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Abstract
This case study tells the story of two educators at the University of Plymouth (United Kingdom) who reconsidered the fundamental purpose of their curriculum in light of the United Nations Sustainable Development agenda. This resulted in the development of a new community-engaged applied practice module during the final year of the Theatre and Performance degree. Reflection on their innovation process reveals that students engaged in their community benefit from making direct links in the curricula to locally-relevant sustainable development goals. However, it also highlights the interplay of other external forces influencing curriculum design, such as notions of teaching excellence becoming increasingly framed by student employability outcomes. Finding the means to hold these different agendas symbiotically is presented as key to survival within such an educational context.

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Introduction

The United Nations Sustainable Development agenda provides an important platform for lecturers to rethink the fundamental purposes of Higher Education (UNESCO 2015). This case study tells the story of two educators partnering to embed Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)[i] within a Theatre and Performance degree programme at the University of Plymouth, UK. The University of Plymouth is a post-1992 institution with over 21,000 students. Its educational strategic vision is to 'deliver outstanding education that makes a difference, improving local, national and global communities' (University of Plymouth 2018). The Theatre and Performance degree is housed within the Plymouth Conservatoire, a unique partnership between the University of Plymouth and Theatre Royal Plymouth. This partnership expands the teaching and practical experiences available to the students and encourages its students to engage with its local community through the University, the Theatre Royal, and the students' own projects. Thus, a community-focused applied practices module was warmly welcomed within the Conservatoire.

The marriage between applied theatre and ESD was based on findings that many UK Higher Education students desired to embed sustainability into their curriculum as a learning opportunity (Drayson et al. 2015). It also drew from international research that argues the most effective pedagogical approaches to ESD are interdisciplinary, applied and participatory (UNESCO 2014; Tilbury 2011). However, this is difficult to achieve in institutions that are traditionally constructed around the didactic instruction of subject specific expertise or shaped by different neo-liberal agendas such as the employability of its graduates. This case study highlights some of the challenges faced when seeking to implement ESD within such a higher education (HE) context and shares key lessons learnt for future educational improvement.

The need to fuse sustainability and employability agendas

In 2016, Alex Cahill (Programme Lead, Theatre and Performance) and Paul Warwick (Centre for Sustainable Futures Lead) began a year long conversation on how sustainability could be braided into the theatre and performance curriculum. This discussion resulted in a new 3rd Year applied practice module, with the purpose to engage students as 'compassionate critical creatives' (Warwick 2016). As 'compassionate critical creatives', students explore how they can use their subject expertise to have a positive impact on sustainability challenges experienced in their local communities[ii]. In so doing this module sought to follow the lead of Helen Nicholson's definition of applied theatre (2005), whilst integrating an action where community transactions are connected to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The seventeen UN SDGs represent a comprehensive plan for societal change that address a range of challenges to the well-being of people and the environment[iii].

With the aim of engaging students with these SDGs in local contexts, Cahill and Warwick chose to design a twelve-week applied practice module that was divided into two parts. The first part of the module focused all students on collaboratively working towards a community action that addressed one specific SDG. This SDG was chosen by the module leaders through a number of community consultations that revealed SDG14 – 'to conserve and sustainably use the oceans' – was of particular concern to Plymouth locals. Specifically, the consultations were informed by a co-ordinated public and third sector campaign in Plymouth to respond to the public's interest in reducing marine plastic pollution in coastal areas such as the Plymouth Sound – a natural bay surrounding the city. The second part of the module would then give students the freedom for an independent study where each student focused on addressing a different SDG of their choice and considered how positive action could be applied within the local context.

