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Developing Sustainable Student Communities: Informal Learning and Becoming Peer

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Teaching Fellowship Award Scheme final report

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Names of other staff involved: Joanna Haynes, Mel Joyner

With students from the BA ECS, BA EDST and BSc Sociology programmes:

Jenna Illingworth, Georgina Norgrove, Danielle Matthews, Gary Burns, Emily Biden, Nicole Clear, Sarah-Louise Clarke, Lyndsey Lunt, Will Sugg, Penny Qi, Kimberley Smith.

Title of project:

Developing Sustainable Student Communities: Informal Learning and Becoming Peer.

Type of project: Focus group supported development

Aims of project

We aimed to exploit opportunities arising from the merging of the faculties of Health and Education to explore ways of supporting students in the development of a network of sustainable communities.

Background to project:

While there is a substantial literature on how students engage and participate in the academic cultures of HEIs and on factors which affect student retention and quality of life, less research has been focused on the relationships between what might be called the formal curriculum and the informal learning opportunities afforded by participation in a student community.

In the context of the creation of the Faculty of Health, Education and Society, we are particularly interested in exploring ways in which the practice of care can become a significant feature of the life and ethos of students and tutors. While care is at the core of the curriculum in the majority of our programmes we recognise that there may be further opportunities to support students in the development of a network of sustainable communities which draw new entrants into a vibrant framework of opportunities to participate, contribute and engage and which provide powerful models of what is available to, and expected of, the Plymouth student. The new faculty will also provide a clear focus for the development, practice and study of multiprofessional discourse and this project will inform efforts to facilitate and support active engagement between students studying on different programmes.

Methods used

Focus group discussions with Y3 students and with Y3 and Y1 students. FGs introduced by tutors who offered a set of potential focuses drawn from previous meetings and then withdrew to allow students to discuss the focuses themselves. Students agreed to having their discussions recorded but were able to edit these recordings before they were transcribed and shared with tutors.

The steering group met on two occasions in the autumn term: a first informal meeting on October 18th to talk about the role of the group and to begin to negotiate ways of working and a second meeting on November 15th (for which notes were taken and written up by Claire Shuter) to consider ways of working with Y1 students. In January 2012 we identified Y1 students from the three programmes involved in the project (BA ECS, BA EDST and BA/BSc Sociology) who were interested in taking part. The first focus group meeting with Y3 and Y1 students took place on Feb 23rd but with only four students (Two Y3 and two Y1 all from BA EDST). This meeting was audio recorded and participating students were able to identify sections of the recording to be deleted before it was transcribed. The second focus group meeting was held on March 28th, with 2 Y3 and 3 Y1 students (4 BA EDST and 1 BA ECS), on this occasion the recording failed so we were only able to access the students' discussions from their notes. The third meeting was on May 16th, with 2Y3 and 1 Y1 student (2 BA ECS and 1 BA EDST). The recording from this FG was transcribed by two of the students at the meeting.

What remains to be done?

Notes and transcriptions from all meetings have been distributed to the project team who will meet on Nov 13th and Nov 26th to identify themes to be developed in presentation at SRHE conference (December 12-14, 2012) and for paper to be submitted in spring 2013.

Dissemination –

A presentation on the project was given at the VC's Teaching and Learning Conference, July 2012.

Students have developed a Facebook page to support communication between students in different cohorts and on different programmes and a poster to advertise the project and the Facebook page.

Students have also expressed interest in helping to develop FAQs sections in programme handbooks/Tulip sites.

Paper accepted for presentation at SRHE conference in December 2012 (see appendix 1). This will be presented by Rod Parker-Rees, Joanna Haynes and two students from the project and will be developed for submission to a relevant journal (TiHE or PCiE).

Website:

Project Tulip site -

<https://tulip.plymouth.ac.uk/Programme/3645/SSCP/SitePages/Home.aspx>

Students' Facebook Page –

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Health-Education-and-Society/377605645600577>

Keywords: informal learning, peer support, student-led focus groups, student culture, social action.

Appendix one:

Paper accepted for presentation at SRHE conference, December 12-14 2012

Title:

Developing Sustainable Student Communities: Informal Learning and Becoming Peer.

Project team:

Rod Parker- Rees, Joanna Haynes, Mel Joyner, Jenna Illingworth, Georgina Norgrove, Danielle Matthews, Gary Burns, Emily Biden, Nicole Clear, Sarah-Louise Clarke, Lyndsey Lunt, Will Sugg, Penny Qi, Kimberley Smith.

Key words: informal learning, peer support, student-led focus groups, student culture, social action

Presenters:

Rod Parker-Rees is coordinator of Early Childhood Studies in the School of Education at Plymouth University. His research interests include very early forms of communication (in the first year of life) and ways in which undergraduate students can help each other to enjoy their university experience.

Joanna Haynes teaches on the Education Studies programme at Plymouth University. Her research interests are in the areas of critical pedagogy, troublesome knowledge and developing communities of philosophical enquiry.

Two students involved in the project will also contribute to the presentation.

