the project:

- mini cycle 1 – the perspectives of the employer mentors;
- mini cycle 2 – the perspectives of the participants;
- mini cycle 3 – the perspectives of a disability support worker.

After each mini cycle, I reflected on emerging themes and allowed these to inform the indicative topics included for discussion in the next mini cycle. In addition, pre-cycle reflections were recorded and suggestions for the next cycle (Cycle 2) were outlined at the end of the project.

Throughout this study, I also sought to reflect on my learning as a practitioner and as a researcher, and these self-reflections formed a key part of the action research. Quantitative data analysis of the questionnaires examined the 'learning gain' (or 'distance travelled') for the participants; and data analysis of the semi-structured interviews and focus group was carried out using a thematic approach and a NVivo analysis. These two separate analyses were then compared and emerging themes were categorised.

Findings

The findings of this study suggest that there are real benefits for individuals with an ASD who take part in work experience placements, including development of an understanding of the workplace. One participant said:

> I think the main benefit is getting used to the environment … so it's nice actually, if I end up going into a graduate job or whatever … because you will be like really nervous on the first day anyway, but I would have that bit of context … it will make it easier to … transition a bit better.

There were also indications of the enhancement of a number of employability skills: notably, written and verbal communication skills, problem-solving skills and the ability to work effectively with others. In addition, participants felt they had gained confidence, particularly relating to disclosure of their disability to future employers; one participant stated that he would be more comfortable having a conversation about disclosure with an employer in the future: " … because of the fact that we now know employers are a bit more willing to customise the situation, to fit the Autistic person." The work experience has also led to an increased focus on future career plans, including intended actions relating to these plans.

A key element of the programme was found to be the role played by the employer mentors and the use of a person-centred, 'bespoke' approach. Benefits for the employer were also noted. These included training opportunities for staff, and the chance for staff members to have a positive impact on the lives of others. (One mentor stated: "I feel really good about myself actually helping these students out.")

Impact

As a result of this study, and due to the success of the work experience programme, there is a desire among those in senior management at Keele University for this programme to be delivered each year. Indeed, it is intended that the programme will be expanded this year (2017-18), with an increase in the number of students and employers involved. Beyond my institution, there is an increased awareness of the benefits of a work experience programme for students with an ASD, as I recently spoke at the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) national conference for careers and employability professionals in higher education, and have subsequently been contacted for advice by colleagues at other institutions.

Reflection

As a practitioner and as a researcher, I have learnt a great deal through carrying out this action research project and have greatly valued the opportunity to explore the improvement of my practice and to consider how to further develop a programme which seeks to support individuals with an ASD in their preparation for the future. As a Careers Adviser, I have developed a much deeper understanding of individuals with an ASD; as a researcher carrying out an action research project for the first time, I particularly enjoyed the fact that I was immersed in the project and valued the key part that reflection played in the process.

I intend to carry out further research relating to the barriers to employment experienced by individuals with an ASD and how the employability skills of these individuals can be improved; participatory action research will be considered as an approach for this study, where individuals with an ASD are co-researchers in the project.

My advice to others considering embarking on an action research project would be to go for it! Although this form of research can appear quite 'messy' to start with, I have found that it has real value for examining practice. I would thoroughly recommend using a reflective journal, which can capture thoughts and observations and allow a researcher to understand how they have developed throughout their action research project.

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2. Psychology staff perspectives on students' engagement at University of Suffolk

Jennifer Coe, University of Suffolk (jennifer.coe@uos.ac.uk)

Learning and teaching issue

Within higher education, the concept of student engagement has become a popular topic of discussion (e.g. Thomas 2012; Taylor and Parsons 2011; Kahu 2013). Student engagement is a complex concept and links are often made with student belonging (Ramsden 2003); progression, academic achievement and retention (Thomas 2012). Many higher education institutions now place student engagement at the forefront of their strategies and policies and it is encouraged within the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA 2016) – Quality Code for Higher Education, and the UKPSF Dimensions framework (Professional values, V2).

Student engagement is the amount of time in which students participate actively and collaboratively in both academic and non-academic activities, which contribute to their educational experiences and success (Kahu 2009; Coates 2007). An important aspect of student engagement is that it encompasses efforts from higher education institutions to promote student engagement in academic and social aspects, as well as encouraging professional practitioners to deploy effective educational practices within their courses (Kuh 2003; Kahu 2013, Harper and Quaye 2015).

I carried out an action research project to explore student engagement at the University of Suffolk. I focused this project on the Psychology team's current knowledge, conceptions, and perceptions of student engagement and reviewed current practices associated with it for undergraduate students on the Psychology undergraduate degree programme(s).

As an action research project focuses on promoting enhancement, I attempted to get the Psychology team to review current practices *and* derive potential new practices around student engagement for implementation within the next academic year.

Method

Throughout this project I employed a qualitative methodological approach with an emphasis on the process of social life (Bryman 2012). I took an interpretivist, epistemological stance, as it is associated with focusing on subjective meaning associated with social actions and is based around the naturalistic approach for data collection primarily using methods such as interviews and observation (Colins, 2010). I also took a constructivist ontological stance, as it adopts the qualitative data collection method of interviews as well as recognising that reality is a construct of the human mind interacting with the real world and that reality is subjective (Andrew, Pedersen and McEvoy 2011). Data was collected through semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions, carried out with all Psychology staff ((n = 5), females (n = 3), males (n = 2), aged 29-53 years). All interview data was anonymised during transcription using respondent pseudonyms. Interview transcripts were analysed using ATLAS.ti. A thematic analysis method was employed, as it enables themes to be developed across transcripts (Braun and Clarke 2006) and it is simple, flexible and the most appropriate for novice qualitative researchers such as myself. This project was a one cycle action research study, undertaken as part of my Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP), 'Developing as a Reflective Practitioner' module.

Findings

Findings highlighted that Psychology staff are aware of what student engagement is within higher education, and believe there are multiple levels to it. It was acknowledged that there are both social and academic aspects to student engagement, including students' effort and participation in reading, tutorials, and lectures, as well as in social events (Koshy 2010). Findings also showed that Psychology staff believe student engagement is not only the responsibility of the student, but has implications for staff members, and that there needs to be an aligned relationship between the two.

I found certain practices that the team believe they already do to encourage student engagement. This included the belief that they provide a supportive, enthusiastic and interactive learning experience for students and that they provide social activities and broader student engagement opportunities such as the Suffolk Psychology Society talks with visiting speakers and end of year/Christmas parties.

A variety of actions staff want to see implemented in the new academic year (2018-2019) as well as future actions for longer term consideration by the Psychology team to promote student engagement were identified. The immediate actions proposed included organising a series of informal research sessions, open to all undergraduate levels where staff and postgraduate students present their own research; and the Suffolk Psychology Society talks could be reviewed to ensure that external speakers cover topics which fit closely with what is being explored within the curriculum.

Interestingly, the study revealed a concern among the team that they may be enabling disengagement by providing too many resources and additional materials to students. This was not an aspect I had thought about or discussed in the literature, however, it is something that I would consider exploring in the future.

Impact

This action research has impacted on the way in which the Psychology team (which includes myself) are preparing for the new academic year. For example, we have been thinking more carefully about the way in which we deliver sessions, to ensure they are interesting and engaging for the students. The team have already begun planning for a series of research talks involving students and staff to help build stronger relationships as an engagement mechanism. It appears an awareness of student engagement and its importance within higher education has been increased among the Psychology team, including myself. To date, there is no further impact to report at the institutional level, however, cross-disciplinary task groups are currently in the process of addressing various learning and teaching issues, including student engagement.

Reflection

From a personal perspective, engaging in action research has made me realise how valuable reflection on one's own professional practice is, and how useful it is in promoting one's own professional development and practice change. The benefits of using action research mean that you will, for example, be exploring your own practices, interviewing members of your own team, and drawing upon your own knowledge and understanding of the research area and the practices you employ. It is important to note that action research recognises the researcher as an active participant in developing and driving change; and encourages the researcher's own views to be expressed during the process alongside those of others. As a reflection point for myself, but also advice to others, I would suggest it is important to remember that you do not need to be wholly objective or detached when using this approach.

I hope in the future to use action research to further develop and improve my own and my team's practices. I also hope in the future to conduct further research with the Psychology students themselves. It would be great to explore students' perspectives on engagement, their views on what the Psychology team currently does and their ideas on how we might better facilitate student engagement in the future.

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3. Utilising action research to evaluate the long-term benefits of student participation in an extra-curricular undergraduate research conference

Dr Chris Little, Keele University (c.w.r.little@keele.ac.uk)

Learning and teaching issue

The *JADE Student Learning Undergraduate Research Conference* – abbreviated on social media to 'JSLUG' by its undergraduate presenters and attendees – gave students at Keele University a platform to pursue and disseminate research beyond the requirements, pressures and power-relations of summative assessments. This project was initiated by myself as a member of the University's centrally based learning development team, named 'Student Learning'. The JSLUG conference evaluated in this project took place on 1 June 2016, with 75 undergraduate students attending.

Created in partnership with the *Journal of Academic Development and Education* (JADE), Keele's in-house pedagogic journal, the conference would also publish all student abstracts, posters and selected papers following the conference, giving students an experience of peer-review and the publication process. By providing the conference and journal platforms, it sought to provide a flexible learning experience outside of the curriculum, encouraging learning across disciplinary and Framework for Higher Education Qualification (FHEQ) level boundaries in order to empower learners as creators of knowledge, recognising the "breadth of skills they bring to their HE experience" (Ryan and Tilbury 2013, p. 16).

Method

The project investigated JSLUG by adopting a participatory action research approach consisting of two cycles of research in order to gather qualitative data from participants. Cycle 1 utilised anonymous questionnaires to gather data regarding reported benefits of participation in JSLUG via *Google Forms*. The questionnaire featured just five items and provided a data collection method that was time-efficient, cost-effective, and easy to complete for participants (Gilham 2007; Walliman 2011). The questionnaire was emailed to 51 students who remained students of Keele since the 2016 JSLUG event, and to 17 alumni who had since graduated and left contact details. Cycle 1 obtained 25 responses from these 68 students, yielding a response rate of 37%. I analysed this data using the thematic analysis programme described in Norton (2009).

Cycle 2 explored the emergent themes from the data gathered in cycle 1 via focus groups as they have the potential to reveal "dimensions of understanding that often remain untapped by more conventional data collection techniques" (Kitzinger 1995, pp. 299–300). The invitation to participate in a focus group was sent to the previously mentioned 68 students, with six students attending a focus group. The focus group recording was transcribed and consequently subjected to transcript and tape-based analysis to provide a rigorous examination of the comments (Onwuegbuzie *et al.* 2009). While the study would have ideally recruited more focus group participants, the range of disciplines covered by these six students does ensure that each of the three faculties at Keele were equally represented with the following disciplines: International Relations, Business Management, Psychology, Adult/Mental Health/Children's Nursing, and Neuroscience.

The combination of these two methods allowed me to gather data from a disparate group of students spread across all faculties and levels of undergraduate study at Keele University, while also allowing a more focused exploration of this data, in a face-to-face and dialogical manner with students.

Findings

By completing two cycles of action research, this project echoes much of the published literature in finding that undergraduate research conferences can lead to the development of more sophisticated academic and interpersonal skills (McGuinness and Simm 2003; Spronken-Smith *et al*. 2013), the development of self-authorship and a more nuanced approach to research (Hill and Walkington 2016; Mabrouk 2009; Walkington, Hill and Kneale 2017). However, I also found that this conference acted as a springboard for increased engagement with additional extra-curricular opportunities such as other conferences, journals and external training courses. I will disseminate this previously unreported finding in order to inform the current institutional and sector-wide debates concerning the value and place of undergraduate research.

Impact

The above findings have led to a number of key developments. Firstly, I have been able to share this data on several occasions with the higher education (HE) community, by presenting the findings at a number of conferences, including the HEA Annual Conference. This has led to the scope of the JSLUG conference growing significantly, with the next event inviting participants from outside of Keele for the first time. It has also led to a number of conversations with colleagues at other institutions where the JSLUG project, and the findings of this action research project specifically, have given them the confidence to begin planning their own version of JSLUG, with me taking on a consultant-like role.

The JSLUG project, and the findings of this investigation featured prominently in Keele University's first Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) submission as an example of inclusive and excellent educational practice, for which we received the Gold award. Regardless of one's thoughts on the TEF initiative, this demonstrates that value and importance that Keele University places on initiatives such as JSLUG, which prove they have a longer-term impact on students.

Reflection

As a practitioner, I had never used focus groups previously so the project required me to attend some training in order to feel comfortable utilising this method. This demonstrates the reflexive nature of action research – not only did this project investigate and improve my research area, it also empowered me as a researcher. Developing this new set of skills has since encouraged me to pursue a number of other research projects utilising this method, and I have since gained external funding to utilise a similar action research approach in other areas of pedagogical research.

In addition to the previously noted benefits to students, the project has greatly developed my own practices as a field researcher. My educational background is purely in textual analysis and critical theory, so the experiences of collecting primary data here will be of great value to my teaching and learning practices, but also to future research endeavours. The action research approach, with its inherent reflexivity, has also encouraged me to consider how these competences may be developed further.

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Further resources

To learn more about the *JADE Student Learning Undergraduate Research Conference* (*JSLUG*) project, you may wish to explore the following resources:

The conference website: www.keele.ac.uk/ilas/conferences

The 2017 Student Edition of Keele's *Journal of Academic Development and Education* (JADE): https://jadekeele.files.wordpress.com/2017/11/jade-student-2017-final.pdf

The 2016 Student Edition of Keele's *Journal of Academic Development and Education*: https://jadekeele.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/jade-student-edition-20016-dec-144dpi.pdf

4. Cabaret for research and as research dissemination

Dr. Geof Hill, Birmingham City University (geof.hill@bcu.ac.uk)

Background

Donald Schön's (1983, p. 50) notion of 'troubling' is the catalyst for this action inquiry. 'Troubling' is linked to Lewin's (1948) suggestion that action inquiry begins with a general or initial idea and Zuber-Skerrit's (1993) suggestion that inquiry is initiated by a problem. Strauss and Corbin (2008, p. 23) articulate 'troubling' about practice by suggesting that one's professional experiences often lead to "the judgment that some feature of the profession or its practice is less than effective, efficient, human, or equitable."

This inquiry was initiated in 'troubling' around the hegemony of research dissemination. Research dissemination is influenced by the scientific paradigm's impact on research and limited to journal publications and conference presentations. In proposing a presentation for the *Inaugural Storytelling Conference* in Prague in 2012, I offered something different in the form of an auto ethnographic cabaret. This proposal was the initiating cycle for my inquiry.

Method

Although many performances can be single events, my research dissemination cabarets are iterative. After the initial presentation, subsequent presentations emerge from reflection and consideration of audience reception. Each new cabaret audience invites a new version, or publication, of that cabaret and in so doing, draws on the experience and knowledge emerging from previous presentations of the same content. Between each performance, and leading up to a specific performance, there are iterations of rehearsal. These iterations of rehearsal and performance thus create a fallow ground for using action inquiry for performer practitioner investigation.

My proposal for an auto-ethnographic cabaret for the *Inaugural Storytelling Conference* in Prague in 2012 was idiosyncratic of my academic researcher/inquirer professional practice and drew on my musical theatre background. Immediately following the first performance of the cabaret in Prague, three presentations followed in Europa University, Berlin; Coventry University, UK; and finally at a HEA conference at Wolverhampton University (July 2012). The audiences varied in size and purpose, thus generating different iterations for contributing to an overall action inquiry. My inquiry was primarily a first-person action inquiry (Marshall 2011), involving the protagonist/performer changing their practice. Modelling a different way to publish research also opened the inquiry to a second-person action inquiry by encouraging others to explore performative publication; and third-person action inquiry in which the culture of research dissemination is changed. A report of this action inquiry (Hill 2015) identified 14 cycles of inquiry, but not each cycle involved an actual performance. Some cycles of inquiry involved rehearsal for a performance. Such delineation of cycles contributes to the contention about what constitutes an action inquiry cycle (Hill 2014b).

Findings

The action inquiry publication was intended to generate new questions about the practice; questions such as “How do other cabaret performers write, rehearse and perform their work?”, and “How do the audience understand this marginalised form on academic discourse?”. These questions contribute to deepening understanding of the practice. They enable the detail and the inner workings of a practice to be documented and the connections between different elements of the work to be made explicit. They open up the practice to additional aspects of benchmarking – comparing to literature and critical reflection to ascertain the assumptions and beliefs underpinning the work (Hill 2015).

While it may seem trite to say that an important finding is that the method is possible, that finding needs to be understood in the context of the emergent discourse surrounding performative work and inquiry into performative work. Haseman (2006) posited a performative (inquiry) paradigm positioned alongside quantitative and qualitative forms of research. Peterson and Langellier (2006) positioned performative inquiry as an extension or development in narrative inquiry, citing the emergence of telling stories using various performative devices. Finding that a cabaret can disseminate research is important in the context of both propositions and gives substance to the idea that performative inquiry has practical examples.

Impact

General definitions of action research often refer to changed practice, and so recognising the ways that a broader set of researchers present their research is valuable for recognising the impact of my own cabaret practices. Given Marshall’s (2011) notion of action inquiry, there is a sense that one of the ways to measure impact is to note the shift from personal impact towards disciplinary, departmental, or institutional forms of impact. There are two sets of evidence to demonstrate this impact.

The first lies within the institutional fabric of my own current university in which colleagues have collaborated around a community of practice for using performative modes of research dissemination. This has led to work with colleagues using comedy and art installations as well as with other academics using cabaret. The workings of this group themselves contribute to the University's action inquiry that relates to the larger study of the 'Faculty Learning Groups'. A second point of evidence is in the broader higher education world, and this can be ascertained through the blog entries about the cabaret, such as Grove's (2016) review of the article about cabaret on 'The Conversation' website , and the responses on the site from people who have attended various cabarets (Hill 2014).

Reflection

The reflective process is part and parcel of this particular action inquiry. In the moment of delivering my cabaret, as a performer, I am judging the audience response and noting the way in which the material or the cabaret curriculum has an impact on the audience. After the moment there is a review of what has happened, and planning for the next planned or imagined (or hoped for) presentation of the cabaret. Over time, and in the course of writing up the action inquiry there is a broader brush reflective practice, wherein I review cycles of my practice over a broader expanse of time. This later reflective practice can also contain advice to others, and each time I present a cabaret, I am mindful to suggest to the audience that in presenting cabaret I am not advocating that each person adopt cabaret but that they question the dominance of hegemony in research dissemination and embrace their own creativities.

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Further resources

An earlier version of this particular study (Hill 2015) has been published in *Action Learning Action Research*.

There is further discussion about using cabaret on the research S*upervisor's Friend* website: https://supervisorsfriend.wordpress.com/2013/09/20/arguing-philosophically-for-something-different-in-the-dissertation [Accessed January 21st 2018].

The issue is also discussed in the *Times Higher Education* (Grove 2016)

5. University-school mentoring: supporting students' employability and pupils' transition into Higher Education

Alana I. James, University of Reading (a.i.james@reading.ac.uk)

(case study conducted at Royal Holloway, University of London)

Learning and teaching issue

Two challenges within undergraduate education were addressed: supporting entry students' transition into higher education (HE), and supporting graduates' transition into employment. In this research, I focused upon Psychology students, but the project could be adapted for other disciplines.

Ensuring that new students have realistic expectations can promote retention; withdrawal or withdrawal consideration can arise due to a mismatch between expectations of HE and the reality (Briggs *et al.* 2012). Common misconceptions held by new Psychology students have been identified – for example, not conceptualising Psychology as a science (Reddy and Lantz 2010) – and a review of undergraduate Psychology education (Trapp *et al.* 2011) recommends that entry students should be informed about what is involved in Psychology degrees.

