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# **Active Participation in Learning: Students Creating their Educational Experience**

**Joan Walton**

## **Abstract**

*This chapter gives an account of teaching a second year undergraduate module entitled 'Active Participation in Learning.' It is argued that a positivist paradigm which separates the world into 'subjects' and 'objects' is not helpful when considering how to encourage the full participation of students in all aspects of their university education. Rather, a participative paradigm (Heron, 1996) provides a theoretical framework which dissolves the subjective-objective divide, and establishes an ethos of equality and mutuality which is, arguably, integral to achieving the full engagement of students in enhancing their own learning experiences. This case study is a first person account of a lecturer who explains and analyses the process and outcomes of taking an action research approach to the teaching of a two-semester module. A major aim is to evaluate the usefulness of teaching and learning being guided by a participative world view. The study includes an account of the experiences and responses of the students, from their initial surprise at being given the opportunity to be involved in the creating of the module curriculum to their final conclusions which includes not only a passionate commitment to student engagement but also ideas about how this can be encouraged in practice.*

## **Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to give an account of teaching a group of second year students, who were encouraged to create their own education experience in a module entitled *Active Participation in Learning*. The student group was registered for an honours degree in Education Studies at a university in the north-west of England.

The account begins with an explanation of my approach to teaching, and the educational influences that have inspired my thinking and actions. These influences include Dewey's (1916) ideas of experiential learning, a participative reality (Heron 1996), Biggs (1996) notion of constructive alignment, Schön's (1995) new epistemology for a new scholarship, and improving practice through values-based action research (Reason and Bradbury 2001; Whitehead and McNiff 2006).

This is followed by the ‘story’ of the module, which shows the interweaving relationship between my teaching philosophy and the students’ responses as they engage with what is for them a new experience of teaching and learning. They were encouraged to actively participate in creating and delivering the curriculum, determine forms of assessment, and continuously learn from and evaluate their experience through a series of action reflection cycles.

The chapter is written from a first person perspective, reflecting a living theory approach to action research (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006) which was guiding my research-informed teaching. The chapter ends with a brief reflection on the significance of this methodology as one means of enhancing student engagement.

### **Theoretical Framework**

My approach to learning and teaching is informed by an ontological view of the world which has been greatly influenced by John Heron’s views of a ‘participative reality’ (1996). This world view challenges the ‘subject-object’ divide which forms the basis of positivist perceptions of the world. Within a participatory worldview, the world is not seen as existing independently of any observer, just waiting to be known through a process of observation and analysis. Rather, it views human beings as equal participants in the world, who co-create a reality which is shaped by the nature and quality of our subjective-objective relationships.

A participative reality (Bateson, 1979; Merleau-Ponty, 1963; Reason and Rowan, 1981; Skolimowski, 1994) sees the world as subjective-objective, where there is an ‘intermarriage between the creative construing of the human mind and what is cosmically given.... This ontology calls for a new view about truth and ways of knowing ...’ (Heron, 1996, p.162).

The underlying assumption is that, in meeting people, there is the possibility of reciprocal participative knowing. Unless this process is truly mutual, we are not able to properly know the other. Buber (1937) with his notion of ‘I-Thou’ suggests that the reality of the other is found in the fullness of our relationships, where we ‘each engage in mutual participation’ (Heron 1996, p. 11).

A participative view of reality has major implications for the way we view ourselves, and others in relation to ourselves. It challenges the power disparities that exist in social structures, where people are valued according to their perceived objective status in a hierarchically structured universe. From this ontology emerges an epistemology that emphasises a participative relationship between the knower and known, and between knower and knower. There is no separation in these interactive relationships.

A participative paradigm supports a view of human interaction which sees all people of equal importance and value in continually evolving, co-created view of reality; where ‘human flourishing’ is perceived as a valuable end in itself.

What is valuable as a means to this end is participative decision-making, which enables people to be involved in the making of decisions, in every social context, which affect their flourishing in any way (ibid).

However, much of the theory on teaching and learning focuses on the ‘separation’ between teacher and learner, rather than on the development of a mutually informing relationship.

My approach to teaching and learning has been influenced by John Heron’s (1996) views of a ‘participative reality’. A participative view of reality challenges the ‘subject-object’ divide which forms the basis of positivist methods of research, where

and has major implications for the way we view ourselves, and others in relation to ourselves. It deeply challenges the power imbalances inherent within social structures that are established in contexts which ascribe value to a person or thing according to its perceived status in a hierarchically structured universe of independently existing ‘objects’. Within a participatory worldview, we do not discover a world just waiting to be known; rather, we co-create a reality which is shaped by the nature and quality of our subjective-objective relationships.