Recognising the intrinsically held driver to introduce sustainable development as a core theme within the curriculum, Cahill and Warwick then reflexively considered what other extrinsic drivers were influencing their module design approach. This reflection exposed the influence of increasingly prevalent student employability narratives within HE in the UK. In particular, they recognised the effect of the newly implemented Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) on their approach to curriculum design. This policy drive specifically measures teaching excellence parallel to graduate employment outcomes. Each HE institution's TEF ranking has the potential to impact its funding by influencing student recruitment and thus, incoming tuition fees. The module design was therefore considerably influenced by concerns over students' perceptions of 'value for money' as a learning opportunity and its usefulness in enhancing their future employability. Aware of these external responsibilities as HE academics, Cahill and Warwick designed the module to allow students to create sustainability projects that simultaneously enhanced their employability skills and social capital. These skills were built by the students' ability to foster third sector partnerships and work with potential future employers.

Apt pedagogical design

With the sustainability and employability agendas in mind, a pedagogical approach was identified that was in the same spirit of collaborative participation for positive social change. Due to Cahill's training in Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal 1979) and her interest in forum theatre's integration into community issues, it was decided that the pedagogy of forum theatre offered a potentially apt approach to pilot in this module. Consequently, the applied practice module began by dividing the cohort into three groups of 8-12 students who were trained in forum theatre. The module then asked the students to generate a forum theatre piece based on the shared community issue of how to reduce levels of plastic pollution in Plymouth Sound. The students were free to write, direct, and perform the pieces as they saw fit. In total, the students workshopped for four weeks in the classroom before taking their pieces to a local secondary school serving as a community partner, Plymouth School of Creative Arts (PSCA), in October

2017. Pupils aged 11-13 at PSCA were divided into three groups to watch and participate in one of the created forum theatre pieces. After the initial performances, the PSCA pupils were asked to become spect-actors and work with the actors on the issues arising in the performance such as plastic recycling barriers and opportunities, and ways to support the reduction in single use plastics.

> *Photo 1 Image Theatre: Theatre and Performance students from the University of Plymouth work on Image Theatre regarding plastic pollution to generate ideas for their forum theatre piece. Photo by Dr Paul Warwick.*

Following these forum theatre performances, a series of student evaluation and debrief exercises were used to inquire into the university students' experiences and clarify their understanding of the concepts of community-based learning, sustainability, and applied practices. The module then asked the students in the latter eight weeks to work individually or in pairs on devising a community-based project focused on their chosen SDG. These independent projects ranged from dance workshops in rehabilitation centres to comedy workshops for mental health patients[iv]; as well as theatre workshops for students based on the importance of attendance[v] to a luminous dance piece in a derelict area of the city to raise awareness on heritage preservation[vi].

A good start but room for improvement

A positive outcome of this module was staff observation of high engagement levels with students identifying a shared issue of concern, critically exploring its root causes and sustainability implications, and creatively exploring positive actions. In doing so, the Theatre and Performance students were able to embody the understanding of community-based learning in an organised environment – allowing theory (both sustainable education and applied practices) to be absorbed kinaesthetically. This interdisciplinary learning conducted under the guidance of the tutors offered a safety net for those students still apprehensive about the theory or community outreach component.

In some cases, the students' ingenuity caught the imagination and interest of others. For example, one BA (Hons) Dance student partnered with a local primary school to include the children in a video centered on SDG 15: life on land. The student based her project on the importance of nature in children's development (Kellert 2005), and the project resulted in an environmental film depicting the issues of deforestation through dance. The film, *Rooted*, has been submitted to a number a film festivals and is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rKcg0a_mxSQ&t=1s.

Through a mid-module evaluation exercise involving all participants, a common feedback point was students' interest in the topic of sustainable development being integrated into their

curriculum. This echoes the findings of national research (Drayson et al. 2015) and is further exemplified by the student cohort questioning why the University had only included sustainability within the final year of their degree programme.

