

## Evaluating a Health and Social Care communication module: Engaging students through critical and emancipatory pedagogy

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### Introduction

This paper outlines an evaluation carried out on a level 4 module on a BSc Health and Social Care course, with the aim of improving teaching practice and student learning. The module focused on the development of practical skills in communicating with different client groups and vulnerable people. As a backdrop to these efforts, in November 2019 London Metropolitan University introduced a new strategy which amplified the institution's commitment to social justice and social mobility. Subsequently the university's Centre for Equity Diversion and Inclusion developed the *Education for Social Justice Framework* (ESJF) which provided a framework for actualising the university's new strategy (London Metropolitan University, 2021). Critical and emancipatory pedagogy were the underpinning philosophy behind the new framework, emphasising the key role of education in creating a democratic, fair and humane society (Giroux, 2010a). The ESJF and underlying philosophy provided cues for the design and interpretation of the evaluation outlined in this paper.

Evaluation is an essential starting point for a redesign process. Patton (2002, p. 10) defines evaluation as 'the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics and outcomes of [programmes, courses, modules] to make judgements about [them]... improve [their] effectiveness and/or inform decisions about future [instances]...'. Hence, the evaluation stage is key in order to ensure that any redesign of the module is evidence-based and based on student voice. The evaluation focuses on qualitative feedback from students currently undertaking the module, as well as student records and statistics. The 'Evaluation Cycle' (Hatt, 2007) was applied as a framework to guide the project. This framework consists of four stages which are incorporated into the following sections of this paper: identification of topics to provide a framing for the study (rationale/context), secondly gathering the evidence (methods/process), the third stage is analysis of data, and finally presentation of data (analysis and evaluation).

### Rationale

The complexity of curriculum evaluation is compounded by the necessary dynamic and chaotic nature of higher education. The reality of time constraints and daily emergent interrelation, enjoin staff and students to continuously learn, assess and develop (Levine, 2002). With this primordial soup in mind, short term planning and evaluation are desirable and more likely to bear results when paired with the messy business of higher education (Doll, 1993 cited in Levine, 2002). An inductive evaluation of the module's syllabus, process and outcomes with a focus on student engagement and participation is essential in ensuring that the redesign process is conducted in a manner which is inclusive and democratic. One dimension of the University's ESJF is 'Identity,

Personalisation and Reflection'. This dimension puts the onus on curricula design and teaching practice to foster qualities of belonging, confidence and student capital. This manner of doing curriculum evaluation is described in Warren (2016) as collective or participative. Through this process, students can provide their own 'rich experiences' to the evaluation and 'open up meaningful dialogue' (Bovill, 2014 cited in Warren, 2016).

## **Context**

### **Local context**

The programme aims to equip students to '(...) identify and critique dominant perspectives and societal structures that lead to divergent health and social outcomes', and further to engage students '(...) as partners in a collaborative and participative approach that reflects the lived experience and diversity of the student body and of the individuals and communities they will be working with as graduates' The main learning outcome of the module is to '(...) help students to develop their understanding and application of key communication skills, recognising the importance of these core skills for effective working in contemporary health and social care settings'. The module in itself aims to facilitate a student understanding and knowledge of themes currently present in the ESJF. Particularly, the dimensions of 'Relationships and Psychosocial Environment' and 'Identity, Personalisation and Reflection'. In the module, students are asked to develop and practice key communication skills in the context of health and social care, as well as reflect how their communication impacts issues such as discrimination, stigmatisation, equality and diversity.

The Health and Social Care Communication students represent London Met's diverse student body, and is mostly made up of students who are mature, from BAME, or high material deprivation backgrounds. Several of the students on the module have experiences of care work, and many attend University without any formal prior qualifications.

### **Wider context**

Universities are under increasing scrutiny, not only from governing bodies and business partners, but from students and the National Student Survey (NSS). The Higher Education Academy (now Advance HE) (2013) has called for a greater level of involvement from students as partners in curriculum development, and to more thoroughly use evaluation plans to ensure that views of all stakeholders are taken into account in such processes. In the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA, 2019, p. 4) Subject Benchmarks for Health Studies, it is also stated that 'the process of planning, development, delivery and evaluation of courses, relevant stakeholders such as students (...) would be engaged'. Further, the University's strategic plan 2019/20 – 2024/25 (London Metropolitan University, 2019) also highlighted that we must 'continuously review our curricula to ensure that all of our programmes are fully inclusive and highly engaging, especially for underrepresented groups' (p. 7).