In meeting people, there is the possibility of reciprocal participative knowing, and unless truly mutual, we don't properly know the other. The reality of the other is found in the fullness of our open relation (Buber 1937), when we each engage in our mutual participation (Heron 1996, p. 11).

A participative paradigm promotes a view of human interaction that sees all people of equal significance and value in an ever-evolving, co-created view of reality; where 'human flourishing' is perceived as a valuable end in itself.

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Entering a classroom to work with groups of students in ways that reflect a participative paradigm is clearly a challenge when in a professional context which traditionally emphasises the 'subject-object' divide. Much of the theory on teaching and learning focuses on the 'separation' between teacher and learner, rather than on the development of a mutually informing relationship. For example, Biggs and Tang (2007) differentiate between three levels of thinking about the effectiveness of teaching. The first level suggests that the teacher is the 'expert', and transmits knowledge, normally by lecturing. Generally, students are assessed through being given 'marks' according to how accurately they can reproduce the knowledge received; and if they get a low mark, this is because they have been a poor student. When a teacher evaluates their sessions, they are in effect evaluating the ability or motivation of the students rather than the competency of their own teaching.

In level 2, the emphasis is still on the transmission of knowledge; but the teacher takes greater responsibility for developing a range of teaching methods that are likely to better communicate that knowledge. In evaluating their sessions, the teacher will evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching methodologies, and how they might adjust these for better outcomes.

In level 3, the focus returns to the student, but centres on what the student learns, and whether that learning achieves identified outcomes. Within this context, Biggs has

developed the well-recognised process of ‘constructive alignment’, an approach to curriculum design which aims to optimise the conditions for quality learning (Biggs 1996, Biggs & Tang 2007).

In a number of ways, constructive alignment addresses my belief that effective learning emerges from the relationship between teacher and learner. In constructive alignment, it is recognised that the quality of the learning of the student is influenced by the nature of the learning activities. The learning is not transmitted from teacher to student, but is something the students have to create for themselves. Teaching in this way is seen as a catalyst for learning. The teacher’s responsibility, then, is to establish a learning environment which ensures that the activities undertaken by the students are likely to achieve the learning outcomes. Consequently, it is important to ‘align’ planned outcomes, learning activities, teaching methods and assessment tasks.

Much of the recent pedagogical literature focuses on models of learning which closely reflect or are directly based on Biggs and Tang’s ‘third level’ to form appropriate theoretical frameworks that guide curriculum planning and implementation (Walsh 2007, Treleaven 2008, Savin-Baden 2004, Hoddinott, 2000).

Traditional learning, with the teacher spouting facts and figures, and with participants regurgitating the information without deeper involvement, is a very ineffective form of learning. A much more effective and long-lasting form of learning is to involve the learner by creating a meaningful learning experience. (Beard and Wilson 2006, p.1)

There is also a growing emphasis on the value of reflective practice as a means of enhancing the learning of both teachers and students (Cowan 2006, Brockbank and McGill 2007).

However, there is still a separation between lecturer and student in that most of the literature assumes that the teacher will determine the curriculum without involvement of the student. This assumption is being challenged by the idea of promoting ‘student voice’ and ‘student engagement’ which, though originating in the school environment, is also relevant for university students (Taylor & Robinson 2009, Cook-Sather 2006).

Although the terminology changes, the idea is not new. As far back as the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Dewey (1916) was advocating that students should be actively involved in their own learning. In an educational setting, “each subject is not only a body of facts but a form of living personal experience” (Tanner 1991, p. 103).

Heron (1999, p. 131) suggests:

...a fully educated person is, among other things, an awarely self-determining person, in the sense of being able to set objectives, to formulate standards of excellence for the work that realises those objectives, to assess work done in the light of those standards, and to be able to modify the objectives, the standards or the work programme in the light of experience and action; and all this in discussion and consultation with other relevant persons....

Unfortunately, the educational process in most of our major institutions does not prepare students to acquire this kind of self-determining ability. For the staff in these institutions unilaterally decide student objectives, work programmes and assessment criteria, and unilaterally do the assessment of student work. This goes on until graduation, so that fledgling professionals are undereducated so far as the *process* of education is concerned; they have had no experience in setting objectives, planning a work programme, devising assessment criteria, or in self-assessment; nor have they acquired any skills in doing any of these things co-operatively with others.

