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Increasing motivation and ownership of learning through Students as Partners: The importance of transparency and belonging

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Abstract

As Higher Education institutions increasingly turn their attention to creating a culture of inclusivity and diversity the student voice is becoming progressively valued. Thus, the increased attention in *Students as Partners* over the last five years is timely, whereby students and educators collaborate in curriculum design. This article explores Bachelor of Music (Honours) students' perspectives of a recent initiative where they collaborated in enhancing one of their research courses with their educator (the author) and two Honours graduates.

With the aim of creating assessments that were relevant, timely and interesting, students and graduates were invited to participate in a planning meeting where they undertook SWOT analyses of assessment items. Potential due dates and potential new assessment tasks were also explored. Two focus groups were then conducted: one after the planning meeting and prior to the course commencing; the other upon completion of the course. These explored any perceived benefits of the partnership and students' experiences within the course.

Co-creating the course with students and graduates resulted in a strongly relevant course design. Students indicated possessing deep ownership of their learning, an enhanced sense of belonging, and sustained motivation and engagement. Most notably, transparency around the *process*, and not only the *product* was most valued by students, as well as involvement in the decision-making process and transparency around expected student experiences. Graduate involvement was welcomed, with their recent experience of the course contributing to achieving consensus in the decisions made. Horizontal alignment of workload across the Honours program was also appreciated. Students' engagement was enhanced by the existing strong rapport between the educator and students, with students being accustomed to active learning and providing feedback in an earlier research course.

This initiative highlights that curriculum design is less about the educator and more about the students, and that feelings of involvement, belonging and ownership should not be underestimated. Questions remain about how such an approach to partnerships might unfold with earlier undergraduate courses, especially when cohorts are larger or there is no pre-existing student-teacher relationship. How to create such strong ownership where partnerships might not be appropriate also requires further attention. Given participants' unfavourable perspectives on their previous undergraduate course plans, insights into undergraduate music students' understanding of their courses more broadly and any consequent impact on their engagement would be useful. This could inform a more inclusive approach to curriculum and program design.

Keywords: curriculum design; higher music education; student engagement; students as partners; transparency

“Academic staff should not only consult students but also explore ways for students to become full participants in the design of teaching approaches, courses and curricula.”

Bovill, Cook-Sather., & Felten, 2011, p. 133

As Higher Education institutions increasingly turn their attention to creating a culture of inclusivity and diversity the student voice is becoming progressively valued. Thus, the increased attention in *Students as Partners* over the last five years (Healey & Healey, 2018) is timely, where partnership “is framed as a process of student engagement, understood as staff and students learning and working together to foster engaged student learning and engaging learning and teaching enhancement” (Healey, Flint., & Harrington, 2014, p. 7).

Healey and Healey (2018) describe *Students as Partners* as a “lens through which to reconsider the nature of higher education” (p. 6). Rather than viewing students as customers, this lens is “the radical antithesis of the consumerist mind-set in higher education” (Healey, Healey, & Cliffe, 2018, para 3), placing “reciprocal learning at the heart of the relationship” (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014, p. 17). *Students as Partners* thus challenges established hierarchies such as who is responsible for decision-making and whose knowledge is important. As Bovill, Cook-Sather and Felten (2011) explain, this “challenges conventional conceptions of learners as subordinate to the expert tutor/faculty in engaging with what is taught and ... calls for ‘radical collegiality’ in which students are ‘agents in the process of transformative learning’ (Fielding, 1999, p. 22)” (p. 133).

Fostering such agency in students has also been called for in higher music education (HME) (Carruthers, 2018), with much necessary focus being given to collaborative and transformative approaches to instrumental and vocal music tuition (e.g. Burwell, 2005; Carey & Grant, 2016; Carey et al., 2018; Gaunt, 2010; 2011; Gaunt & Westerlund, 2016). Minimal attention, however, has been given to collaborative partnerships within class-based tertiary music courses, with just two discrete case studies found to date (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014, pp. 37-38; Coutts, 2019a). With its potential benefits, such as increased ownership of learning and sustained motivation and engagement (Mercer-Mapstone, et al., 2017), it is arguably time to explore Students as Partners further within the HME context.

