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Student Teaching and Learning Consultants: developing conversations about teaching and learning

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Abstract

This paper outlines a model for students and staff working in partnership to enhance teaching and learning and describes the role of the Student Teaching and Learning Consultant. The background, structure and process of the scheme are presented. Training activities were designed to develop students' confidence in their perspectives, in order to enable them to act as partners in dialogue; such dialogue was to be focused on discussing teaching and learning practice rather than solving problems and offering solutions. One of the Student Consultants reflects on her experience of taking part, including her view of how the Student Consultant role differs from that of a Course Representative in terms of their work with staff.

Involving students in enhancing teaching and learning

The Higher Education Academy (HEA) has recently developed a 'Framework for partnership in learning and teaching in higher education' as a way to bring focus to discussions about student engagement and the concept of partnership. In the framework:

'...partnership is understood as a relationship in which all involved are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together to foster engaged student learning and engaging learning and teaching enhancement. Partnership is essentially a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself.'
(HEA 2014)

The 'Student Teaching and Learning Consultant' project was developed before the HEA framework and was inspired the call by both the Quality Assurance Agency and the National Union of Students for new ways to engage students in their learning, as detailed in the report 'Rethinking the values of Higher Education' by Kay, Dunne & Hutchinson (2010). Since then, this call has been developed in much more detail in the QAA chapter on student engagement (2012) and the NUS Manifesto for Partnership (2012). The project was funded by the Higher Education Academy for a pilot year in 2012/2013 and then funded by the University of Huddersfield for a second year. Throughout both years, the project was a joint undertaking by the Teaching and Learning Institute and the Students' Union (SU).

The project aimed to enhance teaching and learning by repositioning students to engage with staff in dialogue about teaching and learning by:

- inviting students to be active partners in developing teaching and learning approaches;
- supporting dialogue across differences of position and perspectives to promote new insights and deep engagement in teaching and learning;
- fostering collaboration, through which both academic staff and students could take more responsibility for teaching and learning;

- having students serve as intermediaries and facilitators of new relationships between students and academic staff.

(adapted from Bovill, Cook-Sather & Felten, 2011)

The project built on Dr Crawford's University of Lincoln project paper 'Students consulting on teaching' (Crawford, 2012), in which she points out that 'students have unique perspectives and are experts on the experience of learning in higher education'. The work done by Cook-Sather (2008), concerning the benefits of student and staff collaboration, also influenced the project design.

In this paper, the Project Coordinator, Kathrine Jensen, first outlines the structure and process of setting up the scheme as well as the aims of the project. Then Dawn Bagnall, who worked as a Student Consultant, reflects on her expectations and experiences of taking part in the scheme. Finally, Kathrine Jensen considers the lessons learned by the people involved in the partnership scheme and the impact of changing priorities upon them.

Recruitment

The Student Consultants were recruited from the body of students taking part in the University of Huddersfield Students' Union's STARS (Student Training and Recognition Scheme). Participants in STARS are themselves drawn from a wide range of involved students that includes course representatives, student activity group leaders and community volunteers.

In the first year, eleven students were recruited and asked to submit a paragraph about why they wanted to be part of the project and about their interest in teaching and learning in general. In the second year, only four students were recruited, as four from the first year continued to serve. The four new students went through a more formal interview and selection process organised by the SU. All the students have shown themselves to be motivated to improve the experience for their fellow students and to work with lecturers to discuss and improve teaching.

Student and staff consultations

The Project Coordinator received all expressions of interest from staff, but, in many cases, staff did not have a clear idea about what the Student Consultant might work on with them. This meant that the Student Consultant activity was often negotiated in the initial meeting between the student and the member of staff. Students were matched with staff outside their department so that the collaboration could take place without the member of staff's influencing the Student Consultant's coursework or grades or the Student Consultant's contributing to the formal evaluation of the teaching of the member of staff.