Once on the degree, it is essential that students develop the ability to apply what they learn in the curriculum and gain real-world experience. Entry into professional psychology training routes requires a substantial amount of hands-on experience, which may partly explain why around 80-85% of Psychology graduates go on to work outside of these routes (Trapp *et al.* 2011).

Method

I developed cross-age mentoring, where university Psychology students acted as mentors to year 12 A-level psychology pupils. Mentoring has been highlighted as a valuable type of placement for Psychology students (Trapp *et al.* 2011), and has been used to support educational transitions (e.g. Chester *et al.* 2013; Passy and Morris 2010). I was able to build upon my past experience of researching peer support schemes, and of being a mentor. My project aimed to provide real-world experience for mentors, while promoting mentees' aspirations towards HE and smoothing their potential transition to studying Psychology at university.

Mentoring was conducted at participating schools, and involved an initial presentation open to all year 12 A-level Psychology pupils on what it was like to study Psychology at university, followed by small-group mentee sessions and an opportunity to visit the University. Mentors were second or third year undergraduates who completed training covering listening and mentoring skills, and safeguarding. Mentors participated as part of either a course-linked placement scheme or a university-wide extra-curricular experience scheme. Mentees were selected by their Psychology teacher, and met at least one of the University's widening participation criteria (e.g. limited experience of HE in their family). Typically two schools participated per cycle and around four mentors were allocated per school, usually working in pairs with small groups of mentees.

The first cycle ran in the 2013-14 academic year, with funding from a HEA Individual Teaching Development Grant and was comprehensively evaluated. Subsequent iterations were run in 2014-15, 2015-16, and 2016-17, and ongoing evaluations were conducted to continually adapt the project.

Evaluation of the first cycle:

I conducted a mixed-methods, pre-post evaluation. There were eight mentors working with two schools. School 1 included ten mentees and ten control pupils, and had eight mentoring sessions (mean attended: 6.4). School 2 included ten mentees and 14 control pupils, and had only six mentoring sessions due to difficulties in scheduling (mean attended: 4.22). Data for the schools were analysed separately.

Questionnaires assessed:

- attitudes to higher education (pupils only; selected items from Maras *et al*. 2007);
- psychological literacies (mentors only; Chester *et al*. 2013);
- self-esteem (Rosenberg 1965);
- self-efficacy (Schwarzer and Jerusalem 1995);
- perceived impact of mentoring (adapted from Hryciw *et al*. 2013).

Pre-post differences in mentees' scores relative to control pupils, and pre-post differences in mentors' scores were statistically tested.

Focus groups were held with mentors at the start and end, and interviews with the teachers at the end. Transcripts, and open questionnaire item responses, were analysed to identify: perceived benefits for pupils and mentors, and positive and negative implementation factors.

Findings

First cycle

Mentees did not improve relative to controls on attitudes towards HE, self-efficacy or self-esteem. Reported benefits for mentees included enhanced insight into going to university, greater knowledge of Psychology, and gains in academic skills. Mentees in School 1 were highly satisfied, with greater variation for School 2. Mentors showed significant increases in two of nine psychological literacies and in self-efficacy, but not self-esteem. Mentors were highly satisfied with the experience, though School 2 mentors found the scheduling difficulties challenging. Reported benefits for mentors included enhanced communication skills, insight into potential career paths, and awareness of how their understanding of Psychology had developed.

Adaptations identified for the next cycle included: greater focus upon the Psychology A-level curriculum, and increased communication between mentors and school staff.

Subsequent cycles

On reflection, I felt that some of the outcomes I measured in the first cycle were too global, and not sufficiently tied to the areas where mentoring could have an impact. Therefore, I adapted the measures to include:

- project goals form – I developed an individual goal-setting form for mentees and mentors, which enabled tracking of individuals' progress against their own goals and helped mentors know how to support mentees;
- attitudes to higher education (pupils only; selected items from Maras *et al.* 2007);
- self-efficacy beliefs for learning Psychology (pupils only; adapted from Pintrich and DeGroot 1990);
- feelings about university transition (pupils only; adapted from Lizzio 2006);
- skills for employability (mentors only; adapted from Lantz 2011);
- self-efficacy (Schwarzer and Jerusalem 1995);
- perceived impact of mentoring (adapted from Hryciw *et al.* 2013).

Overall, similar benefits for mentors and mentees have been reported each year. Consistent attendance is important; when scheduling difficulties have led to mentees missing sessions the impact is generally lessened.

Impact

The mentoring project became a core part of the University Department's outreach activities, which I co-ordinated while at Royal Holloway, University of London. Approximately 70 pupils meeting widening participation indicators from three schools have received mentoring, and further pupils benefitted from hearing mentors' presentations about Psychology degrees. The links fostered led to the schools becoming involved in other outreach activities.

Over 30 undergraduate students have acted as mentors, and many have benefited beyond the initial experience. For example, some completed further work experience in the school or conducted research with pupils for their final year project. Many have been inspired to develop careers in education or working with young people.

The project has been disseminated within the University to staff from other departments and externally through invited talks and conference presentations.

Reflection

Running the mentoring project was logistically challenging, but it was rewarding to see mentors form supportive relationships with their mentees and grow from the experience. Here are my top tips for others developing university–school mentoring schemes or conducting educational action research:

- explain to teachers that consistent attendance by mentees is important, but understand that scheduling problems may be out of their control;
- trust mentors to plan activities and liaise with schools. They will find it challenging at times, but this is a valuable part of the real-world experience;
- recruit students as research assistants to help manage the workload, and to gain student perspectives on the project development;
- be realistic about the time involved and consider collaboration. My action research project fit well within my role as departmental outreach co-ordinator. However, I lacked the time to write up further cycles for publication, which limited its reach, and the project was suspended when I moved universities. On reflection bringing on board a collaborator would have made the project more manageable and sustainable.

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Higher Education Academy Blogs: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/using-mentoring-support-transition-and-out-higher-education

Further work from Alana James: http://www.reading.ac.uk/Psychology/About/staff/a-i-james.aspx

6. Building scholarly cultures in partnership: University Centre, North Lindsey scholarship intern programme

Dr Jenny Lawrence, Association of Colleges, University Centre, North Lindsey
(jenny.lawrence@northlindsey.ac.uk)

Learning and Teaching Issue

Introduced to support the 'students-as-partners' agenda, the 'scholarship intern programme' (SchIP) has evolved to become a catalyst for scholarly development across the learning community. Students, teachers, managers, human resource, health and safety and support staff have been involved in every step of this initiative's development.

The college higher education (CHE) sector is growing scholarly cultures to fit a 'specific context'; a context where staff may not have research time written into work loads, teaching hours may be high, and CHE teachers may not have research experience comparable to university-peers (Lawrence 2016; Hall and Lawrence 2017).

These challenges have led to an innovative solution to building scholarly practices: the SchIP was introduced at the University Centre, North Lindsey (UCNL) by the Higher Education Director in 2014. SchIP provides funding to pay a student to collaborate on a staff-defined, small-scale research project. In 2016, I trialled and tested the initiative as part of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and Association of Colleges 'Scholarship Project', and rolled SchIP out to our project partner, East Coast College (ECC). The aim of the trial was to assess the value and impact of the innovation. Through the action research cycle of the trial it became clear how valuable SchIP is to building scholarly competencies, and more importantly, confidence, for the CHE learning community.

Method

I started with 'reconnaissance' (Lewin 1946), a research and consultation exercise which brought to the fore the experience of the learning community and helped me better understand the context in which we work. This involved:

- literature review to assess best practice;
- process mapping to streamline administrative process;
- qualitative research interviews with educators and learners involved in early projects, unsuccessful applicants, managers, and teachers;
- consultation with students, teachers and managers in developing application process and paperwork, peer review practice, and guidance.

This led to a number of refinements, implemented for the next call. The programme was shaped around an understanding that:

> scholarship may include conventional *research* (discovery of new knowledge), innovation in *application* or *integration* of existing knowledge, for example in professional practice, or the *study of learning and teaching* process and practice. (QAA, Chapter B3: Learning and Teaching 2012; my emphasis)

Projects were asked to support professional practice through the scholarship of teaching and learning, or build curriculum through disciplinary research. Further, outcomes (how the knowledge created could be applied and integrated) were given equal weighting as outputs, which need not be tied to academic publication.

Cycle 1

The action research approach started in earnest for the 2016-17 call and covered three dimensions of activity.

Details

Brief e-surveys (five questions, accessible from any device, anonymised responses, explicit consent to use data agreed) were issued to all six applicants after submission and the ten-strong team of reviewers on completing peer review. Verbal and email feedback was gathered from all project teams on submitting interim and final reports. I had a 100% return across both colleges. This offered an inarguably frank database to work from when refining process and documentation. All participants consented to their inputs' use in academic outputs.

Progress

Together with project leaders and interns we developed a reporting process that responded to institutional requirements, corresponded with workload/study loads and documented individual academic development. This illuminated, for project leads, the need for specific information, and led to more careful tracking of activity and expenditure.

Overview

Finally, we took a holistic view of the initiative. A focus group for students and teachers involved in SchIP and members of the UCNL learning community explored the initiative in depth and asked what the community needed to succeed (Figure 1). A SWOT[2] analysis threw up a wealth of intelligence (Fig. 2 and 3). I learned the wealth of resources at the college were not widely known (weakness – lack of resources), and recognised desire to engage employers (opportunity). We used this intelligence to reshape the following funding call.

Cycle 2

The 2017-18 SchIP programme and action research cycle has started. This will help us understand how successful the refinements informed by the previous years' evaluation of process and reflection on practice have been. We are evaluating this second cycle using a mixture of e-surveys – they proved effective and popular, and reflective dialogue – which allows for in-depth interrogation.