Taylor (2007, p. 41) accepts the desirability of students being centrally involved in all aspects of the learning process, and has developed the concept of ‘whole person learning’ which has integrated within it the following principles:

1. The more involved the learner is required to become in their own learning, the more the conditions of that learning need to reflect the nature of an adult to adult relationship.

2. 'Communities of practice' are successfully able to evolve without hierarchical authorities.
3. Individuals can be involved not only in what they are learning, but in what they are going to learn, in how they are going to do that learning, and also in assessing how successfully they have accomplished their learning.

Taylor (2007, p.132) differentiates between what traditional learning expects, and what whole person learning encourages:

<b>Traditional learning expects:</b>	<b>Whole person learning encourages:</b>
Acceptance of external decisions	Participant involvement in planning
Respect for those in authority	Participants developing a questioning attitude
Acceptance of predetermined objectives	Participants identifying their own learning objectives
Adherence to aims based on content	Objectives based on participants' needs
Formal procedures and relationships	Individual focus on personal objectives
Focus upon content and presentation	Process: learning how to learn

There is a growing demand for whole person learning and student engagement, supported by a recognition of its educational benefits (evidenced in the Handbook which contains this chapter). However, there is little literature which identifies methods that have been successfully used to promote the active participation of students in all aspects of their own learning. Given that I had an ideological commitment to student engagement, but did not



have a ready-made ‘procedure’ for ensuring it happened, I chose an action research approach to establishing and improving my practice of enabling students’ active participation in all stages of their own learning process.

### **An Action Research Approach To Teaching And Learning**

Boyer (1990), when challenging traditional notions of scholarship in higher education, proposed that scholarly activity in universities should not just focus on research, but should include teaching, and the application of learning to practice. He claimed that teaching means “not only transmitting knowledge, but transforming and extending it as well”, in ways that stimulate “active, not passive learning and encourages students to be critical, creative thinkers, with the capacity to go on learning” (1990, 23-24).

Schön (1995) argued that this would require a new epistemology of practice, which he suggested would take the form of action research. Action research is described by Reason and Bradbury as “an orientation to research that is aimed at improving participants’ lives” (2001, p. xxi). They further contend:

By bringing scholarship and praxis back together... our immodest aim is to change the relationship between knowledge and practice.... as the academy seeks additions and alternatives to its heretofore ‘ivory tower’ positivist model of science, research and practice ..... Action research is therefore an inherently value laden activity, usually practised by scholar-practitioners who care deeply about making a positive change in the world (2001, p. xxxiv).

Whitehead (1989) and Whitehead & McNiff (2006) also promote values-based practice in their development of a living theory approach to action research. Living theory is a form of research which has ‘I’ at the centre, where the values of the researcher are fully acknowledged, and where the researcher is accountable for the ways in which she or he lives their values in their practice. A living theory inquiry centres on a series of action-reflection cycles in a process where the aim is to improve a situation of interest and concern to the researcher.

Kemmis makes a distinctive claim when he states that he considers the first concern of action researchers should be “*the contribution of their action to history, not so much to theory*” (2010, p. 425, italics in original). He suggests that action researchers are not only, or even necessarily, contributing to a theoretical body of knowledge, but rather are generating transformational actions, which lead to a “disposition to act wisely in uncertain practical situations” (ibid, p. 422), with the aim of benefiting “the good of each person and the good of humankind” (ibid, p. 425). Action research should be concerned with the flourishing of humanity rather than analysing, conceptualising and philosophising about it. The latter has its place, but in action research these serve the former.

In working with students in educational contexts, my aim is to create a learning environment where they feel inspired and empowered to gain knowledge in ways which they experience as transformative. Ideally, I want students to feel personally changed as a result of their engagement with the course I am teaching. So, in taking a values-based action research approach to improving my ability to achieve this aim, the values I am explicitly seeking to live in my practice are those of participation, mutual empowerment and respect. Encouraging students’ participation is essential if they are to be fully engaged in their learning. However, as students often defer to the traditional authority of the teacher, it is important to enable all students to feel empowered to fully contribute, and to encourage others in the group to do the same. Creating an ethos of respect for each other and the experience that each brings to the education process is, I consider, a prerequisite to creating a transformational learning environment. The values of participation, mutual empowerment and respect are interconnected; facilitating a process that supports mutual empowerment can only authentically be achieved through respecting those with whom I am working, in an environment where everyone has equal right and opportunity to participate in the decision-making.

The theory is that if I live this values-based action research approach in teaching situations, the students will have a transformative learning experience. The next part of the chapter offers my account of what emerged in one educational context when I committed myself to this approach.