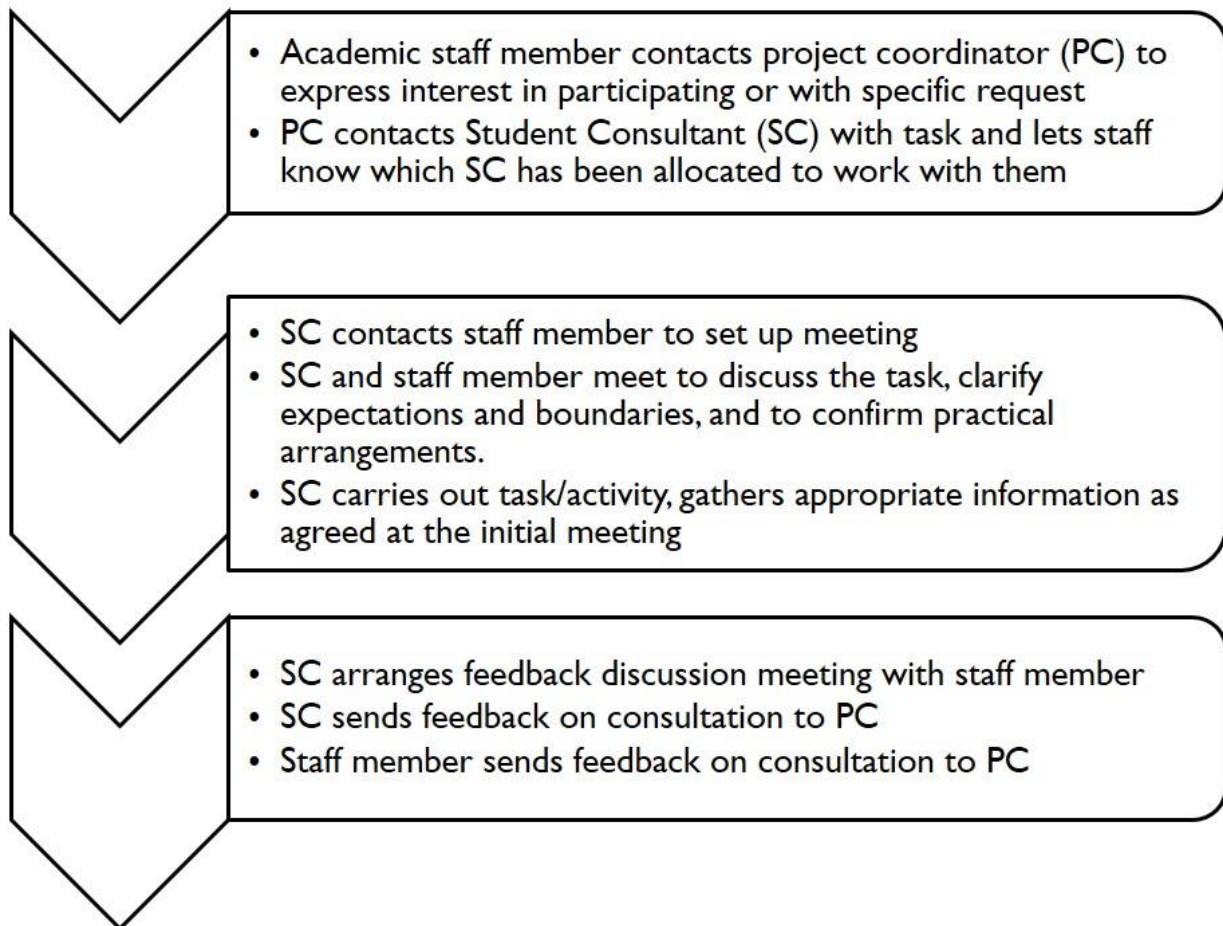
For the most part, the requests from staff fell into one of three main categories:

1. Observation of session/activity, including focus group or dialogue with students on a course.
2. Evaluation of course materials, including the University's virtual learning environment.

3. Facilitation of course students' feedback session.

Below is an illustration of how the consultation process worked.

Figure 1. The student/staff consultation process



Training

Students had two training sessions before they were asked to work with staff, followed by a number of face-to-face meetings with the project team to evaluate project progress and the student experience.

The main aim of the initial training was to prepare the student to meet with staff, present the project aims and negotiate tasks to undertake. The focus was on how to give feedback in a way that enabled conversations about teaching and learning rather than judgements about approaches or styles. Dr Liz Bennett, Senior Lecturer in the School of Education and Professional Development, and Kathrine Jensen designed and delivered the training session for the student consultants.