## Methods

### Philosophy

Critical pedagogy seeks to overturn traditional educational paradigms, 'flip' the classroom, change power balances, and enable the students to take ownership over their own learning experience (Friere, 2006). Essential to this pedagogy is development of critical thought, agency and awareness (Giroux, 2010a). I am interested in how education can be instrumentalised to emancipate students by engaging them in a systemic interrogation of their reality, for the purposes of promoting their ability to intervene in the world. Further, this understanding of education positions the learner's own perception and consciousness at its heart. It is therefore important that both lecturer and course design are responsive to students' diverse backgrounds and perceptions of the world. Furthermore, it is essential that inclusive and critical education is not ignored in the assessment processes. As described in the ESJF, inclusive assessment and feedback drives student development, success, and employability, and should be treated as a key facet of curriculum design and development.

Friere's (2006) position on what constitutes learning and the inherent political nature of education, marries with the formally stated goals of the university. Further the university's Strategy 2019/20 - 2024/25 outlines the importance of embedding 'social justice' and 'social inclusion' into our curriculum (p.11). Therefore, a substantial component of this evaluation is to evaluate how the communication module encourages critical thought, and whether the curriculum and teaching is designed in a manner that promotes active learning, participation and emancipatory practice.

### Process

The evaluation employed the 'Evaluation Cycle' (Hatt, 2007), consisting of the following steps: 1. Clarify content and focus 2. Devise a data collection strategy 3. Gather data 4. Analyse and interpret data. The data collection strategy includes a review of the results of the Student Led Module Survey (SLMS) 2019/20. Further, the evaluation applied a collective or participative approach, with students directly involved as the main stakeholders of the evaluation. Students shared their experiences, opinions and suggestions through participation in focus groups.

A focus group is considered an appropriate method for collecting data as it canvasses a number of participants at once and is easy to achieve via an online platform. Focus group interaction and discussion can encourage richer, more candid and less contrived data, shining a light on a participant's feelings in a way that a survey form might not. As Gibbs (1997) explains, a focus group can also have an empowering impact upon the participants as they feel valued as experts who are being made partners in the research. The partnering of students can also foster professional practice and experiential learning, akin to what they might face outside of higher education (Fung, 2017).

Four students volunteered to participate. One focus group was conducted in June 2020. The focus group aimed at collecting rich, descriptive data on students' experience in order to evaluate the module and ensure that student voice was central to module redesign. Students were asked to comment broadly on their experiences of the module, and to give examples of what they thought went well, and what they thought did not go well, and what could be improved. These prompts sparked a lively discussion amongst students. Data was analysed and interpreted in light of the philosophical underpinnings of the project.

## Analysis

### The importance of being heard

In the SLMS conducted in November 2019, 10 students, of a cohort of 79, participated in evaluating the module in question. It asked students to relate their satisfaction with the module delivery and support they had received from the university. All forms of feedback have an inherently interpersonal dimension and impact upon behaviours and perceptions (Hyland and Hyland, 2006). Ironically, despite students feeding back that they did not think previous responses had been acted upon, they still had a high module satisfaction. Illich (1971) might argue that this is the alienating aspect of schooling at play, as students learn to be taught. This particular gap in communication is noteworthy because it relates to the wider power dynamic in the classroom and the course. If students feel that their voices are not important or are secondary, this may determine their behaviours and engagement on the module. This may engender a passivity that runs contrary to the module's stated learning outcomes of self reflection and self awareness. As Friere (1996) explains, a concern for the content of dialogue cannot be separated from the concern for the content of learning (p.93). Feedback, when transparent and a two way communication provides opportunities for meaningful dialogue and positive change. McArthur and Huxham (2013) explain that the notion of feedback as dialogue has emancipatory and critical possibilities for the everyday classroom exchange. It is clear that a module redesign must seek to pull away the curtain of mystique, and dialogue with students on the importance of their feedback to module delivery, assessment and learning. Students must be encouraged to take on the role of partners rather than subjects. This is commensurate with the ESJF expectation that students be encouraged to be co-creators of their assessment and curricula experiences.

### Being heard

The online focus group discussion was broadly facilitated and centered around learning about the student experience of the module, as well as examining students' own suggestions for improvement of the module. The participants were effective at cajoling and pressing each other gently for deeper reflections on the module. This is likely a consequence of the participants knowing each other well. Student experience of the module was mixed and far more critical than presented in the student survey. The relationships observed between students were a strength as this yielded some rich data as the participants felt comfortable expressing themselves. As stated in the ESJF, relationships between students are crucial to foster a sense of belonging and academic identity. This could yield further benefits such as improved employability outcomes and longer term engagement with the University. This is seen as particularly important due to the diverse makeup of the Health and Social Care cohort.

