Developing Novice Researchers – Reimagining the Dissertation Module on BA Education Studies

Naveed Kazmi

London Metropolitan University

Introduction

This article reports on the findings of a small-scale practitioner research carried out within the broader tradition of action research in education (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, 2018). The main aim of this project was to evaluate the delivery of the Dissertation Module in the final year of BA Education Studies programme, with a view to improve the learning for all students, enabling them to do their research projects more effectively and write their dissertations more confidently.

The Context & Rationale

Education Studies Dissertation is a year long, 30 credit module that aims to equip the students with necessary knowledge, understanding and skills to carry out their small-scale research project, leading to their dissertations.

I chose to investigate the dissertation module because it is an important component of the BA Education Studies programme. There has been a general feeling amongst the staff and students that this module is challenging as most students have no prior experience of conducting social research. This project had a strong social justice agenda and is aligned with the university's Education For Social Justice Framework (ESJF) and was delivered through the implementation of the principle of 'students as partners' in the teaching and learning process - and to make assessment more 'inclusive'.

The Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted in this study comprised two main strands. The first of these is Michel Foucault's theory of truth, knowledge, and discourse. The second strand comprised curriculum theory specifically Kirkpatrick's four-pronged model of learning evaluation (Kirkpatrick 2020; and as cited in Warren, 2016: 33); Healy, Flint and Harrington's (2014) idea of engaging students as partners in their own learning in higher education; and the theory of 'constructivist alignment' as presented by Biggs and Tang (2007). I will now briefly discuss each of these two strands.

The Philosophical Underpinnings

The key philosophical perspective employed in this project comprises Michel Foucault's ideas about truth, knowledge, and discourse (Foucault, 1980 & 1989). I have drawn on Foucault's unique conceptualisation of the inextricable relationship between truth and power. His emphasis on the positive and productive functions of power, rather than the traditional repressive and negative workings of it, is especially germane for the purposes of my evaluation. This productive feature of power entwines it with the notion of 'truth'. This 'circular relation' between truth and power constitutes what he refers to as a 'régime of truth' (Foucault, 1980: 133). These regimes are enmeshed in and sustained by the 'politics of truth' (Foucault, 1980: 132). Foucault (1980: 133) suggests:

> The essential political problem for the intellectual is not to criticise the ideological contents supposedly linked to science, or to ensure that his own scientific practice is accompanied by a correct ideology, but that of ascertaining the possibility of constituting a new politics of truth.

In the context of this project, the notion of 'truth' is related to the dominant and hegemonic modes in which the pedagogy was imagined and articulated in higher education generally and in this module more specifically. By engaging with the students to develop strategies to enhance their learning, I hoped to create new ways of articulating learning and teaching processes – creating new discourses and a reconceptualised 'regime of (pedagogical) truth'.

The Pedagogical Framework

I see the learners in my classroom and myself as active members of a learning community. In other words, rather than viewing learning as a passive process, I believe it is an active hands-on process, in which all members of the learning community jointly work and interact together to construct their learning. This resonates closely with what is referred to as the social constructivist theory of learning (e.g. Wray 2018 and Pritchard 2018).

My pedagogy in higher education has been influenced by social constructivism – a perspective that developed from the constructivist theory of learning, which, in turn, emerged from the ideas about child development and learning espoused by the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (Wray 2018 and Pritchard 2018).

Social constructivism is often seen as a development of the constructivist theory (Pritchard, 2018). Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner are the key figures who are associated with this theory. Rather than viewing the learner being 'a lone scientist' as proposed by Piaget, social constructivists emphasise the 'interaction between the learner and others' (Pritchard, 2018: 44) as fundamental to most learning.

I employed a specific feature of social constructivism – Vygotsky's notion of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Explaining his idea of ZPD, Vygotsky (2016: 40) writes:

> The zone of proximal development defines those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state. These functions could be termed the 'buds' or 'flowers' of development rather than the 'fruits' of development. The actual developmental level characterizes mental

development retrospectively, while the zone of proximal development characterizes mental development prospectively.