## **Students Creating Their Educational Experience: A Case Study**

### ***Introduction***

The following section tracks the development of a second year, two-semester module entitled 'Active Participation in Learning'. This was an optional module for students who were hoping to gain employment post-university in an educational setting, generally but not exclusively in schools or youth services. A formal objective was that they learn how to encourage the active participation in learning of children and young people, in any future professional work context.

The module had run the previous year, led by a lecturer who had now left the university. I was informed that the module had received a poor evaluation from students, and that I was free to develop it in any way I wished. The course specification was relatively generalised, so gave me considerable scope for development.

This account of the module is written from my perspective, with myself as sole author. Ideally this would be a co-authored account, with all the students as equal contributors. However they have now gone their individual ways with their time prioritised on their chosen professional and personal activities. Nevertheless, I wanted to stay as true as possible to the principle of the students actively participating in all stages of the process. With this principle in mind, I have chosen to write the case study such that the students' voices are integrated (in italic) into the narrative, in the form of extracts taken from their reflective accounts written during and at the end of the module. It is hoped that by taking this approach, the truly participatory nature of the development of the module will be communicated, including the wide range of emotions, uncertainties, and sense of achievement that were experienced at different stages of the process.

### ***The first session***

From the beginning, it was obvious that the students did not have much awareness of what they were signing up to.

*When choosing the 'Active Participation in Learning' module, I was unsure what to expect. I had no prior knowledge of the concept of active participation. I struggled to find a definition. The dictionary defines it as "the involvement, either by an individual or a group of*

*individuals, in their own governance or other activities, with the purpose of exerting influence". I was intrigued to find out just how actively I would be required to engage in the process of my own learning. (S1)*

When explaining the purpose and benefits of participation, I introduced the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), where the child's right to participation is identified as a fundamental right in all situations where adults are making decisions that affect them (1989, Article 12). Article 42 specifically spells out the responsibility governments have in ensuring that every child and adult is informed about the Convention.

However the students in the class did not have any knowledge or understanding of the UNCRC. Although the UK ratified the Convention in 1991, no legislation has been passed which requires schools to teach it, nor requires teachers to implement it. Consequently, it is common for school leavers to enter university with little knowledge, experience or confidence in actively participating in decisions concerning the content and process of their educational experience. The students registered for this module were all in this position.

A major challenge, then, was how to introduce the idea that I wanted the students to engage in the process of planning the curriculum for the whole module, with me facilitating the process but not determining it. This created a strong response from the outset.

*I was surprised and a little worried by the approach to the first lecture. To be asked what we might like to learn and to be presented with a number of options was so alien to my previous experiences of academic education. I felt as though I was being asked to step out of my comfort zone and to take responsibility for, or ownership of, my own learning, in a more personal manner than in my other more traditionally led subjects. My primary concerns were ones of responsibility. If I were to agree how I would like to learn and how I would like to be assessed, all excuses for failure and non-engagement would be removed and I would truly be responsible for my own learning and outcomes. This did raise some concerns in me as it is harder for me, and others, to undertake a deep approach to learning when nervous or anxious (Entwistle 1996). (S2)*

There was an immediate fear that it would have adverse consequences for their assessment.

*On learning that there was no set course outline for this module, I was rather taken aback, and I wondered how everything was going to be run and planned out, as this was completely different to how it was run the previous year, and was set out in a different way to my other subject modules. At first I was a bit worried about how we were all going to be assessed throughout the course, if we didn't yet know what we were going to be doing. This alarmed me as I felt that if there was no set topic to learn, no activities to do, or no set assignments, then I might find myself not fully engaging in the course, and that this would lead to me not achieving my best. As a result, I would not achieve a good grade at the end of the year. I also felt the course would not really go anywhere if there was no direction to follow on from each lesson. (S3)*

The first session was as demanding for me as it was for the students. I was aware of their uncertainty, and had to resist the pressure to take control of the decision-making. Instead I tried to communicate to them what I was hoping to achieve. I stated that in working with them, I would be researching my own practice, and would be encouraging them to do the same. I introduced the values of respect, participation and mutual empowerment that underpinned my educational work with students, and proposed that, although I would support them as much as they required, I would like them to accept the challenge of creating their own curriculum.

In terms of a knowledge base, and in addition to exploring the meaning and legislative background to active participation, I briefly introduced experiential learning theory (Kolb 1984), and the idea of reflective practice (Moon 1999, Bolton 2005).

By the end of the first session, it felt as though the students, though rather bemused, were willing to experiment in creating their own educational experience.