[2] Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

Findings

It became apparent that SchIP offers a conduit for 'knowledge mobilisation', or the creation of knowledge that can be used to address real-world issues (Hynie *et al.* 2011). Teachers and students told us the direct application of disciplinary knowledge: (i) builds understanding of scholarship allied to employability (a student intern discussed their project at an interview, which led to a job offer; a teacher is more confident addressing employability in teaching practice); (ii) sustains motivation (an intern told us "doing something useful" for their profession community drove them to "find the time"); and (iii) liberates projects from traditional academic outputs, which makes the scheme more attractive. The thought of publishing was daunting for some at the beginning of their work. However, project teams have presented at national conferences and are now thinking of publication.

The initiative builds understanding of the research–teaching relationship, and offers a shared endeavour to grow learning and teaching practices that suit teachers context and widening participation student profiles; and enhances everyone's HE experience. Data evidences multiple benefits for students and teachers involved, not only in SchIP, but also the action research process.

The continuous process of action research is ongoing, and will ensure the initiative evolves as the College's scholarly journey progresses.

Impact

A number of operational changes were born from this action research: a longer call; enhanced support in bid writing; workshop-based peer review; multi-service SchIP induction for successful bids; and the facility for group submissions and to employ more than one intern per project (funds permitting) to ensure equality of opportunity (understanding some may only be able to commit to a few hours input).

Feedback evidences the refinements' success, and will inform further modelling of the programme.

The work presented here has opened the doors to "community engaged scholarship" (Hynie *et al.* 2011). Directed by the focus group, we have in collaboration with human resources and the health and safety offices built robust, labour-light processes to enable intern engagement with external partners that abides by our duty of care and satisfies legal obligations. Projects for the 2017-18 session are running in collaboration with a local charity, a number of employers and a high profile heritage sight.

Reflection

Research-intern programmes can fall into an 'elite' model, where only high-achieving students benefit from the initiative. I feel that taking an action research approach addressed this effectively. Teachers and students have been pro-active in ensuring all practices are accessible, inclusive and flexible and so may accommodate learners and educators at any place in their scholarly development. Shaping projects to support teaching and learning benefits the wider learning community, not only those directly involved.

Students and staff involved in SchIP projects during this period of action research are submitting to international conferences, researching with a Russell Group university, and confidently leading change in their professional realm. SchIP is valuable for the scholarly opportunities it presents, as well as the sense of pride and empowerment in being 'an architect' of the learning experience (Flint, Goddard and Russell 2017) that the action-research approach brings to the learning community.

Figure 1: 'What do you need to succeed?'

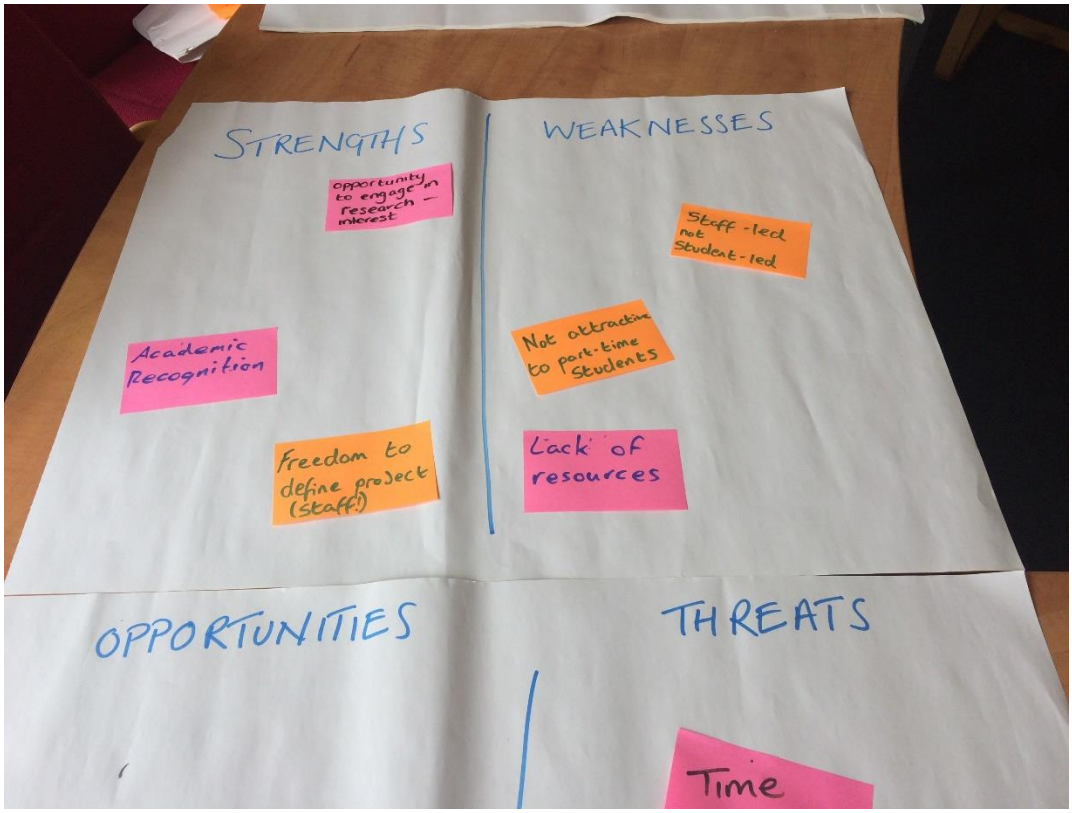

Figure 2: 'SWOT' – strengths and weaknesses

Figure 3: 'SWOT' – opportunities and threats

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Further resources

The Association of Colleges Scholarship Project: https://www.aoc.co.uk/enhancing-scholarship-in-college-higher-education-the-scholarship-project [Accessed 30 November 2017].

7. Exploring grouping strategies with trainee teachers

Helen Scanlan, Newcastle College (helen.scanlan@ncl-coll.ac.uk)

Description

The context for this project was with trainee teachers in the second stage of a foundation degree in Education and Training. The project focused on a curriculum issue related to feedback from – and involved the scrutiny of – findings from teaching observations. Particularly, it looked at how to effectively group learners in lessons to facilitate peer support, and to adapt teaching and learning activities in relation to their learners' needs (differentiation). Trainee teachers were not using successful grouping tactics in their teaching/delivery. As our initial teacher education (ITE) courses employ an experiential learning approach, a collaborative project with the trainee teachers was used to explore how they can effectively group their learners.

The benefits of using group-work learning methods with learners are recognised and advocated by many (e.g. Baumgardner 2015; Zarraga-Rodriguez *et al.* 2015; Peterson 2012). Authors highlight the benefits of using peer learning and co-operative learning activities, and show how they contribute to independent learning and the development of the communication skills of learners. Grouping learners to facilitate peer support and promote inclusion was the focus of the project.

Research into 'best practice' when forming groups of learners has provided varied conclusions: the challenges related to group formation and carefully managing interactions within the groups must be considered, in addition to the difficulties which arise with "the coming together of groups of individuals, each with their own knowledge, attitudes to learning, sets of experiences and personalities" (Jackson *et al.* 2014, p. 117).

The purpose of the project was therefore to explore different methods for forming groups for learning activities, in collaboration with teachers new to the profession, and using an experiential learning approach to deepen the pedagogical impact (Anderson, Hsu and Kinney 2016).

Method

Professionals who use action research use reflective analysis, evaluation of data, and experimental techniques to apply informed, focused actions to revise a "practical problem or improving a practice" (Cunningham 2008, p. 5). The systematic, cyclical process of this type of research allows practitioners to be active participants in their inquiry, evaluate effectiveness and plan the most appropriate cause of action.

Action research typically collects qualitative data, and suggested methods for this are observations, interviews and document analysis (Grady 1998). However, it has been proposed that effective action research requires the collection and analysis of quantitative data, or a mixed-method approach, to "reinforce the validity of research but also to increase meaningfulness of research, reduce error, and facilitate the comparability across studies" (Craig 2009, p. 64). Therefore, for this project (due to time restraints) interviews were rejected as a method in favour of a questionnaire, and classroom observations were used to collect both qualitative and quantitative data (Bryman 2012).

Before commencing the project, there was discussion with the participants regarding the research I was going to carry out and how they could both inform and benefit from it. Differentiated teaching, and grouping strategies to support differentiated learning, were the areas collaboratively chosen as the focus.

For the project, three different grouping strategies were used:

- random allocation of a group on entering the session;
- groups based on learners' self-assessment of their understanding of the topic;
- learners self-choosing their groups.

Each grouping strategy was analysed: participants were asked to complete session activities in groups, while reflecting on how effective the groupings were in relation to the task completion. For each grouping tactic, participants were asked to analyse how they felt the group 'worked' and how they might adapt/use each method in their own teaching. Completion of the questionnaire was not mandatory, and participants' names were not asked for to ensure anonymity.

Findings

Of the 18 participants, 17 completed questionnaires were returned. The first 'randomly' chosen grouping activity was the least successful, and feedback from the participants was negative. The learners did not feel comfortable in the indiscriminately formed groups, with 12 respondents expressing negative feedback. The second group formation tactic used an evaluation of the skills and confidence of the individuals concerned, and participant feedback for this method was extremely positive. Fifteen respondents acknowledged how useful and successful they found this approach. The third grouping strategy allowed the learners to self-choose their groups, and although this method was preferred by the participants, analysis of its success in the session tasks and activities acknowledged its limitations, as focus on the task was lower for all participants.

Impact

The findings from the project have been positive: they have highlighted and reinforced the advantages of using an experiential learning approach for both the teaching staff and learners. Curriculum planning has been informed by feedback from the participants, and the 'loop input' approach (Woodward 1998, 2003) has been used as a notion of best practice across our teacher education team. Collaborative working in this way has strengthened relationships between the teacher educators and their trainee teachers, and a joint approach to evaluating classroom practice has allowed for shared analysis and reflection. The findings were so positive that the use of an action research project has been included in a summative assessment activity for one of the core modules.

Reflection

Completion of this project has confirmed the importance of selecting the most effective grouping strategy with learners. It has also deepened my understanding of the importance of experiential learning, and how it can be used by teacher trainers to reinforce certain approaches; in this case, classroom grouping strategies. It has also highlighted how I can use experiential learning to effectively engage my learners to improve their skills and practice. By experiencing different grouping strategies as learners, and evaluating their impact and effectiveness, they are able to make more informed choices regarding the grouping strategies they use in their teaching.

