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Challenges and opportunities in co-creating a wellbeing toolkit in a distance learning environment: a case study

Emma Jones^a, Mychelle Pride^b, Carol Edwards^b, Rob Tumilty^b
University of Sheffield^a, The Open University^b

Introduction

Co-creation with students is becoming an increasingly prominent method of developing strategies and resources in higher education (HE) (Bovill, 2014). Its central notion of 'engagement through partnership' suggests a process whereby students and other key stakeholders (including staff, institutions and student unions) are actively involved as creators (Higher Education Academy, 2014, p.2). This contrasts with the traditional characterisation of students as participants or, more recently, consumers, whose voice is more passively represented through questionnaires and consultations, such as the National Student Survey (Canning, 2016, p.520). However, despite this growing recognition, the existing literature on co-creation focuses largely on projects undertaken in traditional learning environments, where the face-to-face presence of students and other stakeholders is assumed. In contrast to such a face-to-face focus, this case study describes the development of a co-creation project in a wholly online environment, undertaken by members of The Open University's Faculty of Business and Law.

This particular project was built on the growing interest in the co-production of resources supporting student mental health and wellbeing (Student Minds, 2018). There is significant evidence that students experience difficulties with wellbeing and mental health across the HE sector (Insight Network, 2019). A study of law students undertaken in The Open University's Law School also indicated a range of issues, with levels of stress, anxiety and depression above those of the general United Kingdom (UK) population (Jones *et al.*, 2018). Although the evidence relating specifically to business students appears to be sparse, the wider evidence-base across HE implies that similar issues are likely to arise. As a response, the project initiators decided to collaborate, on a faculty-wide basis, to co-create a wellbeing toolkit for law and business students, working with both students and associate lecturers (ALs) – who facilitate student learning – as co-creators.

Methodology

The Open University overall has around 150,000 students. The Faculty of Business and Law alone has about 19,000 students. Given the level of engagement and resource demanded by the co-creation process, it was decided to focus on students undertaking their initial level 4 module (either W101: An Introduction to Law or B100: Introduction to Business and Management). The selection of these modules was based upon internal data, which indicated that issues of retention and progression were particularly pronounced in students' first year of study (reflecting the open access nature of the programmes). A random sample of 150 students per cohort was obtained and these were invited to participate in the project via email, with the offer of a £50 voucher as an incentive.

The four academics who initiated the co-creation project have central academic roles at The Open University. However, as indicated above, the institution's structure means that students' learning is facilitated by ALs. These colleagues often work for the institution part

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time, alongside other full- or part-time work (for example, a number of law ALs are practising legal professionals). ALs are currently employed on specific modules and are allocated groups of approximately twenty students per module presentation, largely on a geographical basis (although some ALs will have multiple contracts for groups on a single presentation). ALs are the first point of call for academic-related questions and concerns; they also run face-to-face and/or online tutorials, mark student assignments and conduct one-to-one discussions via telephone at designated check-in points (on W101); they liaise with the module team (of central academics) to pass on student feedback, raise academic queries on the module materials and discuss other issues which may arise on the module. Given the important role of ALs as a conduit between students and central academics and their close association with the lived study experience of the learners, it was decided also to include ALs in the project. An email was sent to all ALs tutoring on the February 2019 presentations of W101 and B100, inviting them to participate and again offering a £50 voucher as an incentive. Following a low response rate, a second invitation was sent to all ALs tutoring on the October 2018 presentation of W101 and B100.

Following the initial invitations, eight students (three from W101 and five from B100) accepted the invitation to join in the co-creation project. Out of eighteen ALs who volunteered, five from W101 and six from B100 were selected (on the basis of geographical location, gender and experience) to avoid an uneven balance of students and ALs. Each student and AL selected then undertook a one-to-one telephone briefing with one of the four project instigators. A total of four hour-long synchronous sessions were then held via the online learning platform Adobe Connect – one for W101 students, one for B100 students, one for W101 and B100 ALs and one final session for W101 and B100 students and W101 and B100 ALs (in other words, everyone involved). The four project initiators were involved in facilitating the sessions. To avoid students' feeling overwhelmed, two of the project initiators attended each of the W101 and B100 student sessions. All the project initiators attended the one for W101 and B100 ALs and the final session. Each session was recorded, to allow sessions to be revisited and reflected upon. Alongside these synchronous sessions, a dedicated asynchronous online forum, created on The Open University's virtual learning environment, was open to everyone involved (but to no-one outside the project).