For Vygotsky (2016), ZPD is crucially important from the point of view of the educator. It provides them with a useful tool to analyse the trajectory of the learning process – how far has the learner come and where next they need to go.

Curriculum Theory

In this subsection, I will briefly outline the approach and model of curriculum evaluation I adopted for this project. The approach I have used is what Warren (2016: 32) posits as 'collective or participative'. This is because giving students a voice sits at the heart of the project (ESJF). This approach dovetails with Foucault's (1980) idea of participating in the 'politics of truth'.

The curriculum evaluation framework, I have used, includes ideas and strands from different models and approaches to curriculum evaluation. One of the strands in my framework draws on Kirkpatrick's model of learning evaluation (Kirkpatrick Partners, 2020 and as cited in Warren, 2016: 33). It comprises four levels, which Warren (2016: 33) explains as below:

1) Reaction – how students feel about course/learning experience.

2) Learning – their acquisition of new knowledge, skills and attitudes.

3) Behaviour – changes in their behaviour in learning and practising.

4) Results – usually this refers to the benefits to the organisation.

A key strength of this model is that it offers a nuanced and staged evaluation of the curriculum – helping us to assess the impact of the planned project at the four different levels outlined above.

Another important strand within my framework is engaging students as partners in their own learning in higher education (Healy, Flint, and Harrington, 2014; ESJF).

The final component of my framework for this project is the notion of 'constructivist alignment' as developed by Biggs and Tang (2007). Put very simply, it suggests that the intended learning outcomes (ILOs), the teaching and learning activities (TLAs), and the assessment tasks (ATs) are 'aligned intrinsically' and mirror each other.

The framework I have devised for my proposed project can be visualised as three overlapping circles, shown in figure 1.
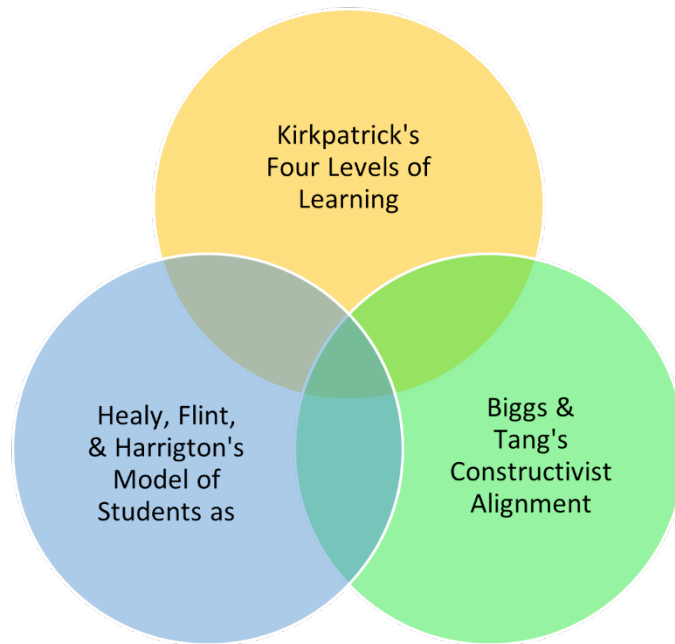
Figure 1: The Hybrid Framework for Proposed Evaluative Project

Analytical Account

In this section, I will provide an analytical account of the curriculum evaluation project that I carried out.

The analytical account presented in this section draws on two sources of information and ideas. The first of these is based on my reflection on my own practice and the experience of delivering the module in the past. This was in the form of notes taken during and soon after the sessions, students' responses during the sessions, and feedback accumulated through platforms such as course committee meetings. The second source of data comes from semi-structured interviews that I did with three students who attended the module two years ago.

It would be pertinent to mention that the data collection from students was done in line with British Educational Research Association's *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (BERA, 2018). As such, all participants' details have been anonymised and full confidentiality has been maintained.

