**Staff and Student Experiences of Dialogue Days, a Student Engagement Activity.**

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This paper reports the findings from a descriptive phenomenological exploration of the lived experience of dialogue days, a student engagement activity, from the perspectives of staff and students. I suggest that Dialogue Days enhance the relational and emotional aspects of learning with the potential to impact on future student engagement and motivation. In the discussion I consider the role of the self and the importance of community within a concept of “relational pedagogy.” In conclusion I propose that dialogue days are one way to develop relational pedagogy as a means to enhance student engagement.

Keywords: dialogue, relational pedagogy, student engagement

**Introduction**

Higher Education Institutions in the UK are required to engage with students as partners to ensure their views are sufficiently represented. The outcomes of this engagement are expected to influence the future direction of courses or programmes and improve the educational experiences of all students (Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) chapter 5, 2012; Carey, 2013). However, the QAA (2012, p.2) identify a second domain of student engagement as “improving the motivation of students to engage in learning and to learn independently.” This paper gives an account of an initiative, locally termed Dialogue Days, designed to facilitate shared understanding between staff and students in a way that potentially addresses both domains of student engagement. The paper reports on the findings from semi-structured interviews with 16 students and staff.

**Background**

Student engagement is of international concern in higher education (Trowler, 2010). Newberry (2012) suggests that engagement is about a relation between the student and the object of that engagement relation, which could be a task, a programme leader, their peers, the institution, etc. Psychological dimensions of engagement, such as behavioural, emotional and motivational aspects and cognition, add to the complexity of the concept (Trowler, 2010). Also influenced by the environment in which it takes place (Zepke, Bulter & Leach, 2012), student engagement is consequently dynamic and changeable (Bryson & Hand, 2008).

Engagement is perceived by some staff as being the student’s problem, yet it is acknowledged that teachers have the power to really make a difference to the involvement that students have in their learning (Zyngier, 2008; Bryson & Hand, 2008, Bryson & Hardy, 2012). There is the suggestion that many tutors are alienating students with their behaviour and some students withdraw as a consequence (Bryson & Hardy, 2012; Purnell & Foster, 2008). Pearce and Down (2011) found that tutors who encouraged positive relationships and opportunities for interaction can profoundly influence student success. Negative relationships, on the contrary are often dominated by power dynamics that can adversely influence learning (Pearce & Down, 2011; Bryson & Hand, 2007).

It is important to provide opportunities to hear *all* students’ voices (Hand & Bryson, 2008) and to develop dialogue in ways that overcome the “nostalgic fiction” of what student behaviour ought to be like (Baer 2008, p.315). Although Lyle (2008) writes in relation to the school classroom, she describes how within a traditional Bakthinian approach, classroom talk is viewed as primarily monologic, with the principal aim to achieve the teacher’s goals. This may well be true of many learning situations in higher education, particularly with growing class sizes resulting in fewer opportunities for genuine dialogic pedagogical approaches. It may also be true that what Stern (2009, p.273) calls “the temptations of high status disciplinary *expertise* can lead academics and even students to believe they have no need to listen to others.”

By providing opportunities, such as Dialogue Days, there is the potential to hear all student voices using an approach that goes beyond one that is merely about the collection of data and where students adopt a passive role without any real interaction (Carey, 2013). The importance of how the dialogue is constructed is therefore crucial. Bohm (1996) suggests that, for something new to emerge, people must listen and be prepared to change their opinions. Dialogue Days are therefore structured to promote interactive talk, often focused on a particular theme e.g. assessment and feedback. They include activities designed to stimulate conversations and reflection through games, problem solving activities, and creative tasks that are impossible to engage in without talk and the sharing of ideas (see Asghar 2012 for details). Often held in external venues and with a neutral facilitator, the days afford an opportunity for staff and students to engage with each other in a social space. They provide educational development that may lead to an improved appreciation of each others needs and concerns.. It is hoped that this subsequently leads to greater student motivation to engage in learning.The, anecdotally reported, success of Dialogue Days prompted the need to investigate more systematically the value of this type of engagement activity. This study therefore aims to provide better understanding of their perceived value, to explore if and how Dialogue Days promote shared meanings between staff and students, and to inform future practice.