Relationships between the participants and I have improved. As many of them are new to higher education study and have not been part of a research project, they felt more valued through the experience and the collaborative approach, and supported analysis encouraged engagement with the subject. I enjoyed carrying out the project immensely, and the value of action research has been reinforced.

Completing the project also allowed me to offer something the majority of the participants had not experienced before. With their limited access to primary research, it allowed me to introduce them to higher-level study and promote advanced critical thinking and analysis.

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8. Augmented anatomy

Dan Amin and Josh Wroot, Doncaster College

dan.amin@don.ac.uk and josh.wroot@don.ac.uk

Learning and teaching issue

Historically, one of the Sport and Exercise programmes within our institution, Musculoskeletal Anatomy, had been taught from a textbook. However, upon my appointment to deliver the module in 2012, I decided to make the taught element practically based to enable students to learn about anatomy, more functionally, and through a kinaesthetic approach. This change brought about an anecdotal improvement among students in understanding the subject, an increased ability to apply anatomical knowledge to other modules across the programme, and was discussed in article published in a sport therapy periodical (Amin 2014).

Delivering theory in a practical way, however, also had its limitations – namely, it was introduced within the clinic and, once the students left the clinic, they had no reference point from which to revise. Over subsequent years, some students had started to film me on their phones while I was demonstrating the practical learning content, which led me to consider the need to enable the students to access a permanent repository of practical-based anatomy teaching videos in order to enhance revision and consolidate learning away from the classroom. Our institution does *not* have a lecture-capture policy, hence the need to take this approach.

Method

The first step in achieving the video repository took place during the 2015-16 academic year, and was to work with the e-media team to create a series of short revision videos based around key anatomical regions (namely hip, shoulder, knee, etc.). I acted as the instructor, and included students within the videos to give them a more active engagement with the process (Falchikov 2013), and to make the videos more accessible for future cohorts. Once the videos were complete, they were edited, annotated, and placed within the Anatomy module on the students' virtual learning environment (VLE).

The use of augmented reality (AR) within education is a relatively new phenomenon, and has had mixed results in terms of effectiveness (Bacca *et al*. 2014). However, it does potentially offer a clear way to use the videos in a novel manner. As such, I also worked with the e-media team to create two 'classic' anatomy posters, with the teaching videos embedded within them using AR technology (Layar). These were referred to as the 'Augmented Anatomy' posters. Augmented reality technology allows a user to 'hover' their smart device over a 2D image and, in effect, bring that image to life through providing an extra layer of information, that is, an animation, a link to a website, a video, etc.

A new lecturer (Josh Wroot) was given responsibility for the Anatomy module, and briefed on the videos and posters. He took the lead on implementing them within the module, during the 2016-17 academic year, with a view of evaluating their effectiveness on enhancing the learning process, and impact on assessment grades. A ten-item questionnaire was submitted to the Level 4 BSc (Hons) Sport, Fitness and Exercise Science students (n = 13) upon completion of the module.

Due to licensing issues, the Augmented Anatomy posters could only be used within the timetabled sessions, on site, and could not be taken away by the students.

Findings

There was a 100% response rate to the questionnaire, and the findings were predominantly positive. The students felt that the videos contributed considerably (7.3/10, on an ascending Likert scale) to their assessment grade, and were used frequently in the weeks leading up to this assessment: seven of the students used them at least once a week, with every single student using the posters at least once in the final week before the assessment.

The students felt that the Augmented Anatomy posters were easy to use (7.53/10), however, their use as a classroom tool was less well received: only four of them thought that their learning would have probably or definitely been detrimentally affected if the poster had not been used in the lesson, and seven would have preferred them *not* to have been used in the sessions. However, all of the students would have wanted to have had copies of the poster for their own personal use at home, suggesting its potential value as a revision tool.

Impact

The feedback from the students has led to the permanent housing of the learning videos on the VLE, which are now accessible to all students on the BSc (Hons) Sport, Fitness and Exercise Science, and now to our distance learning students enrolled on the BSc (Hons) Sport Science and Coaching. The feedback has also led to the continued use of the posters within Anatomy lectures, and the opportunity for students to acquire their own copy for revision purposes.

An interesting development is taking place regarding the Augmented Anatomy concept itself, as JW has taken it upon himself to try and develop an anatomy mobile application, rather than an augmented reality poster, based on the feedback from the learners and current research regarding mobile pedagogies e.g. Vazquez-Cano (2014).

Reflection

The reflections below are offered from myself, as project investigator (DA), and by Josh Wroot (JW), the member of staff who implemented the posters in his sessions.

Dan Amin: From a personal perspective, this action research journey was most rewarding because it involved so many different parties, all of whom received their own benefits: It provided me with more answers regarding an area that has interested me for some years; It offered a colleague a first engagement with pedagogical research, in a professional context, and the subsequent independent desire to develop the learning resource beyond my original ideas; it provided the e-media team with a first opportunity to develop AR in a teaching and learning context; and it gave the students a genuine opportunity to work with a tutor to create a learning resource for multiple cohorts. Moving forward, I am keen to know how the anatomy app progresses, and how effectively it is used on the programme.

Josh Wroot: The action research was undertaken during my first year of full-time teaching. This gave me a fresh perspective as I had never delivered the subject on my own. Using innovative technology in my lectures has always been something I strive towards, so the inclusion of AR was a great opportunity. I am looking forward to developing this further, and will be continuing the use of the AR poster in lectures this year. The next iteration of this will be a standalone mobile application that can be accessed without the poster. This opportunity had been rewarding, and has given me a drive to undertake more research and improve the student experience on my programmes.

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9. The Padlet project: fostering creativity, engagement and digital literacy in seminar teaching

Wendy A Garnham, Tabban Betts, and Anne Hole, University of Sussex

(w.a.garnham@sussex.ac.uk)

Learning and teaching issue

As the volume of information uploaded to the Internet increases, the traditional classroom model is being replaced with more active learning experiences which are socially directed and driven by a range of media (McLoughlin and Lee 2010). For example, McLean, Attardi, Faden and Goldszmidt (2016) suggest that purposeful interaction with peers and application of content are two of the most positive aspects of these new style classrooms. The role of universities is therefore moving to one which emphasizes careful scaffolding and support of problem-solving and creativity (McNeill, Gosper and Xu 2012). However, traditional tutor-led seminar teaching has not always kept pace with this research.

Working with foundation year Psychology students, I increasingly found such seminars to be dominated by one or two more confident students while the rest of the group remained non-participatory and often became distracted. Students who had completed all the preparatory work were often left listening to others in the seminar group without being able to actively apply their new-found knowledge.

Using Zuber-Skerritt's (1992) 'critical, reflective, accountable, self-evaluative, participative' (CRASP) model of action research, this critical attitude to the status quo in teaching practice led to discussions between myself, Tab Betts, and Anne Hole from the Technology Enhanced Learning Team about how the use of digital technology might be used to address and resolve this issue. We needed to find something that students would be able to master within the confines of the time limit of the seminar, but something that would enable all students to contribute and participate creatively at a level that suited their particular learning needs.

Fuchs (2014) reported success in improving student engagement using an application named 'Padlet'. This is a free application which enables users to post material (infographics, podcasts, images, videos) onto an online notice board. Kleinsmith (2017) has also reported positive effects on both engagement and achievement in a fifth grade Maths class using this application. We decided to try using Padlet in our seminars.

'The Padlet project' as we named it, introduced a blended learning component to the seminar programme, with students completing preparatory reading outside of the seminar and then working together in small groups in the seminar itself, to produce multi-media posts for an online 'noticeboard': the Padlet wall. Once posted, peers could comment on each other's work to raise further questions, initiate discussion or to reflect. The role of the tutor moved from leading the session to working collaboratively with students.

Method

In the first week of the Padlet project, a member of the Technology Enhanced Learning Team came to each seminar to support students in the use of Padlet. As students entered the room, they were randomly assigned to work in a small group of no more than three. Keeping the groups small was critical in ensuring the project ran successfully as, with only three people working together, there was an onus on members of the group to make sure they had completed the preparation so that they could contribute to their group task.

Each group was asked to discuss whether they wanted to work on a 'consolidation' post or an 'extension' post. Consolidation posts enable students to deepen their understanding of the key reading, iron out misconceptions about it, or focus on key aspects of the paper such as the terminology, the research methods used, or the story told in the introduction. Extension posts enable students to move beyond the seminar paper to explore the research topic more widely. This could be identifying a further article in the area and explaining why it is relevant, designing a small research-based task for their peers to try or finding online materials, such as video clips that relate to the theme of the readings. All Padlet groups were then asked to produce their post, using one of a range of possible multimedia applications, for a themed Padlet wall.

Each week, the Padlet groups changed to ensure that students got to know the other members of the group and, in doing so, developed skills of networking and collaboration.

At the end of term, the final seminar was used to gather data on the progress of the Padlet project. Students were asked to complete an online questionnaire to gather their views on how they were finding the Padlet project. They were then asked to work in a group of three to record their views on three aspects of the project: what they liked, what they did not like, and how they wanted the project to develop.

Findings

Each themed Padlet wall was available for students to access right through the term and into the assessment period. As a result of the work completed in each seminar, students were able to construct a detailed resource bank of materials to aid with revision and extension of understanding in each topic area on the module. When it came to exam results, 93% of the 67 students who had taken part in the Padlet project were able to show an improvement in exam scores from assessment period 1 (before the project began) to assessment period 2 (after the project had finished). Although it is difficult to ascertain whether this is due to the Padlet project or other factors, there is good reason to think that the Padlet project had a big role to play. In a comparable module – of similar difficulty and length and containing the same type of assessment – only 16% showed a similar pattern. I observed that not only did the Padlet project increase student engagement within the seminars, but it also enabled students to develop a range of digital literacy skills which they could apply to new projects.