*The first session with the tutor was a revelation, the most startling part was her honesty. We as a group agreed the synopsis of the module had left us with little idea of the subjects to be covered. It was decided that we would agree the curriculum ourselves, from the areas we would like to learn about, to the form of assessment. This was an exciting yet daunting prospect. In my educational career it has been the norm to be told what we are to learn and how we are to learn it, rather than create a course ourselves. However the thought also*

*filled me with apprehension; would I, left to my own devices, push myself academically as hard as I would have to work on a proscribed course?(S4)*

### ***Planning the curriculum***

During the next two sessions the students, in consultation with myself, discussed their aim and objectives, and established the following:

#### **Active Participation in Learning**

##### **Aim**

For students to participate in the planning, implementation and evaluation of their own learning, in their second year module *Active Participation in Learning*

##### **Objectives**

In collaboration / consultation with their tutor and other members of the group, each student to:

1. Identify their own learning objectives.
2. Identify and arrange a placement which will enable them to meet their learning objectives.
3. Write a reflective diary which will enable them to record their experience on the module and explore what helps and hinders them achieving their learning objectives.
4. Research articles and books that help them understand more about active participation in learning, both in relation to themselves as learners, and to the engagement of others within a professional context.
5. Agree with the group appropriate forms of assessment.

The aim was a formal wording of what I was proposing they do, and which they accepted.

When considering learning objectives, the students felt that these may differ for each of them, so each should take responsibility for identifying their own, then be accountable to the others in the group for how they were met.

*Despite my initial concerns, I thought it was a really good idea when it was decided that we would create our own module and decide what we each wanted to learn, rather than just being told what we had to learn. I felt that it would be a really good way of engaging everyone in the lessons if they were learning about something they were interested in. I was rather excited about this as it meant I could play to my strengths to increase my chance of getting the best grade I could, by doing something I was interested in. (S3)*

One of the students mentioned that teacher education students were fortunate, as they were given placements in schools, and hence could explore what active participation meant in a professional setting. After discussion, they realised that they could arrange their own voluntary placements. Although the university would not formally organise these for them, I could help by giving them a university-headed introductory letter plus a placement handbook, explaining the purpose for the placement, and what would be requested of any setting offering a placement.

Having been given an introduction to the purpose and process of reflection, they decided that one form of assessment should be a reflective account of their experience of the module, to be submitted at the end of the year; and in the meantime, they should keep a reflective diary that charted their experience of the course, and of their placement.

As the module title was ‘Active Participation in Learning’, it was agreed that at all stages of the module, we should ensure the principle of active participation was encouraged. There was extended discussion as to how to achieve this in a way that shared the responsibility for enabling it to happen, rather than it being seen as my responsibility.

Finally one of the group members proposed that each student could take turns in planning and running a teaching session. Rather than be given a subject to teach, they would identify this for themselves. I suggested that they could be imaginative in their thinking about what the focus might be. They could take the opportunity to research a subject that was of educational interest to them; then plan a session where they would ‘communicate’ (i.e. teach) what they had learned to the others in the group.

This ‘communicating’ was to be done with the active participation of the learners, in the same way that I was encouraging their active participation.

Again, this resulted in a mixture of emotions.

*It was decided amongst the group that we would each come up with our plan for a lesson, based on something that we are interested in and present it to the rest of the class. I was excited by this as I thought it was an excellent idea and the perfect opportunity for all of us to engage and take control of our own learning. However the only issue I had about choosing to run my own session, was I felt there was a greater pressure to deliver an interesting and successful lesson about something I was interested in, and that I had no-one else to blame but myself if it never turned out as I first planned. (S5)*

As these sessions would form a central element of the module, it was agreed that the second form of assessment would consist of an evaluation of how they were planned and run. The criteria by which students would be assessed provoked considerable discussion, and resulted in them determining the following criteria: quality of session plan; level of active participation in session; extent to which identified aims of session were achieved; extent to which the individualised learning outcomes of the student (leading the session) were achieved; and general comments with a grade.

There also expressed a wish to contribute to the assessment process. One way of doing this was to give each other feedback as the module progressed, through discussions on Moodle (the virtual learning environment used by the university). The students were used to using Moodle as a means of gaining course information, reading lists, and various other supportive learning materials from their subject tutors. However using it as a forum for dialogue and for peer formative assessment was new to them.

