JOHN OWEN

STUDENT-STAFF PARTNERSHIPS IN TEACHING AND LEARNING DESIGN

ITL FELLOWSHIP 2020/21

PROJECT REPORT

ITL Fellow 2020/21

JOHN OWEN

John Owen is a Lecturer in Technology-Enhanced Learning in a team of health professionals and data scientists, developing interdisciplinary and innovative methods to teaching and research.

He has a background in teaching multimedia computing, educational development and technology-enhanced learning, with extensive experience in the development, implementation and evaluation of online and blended learning.

Fellowship Student Partner Interns

EVA SHELMERDINE
LOUISE TURNER

STUDENT-STAFF PARTNERSHIPS IN TEACHING AND LEARNING DESIGN

ITL Fellowship project

This project explored and evaluated the potential of a new methodology to improve working in partnership with students on curriculum design projects, and how this might be applied to other areas such as assessment and feedback, peer support and research and scholarship.

Context

The practice of staff in educational institutions working in partnership with their students to co-create learning has expanded rapidly in recent years. Student partnerships have the potential to positively impact the student experience and their input can influence and continually improve teaching and learning practice and processes. As of January 2020 there were pockets of student-staff partnership (SSP) activity across the university but no inclusion of SSP approaches and practices in central university policies, procedures and guidance. There also appeared to be limited scholarly activity in SSP at UoM.

Objectives of the Fellowship project

- Raise awareness of the benefits of SSP and the opportunities they present
- Increase adoption of SSP practice using current practice as the benchmark
- Encourage staff and students to consider the benefits of co-created curricula
- Embed co-creation of learning and teaching guidance into university curriculum design and approval processes
- Develop a learning community approach to learning and teaching through student-staff partnerships

Project activities

- Developed of a **staff survey** to identify current/past SSP practice at the University of Manchester, to which we received 48 responses from colleagues. Staff offered a variety of reasons for choosing to work collaboratively with students across teaching, learning, research and extracurricular projects, and we used these results to inform further activities (see Outputs below).
- Set up a University of Manchester **Yammer group dedicated to student-staff partnerships** - Student and Teaching Engagement through Partnerships (STEP) - to develop a SSP learning community. The group has 47 members as of summer 2021.
- Identified **external case studies** and **examples of good practice.**
- **Shared UoM good practice** through a range of communication channels and events (including blogs such as TEA, my personal blog and the STEP blog, on Yammer groups and at conferences.
- **Invited students and staff to publish** case studies and reflective blog posts of their experiences of SSP.
- **Promoted scholarship of teaching and learning** and encouraged staff and students to write about and disseminate their work.
- Developed and ran **partnership workshops** to share internal and external best practice (see Outputs for details).
- **Promoted the importance of a learning community**.
- **Co-authored two papers** for *The International Journal for Students as Partners* and *Compass: Journal of Learning and Teaching*.

Challenges faced

The immediate move to remote working in March 2020 had some impact on the organisation and activities of the project. This wasn't too challenging as the rest of the university were also working remotely and the processes and technology for managing SSP projects that I was already using meant that this transition was largely straight forward.

Staff engagement was somewhat challenging. Some colleagues are not as interested in working with their students in a partnership context (which was expected), and others may be happy to have students working on tasks with or for them, but this is not always in a spirit of real partnership (more of an 'intern' approach). However, this didn't really impact the progress of the project. A range of staff attended the first workshop, including those who had lots of SSP experience as well as colleagues who had no previous experience in this but were interested in the concept and how to get started.

Student partnership

I worked with two student partners, who were both brilliant. They had different skills and experience which they brought to the project. The first SPI did lots of work on the survey, both development of the questions and analysis of results. They also helped develop and run the staff workshop. The second SPI contributed lots to the STEP blog, through interviewing UoM students and staff who had worked (or were currently working) on their own partnership projects. I think we had open and productive relationships and we regularly spent time just chatting about the concept of partnerships, informed by practice and personal experience, and the literature. Both SPIs brought a different perspective to the project - not just the student perspective, but also work and life experiences, which led to many interesting (and sometimes philosophical) discussions.