Since completing research into transformative pedagogy within a piano studio, which highlighted student involvement and relevance in lesson planning as key to engaged student learning (Coutts, 2018; 2019b), I have been intrigued by how student-informed approaches to course design might unfold within HME class-based courses. This article explores students' experiences with and perceptions of a recent initiative where I collaborated with Bachelor of Music (Honours) students and graduates to enhance one of their research courses.

Context: Music Research Design 2

During their Bachelor of Music (Honours) program fourth-year students undertake an independent research project which culminates in a 10,000 to 15,000-word dissertation. Students are supported by two compulsory *Music Research Design* courses (MRD1; MRD2) that run concurrently with their research projects (semester 1 and 2 respectively). The aim of these courses is to develop in students the research skills they need to implement their projects and

complete their dissertations. The Students as Partners initiative in this study relates to the 2019 iteration of MRD2.

Study Design: Co-creation of curriculum

With the aim of creating assessments that were relevant, timely and interesting to students, I invited current 2019 students to collaborate in re-designing MRD2. Eight of the 11 students accepted (names used in this article are pseudonyms in line with ethics):

- Four females: Three classical music majors; one composition major
- Four males: One classical music major; three popular music majors

I also invited the previous year's (2018) cohort to be involved to share their unique perspectives. Two of the eight graduates contacted accepted: one female classical music major; and one female popular music major.

Each participant brought with them “different but equal” (Matthews, 2017) forms of expertise to inform the course design:

- Current students: Experts in being students, in their own situations, interests, goals, perspectives and challenges;
- Graduates: Experts in their recent experiences of having completed the course and assessment tasks;
- Course convenor and educator (female, early career academic): Expert in course design and experience in delivering the course since 2017, possesses insights into the broader functioning of the Honours degree program.

Planning meetings.

We met prior to semester 2 to plan the design of *MRD2*. While I initially intended to hold three planning meetings, focusing on assessment, class activities and final approvals respectively, due to a range of factors only one was possible, and so this lasted two-and-a-half hours and was inclusive of assessments and approaches to classroom learning. During the planning meeting we undertook SWOT analyses (Gürel & Tat, 2017) of *MRD2* assessment items, identifying strengths and weaknesses, opportunities for enhancements and threats to students' engagement. We also explored potential due dates and new assessment tasks.

Recognising the importance of listening as a first step (Mihans, Long, & Felten, 2008) and ensuring I was guided by student interests and concerns (Hudd, 2003) I acted as facilitator, asking questions to seek clarity and to prompt different perspectives, ensuring all views were heard before sharing my own. In doing so I aspired to share power with all those involved (Matthews, 2017). I also stayed keenly aware of ethics, not only in formal ethics approvals (which was granted by the host institution), but also “an ethic of reciprocity” (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017). This includes respect and shared responsibility “premised on dialogue, negotiation, and exchange of ideas between partners” (Mercer-Mapstone, et al., 2017, p. 14).

Data generation and analysis.

Following the planning meeting a semi-structured (Roulston & Choi, 2018) focus group (n=8) was conducted to uncover students' experiences with and perceptions of the planning process and the consequent course and assessment plan. A second focus group (n=6) was conducted upon completion of the course using a general interview guide (Edwards & Hollan, 2013) to

investigate students' experiences within the course itself and to ascertain whether their initial motivation was sustained. Focus groups were transcribed and coded using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Descriptive themes aligning with student engagement such as relevance, transparency, motivation and ownership of learning served as a starting point while allowing inductive themes to emerge.

Creating relevant assessments

One aim of the planning meeting was to create relevant and interesting assessment items (Biggs & Tang, 2011). This resulted in the removal of two assessment items and the development of two new ones, with a complete overhaul of due dates (illustrated in Figures 1 and 2 below).