*I decided to research formative assessment through active participation in order to get an idea of the processes ahead of us and what I could gain from this type of course. Formative assessment is a self-reflective process that intends to promote student attainment by making the learner aware of how they can progress. It involves “creating a classroom culture in which all involved see ability as incremental rather than fixed” and “involving students in*



*planning both appropriately pitched content and meaningful contexts” (Clarke, 2008) in order to develop their own competencies. In order to achieve this I could see that we would have to work as a group to agree what we wished to achieve. I felt this approach had the benefit of creating a feeling of ownership within the group, motivating us to make the module succeed. (S4)*

The course specification did not allow for summative peer assessment. However it was agreed that the students would each complete an assessment sheet after each student’s session and submit it to me; I would take their comments and grades into consideration when compiling my own.

*Something which really sets this module aside from others is the way in which we as students are being allowed to influence our own assessment methods. This is something that is very controversial in a university setting or indeed in any modern educational setting. This course is allowing me to reflect on current problems with assessment methods currently used; and also to learn more about alternative assessment methods and teaching styles which I will aim to actively encourage in my own classroom when I enter into a teaching career. (S1)*

During these early sessions I was also continuing to provide knowledge on experiential learning and reflective practice, in order to provide a theoretical basis for the work they were committing themselves to, and to give them options for writing and structuring their reflective diary. The students used this to reflect on their own practice.

*Whilst planning the curriculum and applying for placements, we were also having lectures on reflective learning. The most enlightening session for me was the lecture on Kolb’s learning cycle. The model proposes the idea that we can engage in a continual learning process that adapts to the situations we find ourselves in. Kolb suggests that we must move through four stages in order to learn from our experiences:*

- *Concrete experience – doing / having the experience*
- *Reflective observation – reviewing / reflecting on the experience*
- *Abstract conceptualisation – concluding / learning from that experience*
- *Active experimentation – planning / trying out what you have learn (Kolb 1984)*

*I was surprised to find that I was repeatedly only achieving stages one and two of the cycle, having the experience and looking back at it. I have always been an analytical person but it seemed that there was room to improve my thinking by researching areas both in my studies and wider personal experiences and testing the new knowledge in practice. I decided whilst on the course I would not only reflect on what I had found challenging but research theories and models of education which would allow me to overcome those challenges. (S4)*

Although initially a number of students were not sure how to write a reflective journal, their confidence in this grew as the module progressed.

*A key part of the knowledge that our tutor shared with us was reflective practice, as this was seen to be an important part of understanding the learning process we were to actively engage in. Moon's description of the reflective learning process is "a set of abilities and skills, to indicate the taking of a critical stance, an orientation to problem solving or state of mind" (Moon, 1999, p. 63). Moon feels that a large part of the overall learning process takes place when the learner begins to organise and clarify what they feel they have learned (Moon 1999, p. 15). The learning journal that we each completed following every session was a successful way of helping us clarify and understand what knowledge, skills or new concepts we had learned during each session.*

### ***Student –led sessions***

The range and creativity of the sessions planned and run by the students were impressive. Although after the initial apprehension and uncertainty, they seemed happy to commit themselves to planning a session, I had no idea what would emerge. I had to work hard to 'trust the process'; to trust that if I stayed true to the values of respect, participation and mutual empowerment, and responded to the students' requests for help as and when they arose, the outcome would be worthwhile. My own reflective journaling shows that there was at times a strong temptation to take control; but as I wrote, I realised that the temptation was more about creating security for myself, rather than responding to what the students were now needing. They were flourishing with the freedom. The challenge for me was to provide a structure sufficiently stable for them to feel supported, and able to ask for help and information as they required; but sufficiently flexible to encourage them to develop their ideas as creatively and imaginatively as they were able.

The outcome was a series of interactive sessions which were diverse in nature, where the students learned a considerable amount, developed good relationships with each other, and engaged the active participation of everyone in the group, including myself as an equal group member.

Their own reflections communicated their aims, and what the experience had meant to them, the following being just one example:

*To demonstrate to the group how children learn through creative play and the benefits this has for their learning, I decided to ask the group to engage in a creative activity using play dough and other art materials, as well as creative writing which encouraged them to use their own imaginative skills. I also wanted to give them ideas about how the curriculum can be incorporated within creative play. Duffy (1998) believes that 'creativity and imagination are part of the process of learning across all curriculum areas' and that 'creative play contributes to children's development in all areas of learning'.*

*I was eager to see how well my session would go and if the group members could relate it to their own education and tell us if creative play and development had helped with their learning. They firstly had to work on their own with the playdough, or use the paints, to create a model or picture. They then had to work together in pairs, and come up with a short play, poem or story that would explain what the playdough models or artwork meant for them, and to present it to the rest of the group.*