Short abstract

We explored ways of supporting the co-construction of sustainable student communities which could survive and evolve over time while enhancing opportunities for students to engage in social action.

The steering group consisted of tutors and Y3 students from three undergraduate programmes in the Faculty of Health, Education and Society. With only minimal support from tutors, Y3 students engaged with Y1 students in focus group discussions to explore ways of enriching the informal student learning culture in the Faculty. These meetings were recorded and transcribed and key ideas and themes were identified. Students discussed ways of creating actual and virtual social learning spaces, the best media for passing on students' 'accumulated wisdom', proactive ways of supporting less confident students and the value of mentoring systems. Students have established Facebook groups to address identified needs for coordination of social events, informal learning events and information sharing.

Long abstract

While there is a substantial literature on how students engage with and participate in the academic cultures of HEIs (Boud *et al.* 2001, Boud and Lee 2005, Holmberg 2006, Smith 2007) and on factors which affect student retention and quality of life (Wilcox *et al.* 2005, Cartney and Rouse 2006, Christie *et al.* 2008), less research has been focused on the relationships between what might be called the formal curriculum and the informal learning opportunities afforded by participation in student communities (Havnes 2008). We became interested in the concept of social learning spaces as developed by Matthews *et al.* (2011) and sustainable ways of realising such real, metaphorical and virtual spaces to enrich students' and tutors' experiences of life in a university community.

In the context of the creation of a new Faculty of Health, Education and Society at our University, we were particularly interested in exploring ways in which the practice of care could become a significant feature of the life and ethos of students and tutors. While care is at the core of the curriculum in the majority of our programmes we recognise that more could be done to support students in the development of a network of sustainable communities which draw new entrants into a vibrant framework of opportunities to participate, contribute, belong and engage and which provide powerful models of what is available to, and expected of, students in our faculty. Communities provide contexts for the practice of care (e.g. recognising a common responsibility for each other's wellbeing; noticing when people may need support; dealing with conflicts of interests and ensuring that all have opportunities to participate) but they can also help to initiate newcomers into shared cultures which help them to identify what is worth caring about (e.g. professional, ethical and moral standards; social justice and inclusion; diverse ways of knowing and understanding; approaches to the evaluation and interpretation of policies; critical respect for other points of view). The new faculty provides a clear focus for the development, practice and study of multi-professional discourses and this project will inform efforts to facilitate and support active engagement between students studying on different programmes.

The project steering group (tutors and Year 3 students from three undergraduate programmes) met twice in the autumn term of 2011 to negotiate the role of the group and to explore possible ways of working with Y1 students. In the spring term of 2012 we invited Year 1 students from the three programmes to join us for two focus group meetings. In common with several other projects which have sought student participation, and despite shameless promises of free food, we encountered some difficulties in persuading busy students to give up their time to come to meetings. We suspect that this disinterest may reflect a degree of 'student voice fatigue' resulting from the recent market driven emphasis on 'the student experience'.

Four students attended the first meeting (2 Y3 and 2 Y1) and five attended the second meeting (2 Y3, 3 Y1). After brief introductions, the tutors involved in the project left and the students spent about an hour talking around a loose framework of topics which had been distilled from earlier meetings. The student focus group meetings were audio recorded and the recording was shared with participating students via a Dropbox folder so that they could identify any sections of the recording which they wanted to be deleted before the recording was posted on a shared web space and transcribed. The final meeting, attended by three students (2 Y3 and 1 Y1) was held in the summer term.

Students' discussions initially focused on three broad areas: provision of social learning spaces on the campus (students felt that they should have more informal places where they could meet and chat without feeling they were obliged to buy food or drinks or that

they were occupying other people's territories); use of communication technology to facilitate networking between students (particularly those whose other commitments made it difficult for them to spend a lot of time on campus) and ways in which students who had already 'settled in' and found their way around the campus and life at university could share their knowledge with new students (both entrants to Year1 and Direct Entrants to Y3). Discussion about each of these areas identified the need for a 'third space' between the formal provision, 'owned' by the university and the private domain 'owned' by students. Students felt that what was needed was university support for spaces (both physical and 'virtual') which students would be trusted to manage for themselves (Hockings 2010).

We aim to use this project to bring together students and tutors from a range of schools and programmes to share ideas and to promote the development of links across, as well as within, different programmes. We do not intend to encourage the development of a single, monolithic learning community; we would anticipate, rather, that smaller, more intimate groupings or societies will provide secure bases for students who share common interests while also actively encouraging links and shared activities with other groups (modelling 'multi-professional' approaches to sharing traditions and expertise rather than crude homogenisation). We hope to encourage both students and tutors to consider ways of developing opportunities for 'lived learning' around the curriculum content of particular programmes. The new faculty of Health, Education and Society offers a particularly appropriate context for exploring ways in which students can participate in inclusive, caring and self-sustaining learning communities but we would hope to disseminate interest in this project to other faculties in our university, both through our HE pedagogy community and through the work of the Students' Union. While we share our university's aim to help graduates to be 'active, co-operative and responsible citizens in local and global society' we recognise that strong student communities will also support the development of confident, challenging, even subversive voices (Harris 2012).

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