REFLECTIVE PIECE

# Co-Researching Co-Creation of the Curriculum: Reflections on Arts-Based Methods in Education and Connections to Health Care Co-Production

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Learning through experience is an important, creative, and fulfilling way to apply theory to practice. In this essay, we explore our experiences of co-researching how students and staff conceptualise co-creation of the curriculum. We each have multi-faceted roles in higher education as we study, work, and contribute to formal student representation processes. At the time of this project, I (Tanya) was working at the Edinburgh University Students' Association, supporting student representation, and I (Hermina) was a first-year student representative from the School of Health in Social Science. It was through a University of Edinburgh Innovative Initiative Grant project related to Tanya's PhD research (focusing on co-creation of the curriculum) that we began to work together closely.

We are both passionate about becoming involved in collaborative initiatives that improve the student experience and the wider university community. We were interested in exploring how our individual experiences as co-researchers could bridge boundaries between the traditional roles of postgraduate and undergraduate students, staff and students, and researchers and participants. Our aim was to blur the lines between these roles by working collaboratively with students-as-partners, facilitating open dialogue about best practices in learning and teaching, and redistributing power to create new synergies. Below, we focus on these topics and the little-explored connections between our academic disciplines in which co-creation of higher education curricula and co-production of health care are each beginning to play important roles. We reflect on our experiences of engaging in collaborative research using deliberative-democratic and arts-based methods, and we aim to provide an informative account of our experiences while drawing new connections.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Our research project aimed to better understand students' and staff members' views about effective teaching and student engagement to achieve their aims in higher education,

and whether co-creation of the curriculum could advance these aims. We have drawn on the work of Bovill et al. (2016), who state that "co-creation of learning and teaching occurs when staff and students work collaboratively with one another to create components of curricula and/or pedagogical approaches" (p. 196). We see student-centred learning, autonomous learning, and student engagement as established, foundational aspects of co-creation of the curriculum. However, co-creation of the curriculum is distinct because we agree with Cook-Sather et al. (2014) that it promotes different attitudes and ways of working with students-as-partners in learning and teaching.

To try co-creating an aspect of my PhD research by putting these attitudes and collaborative ways of working into practice, I (Tanya) involved two paid, undergraduate students to work as research partners on one aspect of my PhD data collection and analysis. I had already explored the benefits and challenges of partnership work for student and staff co-creation practitioners (for example, see Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2017; 2018) and now wanted to learn about the views of non-practitioners while engaging student partners. I designed and led two focus group discussions with student representatives who had not been involved in formal co-creation of curriculum projects, and I (Hermina) responded to the open call to become a paid, undergraduate student co-researcher.

The undergraduate co-researcher role involved co-analysing the qualitative data from two student focus groups and co-leading two subsequent focus groups with staff members. We took turns leading the discussions. We concluded with the undergraduate co-researchers presenting our initial co-analysis of the student focus group data and leading a discussion with the staff about their impressions or questions. This helped staff learn more about undergraduate student views regarding effective teaching, student engagement, and co-creation of the curriculum since many of them had not previously discussed these topics with students. Therefore, in practice, our collaborative project meant developing a partnership as co-researchers by having an open dialogue, constructively exploring joint analysis of the data, and learning from different perspectives.

We used several methods that further reinforced our partnership work. Co-inquiry proved beneficial and relevant to co-creation since using deliberative democratic methods "involves key stakeholders in the study, promotes dialogue with and among researchers, and enhances deliberation about research findings" (House, 2012, p. 451). Another important aspect of our research was using arts-based methods to help participants articulate their views about how undergraduate students engage with learning and teaching, and to understand their aims in higher education. Eisner (1997) suggests that arts-based methods "open up new ways of seeing and saying" (p. 4); similarly, we felt these methods helped participants articulate their perspectives while using images as metaphors.

JOINT REFLECTIONS ON THE PROJECT

There were many benefits from our collaborative work, but there were also challenges. We each found it difficult to balance the time this project required with our many other obligations including studies, paid work, and extracurricular activities. It was also challenging to work fully in partnership when some things had been decided already to initiate the project,

including the research questions, project focus, and amount of time undergraduate co-researchers would be paid. Another challenge was staying focused on the research questions when the data presented many additional themes that we would have liked to explore more, such as responsibilities for student engagement and the perceived imbalance due to research often overshadowing teaching.

For the undergraduate co-researchers, it was the first time they were involved in a research project. We reflected on the valuable experience they gained, which is elaborated on below. We saw ourselves as co-creating the qualitative data with participants because we recognised our positionality and our own interests in student engagement. However, it was sometimes difficult to not unduly influence staff focus group discussions in areas about which we are passionate. We often would have liked to contribute perspectives earlier but refrained until the end, when we allowed ourselves to have a more open conversation with participants after presenting the summary of themes arising from the student focus groups. Some staff seemed surprised when we shared that many student participants strongly emphasised the importance of staff responding to student feedback. We were a bit surprised that they were surprised, but this led to good discussions! In our student representation roles, we often highlight the best practice of the *feedback loop* by staff respecting and responding to feedback to let students know the outcomes of their contributions, but some staff members had not previously considered the significance of following up with students to discuss how their feedback had been valued.