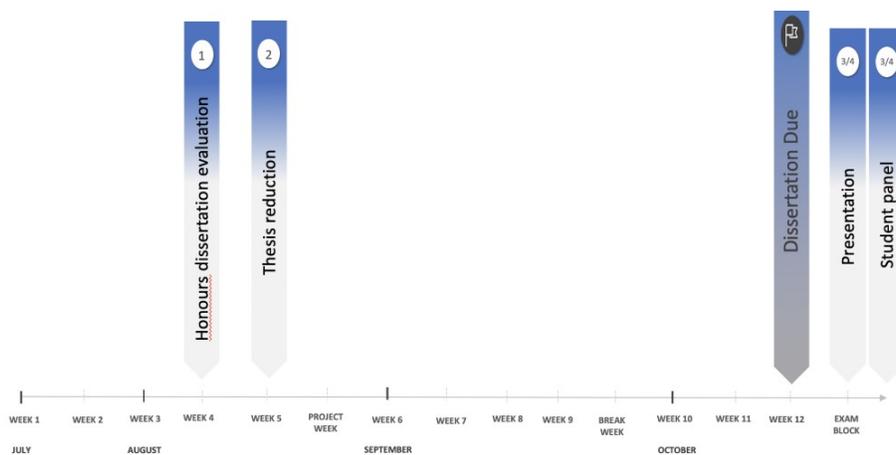


Figure 1: 2018 assessment item, where the first item was deemed more valuable as an in-class activity, and any assessments due after the dissertation were redundant.

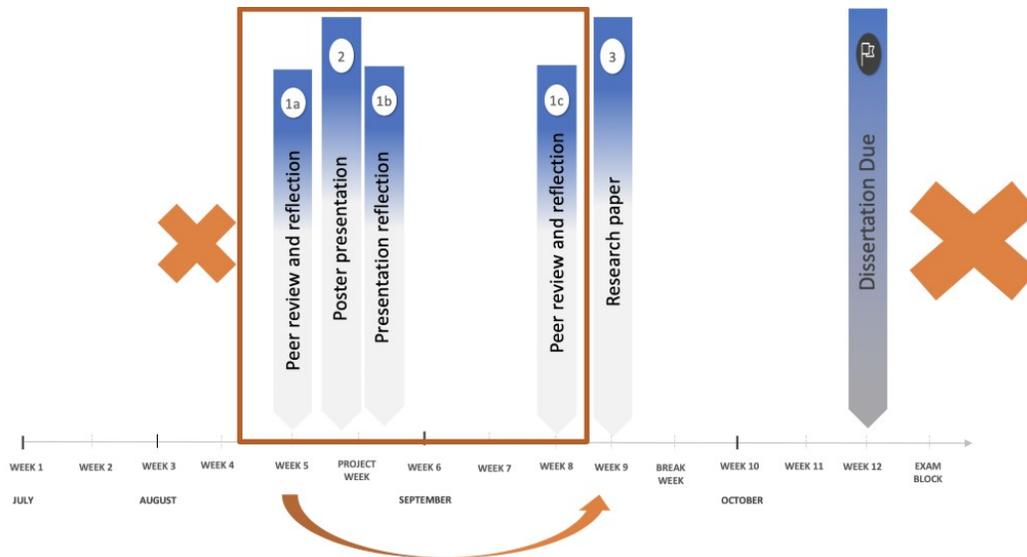


Figure 2: 2019 assessment items, where the crosses signify removed assessment items, the items in the box are new items, and the arrow signifies a later due date. 1a, b and c together form a reflective portfolio submitted upon completion of all three parts.

Students highlighted three areas of relevance this new assessment plan achieved: alignment with their dissertations; preparing for postgraduate study; and relevance for their careers more broadly, each agreeing these were important (FG1). Luke saw my empathy towards their holistic student experience as integral to achieving this, while several others linked this to enhancing their learning and engagement (FG1). This perceived relevance continued throughout the course for all involved. As Elaine summarised, “Every single assessment that we did and everything we learned in the class was relevant and useful” (FG2).

Graduate input was valued highly through this process (n=5), with Tom describing their insights as integral to transforming his perspectives: “... Because what we thought were strengths and what [graduates] thought were strengths were pretty different a lot of the time” (FG1). While

there were a range of preferences relating to assessment tasks early in the meeting, consensus was achieved as differing perspectives shone new light on advantages and disadvantages of each task and due date, indicating a presence of critical thinking and reflection skills.