From Knowledge to Skills – Learning the Craft

Students find the dissertation to be one of the most demanding and challenging parts of their degree. This, I feel, is due to two main reasons. Firstly, as a result of attending this module, students are expected to develop knowledge and understanding of complex ideas and theoretical perspectives. Secondly, it is envisaged that, as a result of attending this module, the students will be able to develop complex and sophisticated academic skills as outlined in the module learning outcomes in the module handbook.

One of the issues that I have been reflecting on is whether the format of 'interactive lectures' that we use for delivering this module is appropriate and fit for purpose.

Writing well-argued and convincing justifications for various methodological choices clearly benefits from being 'taught' about methodological issues, insofar as the students start developing basic understanding of the key features of the two main research paradigms. However, there is a big gap between starting to develop a basic understanding of, for example, key features of qualitative social research and writing a convincing academic justification for using this paradigm. This issue of teaching and learning strategies and activities not helping the learners develop the full set of competencies that the ILOs refer to has been analysed by Biggs and Tang in their theory of constructivist alignment (2007).

I argue that relying primarily on lectures on qualitative social research leads to only partial alignment between the ILOs, TLAs and the AT(s)[1]. This issue resonates with what one of the students whom I interviewed for this project, said:

> They [the sessions] were okay. Just sometimes that [the lecturers] would go explaining it from [their] own point of view and not what other people were asking [them]… I know it is a degree but sometimes in life you do not understand everything. But [they] try to teach us at that level always. Does that make sense?

Another student whom I interviewed, said that it would have helped the students if we showed them examples of previous years' students' dissertations:

> For my fellow students finding it very difficult if they were able to be shown examples that was done by previous students – so more examples of how each section is related to the next section and how qualitative research should be done, just giving them an example because a lot of them find it a bit difficult. So, the only thing I would say is to show them more examples of how short qualitative research is done – maybe. So, that they have the practical side also…

In this excerpt, 'Rehana' suggests that showing the students examples of previous years' students' dissertations would be helpful. She alluded to the need for students to experience the 'practical side' too. I feel that coupled with this, students would immensely benefit from more hands-on writing activities directly related to aspects of the actual dissertations that they would be writing.

Badke (2012: 126—127), in the context of teaching university students research skills, makes a similar point:

> Expertise is not the same as knowledge. Expertise is knowledge on a mission, knowledge in action. The expert disciplinarian does not merely have knowledge. The expert *does* knowledge. Thus, instructing students to know the facts and variants of our disciplines without an emphasis on learning how to *do* our disciplines seems to be a less than viable educational plan.   [emphases in original]

---

[1] I have used AT(s) as the abbreviation for assessment task for this module. I have included an 's' in parenthesis because there is one main assessment task for the module – the dissertation. However, for pedagogical purposes, in the context of the taught sessions, I plan to incorporate various formative assessment tasks corresponding to different aspects of writing up a dissertation and the '(s)' represents this fact.

As a result of doing this curriculum evaluation project I hope to bring this 'emphasis on learning how to *do*' in the taught sessions. As a result of this evaluation, I aim to introduce a higher level of constructivist alignment between the ILOs, TLAs and the AT(s). In line with what Biggs and Tang (2007: 52) suggest, I will be incorporating various writing tasks within the sessions where students would get opportunities to actually undertake some of the activities or behaviours referred to in the learning outcomes for the module.