**Methodology**

Dialogue days provide experiences that individuals may embrace and perceive in uniquely different ways. Methodologically and philosophically, a phenomenological approach therefore allowed for exploration of participants’ lived experiences in a way that accepts the variation of those experiences within context and acknowledging subjectivity (Landridge 2007).

Staff and students were selected by inviting those who had attended a Dialogue Day to participate in the research project. Eight students and eight members of staff from a range of disciplines agreed to participate (Table 1). The data was collected through semi-structured interviews, recorded and transcribed. The study received approval from the university ethics committee. Participants gave informed consent and are identified in this paper by pseudonyms. A number of participants provided respondent validation through review of their transcripts for accuracy in terms of content and to enhance the trustworthiness of the study (Saven-Baden & Howell Major, 2010).

Table 1. Participants by discipline

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Name** | **Staff/Student** |
| Sam | 1st year Occupational Therapy |
| Tina | 1st year Occupational Therapy |
| Emma | 1st year Occupational Therapy |
| Deborah | 1st year Physiotherapy |
| Michael | 3rd year Theatre |
| Tom | 3rd year Theatre |
| Vicky | 2nd year Counseling Studies |
| Adam | Recent Dance Graduate |
| Neil | Academic – Sports’ studies |
| Alex | Academic – Psychology |
| Caroline | Academic – Sports’ studies |
| Lucy | PhD Student – Sports’ studies |
| Clyde | Academic – Physiotherapy |
| Katie | Academic Arts |
| Jane | Academic Arts |
| Jed | Academic Theatre |

**Data Analysis**

It was important to explore the unique nature of each participant’s experience in a way that would bring insights into the beliefs, values and culture of that individual’s world. This would emphasis the highly personal experiences of engagement in a dialogue day and could be achieved by analysing the data from the perspective of the *lifeworld,* described by Ashworth 2003, p25, as *“*our individual meaning-construction of our situation”. Influenced by the work of others, including Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty etc, Ashworth has come to his particular view of the lifeworld. Establishing that the lifeworld is made up of a number of inter-related fractions he suggests they can focus our thoughts, enriching and strengthening analysis (Ashworth 2003). The fractions include *selfhood, sociality, embodiment, temporality, spatiality, project* and *discourse* and although all are necessary for the analysis, Langdridge (2007) suggests they need not all be present or of the same degree of importance. Interviews from the study were considered from an idiographic perspective initially. Subsequently commonalities and differences were considered across the participants. This produced findings most meaningfully located within five of the seven of Ashworth’s (2003) fractions of the lifeworld. With no intention to generalise, they represent the views of staff and students within a particular context.

**Findings**

*Sociality* considers the relationships between staff and students during this event and the impact it had on their view of each other. Dialogue Days appeared to reduce barriers that might normally exist in the classroom, where the relationship is characterized traditionally by the teacher’s dominance. Both students and staff described it as an opportunity to develop different ways of being with each other.

there was more discussion on equal grounds than you would probably have in sort of programme panels, coz I think it’s more group discussion, as opposed to just getting students together and saying what’s your view (Caroline, academic).

particularly first years from school, and they have that sir, miss, student, and I think coming to University, you have to bring them into the fold…. it’s not a family, but they are part of the university, they’re not a subsection. (Clyde, academic).

Putting staff and students together in a space with sparks to stimulate constructive conversations in this way seems to have had a positive influence on building the relationships that can impact on future learning. We make assumptions about each other, and opportunities such as Dialogue Days allow boundaries to be crossed, so that staff and students see each other for who they are and are able to go beneath those initial perceptions.

Some students seemed surprised that they were being given the opportunity to engage with staff in this way, and at how genuinely the staff wanted to engage with them in this way.

Because the way xxx spoke about it seemed like it was not very stressful, it seemed that we could just chat casually about things so that there wasn’t any pressure on us.….it seemed to change the dynamics a little bit so you don’t feel like you’re a bunch of students in front of you, it’s like an equal group of people so to speak. (Tom, student).

I really enjoyed the interaction, because sometimes when at lectures you’re not on a par, you’re students and you’re in a classroom and you’re being taught, But I really enjoyed the interaction as an equal, that felt better, it felt like we’re listened to. (Vicky, student).

