CASE STUDY

Promoting Diversity Through Developing a Sense of Community

Jeanne-Louise Moys, Department of Typography & Graphic Communication, University of Reading, UK

Contact: j.l.moys@reading.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This case study explores how a students-as-partners approach is helping students in the Graphic Communication programme at the University of Reading gain experience of community through a curriculum design project. The "I am, we are … different by design" project began as a partnership initiative aimed at identifying strategies to extend students' experience of diversity in the curriculum. Drawing on a mid-project evaluation, the case study presented here explores student partners' perceptions of achievements and challenges, including developing a sense of community and the impact on career development. It also highlights how supporting opportunities for visibility and recognition throughout a project may contribute to sustaining a culture of reciprocity in partnership.

KEY WORDS

curriculum development, diversity, graphic design, inclusion, reciprocity, students as partners

INTRODUCTION

"I am, we are … different by design" is an extracurricular Students as Partners (SaP) project in the Department of Typography & Graphic Communication at the University of Reading (UK). Curriculum design and pedagogy is a less established area of SaP (Healey et al., 2016). However, as this case study explores, SaP's principle of reciprocity may enable it to make a particular contribution to embedding diversity and inclusion within Teaching & Learning (T&L) (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017).

Matthews (2017, p. 3) argues that reflection is essential for SaP to realise its transformative potential and create space to "reimagine expertise." Accordingly, mid-project interviews were conducted with the student partners to help sustain the achievement of SaP values (Higher Education Academy, 2015) and facilitate dialogue and reflection.

PROJECT OVERVIEW
Rationale
Diversity and inclusion is a cornerstone of the University of Reading's new curriculum framework and an ongoing T&L priority of the department. This is particularly important in the field of graphic communication, which has a dominant Western historical canon and feeds a disproportionately white design industry (Dawood, 2017). Our department has a reputation for world-leading research and postgraduate study in multi-script typeface design. However, taking into account increasing cohort sizes, we need to consider new strategies to effectively extend diversity in our undergraduate programme.

Inspired by Bovill and Bulley (2011) and Dunne and Zandstra (2011) to extend students' agency in curriculum design and building on previous partnership activities (Moys et al., 2018; Loveland et al., 2016), I initiated a SaP project to co-design a new module on design and diversity. My hope was that this approach would ensure the module embodied an ethos of inclusion through building a stronger "sense of relationship" (Bovill et al., 2011, p. 6). SaP is a "way of doing things" (Healey et al. 2017, p. 7) that opens up possibilities beyond our initial motivations. Accordingly, I anticipated that the project could grow in scope and believed it was important to allow this to happen from the outset so that the students could feel a true sense of agency and reciprocity (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017).

Participants
BA Graphic Communication students from all three years of undergraduate study were invited to be part of a team exploring diversity and design. Eight students initially volunteered (one chose not to engage beyond the autumn term, leaving at least two students from each year of study). Another student joined the team later in the academic year.

My observation is that the team had a higher proportion of women and 'black, Asian, and minority ethnicity'[1] participants than the typical demographic profile of our BA Graphic Communication cohorts. This profile is different to that of previous engagement activities in our department and many reported SaP projects (Matthews, 2017). This may suggest that the participants considered the project theme to be of personal and social relevance.

Aims and operations
In the autumn term, the team jointly conceived the project aims and developed a successful funding application to the university's Partnerships in Learning and Teaching scheme. The project name——"I am, we are … different by design"——reflects how our team seeks to encourage exploration of a greater range of individual, cultural, and international inspiration in design projects. Our goals included identifying strategies to develop diversity in the curriculum and create a greater sense of community, as well as more concrete objectives such as developing the new module and designing an awareness campaign. The explicit emphasis on community was a student-identified priority and foregrounds how important it is to jointly consider curricula and learning environments. This highlights how partnership helps to value students' day-to-day lived experiences.

---

[1] These demographic categories may not necessarily align with how individuals choose to identify.

Students' work on the campaign was credited as part of a professional practice module in which students undertake "real jobs" for clients. The rest of the project was considered extracurricular, with students' time counting towards a university-wide recognition scheme.

We began with a series of brainstorming and planning meetings. Two students were appointed as project leaders and worked with me to draft the team's ideas and objectives for the funding application. Once funding was secured, the team met weekly throughout most of the year, with additional meetings to support particular activities. We used Trello (a project management app), email, and social media to communicate between meetings.