From Writing to Assessment – Identifying the Buds of Development (Vygotsky,2016: 40)

The writing tasks described in the previous sub-section, are being posited as integral learning and teaching strategies that have come out of this project. To enhance the learning potential of these writing tasks, they are also envisaged as opportunities for formative assessment, whereby students, individually and in groups, will be able to receive feedback on their emergent knowledge, understanding and skills. One of the students, whom I interviewed said:

> It is so hard because…it could be made more personal as in. So, people have their ideas and actually then discuss in pairs or groups to see how they could get together and put together their framework. It is much easier to do because it is your own personal reading. But once you've done the literature review, you're sort of, you are thinking about all these different things and you never actually know if you've done these correctly…

Here the suggestion is that, in the sessions, students should be able to get together in pairs and groups and discuss the written work they have already done. This way they could get formative feedback from each other as well as the tutor, which would give them more confidence. The formative assessment of the proposed learning tasks will enable me as the tutor to ascertain, what Vygotsky (2016: 40) referred to as, the ZPD for different groups of students. This would, on the one hand, inform my planning, including calibrating the level and focus of future hands-on tasks, and on the other hand empower students to take responsibility and charge for the next steps involved in their own learning. Reimagining the teaching-learning interface in this way, I argue, is a step towards reconceptualising the 'regime of (pedagogical) truth' (Foucault, 1980: 133).

From Pedagogy to Evaluation – Interrogating the Learning

In the future deliveries of the module, I plan to have a non-conventional evaluation of the module. In one of the sessions, half-way through the taught sessions, I plan to divide students into about six to seven groups asking them to reflect on their learning thus far in the module, specifically in the context of the research project they would be carrying out later in the year and subsequently writing up the dissertation. I would ask them to reflect on the newly introduced writing tasks and assess their utility in terms of developing their confidence and skills. Doing so will give the tutors a valuable insight into student experience as well as give the students a voice about their own learning and encourage them to develop personal ownership and responsibility for it. This exercise is also envisaged as an opportunity for the whole learning community – the students and tutors – to interrogate the learning that would have taken place and, hopefully, reconfigure the 'regime of (pedagogical) truth' (Foucault, 1980: 133). In devising this evaluation exercise, I will be guided by Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick's (2006: 21) 'four-levels' of programme evaluation.

Conclusion

Doing this project gave me the time and intellectual space to reflect on my own practice, engage with relevant pedagogical ideas and theories, and look at processes of curriculum evaluation in a more organised and professional manner. The strategies proposed in this paper aim to develop students who are more confident, skilled, participative, and empowered in terms of their own learning and development. At the time of writing this article, I had started implementing some of the strategies proposed in this paper.

References

Badke, W. B. (2012) Teaching Research Processes: The faculty role in the development of skilled student researchers, Chandos Publishing: Cambridge.

Biggs, J. & Tang, C. (2007) Teaching for Quality Learning at University, 3rd edition, Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018) Research Methods in Education, 8th edition, London: Routledge.

BERA (2018) Ethical guidelines for Educational Research, 4th edition

Biggs, J. & Tang, C. (2007) Teaching for Quality Learning at University, 3rd edition, Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Education for Social Justice Framework (2019)

Foucault, M. (1980) Truth and Power in Gordon, C. (ed.) Michel Foucault: Power Knowledge – Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972—1977, Vintage Books: New York.

Healy, M., Flint, A., & Harrington, K. (2014) Engagement through partnership: students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education, [online] URL: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/engagement_through_partnership.pdf, (accessed: January 2020).

Kirkpatrick, D. L. & Kirkpatrick J. D. (2006) Evaluating Training Programs, 3rd edition, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Kirkpatrick Partners (2020) The Kirkpatrick Model, Kirkpatrick Partners, [online] URL: https://www.kirkpatrickpartners.com/Our-Philosophy/The-Kirkpatrick-Model, (accessed: January 2020).

Vygotsky, L. (2016) Mind in society and the Zone of Proximal Development, in Pollard. A. (ed.) Readings for Reflective Teaching in Schools, 2nd edition, London: Bloomsbury.

Warren, D. (2016) Course and Learning Design and Evaluation, Pokorny, H. and Warren, D. (eds.) (2016) Enhancing Teaching Practice in Higher Education, London: Sage.

Biographical note

Dr. Naveed Kazmi

Senior Lecturer in Education

School of Social Sciences and Professions

n.kazmi@londonmet.ac.uk