Creating timely assessments

Another aim of the meeting was to choose assessment due dates that avoided students' major performance schedules and other competing priorities, which placed undue pressure on students in previous years. Students appreciated the opportunity for holistic thinking, noting how different this was to other courses. Several students compared this unfavourably to their other undergraduate courses, where Tom perceived there to be "no foresight or planning" (FG1). Rachael expanded: "[Course convenors] don't look at anything else that's happening in the building and it all comes at once" (FG1). While curriculum mapping (Jacobs, 1997) and creating horizontal alignment (Howard, 2007) typically focuses on course content, this project highlights the value in aligning schedules so as to create more appropriate workload allocations, and indicates that traditional approaches to course design may fail to provide students adequate insights into the curriculum design process.

Due dates also needed to afford students adequate time to incorporate feedback into their dissertations, due on the final day of class (week 12). Thus, assessment items were restricted to the first eight weeks, with flexibility to extend by another week if required. Students' first reactions upon seeing this in the plan was overwhelm: "Eight weeks seems fast to do that much assessment." (Tom, FG1); "I was stressed about [the timeline] ... It looks daunting" (Rachael, FG1); "I was like, 'holy crap, that's a lot of work'" (Luke, FG1). When this was discussed,

however, including reminders of the discussions that led to these decisions and the implications for their broader dissertation, students were satisfied this was the most appropriate plan: "... but looking at where we should be in our actual dissertation, it couldn't really be moved." (Rachael, FG1); "... but it connects to the overall dissertation" (Luke, FG1). Despite their initial concerns, students recognised this plan "align[s] with a lot of our personal thoughts of needing a reasonable timeframe and workload" (Jai, FG1). Flexibility was also appreciated: "Leah was okay with being flexible with deadlines. And she still is. It's good that she's willing to push things based on our feedback ... we always get to make our own decisions" (Toni, FG1).

Jai appreciated the transparency afforded to them through their involvement:

You could see what was going on behind the scenes, and you could see the sacrifices needed when shifting dates around. It's spinning plates. It's really good to feel like you have control over that but you're also realistic about how things affect each other and what's just impossible. (FG2)

Tom explained he wasn't used to such "bigger picture thinking" and was reliant on me to provide these insights (FG1). This transparency led to strong consensus for due dates. While advice in the literature surrounding transparency focuses on the benefits of using a marking rubric (Jonsson, 2014) or creating detailed frameworks outlining assessment plans (e.g. NILOA, 2011), these focus on the product rather than the process. As evidenced throughout this initiative, understanding the process was most beneficial. Once again, Luke mentioned empathy in relation to this process, this time relating to the mutual empathy and understanding reached to achieve the best outcome for the course and students.

Increased motivation and ownership of learning

Despite everyone's initial concerns about workload, involvement in the planning process created deep motivation in the lead-up to the course. Elaine felt "excited", Tom felt "pumped to get started" and Jai "look[ed] forward to getting stuck into it", describing the assessment as "exhilarating" and "stimulating" (FG1). This was achieved, it seems, through students possessing a level of control over their learning: "I feel like having some control over the decisions and where we go next and what we talk about in class makes me more engaged with it" (Toni, FG1). The group agreed. Students also felt more invested in their learning. As Rachael articulated: "Your assessment is more on your shoulders, I feel, because they were clearly assessment items I chose and wanted to do" (FG1). Once more, there were nods all around. As Elaine summarised: "We were all so much more involved in the course by being involved in the planning" (FG2). Students' comments highlight a democratisation of the course (Deeley & Bovill, 2017) was integral to their motivation.

The second focus group confirmed the assessment plan was successful. Students agreed that the assessment "lined up really well" (Jessie), guiding them through each required step (Jai).

Relevance also meant they were excited to go to lectures each week: "I'm usually like, I could just skip this and learn the content at home, but I always wanted to come" (Toni); "I never felt bored or that I couldn't be bothered or didn't want to do it. I was interested because I was curious about what we're going to learn" (Elaine).

Being involved in the decision-making process also increased students' sense of ownership. As Elaine explained, "It definitely helps knowing you had a say in when assessments were due. You

can't be annoyed at that" (FG2). Samantha agreed: "Because we had a say I didn't feel a grudge about it being inconvenient. We chose this. This was the best for everyone". Tom and Samantha described this lack of resentment towards assessments as "odd" and "a strange feeling." Jai brought it back to transparency: "While I'm doing assessments I'm not grumbling because I know if it was another time, it would be affecting other things" (FG2).