A challenge, only partially addressed in this first running of the applied practice module, was the interdisciplinary learning demands of engaging with a sustainability issue. In the case of this module's initial focus on SDG 14, there was a clear need for the students to be informed by relevant scientific research to help devise a piece of forum theatre that identified plausible behavioural dilemmas and evidence-based opportunities for positive change. This challenge was responded to by the module staff instigating a partnership with marine biology staff and students who provided information and advice throughout the first half of the module. But this input from marine biology was voluntary and not formally incorporated into their specific degree programme or workload models. Consequently, the collaborative nature of the project relied heavily upon goodwill and at times was sporadic and restricted. This pilot has highlighted two necessities: 1) the importance that applied practice modules that seek to address sustainability issues should have interdisciplinary input from staff with content expertise; but also 2) the need for this partnership to be embedded within the curriculum and workload allocation for all participants to encourage full participation.

For community engaged learning to be effective, a clear requirement is that all relevant stakeholders – the staff, students and community partners – are provided with the necessary dialogic space for the devised project to be relevant, timely and useful. Within the applied practice module design, the consultation with the local community to identify the initial focus on SDG 14 was only conducted between academic staff and community stakeholders. This process removed an important dimension of the students' experiential and immersive learning opportunity, namely seeing firsthand the importance of developing a community based project *with* rather than *on* community partners. Rightly the students' end of module feedback asked for more time to work with their organizations to develop a deeper connection to the issues at hand as well as a better understanding of how their applied practices can be of use to the community. Implementing this partnered approach poses logistical challenges and an additional workload for individual academics offering their students community engaged learning. Providing a supportive institutional system and community of practice for this experiential approach to HE to be effective and manageable has been highlighted by international research (Butin 2010; Gelmon and Billig 2007) and identified by the University of Plymouth as a key area for future development.

Importantly, negative student feedback has been noted at both mid-module and end of module evaluation points with regard to some students struggling to see the relevance of an applied practice opportunity located within public or voluntary sectors where they personally held no ambitions to seek future employment. This feedback indicates a point of resistance where student

perspectives are more focused on the specific employment sector being opened up to them, and less so on recognising the transferability of the 'soft skills' they are developing within this particular context. One possible response to this finding is to incorporate explicit attention and reflexive activities for students to contemplate and articulate what skills are being developed and how they can be applied to other contexts that might be more aligned to their own future employment preferences.

Conclusion

This case study has focused upon innovation within an applied practice module specifically devised with the ambition to help students develop their compassionate critical creativity while simultaneously enhancing their future employability. These two agendas, when held together, have been found to offer points of synergy, but for some students lacking interest in sustainable development or unable to see the transferability of employable skills developed within a specific context, they can also create points of tension and a risk of disengagement.

What has been experienced as important within this pedagogical approach has been the embedding of a co-constructed students- and community-as-partners approach. Whilst highlighting the need for further refinement of the practice it is also clear that further research is needed on the diversity of students' experiences and the longitudinal impacts of a module of this nature. These points will be taken into effect in Spring 2019 when the module has its second iteration.

This case study has nonetheless pointed towards the potential for an applied practice approach to Education for Sustainable Development. In doing so, students engage with sustainability challenges that exist locally whilst enhancing their employability skills upon graduation. This we would argue deserves further experimentation and scrutiny as it offers the potential for what we view to be a desirable win-win-win scenario in HE, where the needs of the community, students and also the academic institution are met symbiotically.

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[i] Sustainability education is defined as the process of equipping students with the knowledge and understanding, skills and attributes needed to work and live in a way that safeguards environmental, social and economic wellbeing, both in the present and for future generations. (QAA 2014, 5)

[ii] 'Compassionate critical creatives' is a term coined by Paul Warwick in 2016 to describe the 21st Century HE graduate. This theory has in part underpinned the University of Plymouth's Graduate Compass – 'a framework of 'future-facing' attributes' that informs the University's educational strategy for innovative curriculum design (University of Plymouth 2016).

iii UN Sustainable Development Goals consist of a series of ambitious global targets including eradicating poverty in all its forms, realizing human rights and achieving gender equality whilst tackling environmental threats such as climate change and biodiversity loss. (United Nations 2015)

iv Sustainability Development Goal 3: Good health and Wellbeing

v Sustainability Development Goal 4: Quality Education

vi Sustainability Development Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities