

Interventions for Change - an inclusive curriculum design for social justice

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Introduction and context

Recent years have seen a rightful focus on the need to lead inclusive practice at institutional level, for example via inclusive curriculum frameworks, to ensure it underpins and permeates all activities of the institution. To realise social justice intentions and move beyond overarching principles, there is equally a need to foster supportive spaces to share ongoing and fledgling examples of inclusive practice, to learn from opportunities and challenges and to reflect on how curriculum design might seek to move towards the transformative.

This article shares one example of module design of a large multidisciplinary module at foundation level undertaken as preparation for a range of undergraduate pathways within Social Sciences and Professions disciplines. It reflects on how principles of inclusive practice and education for social justice underpinned the design from the outset, distilling features which may be of relevance to others experimenting with inclusive curriculum design.

Foundation level provision, by nature, is social justice driven, seeking to widen participation and maximise opportunity. However, it may be at particular risk of adopting 'deficit' type approaches (Foundation Year Network, 2019). Foundation courses undertake to support students via induction into the established practices and 'norms' of the academy and its disciplines. Yet this need not be a passive process of indoctrination, foundation year courses and their cohorts, in all their rich diversity, arguably offer potential for practice which moves beyond the normative to the transformative (see Lillis et al, 2015).

The module 'Interventions for Change' and its inspiration

Starting point and aims: celebrating students' diverse strengths and cultural wealth

This new multidisciplinary module was designed in response to expansion of a foundation year programme to support progression to an increasing range of degrees and with the aim of recognising, celebrating and building upon the diverse strengths, lived experience, prior achievements, both within and beyond the academy, and aspirations which foundation year students bring, many as mature learners. This 'cultural wealth' may not always be sufficiently recognised and validated (Yosso, 2005), including by the students themselves. The foundation team's commitment to countering 'deficit' approaches historically builds on students' strengths and opportunities to engage with issues which are personally meaningful for students. Students' initial reflective work highlighted wide-ranging personal aspirations and immense engagement with and ambition for social change, often in relation to their degree pathways from Law to Health to Education.

The catalyst for 'Interventions for Change', perhaps exemplifying these aspirations, achievements and potential, was a foundation year student whose social impact intervention for young people at risk of exclusion emerged as the overall winner of a 'Big Idea' change-making competition. A key starting point, then, was to reflect on how many more 'Big Ideas' may be incubating within our cohorts. How might we harness and nurture this potential and support students from the very start of their university experience to work meaningfully towards the fulfilment of their aspirations? How could we achieve this within a large multidisciplinary module? How might we facilitate students' own recognition and celebration of their achievements to support their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994, 1997) within and beyond the academic institution? How could we be 'bold and open in our desire to mobilise our students to be agents of change through what and how they learn' (Education for Social Justice Framework [ESJF], 2019: 2)?

Module overview

With these aims in mind, the module was built around participation in a collaborative change-making project. Self-selecting groups research an intervention in response to a real-world social issue in which they share a common interest. Groups create a poster to communicate analysis of the issue and exploration and evaluation of the intervention, with the option to start developing their own 'big idea' inspired by their findings, or continue with their own projects which are already underway. Posters are shared and discussed in a Change Making Poster Exhibition. The assessment tool is an individual portfolio consisting of the group poster and individual critical reflection that requires students to evidence their participation in the project and exhibition, and critically reflect on the process and their learning outcomes. Sessions include input on change agency, intervention design and evaluation and case studies, and explicitly support group work, academic poster design and reflective writing.

Change-making theme

The umbrella 'change making' theme offered scope for students to explore issues with relevance to their own lives, interests and pathways. As Warren (2021:25) says:

'For interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary course design, a theme-based approach can provide for a coherent architecture and conceptual integration, for example building an 'integrated' curriculum around an overarching 'real-world issue' such as 'migration', 'global health' or 'sustainable housing'.

In common with parallel examples of foundation year curriculum innovation (see Wagstaffe, 2020), our starting point was the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2019). As new entrants to university communities, students could immediately engage with urgent, live, real world issues and see their own potential, through university participation, to contribute to meaningful change, for example through research to inform policy.

Student voice, choice and agency

Beyond being a unifying thread, the 'change-making' theme was chosen for its transformative potential, in alignment with an Education for Social Justice framework which aims to 'focus our pedagogy for a wider purpose, undertaking an unlearning and relearning of the World we live in and the reimaging of an equitable future together in partnership with our students' (ESJF 2019: 2)

Key to the module was the flexibility for students' *own* choice of real-world issues and intervention as their project focus. Students' choices and disciplines shaped the content of the learning sessions, particularly in the project-focussed second half of the module, enabling the student voice and interests to feed powerfully into co-constructing the module. An aim was to engage students as partners (Healey et al, 2017) enabling them to determine what could count as 'valid' or meaningful subject matter, without presupposition of what this might be.

The sheer range of chosen issues/interventions testified to the wealth of 'community cultural capital' (ESJF 2019: 7) among the cohort. This fed strongly into projects, for example, through adapting an existing intervention to a personally meaningful context such as a local borough, region or country of interest or a particular population. Students' diverse experience and skills, such as those gained through prior employment, community engagement or parenting/caring, were valuable assets they tapped into to inform their projects and rich reservoirs of ideas for interventions which in turn sought to empower others, often those at risk of marginalisation.

A collaborative and participatory approach

Collaborative, active learning approaches such as those used in the 'scale-up' methodology where 'students learn through solving problems, sharing ideas, giving and receiving feedback and teaching each other' (Nottingham Trent University, n.d.) have been found to increase student engagement and reduce differential outcomes (Beichner 2014). Through students collaboratively researching responses to real-world issues of genuine mutual interest, we sought to provide a powerful space for democratic peer learning, allowing students to 'become creators of their own learning and learning experience' (Abegglen, Burns & Sinfield, 2016: 5). Students were invited to consider the affordances of multidisciplinary collaboration and cognitive diversity in contributing to innovative solutions to complex, contemporary problems (Syed, 2019) and in doing so, learn from and value their own and each other's contributions. By designing-in time and space for student-centred, peer learning where students can be learners *and* teachers, collaboratively producing a tangible artefact in the form of the change making poster, we hoped to encourage a 'sense of belonging' to the learning community (Wenger, 1998) and development of academic identities.

The celebratory exhibition also extended the learning process, an opportunity to demonstrate depth and breadth of understanding while deepening and broadening knowledge as students participated in academic discourse. Academic staff learned from and alongside students as active audience participants, powerfully evidencing students' meaningful contributions to the 'intellectual enrichment of others' (Abegglen, Burns and Sinfield, 2016: 5).

A dialogic and formative approach to assessment

A neoliberal model of education and increasing pressure on higher education have arguably inflated the importance of assessment *outcomes* and exacerbated associated anxiety (Unwin and Yandell, 2016, Yorke, 2003). By adopting a formative and dialogic approach to assessment we hope to reduce assessment anxiety and engage 'our diverse students in processes that support their development, success and employability, while connecting with their own identities, experiences and cultural capital' (ESJF 2019: 3).

For Freire, dialogic education begins with student experience, empowers by 'giving a voice' to the marginalised, and prioritises 'respect and collaboration between educator and student so that meaning can be co-constructed rather than imposed' (Wegerif, 2006: 8). The change making project was the core module activity but posters and exhibition were not summatively assessed, viewed instead as part of a formative, dialogic learning process. We aimed to provide supportive and dialogic spaces for student voices to emerge and ideas to take shape, both face-to face (classroom time and space for group project work) and virtual (for example dedicated Microsoft Teams channels and shared documents). Here collaborative learning could occur over time, empowering students to try on new theories and try out bold ideas, leaving their comfort zones without fear of failure, enabling the exhibition to be a space for genuine dialogue and celebration of their efforts.

Summative assessment is an individual reflection on the *learning that happened* as a result of participating in the change making project. Inclusion of the poster, illustrative examples and links to core concepts would evidence engagement, but critical reflection focuses on the individual's learning journey - including learning through mistakes and identification of gaps in understanding as well as knowledge/skills development - and on recognition that this was a learning trajectory that could travel beyond the module. By prioritising the learning *process* over assessment *product* we hoped for a more meaningful student experience, developing learner autonomy (OECD, 2008) and increasing confidence in identifying personal learning gains and future goals. Allowing for the potential of change making ideas to live and grow beyond the module, rather than learning ending with the production of an assessment piece to be judged, graded and put away in a box, could strengthen student ownership and sense of control over their learning.

Outcomes and next steps

The module has been successfully piloted across two large cohorts over two years. Student learning has been evidenced via the diverse and inspiring posters shared as 'work in progress' in four celebratory exhibitions, as well as their critically reflective portfolios. Although intended as a face-to-face exhibition, the move to online learning necessitated an alternative digital format via Padlet/MS Teams. Despite the challenges of this change, it produced a rich digital dialogic learning space where a real audience of students and staff could asynchronously view posters, comment and ask questions, supporting students to justify, refine and develop their ideas. Exemplar posters showcasing diverse interventions can act as inspiration for future cohorts. Students and staff gained valuable experience in the affordances of digital platforms for remote collaborative work, including for co-creating visual artefacts and managing project workflow, developing employability

skills. With a return to face-to-face delivery, digital skills development can be retained to facilitate group work via ongoing experimentation with a wider range of tools.

Although we have not yet conducted a full evaluation of the module, we have broadly positive feedback from centralised channels (e.g. student experience surveys), the reflective portfolios, anecdotal student feedback and our own reflections. Group work experience, generally positive in terms of recognising links to developing self-efficacy and improved outcomes, was a key theme, but there were also indications of frustrations and tensions. Arguably, conflict is an integral and valuable part of group work processes. Abegglen, Burns and Sinfield (2016:5) refer to Johnson's (2010) claim that 'ideas need to "collide" with other ideas in order for something bigger to emerge'; this collision has the potential to be uncomfortable. Wenger-Trayner (2015:7) refer to the 'myth' of communities of practice as harmonious places, arguing that 'differences are discussable and that they contribute to the learning', but recognise that this is 'difficult', and we would add arguably even more so with remote delivery. Cognisant of individual struggles in response to this challenge, subsequent design allowed for a solo project option provided engagement in group processes was evidenced in some way, for example via the exhibition. However, we need to further consider how to more effectively scaffold effective and compassionate group work (e.g. Gilbert, 2017) and exploit supportive technologies to enable students to benefit optimally from the collaborative experience.

We are aware of the limitations of feedback that is interpreted by and acted upon by academic staff in a position of power, with minimal student-input and where not every student voice is heard. We recognise the temptation to notice and 'cherry-pick' that which seems to justify and validate our aims and approach. With growing institutional intent to work with students as curriculum consultants and more meaningfully co-construct the curriculum, a clear future aim is to work in fuller partnership with students to rigorously evaluate the extent to which our approach is realising an increasingly inclusive curriculum and practice for social justice, and to work with them to develop the module design.

The aim of empowering students as agents of change and social transformation is challenging to meaningfully evaluate within the foundation year module. Importantly, students have opportunities to take their ideas forward: to bid for university funding and support to implement ideas via future entry to change making competitions, to develop them through more specialised research opportunities within their disciplinary degrees or to realise them in collaboration with social communities they are members of. Although not anticipated when designing the module, in the wake of the pandemic, there is arguably increased need and impetus for collective action and cooperation for social transformation.

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