Activities

The team discussed ideas for the new module and engaged with other students to evaluate these ideas. They were surprised at how challenging it was to get other students to participate in surveys. The students felt that any design project work undertaken as part of the module should have the potential for real impact and decided to call the module "Design for Change." We worked together to write a module description that identified the aims of the module, its learning outcomes, and key content, as well as the T&L and assessment methods. The module design allows students to initially explore a broad range of diversity, inclusion, and social responsibility issues and then work independently on a project of their choice.

This is the first time students in our department have been directly involved in writing a module description. As anticipated, they were unaccustomed to translating their rich ideas into the precise, formal detail required by a module description template. In the questionnaire response, one student noted the particular challenge in "thinking of deliverables and processes that would encourage people who haven't thought about diversity in design to consider taking the module." We negotiated how to manage this challenge, with responsibility for translating their ideas assumed by me, followed by the entire group reviewing and editing the module description. The module has been approved and commenced in October 2018.

The team explored a variety of ideas for their campaign and decided to produce a zine to "showcase diversity in the creative fields." Interviews were conducted with students (from all three departments in the School of Arts and Communication Design), alumni, and other professionals for the zine. The zine was largely produced after the mid-project evaluation and was distributed to students at the start of the new academic year. The team hopes it will inspire other students to consider diversity and inclusion issues more consciously.

Alongside the module design and zine, the team also:
- identified and presented a set of diversity-focused strategies to the department's Student-Staff Liaison Committee for implementation;
- created a diversity wall display in the department;
- engaged with applicants visiting the department as part of the admissions process;
- ordered new books for the library;
- identified potential guest speakers; and
- attended industry events.

Building on the success of these initiatives, our team was invited to present our project as an example of partnership-in-action at the annual Reading University Students' Union (RUSU) T&L Showcase.

METHODS OF EVALUATION

The seven initial students participated in mid-project interviews. Following approval from the university's Research Ethics Committee, the interviews were conducted individually by email to allow each participant to provide a considered, reflective response.

The interview questions explored participants' motivations for participating in the project, their perspectives of the most rewarding and challenging aspects, and whether they would encourage other students to become involved in partnership projects (given the time commitment). The students were also asked to reflect on whether the project influenced their experience of community and their career development. Although both aspects are benefits of partnership (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017; Higher Education Academy, 2015), they were evaluated because (1) developing a sense of community was an explicit goal that the student partners had proposed and (2) previous partnership initiatives in the department had apparent benefits for the students' professional development (Loveland et al., 2016).

STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

Motivations

Participants' articulated motivations for joining the project revealed a clear desire to have "impact and [make] a difference in the world of design" and within the department. Participants also said they wished to extend their own cultural experiences through interacting with other students, gain experience beyond their academic program, and enhance their employability and project/time management skills. One participant—who was writing a dissertation about diversity in graphic design—said she "thought the project would be a rewarding extension of that, where I would get the opportunity to help start the conversation and instigate change."

Individuals also expressed a range of personal motivations for joining the project, reflecting on their experiences of cultural diversity before and during their university studies and their aspirations for bringing about change. For example, one student wrote:

> Although I'm half Ghanaian, I grew up in rural Somerset where diversity and education about diversity doesn't really occur let alone in the creative fields. This project has given me the opportunity to explore various aspects of diversity in design with like-minded people across the entire degree programme.

Another student said she had experienced a greater lack of cultural diversity at university than she was accustomed to from her own upbringing and was "passionate" about wanting to help "future students avoid" having a similar experience.

Career development

As anticipated, many responses highlighted how the project is helping participants develop essential transferable skills, including leadership, organisational, and teamwork skills.

These skills (e.g., "making decisions and doing things instead of just bouncing around ideas," finding solutions to "work around" the "limitations out of our control," developing time management skills to juggle the project with existing commitments, and "learning to work collaboratively") were declared as particular challenges that the project had engaged them in. Interestingly, team dynamics, idea generation, and project management skills were also noted as some of the most rewarding aspects of the project. For example, participants described team meetings and "strategizing and setting tasks to find new ways to make every meeting and discussion better" and then turning these decisions into actions as "extremely worthwhile."

In addition to the anticipated career development benefits, participants described how the project allowed them to "be creative" and "positively" inspired them to explore diversity and "different styles of design" in their own work. They also highlighted that the project is helping them consider the role of graphic communication and its relationship with audiences, build "good future connections," and meet people who are doing "real jobs" with an international focus.

Furthermore, participants elaborated that the project is empowering them to "re-evaluate" or clarify their career aspirations in a variety of ways. The project seems to have helped at least three individuals either develop a more international focus to their career or "cement" an existing goal to volunteer or work abroad. For example, one student said:

> Through the research phase of this project … I've come to appreciate the range of people from around the world who are pioneers of the profession in their nations and cultures. As an international student, the project has broadened my scope of career ideas and I hope to be able to one day take my skills back to my home country of Fiji to help encourage the pursuit of design there.