One unexpected finding was that attendance tended to fall slightly during the term. Our interpretation of this is that the structure of the Padlet project is such that peer pressure is created within the Padlet groups. If a student has not completed the preparation for the seminar, they are less able to contribute to the work of their group and this creates bad feeling among the group. As such, they may choose not to attend rather than attend and find it difficult to contribute anything meaningful. We call this the 'no place to hide' effect.

Impact

Burns (1999) believes that collaborative action research processes strengthen the opportunities for sharing and developing the results of research on practice. Following presentation of the results of the Padlet project by both myself and four of the students from the foundation year, the project is now being trialed in other subjects such as History. Tutors and students in these subjects are working together to create a master-list of applications that can be used to create multi-media products for the Padlet walls.

Reflection

The Padlet project requires tutors and students to learn and produce new content alongside each other, and is a welcome alternative to the idea of the tutor leading the session with students playing a more passive role. The media products produced by the students exceeded all expectations in terms of both quality and creativity and enabled students both to deepen their understanding and develop digital literacy and social networking skills. There is still work to do, however. This term we have refined the project based on student feedback in the final seminar. Some students felt that it would be better to have some element of discussion built into the seminar itself. As a result, students now follow a fortnightly programme in seminars. In week A, students make their posts for the Padlet wall. In week B, students apply their learning to ten multiple choice questions based on the reading, and then discuss a real-world application of their learning. This brings back an element of discussion into the seminar, but only after students have collaborated to produce their Padlet posts.

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10. Digital shifts: an action research approach to developing digital capabilities for staff who teach and support learning in UK higher education

Sue Watling, University of Hull (s.watling@hull.ac.uk)

Learning and teaching issue

The issue was differential levels of digital skills and confidence among staff who teach and support learning. While many were digitally fluent and confident, those more digitally shy resisted the adoption of technology enhanced learning (TEL). As a Senior Lecturer in Education Development at the University of Lincoln, I had a strong interest in the affordances of virtual learning environments (VLE), and was seeking solutions that encouraged collaborative working online. In an increasingly digital HE sector, many staff continue to self-exclude from digitally themed programmes of workshops, events and funding opportunities. As a result, initiatives and interventions designed to encourage digital shifts in attitudes and practices tend to reach those already digitally engaged and confident. I wanted to try a different approach, one which involved experiential learning and was designed to enhance individual digital skills and confidence.

Method

Shifting from a traditional technology 'training' approach to one centred on pedagogically informed learning design, I developed a short, 30 credit postgraduate (PG) course called 'Teaching and Learning in a Digital Age' (TELEDA). This was offered under the institution's teacher education portfolio. Staff were enrolled as students on the institutional VLE (Blackboard) and guided through a set of learning blocks and activities. The outcomes of the experiential learning were explored in weekly reflective journals, while an action research methodology invited participants to engage in continual processes of evaluation. Data from the action research feedback loops were fed into the ongoing design thereby creating an agile, interactive process of course development. The aim was to offer a pedagogically informed Continuing Professional Development (CPD) experience, which was not based on my perception of digital learning and teaching but emerged from the perspective of participants who, unlike most of the course facilitators, were working with large student cohorts on a regular basis (Watling 2014).

The action research methodology substantially influenced subsequent iterations of the course. When staff come onto a CPD teacher education programme such as TELEDA, they are in the unique positon of being both teacher and learner. The reflective journals detailed how the experiential design could be transferred to individual teaching practice, and also recognised the value of applying mini-action research cycles to their own practice on a regular basis (Laurillard 2008; Norton 2008; Zuber-Skeritt 1993).

TELEDA covered learning design and assessment, open education, and online communicating and collaboration. The initial TELEDA ran for three years. During that time a second 30 credit postgraduate course was developed using a similar format and covering social and multiple media in learning and teaching. Each course attracted around 20 participants of whom at least half would take the final reflective portfolio-style assessment. TELEDA became an integral part of my PhD research.

This was a critical investigation into the impact of technology on learning and teaching in higher education (HE); in particular, the ways in which staff conceptualise their practice in a digital age and make digital shifts from traditional to virtual ways of working (Watling 2015b).

Findings

TELEDA evolved into a course that fitted the requirements of staff rather than education developers (Watling 2015a). The latter can inhabit a 'third space', one which is often removed from day-to-day interactions with student cohorts (Whitchurch 2013). The experiential approach, combined with action research loops of reflection and revision, resulted in cognitive shifts that might not otherwise have occurred. The following are examples of comments from the data:

- [the course helped me see] the reasons why people have not necessarily contributed to activities … may be because they were unclear about what was expected and/or afraid of getting it wrong and looking silly;
- this has been quite revealing in terms of the way I previously organised materials on Blackboard, and perhaps missed opportunities to integrate digital tools and materials more fully into my teaching;
- I have made assumptions previously about the skills of students I am working with, and presumed that they would find learning in an online environment 'easy' as this was something that they had chosen;
- preparation is not just about being technically competent, it is about ensuring learners are able to deal with the social and emotional challenges of learning online too.

(Quotes from research data collected 2013-2015)

Impact

Following a departmental restructure, the two TELEDA courses became optional modules at diploma level of a new MA in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. A direct outcome of TELEDA's application of an action research methodology was to enhance perceptions of VLE usage and resulted in the MA being offered as blended learning.

Reflection

I have bought the experience of TELEDA to my post at the University of Hull where I am co-developing Design for Action Learning (D4AL). The D4AL model offers a scholarly approach to academic practice which might or might not include technology but is always focused on what students do. Wherever possible my face-to-face practice includes chunks of online learning. These combine experiential design with action research cycles of reflection. Evidence shows this mix offers an effective way to facilitate digital shifts alongside encouraging the development of more innovative online practice.

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11. Utilising 'students as partners' as an approach to affect change

Dr Roisín Curran, Ulster University (r.curran@ulster.ac.uk)

Learning and teaching issue

The focus of this case study is the exploration of the impact of a student–staff partnership approach in an institutional-wide change programme (2013-2016). 'What Works? Student Retention and Success' (WWSRS) aimed at improving student retention and success. Ulster University was one of 13 institutions involved in the WWSRS change programme (see Thomas *et al*. 2017 for full report), which sought to improve the strategic approach to the engagement, belonging, retention and success of first year students through the implementation of interventions in the areas of induction, active learning and co-curricular activities. One of the key principles of the change programme, was that a 'students as partners' (SAP) ethos should be adopted. Seven discipline areas were selected to be involved, and each discipline team was made up of course team staff members and student partners (representing 145 participants: 94 students and 51 staff). Each team worked together to identify, implement and evaluate interventions aimed at improving the overall first year experience and lowering attrition rates.

As the Project Lead whose day-to-day role is academic development, implementing a SAP approach presented a particular challenge: how I was going to lead staff *and students* to work in partnership – which for many was a new way of working – to achieve the aim of the change programme. I decided to engage in action research as defined by Arnold (2015).

This involved: making change to practice; a concern for overall change and improvement; and using theory to underpin decisions with a willingness to generate new insights. Using an eight-stage action research cycle involving: problem identification; preliminary discussion and negotiation; review of the research literature; redefinition of the original problem; selection of research procedures; choice of evaluation procedures; implementation of project; and interpretation of the data and general summing up (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). My challenge was my stage 1. Discussions were held with the teams to negotiate ways of working and a review of SAP literature was carried out representing stages 2 and 3. As the change programme progressed into year two it became apparent that a SAP approach was being 'lived out' in different ways across the disciplines, and this led to the identification of a research study, effectively stages 4, 5 and 6. Specifically, I sought to explore the impact of student–staff partnerships on the individual in order to provide new data and learning for practitioners and the institution on the impact of such an approach and its potential to be scaled-up across the institution (see Curran, 2017 for further details).

Method

In order to better understand the 'lived experience' of working in partnership, and how it impacts on the individuals involved, 14 one-to-one, hour-long, semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff and students. Purposive sampling was used and the individual interviews included one staff and one student member from each of the seven discipline teams. Trigger questions were used (see below) and the interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using a six-stage approach to qualitative data analysis as detailed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Semi-structured interview trigger questions:

- How do you feel about staff student partnerships?
- Have you seen any differences in the way you interact with staff/students since the partnership was introduced? If so, could you describe them?
- Has the staff–student partnership changed your approach to your studies/teaching practice? If so, how?
- Has the development of the staff student partnership in which you are involved presented any opportunities and/or challenges? If so, could you describe them?

Alongside this, the overall change programme was being implemented and evaluated (representing stage 7) using data – such as student progression rates, retention data, twice-yearly reports and reflections – linked to the programme aim, from the discipline leads of each team.

Findings

The data from the interviews, at stage 8, enabled the drawing out of the benefits of a 'students as partners' approach in relation to how it enhances student engagement. At the same time, it highlighted the challenges and recommendations that should be considered for staff–student partnership to be sustained and be effective.

The benefits of partnership are very similar for both staff and students and are described in the context of changing attitudes and behaviour, articulated under two main themes: *personal development* and *enhancement of the learning climate*. This was an interesting finding and useful to uncover. For both students and staff, it can challenge traditional norms in higher education (HE) and provide each with an insight into the other's perspective, thereby motivating each to adopt new approaches to staff–student engagement. Within each theme, sub-themes were identified: for personal development the sub-themes were 'new ways of thinking' and 'new skills'; for enhancement of the learning climate the sub-themes were 'relationship-building', 'ripple effect', and 'active learning'. Students and staff also identified challenges, and these can be experienced at the individual, school or institutional level. Themes identified were 'time', 'resistance', and 'capacity'.

The study provides the basis for demonstrating how staff–student partnership as an ethos can create a more favourable learning environment in which individual learning is optimised by developing student capacity to engage and staff capacity to be engaging. In addition, the process of partnership has also influenced the personal and professional development of students and staff, particularly with regards to how they view HE and the roles held within it.