Dialogue Days were not set up with the intention to develop relationships in this way, yet the impact of this unintended outcome is one of the tangible consequences that was common to every participant.

*Spatiality* considers the physical environment of the Dialogue Day and the window of opportunity that it creates in the teaching calendar. It became a space to behave and do things differently. This lifeworld fraction raised the importance of unfamiliarity of surroundings and how this influences behaviour by association within “other” spaces.

And I just wanted to take things off my mind of things for a while as well, coz obviously when you’re in the middle of third year you’ve got everything going on. So it was kind of nice to go and not worry about those for an afternoon, and chat about where we’re going and stuff, so it was nice for us to chat I think. (Tom, student).

This wasn’t an everyday event, and I mean any dialogue about their experience should be a daily event, but it isn’t, and it’s something people are noticing and communicating it’s really valuable… There’s something about the qualities of that space that’s facing forwards in terms of communication potential, but it’s quite special, very special. (Katie, academic).

The Dialogue Day space was reported to be new, different, a neutral and unbiased opportunity. Jane presents an image of her students going on a journey, and how the change in environment influenced behaviour on the day.

They have to walk there and maybe their mind set changes. They dressed differently, engaged differently and took on the mantle of where they were. (Jane, academic).

Students Sam and Deborah mirror this in understanding the difference a new space creates for engaging differently, and often, more openly.

So in other words you sort of make a communication with tutors a lot differently from the way you normally would be, in that particular sort of day. (Sam, student).

Some people might actually speak a bit more freely because it’s different, not that people might not have spoken freely before, it’s quite nice to change your surroundings. (Deborah, student).

*Project* explores how the dialogue developed over the day, prompting reconsideration of views by both staff and students, and the influence this may have on their future work as staff or students participating in the academy. It represented the initial uncertainty that students had about the day, feeling as outsiders but who through their engagement gradually become part of the community. Individually, there were differing views about the purpose of the day, with a degree of uncertainty for all about what would happen.

I felt relieved, had lots of things burning up inside me that I just wanted to get off my chest… At the end of the day we are all here to mix and mingle and make work together. Everyone is an adult and should be treated in that way. (Michael, student).

I originally thought it was we were all gonna be sat in a big hall, and we were all gonna have to voice our opinions, which is what slightly put me off, coz I thought like we had to do it in front of people. (Tina, student).

For some, the dialogue was an opportunity to get back to the broader focus of higher education, which sometimes gets lost in the overall mission of a course. Although it can seem quite a risky venture, the participants tell the story of a happening that has the potential to be very powerful, if successful, but could easily fail. There was also a feeling that Dialogue Days are somewhat nebulous, that they sit outside the comfort zone of work that tutors and students normally do together. It’s as though they have to learn to be together in a different way.

because there had never been one done before so it was a sudden leap of faith, you think, well, I don’t know what this is about but we’ll give it a whirl, we’ll give it a go… getting the people there was a complete nightmare, but if you did it, it worked (Katie, academic).

For all of the staff who engaged there was a feeling that this was an opportunity to uncover their practice, and the realization that what they do in their everyday activities can seem quite mysterious to students. Dialogue Days are described as a softer yet richer experience than other student representative processes, but something that is slightly intangible as to what they are and the benefits to be gained.

Making a Dialogue Days happen productively is not without challenge; issues include how to involve the unengaged students and facilitating conversations to move beyond the technical aspects of pedagogic processes, e.g. assignments being too close together. Many of the Dialogue Day facilitators say it is an opportunity to change student perceptions as much as it is to listen to them. And for many students, they did indeed come away with differing perspectives about processes that take place within higher education.

That conversation gave me more insight into everything because I was getting it straight from the horse’s mouth and he was saying things that I never considered before, and it was a two-way process. (Vicky, student).

I think after we went to the one with the PE teachers about how they organized their time with lessons, I think it made us appreciate how long it takes to do things, which sort of stamped on whatever we thought before we started that session. It’s like the first half of the Dialogue Day, we were like, we don’t get assessments back soon enough, and then we went there and we all sort of shut up. (Emma, student).

Dialogue Days are an opportunity for all students to participate in a different way with their tutors. They allow everyone to have a voice, and so small things that often students don’t complain about, that lie under the surface, can be heard and explored, if talked about within the normal everyday, rather than, as one student suggested, being viewed as pestering.