Participants also highlighted both career (e.g., "learn new skills," "gaining experience outside the curriculum for future careers") and personal development (e.g., "a great way to develop yourself as a person," "growing into an adult mind-set with professionalism") benefits when explaining why they would encourage other students to become involved in partnership initiatives.

Community and dissemination

Participants were unanimous about encouraging participation in partnership activities. Some students indicated that an extracurricular project might not be appropriate for students who struggle to manage their academic workload. Interestingly, others suggested that having an extracurricular project could help students prioritise their time better and improve motivation. In this respect, it seemed that the "sense of community created through collaborative work" was having a very positive effect on individuals' "experience of the course" and that feeling motivated about the project improved their overall time management skills. Similar outcomes have been reported for other SaP projects, despite the time commitment often being underestimated (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017).

Their articulated reasons for encouraging other students to be involved in partnership also reinforced the themes emerging from individual motivations. For example, they valued

being part of "a good cause with a good message," "the feeling of being a part of a project that is inspiring that sense of community," and working with students from other years.

Responses to the question about what they have found to be most rewarding reinforced the importance of working with others and receiving encouragement from the university. This included, for example, being awarded funding ("because it meant that other people outside of our group believed in our vision") and being invited to present "who we are, why we do it, what we're doing, and what we plan for the future" to wider audiences. Participants also highlighted dissemination activities (especially the diversity wall display and zine) and the increased interaction with other students in relation to these activities as particularly rewarding:

> The most rewarding part about this project has been the awareness and interest from other students within our department. From the project wall we curated, I've had several colleagues come up to ask me about the project and the work we are doing, showing interest in the artists, visual cultures, and movements that we've highlighted and expressing their excitement in seeing and learning about diverse designers and work they had never heard about or seen before. Being able to highlight diversity and seeing that awareness spread has been the most rewarding.

Participants also highlighted the benefits of teamwork, meeting new people, sharing ideas, or learning new things from each other and working together to "encourage research and a new wave of knowledge." One participant emphasised how rewarding it was to know "that every individual in the room has their own voice and they identify with their confidence to voice their opinions in that very room and beyond," how this experience builds "skills" and "passion" that "expands to other avenues," and how "feeling the confidence in the project to move towards those avenues makes it that much rewarding."

The responses also suggest that getting other people to participate in this project or "acknowledge the potential it holds" to "make a sure difference on how we both 'choose to design' and 'reflect on design' and … give attention to the underlying statements of 'diversity'" has been a particular challenge for the team. Part of this challenge, the students reflected, is about "coming to the realisation that we can't change this diversity issue overnight." Nevertheless, "definitely!" was the emphatic reply of many of our team members to the question about whether being involved in the project has changed their experience of community. For example, one participant said:

> Since joining the project it has been clear that around the department the sense of community has been taken more seriously as we are all driven to promote this notion and get as many people involved and aware as we can.

Others commented on how important the opportunity to collaborate with students from other years—and who may have different cultural backgrounds—has been. They said that the project is enabling them to feel part of a community whose members share the same interests—particularly, a passion for promoting diversity—and "make genuine friendships" across years.

Some team members said that the project has created a "stronger sense of community" for them at a personal level or reduced feelings of "isolation." One student noted: "As the project has developed, so has the way I have encountered the interaction of graphic communication and the community among it; they both go hand in hand and make for the best combination."

CONCLUSION

Feedback from RUSU and university colleagues indicates that the RUSU presentation was extremely "well-received." The team recently met with school colleagues to discuss how we can extend our "very inspiring" initiatives across all three departments next year, evaluate the project, and encourage more students to become involved in partnership projects. We hope to produce the zine as an ongoing, school-wide initiative to showcase and inspire diversity in creative practice. A presentation for the autumn term is planned to inspire new participants to join our team.

We originally planned this case study for an internal resource to inspire student and staff partnerships at the University of Reading and contribute to embedding diversity and inclusion in our curricula. During the course of writing the article, I realised that the evaluation had highlighted three important aspects of partnership. The first is the range of professional and transferable skills that SaP projects enable students to develop. The second is the essential role of a sense of community in enhancing learning and developing confidence and personal effectiveness. These benefits are well-documented in the SaP literature (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). However, the third—the importance of embedding opportunities for recognition within partnership projects—is perhaps less recognised.