Students were presented with an overview of educational approaches, but not given any specific pedagogical training. The training was mainly about giving students confidence in their 'authentic' student voice and in the student perspective they would be able to offer.

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The Project Coordinator introduced the project aims, timeline and processes, in particular the dual focus on feedback and inspirational teaching. The partnership approach was explained as well as the aim of positioning students as 'experts in the student experience' with the ability to offer unique and valid perspectives that were beneficial to staff and had the potential to improve and develop teaching and learning interactions.

Some dressing up with moustaches, scarves and glasses made the role-playing activity less formal and the students joked, had fun with the accessories and seemed fairly relaxed. Role-playing enabled the students to practise their future roles and to discuss important aspects of being consultants, such as:

- how they would introduce themselves;
- how they would explain the project;
- how they would frame what they talked about positively, using the terms 'aspects' and 'focus' rather than 'issues' or 'problems'.

In the feedback scenario, students also discussed the need to be sensitive, how to present potentially problematic feedback by using examples from their own experience and, perhaps more importantly, how they could give feedback from their position as students with confidence in their unique student voice/expertise. The importance of being non-judgemental was also covered. In this activity, the students were encouraged to use some principles for good feedback and it was emphasised that they were not working as problem solvers, but rather offering a perspective and opening up dialogue and opportunities for reflections on teaching and learning practice.

The aim of the training activities was to develop students' confidence in their unique perspectives as a way of enabling them to act as partners in a dialogue focused on teaching and learning practice, not on problems and solutions. The Student Consultants were not positioned as experts in pedagogy and, because they were not within the same discipline as the member of staff, there was also no focus on content. One member of staff had this to say about the benefit of the student perspective offered by the Student Consultant regarding the development of her understanding of and practice in her provision of feedback to students on their course assignments:

'I thought it was amazing. We looked at what students wanted from feedback as opposed to what I want them to learn.'

Working as a Student Consultant

Dawn Bagnall, an undergraduate student in Psychology, worked for two years as a Student Consultant and has now graduated with a First. In the following three sections, she writes about her experiences of the Student Consultant scheme, collaborating with academic staff; she compares this role with that of Course Representative and considers the benefits of the scheme.

Upon my being invited to participate in this innovative scheme, there was an expectation of being able to make a difference to the learning experience as well as to promote positive changes in the relationships between students and academic staff. This scheme ensured that students involved were partnered with staff from a different academic school, enabling both parties to build a relationship with no fear of repercussions for the student, whilst also

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providing a safe feedback environment for the academic staff member rather than a peer-review session (Cook-Sather, 2008). One academic staff member said:

'Working with the student consultants was a real delight; they were professional and polite throughout. They also provided some really useful feedback in a very objective and non-judgemental way; nowhere near as scary as one might first imagine!'

As the relationship that developed between the student and academic staff member was not one that subscribed to the usual hierarchical structure within a university, productive discussions could take place. The collaborative nature of the relationship enabled academic staff members to trust the student to provide constructive feedback in order to facilitate necessary change.

It was also important that the collaborative work could lead to improvement in the learning environment which would be beneficial to the students and academic staff members alike. In this respect, the scheme incorporates the principle/value of 'reciprocity', as outlined in the HEA partnership framework, where 'all parties have an interest in, and stand to benefit from, working and/or learning in partnership' (HEA, 2014).

The Student Consultant role compared to being a Course Representative

The students' role within this scheme differed from that of a Course Representative in that the student and the academic staff member worked together in order to improve student engagement. By contrast, a Course Representative is allowed only a minimal amount of time to put forward aspects that are working well and aspects of concern.

Furthermore, Course Representatives are not easily able to develop working relationships with the academic staff members within a meeting environment, which can be quite formal. Meeting environments are generally not the best place to develop ideas for positive changes as there is limited time for detailed discussion and one student often faces many staff; under these conditions, it may be very difficult to bring up such issues as lack of student engagement without encountering a defensive attitude.

This was also recognised as an important difference by an academic staff member, who said:

'It was good to be able to speak in a relaxed and informal way about the delivery of the course.'