We each benefited from hearing other perspectives during the data collection and analysis phases. One striking example was hearing how staff described the images they chose to represent their views of current students (Figure 1), compared with their vision for graduates.

**Figure 1. "Duckling"**



"Duckling" by katerinavulcova is licensed under CC BY 2.0. https://pixabay.com/en/duckling-duck-cub-pond-water-3415850/

Describing Figure 1, a staff member reflected:

> I chose the duckling to represent our students as undergraduates. They come in and, like the duckling, they are very enthusiastic, very motivated, they want to fly before they can walk, and they look for role models… I see my role as one of nurturing and supporting, wanting to recognise any dangers early, looking out for the fox in the trees waiting to poach them… It's about letting them go out to spread their wings but gathering them back in … to protect them from the foxes; it's finding that balance.

I (Tanya) recognised how this participant cares deeply about supporting students even though I felt protective of the undergraduate co-researchers who listened to these comments without having an opportunity to respond. I hoped that they did not feel patronised. Did they agree or disagree that their peers may be overambitious and perhaps not aware of the challenges of higher education? Or did they feel relieved that staff care about supporting students to "spread their wings" by giving them new opportunities for growth and helping them avert dangers that could derail their degree? As a class representative, I (Hermina) had no doubts that staff play an important part in developing a supportive culture of student engagement and that they can facilitate different practices where students can engage in shaping their learning experience. However, during the staff focus group, it was eye-opening to hear about the logistical and sometimes financial challenges that staff face in the course of helping students engage at all levels.

Throughout our project, we made connections with our disciplinary studies in education and health care. Partnerships in health care can improve outcomes for patients, just as there are many benefits for students and staff who co-create the curriculum. Often in the health care sector, the term "co-production" is used instead of "co-creation" to highlight the behaviour or intervention tool that is produced in partnership with patients to promote their buy-in and increase the potential for a positive outcome. For example, clinicians have used co-production to increase patients' understanding and decision-making power while tailoring lifestyle changes to their abilities and motivation levels (Realpe et al., 2015). For us, their work identifying 22 different co-produced health behaviours resonated with the work of Mercer-Mapstone et al. (2017) and Cook-Sather et al. (2014) who outline the wide range of variables and implementation methods in curriculum co-creation.

Interestingly, Aitken and Shackleton (2014) used action research with undergraduate communication design students and residential care aides to co-create behavioural change solutions. They found that a "collective creativity mindset" was important to the co-creation process, which ultimately had a positive impact on the user-centred solutions that were eventually developed (Aitken & Shackleton, 2014, p. 2). This shift in power and mindset in the health care setting appeared to promote respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility—values that Cook-Sather et al. (2014) suggest are key to successful partnerships in learning and teaching. We see strong parallels between patient/user/student-centred methods of working that facilitate shared decision-making, creative solutions, and, in some cases, transformative learning in health care and higher education.

HERMINA'S REFLECTIONS AS AN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT CO-RESEARCHER
        My first introduction to curriculum co-creation was participating in one of Tanya's student focus groups. I enjoyed learning about it and discussing with other participants our views of effective teaching and the different student engagement practices that enhance our learning experience. I liked that the focus group was designed to allow us to explore many aspects of co-creation and partnership, offer our insights about effective partnership practices, and identify challenges we would need to overcome to achieve partnership.
        The arts-based activity was a case for reflecting on my own aims and hopes about the career path that I have chosen. The caring and nurturing side of the picture with two zebras playing (see Figure 2) appealed to my sense of an empowering and my supportive health care professional, and is well embedded in the Health Sciences and Societies programme that I study. I immediately identified with what I believe to be one of the key challenges that will broadly gain momentum in the field of health care: partnership in health and social care.

**Figure 2. "Zebras in Etosha National Park, Namibia"**



"Zebras in the Etosha National Park, Namibia" by Walter Voigts is licensed under CC BY 2.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Zebras.jpg

        Studies suggest that patients who take greater ownership of their treatment are more fully engaged and experience increased satisfaction and improved health because they contribute to minimising barriers and inequalities that can arise in the patient's professional relationships with their health care professionals (Morgan, 2008). Although our research focused on co-creation of the undergraduate curriculum, I realised that the wide range of partnership practices, which all follow basic guidelines, can encourage a collaborative approach in medical settings.
        Co-creation of the curriculum with its strength in promoting and supporting student engagement has especially captured my attention. I particularly enjoyed co-leading the staff focus groups with Tanya. Engaging with university staff in a different setting provided useful

context for my role as a class representative. It allowed me to apply my hands-on experience as a co-researcher when working alongside staff and students to improve course delivery, facilitate a supportive and positive school community, and strengthen student voice.