The two initial student-focused sessions concentrated on exploring their study experience so far, with questions such as 'What is going well on the module?', 'What are you finding challenging on the module?', 'What does a well OU student look like?' and 'How can the OU help students to be that well student?'. The initial session with ALs started with a question about how they saw their role regarding student wellbeing and to what resources they directed students experiencing problems. Discussion ensued about the concept and characteristics of a thriving student. One of the questions in each of the three initial sessions asked what the final combined synchronous co-creation session should look like, to try to promote active involvement in its development and encourage the students and ALs to see themselves as co-creators. The final session focused on how the discussions in previous sessions could be translated into an online wellbeing toolkit and, by its end, there was broad agreement on the form of the toolkit with three specific parts – one on time management and organisation, one with videos and podcasts and one which was termed a 'big red button' (namely, a place for students to visit to access quick and effective help for common issues).

Following each session, one of the four project initiators wrote up a summary of discussions and posted it on the asynchronous forum for comments. After the final session, the four instigators provided drafts of each of the sections and posted these up for comment. At the time of writing, three detailed drafts are in place and the instigators are at the stage of liaising with The Open University's technical teams to translate these into the online environment.

Discussion

Both the co-creation and online aspects of the project generated several challenges and opportunities. Amongst these, the following were key:

a) The use of technology

Given the wide geographical dispersal of both students and ALs, the use of online synchronous and asynchronous methods was vital in facilitating participation. Any face-to-face sessions would have had to be based upon geographic proximity to The Open University's Milton Keynes campus, thus potentially excluding a range of possible co-creators (for example, international students or ALs and students with disabilities limiting their ability to travel). The use of available online technology therefore had significant benefits in terms of the accessibility of the project, potentially enhancing inclusivity and promoting diversity (Petrick, 2015).

At the same time, the reliance on such technology also generated several barriers to participation. Although the online methods used are those already deployed within both W101 and B100, using them is not a compulsory element of the modules and, therefore, not all students chose to engage with them. In terms of obtaining a representative sample of students as co-creators, it may be surmised that a self-selection process took place – students who had not engaged with the technologies previously did not respond to the initial invitation email.

Those students who did respond and take part also had some issues during the synchronous online sessions. For example, one student, unable to participate clearly via microphone, had to type contributions via the available chat function. Aside from such technical problems, a lack of confidence within the online environment may also have skewed student contributions, leading to a reluctance to join in fully via microphone and to an emphasis on typed communications – arguably briefer and less expressive, given the need simultaneously to type and listen to the continuing session. Although the W101 and B100 ALs would all have had at least some basic training and experience of synchronous online sessions, it is notable that they also tended to resort to using the chat function, although this was less marked than amongst the student co-creators.

b) Imbalances of power

The roles of researcher and participant have traditionally been viewed as creating a significant power imbalance in favour of the researcher (Ben-Ari and Enosh, 2012). Co-creation aims instead to create a partnership approach which lessens or removes such imbalances (Higher Education Academy, *op.cit.*). However, the instigators were aware that their position as academics might generate perceptions by student co-creators of an imbalance of power, despite their having no actual influence over the contributing students'

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progression and attainment. Also present was the possibility that ALs might also perceive some form of imbalance, since two of the academic instigators have a role in the line management of ALs. These issues were compounded by the need to navigate institutional ethics approval processes with documentation based upon the assumption of a more traditional researcher/participant relationship. There was also an awareness that the academics' greater confidence within online environments could lead to their inadvertently dominating the online sessions and forum. As a result, the question of how to position students and ALs as partners, not participants, became one which generated concerns and debates throughout the co-creation project.

The project instigators took great care to use, at all times, both verbal and written language reflecting the co-creation nature of the project. For example, the student consent form referred to the signatory as a 'co-creator' and included reassurance that involvement would in no way have impact on module grades or future treatment (at the same time, it is acknowledged that the very use of a consent form and the need for such assurances potentially reinforces more traditional roles). The focus on co-creation was explicitly emphasised in the one-to-one telephone briefings that took place. To prevent the online synchronous session from replicating a formal focus group, its design included plenty of interactive activities and small-group work in breakout 'rooms'. The aim was to enable students and ALs to engage fully and discuss issues both with and without an academic presence. For example, one activity asked students to work in small groups to draw a picture of the 'well' OU student. Although the project instigators debated whether to join in these small groups, they decided not to do so, to avoid any sense that they were monitoring or over-shadowing the discussions. Their decision proved to be appropriate, even if it may have seemed to contradict the ideals of co-creation.