The ways in which we have supported the visibility of this project from its inception—through university funding, display space, engagement with departmental visitors, and presentations to wider university T&L communities—seem to have been particularly empowering for our team. These activities have helped create a culture of reciprocity that is the cornerstone of effective partnerships. Further to providing recognition for our team, these activities engaged our team with a broader range of beneficiaries, resulting in the project having a wider impact. This engagement helped extend our decision-making, reflection, and evaluation beyond subjective or short-term measures.

Perhaps more importantly, students' experience of community grew. In particular, presenting at the RUSU showcase went beyond giving students an experience of acting as ambassadors for the department to helping them feel part of a broader university T&L community that values the student experience. Preparing the presentation gave the team a chance to reflect and engage with "why it matters for themselves and higher education more broadly" (Matthews, 2017, p. 4). Delivering the presentation gave our team the opportunity to demonstrate and experience the value of "their capital and its unique contribution" (Matthews, 2017, p. 3).

Successful partnerships are often showcased after the fact—perhaps because partnerships are associated with "risk" (Healey et al., 2014, p. 17). Dissemination is also time-consuming and can add to staff and student workloads, particularly as many SaP projects are extracurricular (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). However, supporting the visibility of the team's work as the project evolved seemed to give the students an empowering sense of 'voice,' while

ensuring that reflection about the wider impact of the project was embedded throughout our decision-making. In this respect, it seems that SaP values such as reciprocity and equality can be nurtured by creating opportunities for visibility and recognition.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

Dr Jeanne-Louise Moys *is a lecturer in the University of Reading's Department of Typography & Graphic Communication and a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Her research encompasses design pedagogy and partnership alongside user-centred design research into inclusive design and the role of typographic differentiation in everyday communication.*

REFERENCES

Bovill, C., & Bulley, C. J. (2011). A model of active student participation in curriculum design: exploring desirability and possibility. In Rust, C. *Improving Student Learning* (18): *Global theories and local practices: institutional, disciplinary and cultural variations*. Oxford: The Oxford Centre for Staff and Educational Development (pp. 176-188). Proceedings of the 2010 18th International Symposium/ISSOTL Conference, 19-22 October, Liverpool.

Bovill, C., Cook-Sather, A., & Felten, P. (2011). Students as co-creators of teaching approaches, course design and curricula: implications for academic developers. *International Journal for Academic Development*, *16*(2): 133-145. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2011.568690

Cook-Sather, A., & Felten, P. (2017). Ethics of academic leadership: Guiding learning and teaching. In F. Su & M. Wood (Eds.), *Cosmopolitan perspectives on academic leadership in higher education* (pp. 175-191) London: Bloomsbury.

Dawood, S. (2017). Design industry still 90% white and 60% male, Government figures reveal. *Design Week*. Retrieved from https://www.designweek.co.uk/issues/31-july-6-august-2017/design-industry-90-white-60-male-government-figures-reveal/

Dunne, E., & Zandstra, R. (2011). *Students as change agents—new ways of engaging with learning and teaching in higher education*. Bristol: A joint University of Exeter/ESCalate/Higher Education Academy Publication. Retrieved from http://escalate.ac.uk/8242

Healey, M., Flint, A., & Harrington, K. (2014). *Students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education*. York: Higher Education Academy. Retrieved from

https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/resources/engagement_through_partnership.pdf

Healey, M., Flint, A., & Harrington, K. (2016). Students as partners: Reflections on a conceptual model. *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*, *4*(2): 1-13. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.20343/teachlearninqu.4.2.3

Higher Education Academy. (2015). *Framework for student engagement through partnership*. Retrieved from https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/downloads/student-enagagement-through-partnership-new.pdf

Loveland, P., Moys, J-L., Tollett, H., & Towriss, M. (2016). Typo-resource: developing T&L support materials through collaboration. *The Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change*, *2*(1). Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.21100/jeipc.v2i1.238

Matthews, K. E. (2017). Five propositions for genuine Students as Partners practice. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, *1*(2): 1-9. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.15173/ijsap.v1i2.3315

Mercer-Mapstone, L., Dvorakova, S.L., Matthews, K. E., Abbott, S., Cheng, B., Felten, P., Knorr, K., Marquis, E., Shammas, R., & Swaim, K. (2017). A systematic literature review of Students as Partners in Higher Education. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, *1*(1): 1-23. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.15173/ijsap.v1i1.3119

Moys, J-L., Collier, J., & Joyce, D. (2018). By design: engaging Graphic Communication students in curriculum development. *The Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change*, *4*(1). Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.21100/jeipc.v4i1.752