*Creative play is cross curricular and can link subjects together, as my activity demonstrated. For examples I was combining artistic creativity with English. A good example of this was how C and H combined C's creative skills in English which she used to write a rhyming poem, with H's playdough model-making. Together they enacted a play using his playdough models as 'puppets', and her poem for the script. H was particularly pleased with the outcome, as he had been unaware he even had these skills, as he had not been encouraged to do anything creative at school.(S3)*

*The task encouraged the class to work together and developed their team and social skills. At the end of the session I asked the class if creative play had impacted on their own learning and education, and if they thought it had been beneficial. This allowed the class to*

*reflect upon their own learning, and to think about how their creativity and participation at school could have been improved.*

The students seemed to take on a different persona when stepping into the role of presenter. The impact could be transformative both for the presenter him/herself, as well as for the other group members. One young man had been very quiet at the beginning of the module, and contributed rather less than the others at the initial planning stage. However he introduced his session by bringing out a guitar, and singing some very energetic heavy metal rock music, which he had composed himself. His session was an exploration of the role that music plays in a wide range of social and cultural settings – such as dolphin music used by pregnant women for relaxation, and gospel music as a means of expressing religious passion and inspiration. He grounded his choice of subject in his own story:

*I suffer from bipolar disorder, and as a result have had a lot of trouble in the past controlling my moods. Because of this, my life is made difficult as people who do not understand my disorder make assumptions about me and assume that I am being simply antisocial. One of the main reasons I chose the presentation that I did was because I wanted to show the class that bipolar disorder is something that does not mean I cannot have normal social interactions and is something that, with understanding, is not something that needs to have such a large impact on my life. I also wanted to show how the genre of heavy metal has helped me with channelling my moods into something productive. As a result I based my presentation on what has helped me, as the music itself is a release and how creating it myself has given me something to channel my energy into. In reflecting on this experience, I think it worked well because it perhaps gave the class a different perspective on me, and showed them a side of me that they had not seen before. I think it also worked well, because it allowed them to see how much music can help individuals, and because I used examples of other people and other situations where music is used for specific purposes, I think the point came across well. (S6)*

Participating in sessions such as these had several outcomes.

*I think one of the main benefits in us each having our choice of what we wanted to learn and communicate to others, was that it really opened my eyes to issues I might not otherwise have become aware of; for example how M was able to use his love of rock music to control his bi-*

*polar disorder. He looks at music as a way of realising his anger and uses it to vent his feelings, which he puts into songs. It has helped me see things from other people's perspectives, and increase my knowledge and interest in other areas of education. Hutchings (2009, p.142) states that "learning is an intensely personal activity...it seldom happens in isolation and is influenced by whom we learn with and the place where we learn". (S8)*

The feelings, thoughts, experiences and reflections that the students had throughout the year were collated in their reflective accounts presented for final assessment.

### ***Final reflections***

In their evaluation of the module, the students provided considerable evidence that creating their own educational experience, and reflecting on it, had personally changed them. It had given them knowledge about themselves.

*The active participation in learning module has been a different learning experience from those I am used to. I found the emphasis on taking responsibility for my learning both worrying and liberating. The initial concern at the lack of excuses available to me should I fail was soon replaced by a feeling of enthusiasm about learning about myself and how I can best apply myself in order to achieve as highly as possible. I found that this module challenged me to take responsibility for my learning in a manner which the other more traditional subjects have not allowed. I was initially dismissive of the learning journal, but as I tried to write more and explored the theory behind it I have found it a successful learning tool. The experience of keeping a journal has allowed me, for the first time, to be honest with myself in regard to how my behaviour affects other people. This self honesty, and also the reinforced feeling of personal responsibility has transferred positively to the rest of my studies, and I feel that this module has enhanced my skills and increased the chance of me achieving a good degree. (S2)*

It had also developed their confidence.

*From my own experiences of this module, I would definitely say that actively participating in your own learning raises self-esteem, self-motivation and confidence as the learner sets challenges for themselves and overcomes them. (S7)*

They appreciated the value of the relationships that developed in the process of working together.

*I feel that the success of the course was due to the engagement in all sessions by all students and the tutor. I felt that this led to the development of trust within the group as we evolved into a 'community of practice' (Wenger 2006), and that good relationships developed as a result of the learning we experienced through our mutual involvement in these activities.*

(S8)

They came to understand the purpose and value of reflective practice.