Impact

My reflections on supporting academic colleagues and students to engage in staff–student partnerships, and drawing on the available data presents a convincing evidence base that a partnership approach provides a learning opportunity for both staff and students – where each can see things from the others' perspective, and the barriers to learning can be reduced. It is not suggested that staff–student partnership is a panacea for all the challenges with 'engaging students', but it is enabling in terms of motivating students to engage and prompting staff to create learning climates based on trust and shared responsibilities.

The changes in attitude and behaviour by both staff and students is potentially very powerful and can contribute to a change in culture if it can be adopted more widely throughout the institution. It is also desirable to think about partnership in terms of 'engagement through partnership', where the engagement is for all students, rather than the engagement of some already 'super-engaged' students.

This research has informed the development of the 'Ulster/Ulster Students' Union Partnership Agreement' and the development of the Ulster Student Learning Experience Principles, in particular, Principle 1: the Ulster Learning Model (Ulster 2016) (see below). Staff now have to show how these principles are used to inform on going curriculum design and delivery.

Ulster learning model

Ulster students will experience transformative learning, through participation and interaction with fellow students and staff, building relationships in which all partners are valued contributors within the learning climate.

Reflection

What I have learned from this action research is that partnership should be an ethos or a process of student engagement; it works best when it becomes a mind-set not just at individual level but at module, course, discipline, and institutional levels. It is predicated on relationship building, which breaks down the 'them and us' status quo and enhances student belonging, self-confidence and engagement, which is critical to addressing the issue of early leavers and enabling student success.

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12. Understanding the barriers to engagement and promoting MSc students learning through small-group teaching

Janet Francis Akhile, University of Bedfordshire (janet.akhile@study.beds.ac.uk)

Learning and teaching issue

Action research can be described as an investigation into practice conducted by those involved in that practice. Its main purpose is to change and improve that practice. Bradbury-Huang (2010) suggests that action research is a process of enquiry carried out by practitioners to enhance the effectiveness of their teaching and the students' learning. In line with the above statements, this action research was conducted to improve my own classroom teaching and learning strategy, which focuses on enhancing my students' learning and engagement.

As part of the teaching strategy, small-group teaching and learning activities were incorporated to a (15 credit) Comparative Human Resource Management unit, to promote interaction and collaborative learning among the full-time MSc students in the University of Bedfordshire. The idea of incorporating these small-group learning activities in teaching sessions is for the students to solve real-life case study problems relating to different organisations, through small-group discussion. As part of the intended learning outcomes, the students are expected to develop their understanding of concept and theory into practice, working collaboratively. According to Mills and Alexander (2013) small-group teaching and learning creates an atmosphere where the teacher acts as a facilitator rather than dictating to the students what is being learned, meaning that students have an active role in this process by being interactive, engaging, and reflexive.

After carefully observing the students during several classroom sessions, it was identified that most of the students do not fully engage in small-group learning activities. In most cases, some of the students do not engage in the dialogue at all, which is an integral part of the learning process. As such, the anticipated effectiveness of the teaching and learning process that was intended is not fully achieved.

Methodology

In the spring of 2017, a small-scale action research project (McNiff 2013) was conducted with two different cohorts of Masters-level students. A focus-group discussion lasting 30 minutes was conducted, comprising of nineteen students (Ritchie and Lewis 2003). Focus-group discussion was used because it allows the students (participants) to hear from their peers, which provides them with the opportunity to reflect and modify their responses based on their own perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours with regards to small-group learning, thus provide answers to the issues of disengagement. In analysing the qualitative data collected I focused on identifying themes and patterns by drawing inferences as they emerged from the focus-group discussion which was aimed at informing the research questions being investigated (Braun and Clarke 2006; Silverman 2013).

Findings

This action research had two objectives: (1) to analyse Masters students' experience, and perception of participating in small-group learning; and (2) to examine the factors that influence and hinder MSc students from engaging in small-group learning. Consequently, the transcribed data were analysed in detail to identify which aspects of small-group learning were experienced by the students both positively and negatively. Four reoccurring themes were identified:

- the students stated that they were given the opportunity to be more active and less passive during teaching and learning;
- the students felt that they were inspired in class to develop new viewpoints and ideas based on high-level of interactions in group discussions;
- during peer learning and discussion students were found to be ignorant of the topic and unprepared in class;
- different viewpoints from peers were perceived as confusing and contradictory.

The findings indicated that the students had both positive and negative perceptions about small-group learning. These findings concur with many previous studies and pedagogic literature claiming that small-group learning – both collaborative and co-operative – has impact on students' cognitive behaviour, which influences their learning and participation (Blatchford *et al.* 2003; Johnson and Johnson 2009; Millis 2010). However, the students showed behaviours of both acceptance and resistance towards small-group learning.

Furthermore, factors which hinder students from engaging in small-group learning were explored, and the following themes were identified:

- dysfunctional groups were identified as a problematic factor which hinders students from engaging in the learning process. Because each small-group consist of students with different assumptions and communication styles, which may not only cause conflicting ideas and but limit their ability to resolve issues;
- dissatisfaction with other members of the group occurred because at least one group member was either argumentative or controlling;
- some students considered themselves exploited because in the past they had carried a disproportionately heavy task;
- some students stated unfamiliarity with other students as a problem, which led to disengagement or communication issues such as language barriers.

The findings highlighted several factors that influence the students engaging in small-group learning, and one main factor pointed toward a dysfunctional group (Osmond and Roed 2010). However, misunderstanding towards peers' knowledge and lack of good communication skills among students were some of the factors that impede students' engagement in group learning with their peers.

Impact

In addition to successfully understanding factors that hinder students from engaging in small-group teaching and learning, we have now implemented different activities aimed at overcoming such learning barriers, which includes icebreaking social interaction activities during induction week. Many students suggested ways to get them involved, such as selecting their own group members, which they believe will help them interact more. These types of learning styles are new to most of the international students since they are typically taught to listen to lecturers, unlike small-group teaching where they are encouraged to take an active role through dialogue, which is believed to have more impact on students learning.

Reflection

By conducting this action research, I was able to critically evaluate my teaching strategy and improve on it. Changes have been made which include forming small-groups at the commencement of the unit, and students are provided with clear instructions on tasks, the intended learning outcomes, and expected behaviour during small-group discussion. Based on my observation, I have learnt that small-group teaching and learning could be used to assess students' knowledge and progress formatively (also known as assessment for learning), thereby providing the students with feed-forward on how to improve on their performance instead of waiting until the end of summative assessment (Black and William 1998; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006). Such teaching strategy could be adapted to different contexts to improve on effective teaching practice.

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13. Incorporating action research for curriculum design in initial teacher education

Leo Africano, Newcastle College School of Education
(leonardo.morantes-africano@ncl-coll.ac.uk) @lamorantesa

Learning and teaching issue

In my experience as a teacher trainer, the development of teachers' "digital literacies" (Sharpe and Beetham 2010) is a key area to be addressed in initial teacher training (ITE). The development of digital skills starts with *access* to resources and *support* from a more knowledgeable other. This can be achieved through experiential learning (Kolb 1984). Without a hands-on approach, the idea of using technology in education might be appealing but difficult for some teachers to implement. In order to address this issue, I decided to use action research (AR) for the design and delivery of a PGCE elective module on *resource development* (including emerging technologies for teaching, learning and assessment). I used AR for curriculum design – that is, trainees were asked to use AR to explore the use of technology in their classrooms and produce a report as part of their summative assessment. In order to support this I modelled the process of AR throughout the module delivery, for example, seminars and workshops on AR and theoretical underpinnings for the effective implementation of emerging technologies in the classroom.

The use of AR for this module had a two-fold purpose: to engage students as producers (Neary 2013) and to enable them to have a practitioner-informed approach to critically analyse and evaluate their own practice. I wanted trainees to have a meaningful experience through the exploration of technologies in the classroom. I also wanted a shift from written accounts on technology from a theoretical perspective to a practitioner-led, systematic, collaborative and problem-posing and problem-solving research process (Kemmis and McTaggart 1992), in which they become the "insider expert and knower" (McNiff 2017, p. 56). In summary, the purpose was to contextualise theory and practice through AR. Reflection and evaluation were core skills to be addressed too; this research enabled me and my trainees to become participants and co-researchers through a process of planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Zuber-Skerrit 1993) on our own practice.

Method

From a curriculum design perspective, I divided learning outcomes up in to those related to theory (to be addressed through a written assignment) and those that were reflective and evaluative (to be addressed through a practical application); hence incorporating AR as an assessed component for this module. I discussed the module delivery plan with trainees in order to fully involve the trainees: AR would be modelled to enable them to carry out their own projects and write the reports. There were six PGCE trainees (three full-time and three part-time). Ethical issues were considered including: ethical approval from the College; the participation would have no impact on their assessment; they had a right to withdraw; and data would be protected during dissemination (BERA 2011).

I initially gathered qualitative data on participants' familiarity with AR and their current use of resources in their own classroom (including technologies). The process blended theory with a practical exploration of apps (Kahoot!, Plickers, Socrative), virtual reality (VR), cardboard, and presentation tools (PowerPoint and Prezi). This enabled them to gain a theoretical understanding through reading and research and develop their digital skills (as students) to cascade down in their own classrooms (as teachers The difference between Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and other classroom settings is that in initial teacher education (ITE) the 'loop input' approach – as an experiential learning technique (see Woodward 2003) – enables learning through practical experimentation, reflection, understanding of theory, and adaptation to a variety of contexts. The modelling of AR was a key pedagogical strategy to support new educational researchers.

I carried out an open, transparent, participatory and collaborative process (Winter 1996, pp. 13–14) with my trainees. Their involvement was invaluable for me to evaluate my own approaches to curriculum design and delivery methods, that is, through a module evaluation survey (four out of six participants took part) and for them to develop a well-rounded understanding of theory and development of their own digital skills and new digital practices, that is, using apps for e-assessment (Andrews 2011). This could be considered the first cycle of this formalised AR, as the process stemmed from thoughtful action as a "continuous, private, natural, unarticulated and experiential practice" (Tripp 1995, p. 6) on assessment used around the topic of technology in education, to a structured, intentional and planned pilot using AR for curriculum design.