The inclusion of both students and ALs as co-creators was a deliberate decision, given the vital role of the AL in student learning. Including ALs allowed for the contribution of a rich body of insights and expertise, providing a breadth that would otherwise have been difficult to attain, owing to the relatively small sample of students involved. However, it also added a further significant level of complexity to the issue of power imbalances. The instigators initially had concerns that an AL presence could further skew the power imbalances towards academic involvement and away from the student voice. As the project progressed, the sheer enthusiasm and commitment of the ALs, together with the technological barriers to student participation referred to above, meant that the AL voice did dominate at times, particularly on the asynchronous online forum. The use of separate student and ALs sessions went some way towards mitigating this and the final, combined online synchronous session did have a better sense of parity of contribution between all co-creators than had been anticipated, but it was clear that this was a persistent issue requiring continuous monitoring.

Another unexpected potential barrier arose, in the form of the project instigators' own pre-conceptions. When planning the sessions, there was considerable debate over whether the same activities should be replicated for both the student and AL sessions. A key example of this was the suggested inclusion of a warm-up activity based upon the question 'Which biscuit are you and why?'. While the instigators agreed on the inclusion of this in the synchronous online student sessions as a light-hearted ice-breaker, concerns were raised over whether it was suitable for the AL session or whether it would be viewed as patronising

or inappropriately pitched. Reflection on this discussion led to questions over why we were treating students and ALs differently and whether the instigators were unconsciously implementing assumptions which replicated potential power inequalities. As a result, it was decided to ensure that the student and AL sessions were as similar as possible (although, ironically, the biscuit activity worked better in the AL session).

c) Building community

A successful co-creation project requires the construction of a sense of community and partnership between co-creators (Higher Education Academy, 2015). This in turn requires that there be trust and respect, to ensure a productive and supportive collaboration (Nam, 2014). A lack of face-to-face contact can be particularly problematic in building community, particularly where the co-creators are not previously known to each other. The lack of visual recognition and an inability to see or read body language and ascertain facial cues can all militate against an atmosphere of trust. Although an emerging field of study, the online environment as a site of affect and emotion is also increasingly being recognised (Cleveland-Innes and Campbell, 2012). This means that, in addition to the signals and cues that are absent online, there is also an additional layer of emotion and affect generated by virtue of being within that setting. For example, where two students disagree on an issue, a typed message by one student over the chat function (or even a spoken comment over a microphone) may be interpreted as abrupt or combative by a student in a relatively unfamiliar environment, struggling to juggle her/his own contributions and those of others with increased technological demands and in the absence of a smile or nod to promote friendly dissent. It is possible that a failure to build community contributes to the perpetuation of perceived power imbalances, such as those discussed above.

Recognising this difficulty, the project instigators attempted to use the one-to-one briefings to build a sense of rapport and foster a sense of trust on an individual basis. The interactive design of the online synchronous sessions was also intentionally aimed at fostering discussion to promote community, as was the asynchronous forum. For example, prior to the synchronous sessions, co-creators were encouraged to introduce themselves on the forum and provide a few personal details they were comfortable sharing (such as hobbies or geographical location). It may well have been that to have held more sessions would have assisted in developing a greater sense of community, but the project instigators did have concerns that co-creators were being asked to contribute significant time and resources for a minimal token of thanks (the £50 voucher).

Conclusion

Whilst the online nature of the co-creation project was necessary, and also beneficial in some respects, the technological issues it raised were significant and in turn, at least in part, adversely influenced attempts to ameliorate perceived power imbalances and to build a sense of community amongst co-creators. One way to alleviate these issues in future could be to offer discrete training sessions to co-creators on the use of the online tools, prior to the substantive co-creation sessions. Another (although not feasible here) would be to use a blend of face-to-face and online interactions.

The multi-faceted nature of the project in terms of its involvement of both students and ALs had some benefits, but it did appear to exacerbate issues relating to inequalities of power

(and therefore, by extension, potentially impeded community-building). The use of both synchronous and asynchronous tools, the utilisation of appropriate terminology and language and careful session design all assisted in combating some of these issues. However, it is clear that careful and conscious planning is required throughout projects of this nature to ensure that contributions remain balanced and reflective of the views of all co-creators. The outputs of the project to date demonstrate that online co-creation is a viable and potentially successful option, despite the need to address potential barriers which can arise throughout the process.

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