In order for the scheme to be advantageous to staff and students alike, it was necessary to provide feedback not only on aspects of the learning experience that were working well, but also to focus on aspects of the learning experience that would benefit from development. In line with this notion, the training enabled the students to provide constructive criticism with confidence so that the academic staff member received a full account, covering negative as well as positive points, of how the students were engaging within their learning environment. The ability to offer feedback on all aspects of the environment was very important as, ultimately, this was the reason we had chosen to participate in the project.

The flexibility and benefits of the scheme

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The remit of the scheme was quite broad in that there were no guidelines set regarding what the student was able to work on. The scheme could therefore provide a largely flexible experience for the academic staff members who chose to participate. For example, the scheme included, but was not limited to, lecture or laboratory observations, focus groups with students, accessibility of the virtual learning environment and focus upon the information provided in module handbooks. Because of the diversity of the scheme, the students acquired many different skills, such as how to communicate effectively, whilst also gaining an insight into differing perspectives on teaching and learning. One student said:

'This has been a positive experience and has helped me to feel more confident in communicating with people... It has been interesting to learn how different schools have different teaching methods within the University of Huddersfield.'

This scheme therefore not only provided academic staff with a student's perspective of the learning environment, but also allowed the student to look at the learning environment as a whole with the aim of promoting a better student experience. This experience enabled students to gain an understanding of what learning means to them whilst also developing an understanding of the restraints academic staff members are faced with when trying to implement change (Bovill et al, 2011).

Lessons learned and recommendations

Throughout the scheme, the Student Consultants were not positioned as experts in pedagogy and, because they were not within the same discipline as the member of staff, there was also no focus on subject content. We argue that this position, outside traditional staff/student relationships and formal feedback structures, was crucial to productive informal discussions and enabled the collaboration that took place.

The majority of staff found the student perspective useful, though one or two would have liked more suggestions for how to develop or improve their practice. It can be argued that the scheme was unable to meet this need as it was not set up to offer solutions, though some of the Student Consultants were able to draw on their own experiences to suggest strategies for a number of issues that came up during conversations. The Student Consultants were also able to draw on each other's experiences to enhance their feedback to staff and some preferred to work in teams as this gave them more confidence when meeting with staff. This request for developmental feedback indicates there is a need for follow-up options to the Student Consultant work, which could take the form of signposting staff to other professional development opportunities.

The findings also suggest that, if students and staff are to work in partnership, there needs to be equality and trust, something that takes time to develop. Any partnership scheme or activity will need to ensure this is taken into consideration.

It was also a recurring challenge to evidence the impact of the work done by the Student Consultants in relation to improving the student learning experience. Feedback from staff was very useful but limited in terms of demonstrating how any changes affected the students on the course. We recommend developing ways by which Student Consultants can gather feedback from students at various points as part of undertaking the consultancy work. This

would need to be flagged up to staff as a condition of participating in the scheme and could potentially deter some.

Partnerships and changing priorities

The scheme is not continuing for a third year for a number of reasons, one being the increased funding required to scale up the scheme and another that the Students' Union was keen to change the course representative role to develop quality enhancement, in terms of being more involved in teaching and learning on courses. The priorities of the SU meant that there would be less room for the student teaching and learning consultant role and increased potential for confusion and overlap with the course representatives. So, although the Student Consultant scheme was a successful model for building partnerships between students and staff, it was recognised that the continued collaboration and partnership with the SU was more important than the specific format of the activity.

These developments also underline the importance of continually evaluating schemes to ensure that the partners involved are still invested and can see value and meaning in the partnership activities. The HEA framework also mentions this as part of the principle and value of authenticity in terms of all parties' having 'a meaningful rationale for investing in partnership' (HEA 2014).

At the moment, we are looking at developing activities that serve both the SU and the Teaching and Learning Institute purposes and we are looking at ways to develop purposeful conversations between staff and students as well as to involve students in academic development activities.

A guide on how to develop and run a student/staff partnership scheme to enhance teaching and learning is available online and this includes marketing materials, training materials and other materials developed as part of the project. All of the outputs can be accessed via the central project webpage at:

http://www.hud.ac.uk/tali/projects/proj_archive/central_init/heatlcl/

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