It makes you feel as if the University is listening to you. Well it makes you feel like, if you don’t like something, you know, that’s an opportunity to put that across, rather than just, I know a lot of our cohort, they mumble and grumble about these things. (Sam, student).

How do such opportunities influence activities carried out subsequent to such an event, and do staff and students continue to reflect on their conversations and do things differently in the future? There is a sense from the data that the opportunity afforded by Dialogue Days has both explicit and implicit effects. Many of the students expressed a hope that things would change, but most seemed content to have had the opportunity to talk. Changed thinking and feeling about how staff and students engage with each other and the work they do together in pursuit of their discipline are the aspects that are difficult to quantify. The explicit actions following such a day included reports of small changes made to courses that can be seen in the form of assessment timings and the specificity of feedback. From the student perspective, they subsequently acknowledged an understanding that feedback would come in a variety of formats.

*Self hood,* as a lifeworld fraction, Ashworth (2003) describes as the person’s sense of agency and their role and identity in the situation. Of the staff participants interviewed, each had their own view of their place within the Dialogue Days. There were some who clearly saw themselves as instigators, which lead to anxiety and a sense of responsibility to make it work, compounded by uncertainty about what the success measures were. One participant, in transition to lecturer, saw her role as translator for the students and felt that she provided a useful bridge, highlighting how students, even in this safe environment, shared concerns with her while not wishing to be identified.

When students come and talk to me, sometimes it’s because they don’t know what’s expected of them, and they don’t know, almost they don’t know the lecturer’s “jib” sometimes. (Lucy, academic).

Others included staff who at times demonstrated a lack of control in their own role, and saw this as an opportunity to their own voice concerns alongside the students.

At my side of the forest we’re moving to electronic marking and all the issues around that, feedback and assessment, that’s a huge thing and again that’s had a huge impact this time for us because electronic marking takes longer and all that sort of thing. And you know students want feedback more quickly. (Alex, academic).

Some students felt that suddenly they had a voice. They seemed surprised that they were being listened to and taken seriously.

You know, I’ve been marked down for referencing in a particular way for one assignment, and commended for the same mistake on another assignment, and he was basically taking this on board… he was listening to what we were saying. (Sam, student).

In the way they weren’t on transmit the whole time, they were very much on receive. They were very keen to hear what we were saying, whereas I guess, in lectures we don’t know what we’re talking about really. (Deborah, student).

Dialogue Days seemed to present a challenge for staff, some of whom were uncertain about how they ought to engage with students in this new role, and not as the subject experts in the classroom. Others embraced the opportunity to be a different person to how they were on a day-to-day basis, and this was reflected in how they presented themselves.

I dress differently, it might sound crazy, not in office garb but more casually and softer to give that message out. (Jane, academic).

*Temporality* positions dialogue days within the past, present and future. For the participants, the dialogue can influence what happens next or surface what has happened before. Caroline saw a positive aspect to Dialogue Days in bringing all the years together as one of the means to conquer the issues relating to closing the feedback loop.

And you know, I think they (1st years) then realized, talking to second and third years, I think that maybe they get an understanding that things do change. (Caroline, academic).

Some Dialogue Days are set up with particular themes, such as the one that Tom engaged in, that focused on employability and was about providing a space to explore the future. Touching on the temporal fraction of the students’ lifeworld as it influences their experience, it appeared that there was no sense of urgency in planning for what was to happen next, once they finished their degrees. The Dialogue Day provided an opportunity to engage with this aspect of the real world, rather than just putting off the inevitable.

It was nice to hear what can happen, what we could make happen if we wanted to from hearing positive stories… I guess it’s something I’ve not really thought about, five years way too hard to think about that stage. (Tom, student).

Using the elements of the lifeworld to explore the staff and student perspectives of Dialogue Days provides a rich picture of this student engagement activity. There is an overarching element of uncertainty and anxiety for most of those who participated, but often accompanied by a subsequent feeling that they were glad they had invested the time and effort. In listening to the participants talk about their experiences, it is clear this activity had a powerful effect in building different relationships between staff and students and was an effective means to prompt self-reflection on their perceptions of what it is to engage in the everyday activities of teaching and learning.