Elaine referred to the cohort to further explain her increase in motivation: "Because it was planned to suit everyone it made you want to put in that extra effort. Feeling like you're more a part of the course than 'here's the course, and there you go, do it.'" (Elaine, FG2). This sense of belonging and shared endeavour is an aspect of motivation linked to social constructivism (Powell & Kalina, 2009), whereby a community of learning is created. This was important for students, which was not only reflected in their appreciation for group discussions within the planning meeting, but also in the resultant class activities, which focussed heavily on group activities and peer feedback. Having planned the course together, students collaborated wholeheartedly throughout the semester and were interested in "benchmarking" (Elaine, FG2) and "staying in the same headspace" (Tom, FG2) as their peers.

Levels of influence

Most students felt like they played a large role in shaping MRD2 and described feeling "very involved" (Elaine, FG2) in the process. As Rachael and Toni explained, the assessment plan changed substantially based on students' input in the meeting. Elaine, however, felt she had less input than the other participants: "I mostly listened to my peers' ideas and like what they had to say. I didn't contribute as many ideas. Perhaps this is due to my quieter personality" (FG1).

Despite this, she described having high levels of involvement in the process and felt the same sense of motivation and ownership as her peers. This highlights active listening and inclusion as a valid form of engagement regardless of how ‘active’ a student might appear to be.

Interestingly, while the majority of students agreed their involvement in decision-making was “crucial” (Tom) because they felt they had more of a choice (Samantha) which increased their investment in the course (n=5, FG2), Jessie provided a different perspective: “It wasn’t so much the ownership in the planning session, but more just being explained the entire picture. As long as you’re shown and informed, it lets you become more aware of what’s happening” (FG2).

While the other students disagreed with this, Jessie’s perspective highlights how important transparency is – not only in relation to the course itself, but also in relation to the student experience: “Even if we had no choice what the assessment was, if it was explained - 'you're going to be stressed out at this point' - as long as you know going forward, it really helps”. This also emphasises the importance of educators understanding and considering student experiences, factoring these into decisions made and communicating them explicitly to students.

Summary of findings

Co-creating MRD2 with students and graduates resulted in a course design that was perceived as relevant, which was integral to students’ increased motivation (Keller, 1987; Kember, Ho., & Hong, 2008). Students indicated possessing deep ownership of their learning, an enhanced sense of belonging, and sustained motivation and engagement, which Mercer-Mapstone and colleagues note are common benefits in Students as Partners initiatives (2017). Most notably, transparency around the *process*, and not only the *product* was most valued by students, as well as

involvement in the decision-making process and transparency around expected student experiences. Graduate involvement was welcomed here, with their first-hand and recent experience of the course enhancing these insights and contributing to achieving consensus in the decisions made. Horizontal alignment of workload across the Honours program was also appreciated, with students expressing sincere gratitude for the empathy and inclusivity provided within this initiative.

Reflections

This initiative has highlighted that curriculum design is less about the educator and more about the students, and that feelings of involvement, inclusivity and ownership should not be underestimated. Its success was likely aided by Honours students arguably possessing well-developed levels of maturity and critical thinking skills, supported by the pre-existing student-educator rapport. Questions remain about how such an approach to partnerships might unfold with earlier undergraduate courses, especially when cohorts are larger or there is no such pre-existing relationship. Given students' unfavourable comparisons to undergraduate courses which lacked apparent transparency, insights into undergraduate music students' understanding of their courses' relevance and the consequent impact on their engagement would be useful. This could inform a more inclusive approach to curriculum and program design within HME more broadly.

I am also left questioning how to create such strong ownership of learning with future MRD2 cohorts when the class plan appears to need no further enhancements. Perhaps discussions regarding the course in relation to 2019 students' experiences and goals can be a gateway to increase rapport and transparency without the need for partnership, as Jordan suggested. Or

perhaps ongoing flexibility is a more subtle form of ownership which can unfold organically within the course itself. This does not negate the strength of partnerships; on the contrary, MRD2 would not have had such a strong design had it not been for the input of all those involved.

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