*I found that reflecting on how well my lesson went after I had presented it to the rest of the group was extremely helpful for my learning. I thought about how I wanted my session to go and compared this to how I felt the session actually went. This boosted my confidence as I felt I had been successful in being able to plan and deliver my own session and that I had taken charge over my own learning and achieved my goals. The course has also taught me how to reflect on my own learning, and how important reflection is, rather than just talking about how to reflect. Teaching reflection is just as important as talking about reflection on our education. "Teach people how to reflect, through the assignments given, and then demonstrate how the assignments had developed skills of reflective practice" (Russell, 2005, p.201). (S5)*

Finally, the students' views on what they felt should happen in other modules was influenced by their experience on this one, sometimes expressed strongly.

*During discussions throughout the year, the notion that active participation should be central to higher education was often raised. Many students shared their discontent about their other modules on their course, and said that many students did not participate in lectures. They often reported that this was disheartening and made the learning process rather dull. This was my experience of university. I believe that contributing in lectures and teaching sessions should be built into the assessment process, rather than just be a side line to it. This then would enable a balance to be struck between hearing about theory and learning what it means in practice.*

The following comment summarised the conclusion reached by the whole group.

*A benefit of creating our own course curriculum was that we were able to influence what we wanted to learn, and at a pace that was suitable for all our needs. From my experience of this module, I think that if universities want to encourage students to get involved in their own education, they need to input their ideas as to what they want out of the course and what they want to learn. I think that if this were allowed to happen, students will find their learning more relevant, and it will help strengthen the role they play as stakeholders.(S3)*

### **Concluding Comments**

I had begun the module with the wish that ‘students feel personally changed as a result of their engagement with the course I am teaching.’ The actions and reflections of the students provide evidence that this happened. At the end of the year they presented their experience of the module at a conference *Students as Stakeholders*, organised by the Higher Education Academy, and received considerable acclaim, including a letter being sent from the organisers to the Vice Chancellor of their university, praising the quality of their presentation.

This delighted the students:

*We were extremely pleased with the positive comments we received from other students and professionals about our presentation and its content. We were asked many questions, including how other students in other places could implement this ‘active participation’ approach in different subject areas, and we were able to say how we thought they should have more of a say in both the content and the assessment of whatever subject they were doing (Student 5)*

Undertaking this study has provided evidence that a participatory paradigm, with its underpinning principles of relationship and mutuality, offers a useful view of the world when considering how to encourage student engagement. Through staying true to these principles, and engaging in the values-base action-reflection cycles of a living theory methodology, my decisions were founded, not on academic theories about what constitutes ‘good teaching’, but on what emerged out of the moment-by-moment process of the students, in dialogue with

myself, agreeing how they could create their own educational experience in ways that were of maximum benefit to themselves.

In challenging the mind-set that leads to the ‘subject-object’ divide of conventional teaching in higher education, I was role-modelling a method of working with students that I suggest would merit further exploration. I was able to do so in this context, because the course specification was general enough to allow me considerable leeway. If this approach were to be adopted more widely, then courses would need to be planned and submitted for validation in a form that would give lecturer substantial scope to engage students in all aspects of curriculum development and implementation.

The feedback from the students in this case study suggests that such moves could be very worthwhile. There was general agreement that having an active role in the choice of their assessable work not only motivated them to work harder than they would normally have done, but also gave them a sense of responsibility for achieving good results, as they could not blame anyone else if they did not do well. Writing a reflective journal became a meaningful activity, not only because it gave them a new skill, but also because they had a direct experience of how it enabled them to clarify and understand what they were learning.

Despite the evident success of the module for the students themselves, and the knowledge that has been gained about the value of approaching teaching and learning from a participatory worldview, there are limitations in this case study. Most significantly, it does not explicitly address the socio-cultural context of the university in which the module took place. It would need a much larger study, and a commitment from staff and managers at all levels, to investigate whether a participatory paradigm could effectively inform processes that would lead to enhanced student involvement in creating their own educational experiences. Consequently, this study omits an important dimension when considering what needs to happen to integrate student engagement into university practice when using this approach. The socio-cultural perspective “highlights the need for institutions to consider not just the student support structures but also the institutions’ culture, and the wider political and social debates impacting on student engagement” (Kahu 2011, p. 7).

I acknowledge fully that for student engagement to be incorporated at an institutional level, these wider issues would need to be recognised and addressed. However, no matter how



supportive the institutional environment, each individual teacher and lecturer will always have the challenge of working out how she or he can better relate to students in ways that encourage their active participation. This chapter is intended to provide evidence to support the theory that educators will be better equipped to achieve student engagement through committing themselves to a values-based action research approach to improving their practice, grounded in a participatory worldview.

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