**Discussion**

The study aimed to explore whether this type of student engagement activity promoted greater shared understanding between the participants. The communication exchanges in a dialogue day, appeared to break down barriers and permit both parties to share their concerns in a way that does not normally happen in the everyday classroom. Often, those environments are dominated by staff as experts. Students feel powerless, outsiders in the community, alienated by the unfamiliar discourse (Mann, 2001). In contrast, spaces such as Dialogue Days seem to enhance the relational and emotional aspects of tutor and student engagement as well as potentially influencing the type of learning that students subsequently engage in (Broughan & Grantham, 2012). A safe space which allows students to take risks and facilitates mutuality, while not necessarily without challenge, can promote shared views and a redistribution of power (Mann, 2001; Holley & Stein, 2005). Whether or not Dialogue Days create a change in student learning is difficult to ascertain from the data although it is proposed that a healthy emotional environment can enhance students’ readiness for learning (Broughan & Grantham, 2012).

The lifeworld fraction selfhood, suggests that dialogue days create, sometimes unsettling reflections about personal identities as an academic and the expected ways of being and acting. For the students it also permitted a different way of being, as confident, active, participators with a voice that others were willing to hear. Such informal learning opportunities can create a feeling of belonging, an essential component of a holistic view of education. This is suggested by Solomonides, Reid and Petocz (2012) as necessary for their proposed evidence-informed relational model of student engagement to be effective. Their model demonstrates links between the expressions of the senses of “*self*”. The central component a “sense of being” (p.19) translates as an individual’s confidence and happiness about themselves and their study. Others include a “sense of being a professional” i.e. becoming part of a professional community. Dialogue Days as the lifeworld fraction “project” suggests; provide a space for this type of personal development for students.

Bryson and Hand (2008) suggest that investment in building positive relationships and engaging in opportunities that develop trust, *can* impact greatly on student engagement at a variety of levels of their higher educational experiences. The participants portray, through the lifeworld fractions of sociality and project, interactions as occurring on an equal footing, different to that which occurs in the classroom. This supports a call for tutors to consider a relational pedagogy, a concept which Bingham and Sidorkin 2004 propose as essentially a need for people *to meet* if learning is to take place, with “relations having primacy over the isolated self” (, p2). However they also draw attention to the complexity of relational pedagogy, including the multidimensional and transitional nature of educational relations and the notion that not all relations are good.

Traditionally education is premised on the teacher’s voice as the dominating feature and while the opposite occurs in a student- centred curriculum, in both the focus is on the individual (Gergen 2009). Like Bingham and Sidorkin (2004), Gergen believes effective education requires effective relationships and knowledge is something that is achieved together within “circles of participation” (p245). The emphasis is on community, , negotiation and mutual meaning making. It does not follow staff and students should be best friends but that trust, respect and appreciation are preconditions for powerful learning. Gergen (2009) proposes a relational pedagogy that adopts a dialogic approach, where teachers set aside their expertise and become part of a collaborative endeavour with their students. Providing opportunities for tutors and students to be together in a Dialogue Day as a “circle of participation”, suggests that it is possible to use this approach to develop educationally conducive relationships. The challenge for tutors is to carry this forward into mainstream curriculum.

**Conclusion**

The findings support a recommendation that institutions should provide spaces for dialoguein a way that is wider than the usual student representation system, so that all students can become more connected to the institution and to each other (Axelson & Flick, 2011).While building opportunities such as Dialogue Days for all students’ voices is critical, it is however more important that we consider a relational pedagogy as it is informs our practice. The value of Dialogue Days, as evidenced in this study, supports the views of Bingham and Sidorkin (2004) and Gergen (2009), who call for a need to understand the role of relationships, rather than merely the process of education; and who encourage a dialogic approach, with teachers actively participating in a collective learning process.

There are concerns that organisational constraints can reduce opportunities for dialogic interaction with students, negatively influencing the development of relational pedagogy (Pearce and Down 2011). Student engagement, as partners and in learning, is a challenge for higher education internationally, one that requires effective institutional approaches in ways that are not merely about achieving better survey outcomes and positions in league tables.

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**Notes on Contributor**

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