Findings

Integrating AR in curriculum design was an effective approach to enable trainees to develop digital skills, practices and identities (Sharpe and Beetham 2010), and an understanding of theoretical considerations around technology and AR. The aim of having students as producers was met by them becoming participants and co-researchers. Through their AR projects I witnessed a clear learning journey, both from a theoretical and a practical perspective. This was aided through the capturing of the process. At the beginning this was captured with diagnostic/demographic information; there were teaching observations throughout; and at the end there was a module evaluation survey.

Regarding digital skills development, trainees acting as participants and co-researchers were able to use apps during my delivery, become familiar with the platforms, and then explore and apply in their practice. I witnessed during teaching observations that trainees used online quizzes (e.g. Kahoot and Socrative) for the first time in their delivery. My feedback helped them to evaluate and refine approaches for future use and throughout the process. They also involved their students in the evaluation of e-resources. It was useful to see them sharing experiences with their peers (co-researchers on the same topic) thus establishing a practitioner-led community of practice (COP) (Wenger-Trayner 2015).

Impact

Regarding curriculum design, the incorporation of AR allowed me to bridge the gap between trainees' perception of research as something done by academics and their expected engagement in continuous professional development, research, and scholarly activity (HEA 2011; Education and Training Foundation 2014).

This was also facilitated by the inclusion of a research report as an assessed component for the module. In terms of learning on the topic of technology, I noticed a significant difference between the outcomes of alumni and the group of trainees who carried out this AR. By becoming participants and co-researchers, trainees developed valuable insights into the value of formalised research and some of the advantages and limitations of the use of e-resources in the classroom.

Even though AR methodology was not an intended learning outcome, the process enabled trainees to witness the benefits of contextualised research practices for the improvement of their own practice. Trainees reported an increased confidence with the use of e-resources in the classroom, shared useful considerations with peers through their COP on apps for assessment, and also became the 'more knowledgeable other' on both action research and the topic of technology in education. This process can potentially have a positive effect on the wider sector as practitioners engaging in AR can progress from reflective practice to systematic forms of action inquiry to inform their practice (Tripp 1995, p. 7).

Reflection

My main recommendation for practitioners who want to incorporate AR in curriculum design is to map it carefully around the intended learning outcomes of an academic module. In terms of delivery, the 'loop input' method used in ITE – that is, modelling good and bad practice in regards to resource development – blends theory and practice well. Some of the topics that trainees found beneficial included *PowerPoint: a tree of good and evil* (Farhadipour 2016), and the use of case studies to address inclusive practice. My modelling of good and bad practice on the use of technology in teaching, learning, and assessment, also resulted in a personalised, contextualised and professionally relevant experience for my trainees.

One of the adaptations I will consider for future delivery is the embedding of further support mechanisms on methods and methodology to carry out action research. For example, I plan to further support trainees on data collection and data analysis methods. I will also consider ways to capture data systematically to be able to share outcomes and disseminate the process with the wider community.

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14. What are the barriers to Masters level students' engagement in the pre-reading of case study material for a seminar session?

Jean Egbegi, University of Bedfordshire (jean.egbegi@studybeds.ac.uk)

Learning and teaching issue

Hwang and Hsu (2011) defined pre-reading as studying or reading before the commencement of a class. It encourages leaners' readiness for the session. Brassel and Rasinski (2008) previously explained that pre-reading gives students the opportunity to think about what they already know and predict what they need to know. This could serve as a strategy to improve a learner's interest in the topic that is being taught and implies that pre-reading can be applied across disciplines, as it is not discipline specific. Thomas and Reinhart (2014) states that the concept of pre-reading encompasses everything a reader does to maximise the ability to understand what is being taught. Hence in order for pre-reading to be meaningful, it has to be done before the commencement of the learning process as this will allow the student to integrate their existing knowledge with the new knowledge that is learned (Zhang 2001).

Bradbury-Huang (2010) defines action research (AR) as:

> an orientation to knowledge creation that arises in a context of practice and requires researchers to work with practitioners. Unlike conventional social science, its purpose is not primarily or solely to understand social arrangements, but also to effect desired change as a path to generating knowledge and empowering stakeholders. (Bradbury-Huang 2010, p. 93)

I was drawn to carry out this action research because of my experiences in the role of supporting MSc students' learning at the University of Bedfordshire. One of the support mechanisms I offer to students is to discuss a case study related to the topic that is being taught to them during a teaching session. They are expected to pre-read the case study before the session. This is to enable them to think and draw their responses to the questions from relevant literature. But in most cases, the students do not pre-read the case study, and I know this because most of them are unable to summarise the case study when asked to do so in class. As an alternative solution, students are given a printed version in class to read before commencement of the seminar discussion. This does not only take up teaching time but the students have less time to actively draw from relevant literature in developing their responses to the questions. Again, the anticipated effective learning environment that was intended is not fully achieved.

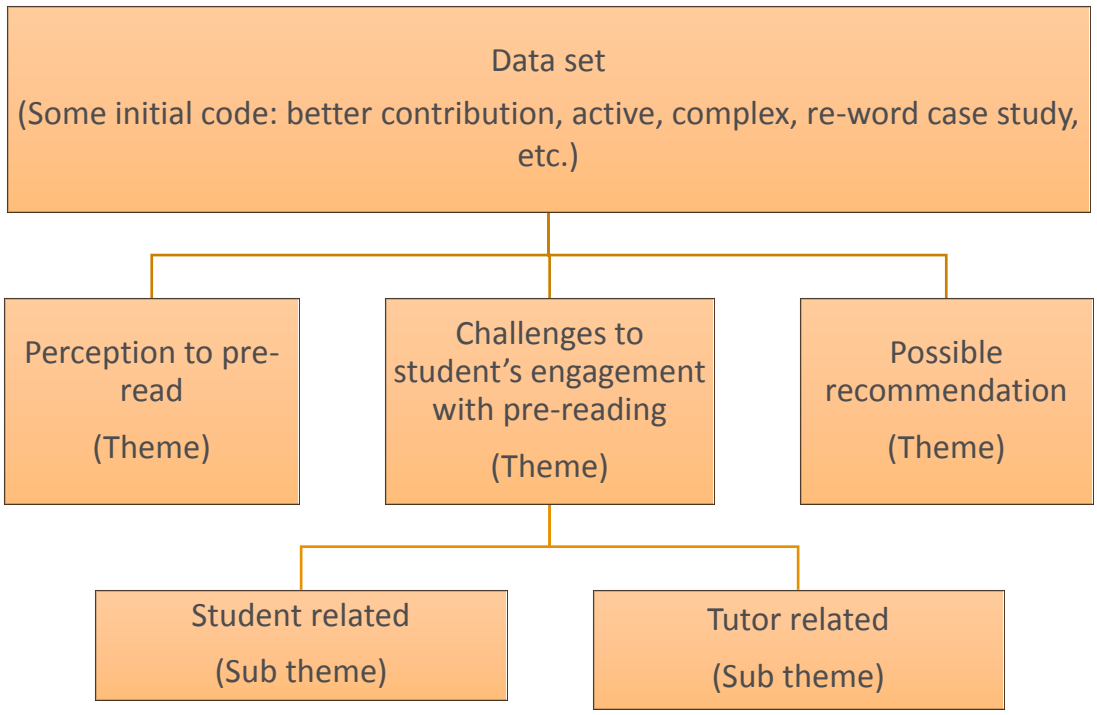
Method

The study adopted a data collection method that would enable me to collect participants' (MSc students) perceptions of pre-reading of case study material and their challenges engaging with it. A semi-structured interview was adopted which supports the inclusion of individual experiences during data analysis (Robson 2011; Silverman 2013). Each interview lasted for ten to fifteen minutes and three participants were interviewed over two days. Data collection was done in compliance with the University of Bedfordshire's code of ethics.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis was adopted as this would allow a rich development of the knowledge which is useful to achieve the research objectives (Norton 2009). Braun and Clarke (2006) defined thematic analysis as:

> a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) details. However, it also often goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic. (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 79)

I adopted Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines on analysing data thematically using six phases: familiarisation of data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing a report. The figure below is a thematic map to illustrate the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data set.



Findings

The findings from the data reveal pre-reading to be a helpful way to stimulate the curiosity of students. Some phrases that participants used to describe their perception of pre-reading are: “make students active during teaching session” and “increase knowledge and prepares student for learning”.

In spite of the positive perception to pre-reading, participants highlighted some of their challenges. Some of these were student-related while others were tutor-related. Student-related challenges are self-identified laziness, not remembering to do pre-reading, and not having enough time to engage due to both personal and academic reasons. They also highlighted the complexity and length of the case study, which is a tutor-related challenge.

Furthermore, participants highlighted some ways to improve engagement with pre-reading. They suggested the re-wording of the case study and a summary to guide students’ understanding.

Impact

This action research has made me consider other ways to ensure that the student engage with pre-reading before the class. At the completion of my action research, I took on another role to support MBA students to develop their critical thinking skills. During one of my sessions I allowed students to pre-read one of their previously read journal paper instead of giving them one to pre-read for the class activity. This mitigated the challenge of the complexity or length of the pre-reading given. The students participated actively, engaged with the class activity and the learning outcome was achieved.

Reflection

This section draws from the findings of the action research and my reflection of the entire action research process. There is a need to keep the case study short with simple words. However, in cases where the case study is extremely lengthy or/and complex, a summary should be given to guide students. This is because their understanding is essential to ensure effective development of new knowledge. My continuous explanation on the benefit of pre-reading the case study and how it affects and/or contributes to their learning and assessment is needed in addition to considering other ways students can engage with pre-read material.

Finally, this AR could be extended because it is worth exploring whether or not doing this will eventually improve student engagement with the pre-reading of case studies effectively or not. It creates a continuous action research cycle which improves my professional practice.

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Contact us

+44 (0)1904 717500 enquiries@heacademy.ac.uk
Innovation Way, York Science Park, Heslington, York, YO10 5BR
Twitter: @HEAcademy www.heacademy.ac.uk

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