Collaborative work

I mostly collaborated within my initial project team (SPIs Eva Shelmerdine and Louise Turner, and Cath Wasiuk, Lecturer in Technology Enhanced Learning), but I also worked with Jennie Blake (fellow Fellow) on the design and delivery of the staff workshop. Some of the outputs involved other student partners, including students from the Masters of Public Health programme and BSc Psychology. I also co-authored a blog post with a colleague from the University of Edinburgh who I met at an online conference, and we have submitted a paper for publication on 'The Potential for Co-Created Learning and Teaching in Digital and Hybrid Spaces'.

Outputs

- Staff survey results
- Workshops for staff, including 'Introduction to Student-Staff Partnerships and the Co-created Curriculum' and 'ITL Student-Staff Partnerships Workshop'
- Yammer group for staff to discuss and share anything SSP-related
- Student and Teaching Engagement through Partnerships (STEP) blog established
- TEA: Teach, Explore, Apply blog post sharing the project's activities, outputs and resources
- University of Edinburgh Teaching Matters blog post co-authored with Tanya Lubicz-Nawrocka on the potential for co-created learning and teaching in digital and hybrid spaces
- Co-authored case study (with students) published in *Compass Journal of Learning and Teaching:* 'Developing an online learning community through an open reflective assessment'
- Case study in the *International Journal for Students as Partners:* 'An agile approach to co-creation of the curriculum'
- Presentation at SHIFT Teaching and Learning Conference, University of Greenwich: 'What drives our passion? Building an online learning community through an open publication of student reflections on public health'
- Presentation at St Mary's Festival of Learning and Teaching 2020, Twickenham: 'Micro-sprints: How an agile approach to co-creation adapted to global disruption'.

Impact

I think my project has had some impact in a range of areas. Firstly, the university is clearly supporting and advocating student-staff partnerships, which is evident through recent university and faculty wide projects and initiatives (e.g. Flexible Learning, Inclusive Teaching and Learning, ITL SPIs etc.) I can't say this progress is directly related to my project, but I believe the project has contributed to the overall momentum and supported student and staff engagement with SSP practice, or at least encouraged them to consider the benefits.

Secondly, at a more localised level, the project has encouraged colleagues to consider and implement SSP practice in projects and initiatives within their own teaching and learning areas, some of which I have been invited to support and provide advice. I also established cross-institutional collaboration through linking with Tanya Lubicz-Nawrocka, a member of staff at the University of Edinburgh.   We met at an online Teaching and Learning conference and realised we had similar educational interests and experience. Tanya had written some excellent and widely cited research articles on curriculum co-creation so had good knowledge of the relevant literature and experience in getting published. I had practical experience of implementing co-creation approaches, so it developed into a productive partnership. Working with someone from another university is very worthwhile - it enables you to discuss contemporary themes in HE, reflect on the differences and similarities between institutions, and consider different approaches in teaching and learning practice. The experience has also improved my confidence in writing and getting my work published.

Finally, it's clear that many students are more aware of the benefits of SSP, particularly for developing their own understanding of teaching, learning and assessment. Some student partners have adopted my Micro-sprint approach as a way of managing and enhancing their own projects, through the implementation of agile principles such as openness, respect, and iterative development and feedback.

In terms of measuring impact, it can be challenging to assess culture change in a large organisation. On a macro level I believe that student partnership practice will eventually become (almost) ubiquitous in higher education and impact could be broadly measured through the usual 'student satisfaction' methods. At a more local level, impact can be measured through a range of (mostly qualitative) approaches - simply speaking with (or surveying) students and staff to ask how they felt working this way seems to be the most common (and practical) approach based on much of the related literature.

Reflection

Overall I have really enjoyed my Fellowship project, and I think the impact of the project outlined above shows that it has mostly achieved its intended objectives. I personally feel it was relatively successful and definitely worth doing - if success is measured by personal enjoyment, then it's been very successful!

The opportunity to work with colleagues and students from outside my initial team has been rewarding, as has learning about other disciplines and innovative methods to teaching, learning and assessment, and seeing students and colleagues apply the approaches I've shared through my Fellowship.

Next steps

- Continue publishing and disseminating case studies/blogs (myself, colleagues and students)
- Work with various groups across UoM to further embed and promote SSP – Flexible Learning Programme, Transforming Teaching Together at Manchester etc
- Advocate for SSP consideration/guidance to be included in T&L policies and processes
- Look for opportunities to publish with colleagues and students at UoM

John Owen
September 2021