### Being heard about not being heard

Main trends arising from the focus groups were; issues with assessment strategy and dissatisfaction with content of the module. On the topic of their experience with the module, participant 1 explained that they were dissatisfied with the content of the curriculum. They explained that they thought the topics covered were "too basic...". Upon probing this, it was clear that the participant had previous experience from level 3 qualifications where the topic had been covered similarly. The student expressed that they did not feel that the level 4 content added any new knowledge on the topic. The participant commented that they did not feel the current module equipped them for "real life in workplaces". Students further explained their non-satisfaction with the delivery of teaching where theory and concepts were introduced before thought and

discussion. This was perceived as “condescending” and “boring” and “like school”. These comments raise questions over the choice and timing of delivery and content. By introducing theory so early on in the module, students might feel like they are being deprived of the chance to make their own minds up about the topic. Participant 3 explained that “once the theory was over, there was not much more to teach... the module lasted too long”. To introduce theory in a prescriptive manner does not promote critical thinking. It tells the students what to think.

This is the issue Freire (2006) raises when he describes the process of simply ‘depositing’ information onto the student (p. 73). It negates critical consciousness and in turn stubs out creativity and students’ ability to actively engage with their own inquiry. For Friere (2006) the very process of encouraging critical thinking constitutes authentic learning. The University’s commitment to critical theory and pedagogy positions our learning as an instrument to upend societally implicit values and norms. The purpose of the ESJF is to disrupt archaic educational practices, and encourage students to to be change agents for themselves and their communities. There is an opportunity to consider how the module’s content could be delivered in more explorative, interesting and challenging ways, to make sure students are more critically engaged throughout.

### **Assessment - challenge**

On the topic of assessment strategy, participant 4 commented that there were “a lot of assessments”. A student complained that the test was “too easy” and upon prompt, explained that the test did not feel like a university level assessment. In the reflective diary, participant 1 commented that they enjoyed this assessment. Participant 2 agreed, but commented that the students were advised to cover identical topics, and that they “all did the same thing”. They further explained that their work was investigated for plagiarism, and the student suspected that this was because of all students reflecting over very similar topics. Participant 3 felt there was too great a gap between key concepts being taught and having to apply them. “By the time we had to use theory...in the role plays... most of us could only remember a few”. Participant 3 articulates an issue not only with the timeliness of module content, but the problematic notion that the taught material was overbearing and crowded out emergent student discovery. Overly prescriptive assessments constructively aligned to meet learning outcomes have been criticised for being antithetical to the teachings of critical pedagogy (London Metropolitan University, 2021) . The student is led to preconceived answers, further entrenching a transmission model of education and stifling critical and creative input from students (Serrano et al, 2017).

### **Evaluation and Conclusion**

The student voice highlighted the need for a student centered approach to course design and the impressionable nature of course design. The inclusion of student voice and feedback via the focus groups was useful as it shed light on how course material and delivery is interpreted and influences student experience. It indicates what we need to undertake together to achieve positive, emancipatory outcomes.

Illich’s (1971) feared that education was an overbearing institution that may exert control far beyond the purpose of learning and teaching, a tool of control and domination. The module could have done more to encourage students to actively engage and critically question. This was borne out in the role plays, where communication concepts were demonstrated performatively but lacked detail and were often framed by contexts and scenarios not true to life. A cognitive dissonance was

observed, as students confidently related theory and relevant concepts but struggled when relating them to themselves and their lived experiences. As per module learning outcomes it is not only important that students understand the significance of effective communication, they must reflect upon how this relates to their own lives and professional practices. Here we see a further dissonance between the module in theory and the module in practice. For the majority of students on the module, praxis was only tenuously realised. As Giroux (2010b) exalts, pedagogy as the theory and practice of learning, holds within its contrivance the potential for students to not merely learn how to be governed, but to be capable of governing.

The six dimensions of ESJF are Inclusive Assessment, Inclusive Leadership, Identity, Personalisation and Reflection, Critical Theory and Critical Pedagogy, Decolonising the Curriculum, Relationships and Psychosocial Environment, and Accessibility. This project has focused on the dimensions of Inclusive Assessment and Identity, Personalisation and Reflection, showing that curriculum design and evaluation can harness core principles of social justice and critical pedagogy. The module evaluation showed that curricula design can play a strong role in contributing towards the universities strategy for social justice and social mobility.

In conclusion, it was found that the evaluated module needed to provide more room for student voice and exploration of core themes. Assessment in the module could be reconfigured in response to student feedback and voice - with a focus on more dynamic and challenging assignments. The data provides a basis for further questions and future intent to canvass student voices to make sure curricula decisions and actions are informed by the student experience of course content and delivery. It is hoped that further integration of student voice and partnership in curricula design will harness aspects of social justice and encourage student emancipation.

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