The reflection and data analysis components of this research have been both a challenge and a highlight for me. As both a student and a class representative, I found it challenging to maintain objectivity when discussing topics that are close to my heart with staff. The many inviting topics emerging from these discussions also made it difficult at times to stay focused and steer the conversation in the right direction. However, participating in the research has given me a better sense of how to put theory into practice and enhanced my understanding of the process underpinning research, data collection, analysis, and reporting.

Overall, I have gained leadership, communication, and teamwork skills. Working closely with Tanya, where we shared our reflections, insights, and experiences, has itself been a co-creation process. Co-leading two staff focus groups and co-presenting findings at a conference helped me reassess my ideas, communicate them effectively, and strengthen my presentation skills. Finally, I am proud to have been involved in this research, and it is essential that I continue to explore the benefits of co-creation in teaching and to illuminate more of these participative pedagogies.

TANYA'S REFLECTIONS AS A PhD STUDENT CO-RESEARCHER

During the initial student focus groups, I did not participate in the arts-based activity I led since my time with participants was limited. While meeting with Hermina to discuss co-writing this reflective essay, I realised that I had not shared my aims for higher education. In the spirit of partnership and reciprocity, I shared how I would choose a bird in flight (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3. "Jurong Bird Park"**



"Jurong Bird Park" by Luc Viatour is licensed under CC BY 2.0. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blue-and yellow_macaw#/media/File:Ara_ararauna_Luc_Viatour.jpg

For me, higher education should help students develop personally and professionally as they take on new challenges in the wilderness of learning by immersing themselves in new opportunities inside and outside the classroom. Ideally, higher education is about facilitating experiences that can foster transformational learning that has the ability to surprise students and staff as they surpass expectations—in other words, letting them fly. I think that student-staff partnerships in co-creating undergraduate curricula can provide these transformational experiences that have positive outcomes for students and staff.

Since this co-research experience was one part of my PhD data collection, I recognised that I had developed the research focus, planned the research processes, obtained the funding, and was ultimately responsible for the project through reporting to my research supervisors and university funders. Although I recognised that I needed to retain ownership over those aspects of this project that are part of my PhD research, I worried that I was taking too large of a role in steering the project which I wanted to be a partnership. Therefore, it was challenging at first to give up some control to the undergraduate co-researchers. However, they often surpassed my expectations by providing outstanding contributions and, in particular, Hermina volunteering to co-write this reflective essay. I was pleasantly surprised at the new ideas I gained from this project and particularly enjoyed learning from Hermina about co-production in health care, which feels like a less radical way of working in that field than sometimes co-creation of the curriculum can feel when it challenges hierarchies in higher education.

Throughout, I reflected on terminology and the difference between student consultant and co-researcher partnership roles, since I originally referred to the student co-researcher role as a "student consultant." Bovill et al. (2016) present a model of four student roles in co-creation: consultants, co-researchers, pedagogical co-designers, and representatives. Bovill et al. (2016, p. 197-198) define the student consultant role as "sharing and discussing valuable perspectives on learning and teaching" and the student co-researcher role as "collaborating meaningfully on teaching and learning research or subject-based research with staff." During the student focus groups, I considered all participants to be consultants sharing and discussing valuable perspectives on learning and teaching that contributed to my PhD research. However, I considered Hermina a co-researcher since she shared ownership by drafting the presentation of our research findings from the student focus groups, which we shared with staff and at the Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland international conference.

Working with undergraduate co-researchers was an extremely positive experience. I was keen to see whether their analysis of the data matched mine. We generally shared similar perspectives on themes arising from the data, and it was beneficial—and validating—to discuss these. Co-researchers' contributions to the staff focus groups also changed the dynamic and led to vibrant discussions with the staff, who posed follow-up questions to the undergraduate co-researchers. Since students traditionally have less power than staff in the classroom (Cook-Sather et al., 2014), this experience let us take the lead and recognise our expertise on student perspectives. We, as undergraduate and postgraduate student co-researchers, learned from staff and vice versa, which modelled the partnership approach that we were examining. Furthermore, our joint conference presentation made me feel that I was practising what I had preached about the benefits of curriculum co-creation.

CONCLUSION

We benefited in many ways from co-researching co-creation of the curriculum by gaining leadership and teamwork skills, as well as developing empathy. It was also fun for us to work collaboratively and get to know each other better. As Hermina stated earlier, the processes of reflecting on and overcoming challenges in our partnership work have been both the hardest aspects *and* the highlights of our work together. It has been rewarding to work in partnership and share our experiences more widely at a conference and in this reflective essay. This helped us feel part of a larger community of students and staff who are interested in students-as-partners initiatives, and we also share our work because we see the potential for co-creative practices to benefit others. There are also implications for learning from the health care sector and other fields that also draw on co-creation and co-production to advance their work. Although these methods may still be relatively rare across higher education and health care, we hope to learn and adapt best practices from other sectors to inspire future partnership projects.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

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**Hermina Simoni** *was born and raised in Albania and graduated from Tirana International School in 2016. She is now in the third year of her undergraduate studies in health sciences at the University of Edinburgh. In addition to her studies, she has been involved with student representation.*

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