

An experience of curriculum co-design at UCU: a student-teacher partnership for designing a new course.

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One year ago, I posted a question on the Forum on this website, asking if there are colleagues who have been working with students in forms of teacher-student partnership, in particular co-designing together a new course. Albeit none of the colleagues who responded had this experience, they were all very interested in teacher-student partnership. Below I am reporting on the partnership that I created at

In my vision, if an institution aims at educating students to take up responsibilities in society, it should offer students opportunities of engaging with their education, not only at the level of learning, teaching and assessment, but also in forming a scholarship of teaching and learning, and in curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy. These two latter forms of student engagement, where students act as partners of faculty and staff, can have transformative power for all engaged persons. Moreover, the contribution of students in designing the course helps tuning educational strategies to engage and motivate the new generation of students, which could be beneficial for other courses as well.

I am pursuing a Doctorate of Education at Durham University (UK) with a focus on Intercultural and International Education, and I am using a Participatory Action Research approach my research: I seek to align my teaching with tenets of Education for Global Citizenship by adopting a highly democratic approach. I want to do this by promoting **student engagement** in constructing their learning environment as a form of community engagement, with a focus on taking responsibilities. The goal is to look at how engaging in theories and practices of Education for Global Citizenship and Intercultural Setting up the co-design partnership and giving students the chance to work with me as equal partners can be seen as a pedagogic intervention to achieve this goal.

I knew that at UCU our colleague Fred Wiegant had organized a semester-long honors seminar some years before, in which a small group of students designed an interdisciplinary course on Evolution. Fred was very positive about the experience, and the course has been included in our curriculum since. With this in mind, I discussed with the Honours coordinator, the Director of Education and the Exam Board of UCU the option of organizing an honors seminar myself. At UCU any honors activity must be taken on top of the 180 ECs that students need to graduate, which proved to be an obstacle in recruiting students. I have been thinking deeply about an effective way to reward student engagement. In the literature about student engagement and teacher-student partnership (think of scholars such as Catherine Bovill, Peter Felten, Alison Cook-Sather, Susan Groundwater-Smith), there are many examples of students who are selected and payed to work with staff both at the level of courses and of programs. However, this wasn't an option at UCU, but while the intrinsic motivation is very important, I felt that there should be a tangible reward as well, because the internship is extra work that students carry on.

I could agree with the Director of Education that the students who would engage in the co-design partnership would enroll in a short internship for 2,5 ECs, which would be graded as pass/fail only. A pass grade would be issued for participating actively to all sessions and group work, and for handing in a short reflective portfolio. Taking the partnership as pass/fail proved to be a crucial element, as the students didn't feel the pressure of having to be assessed on something very new to them.

Organization and expectations

I had decided that the group should not be bigger than eight persons, me included. I sent out an open

call to all students: they could apply by filling in a form where they stated their background, their motivation for engaging in the partnership, what they would be contributing and what challenges they were expecting. I also invited personally students who were taking courses highly relevant to the topic. I organized a couple of info sessions and met with several students. At the end, seven students and a girl who graduated last year, but wanted to stay involved with the college, applied. One dropped after one week, so the partnership was created with six students (three in their second year and three in their final year), the alumna, who got the official position of teaching assistant (I paid her from the budget of 2000 euro that I got from the Honours coordinator) and me. Our colleague Karin Scager of COLUU would support us, and the two of us, together with the TA, prepared a framework and goals for the partnership and for the first sessions.

The goals we defined for the (internship) partnership are:

- Critically evaluating the educational aims of our institution related to Global Citizenship in the light of theories and practices in other universities
- Incorporating student perspectives and goals into the institutional aims for Global Citizenship
- Defining a subset of learning goals for Intercultural Communication Competence at this institution
- Giving student the chance to engage in curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy by designing a new course in Critical Intercultural Communication as different-but-equal-partners
- Creating an opportunity for students to enact their social engagement in a local community to the benefit of their peers

Students would also have the opportunity to present their experience at conferences and journals about Student Engagement.

In the literature on partnership you can read that the benefits of student engagement for both students and staff are for example enhanced teaching and learning practices and an increased engagement with teaching and learning, together with the feeling, for students, of being heard and be able to make a valuable contribution to the teaching and learning environment. Partnership work usually challenges and changes the power-dynamics between teacher (or staff) and students, and this is often seen as a major challenge, not only for teachers who may fear the letting go of some of the ‘power’ that their role entails, but also for students, who may not be up to the amount of responsibility that they are charged with. Other challenges can be time investment, money (or task hours), unsupportive institution or colleagues, fear of not having sufficient experiences and skills. I prepared myself not only by reading extensively, but also by talking to scholars who have been involved and have researched curriculum co-creation.

Key elements for getting started and sustaining teacher-student partnership work are (see Cook-Sather, A., Bovill, C. and Felten, P. (2014) *Engaging students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education: a guide for faculty*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass):

- ensuring that students participate voluntary, but that they also get rewarded for their work;
- creating shared aims; value the process and not only the possible outcomes;
- being patient as things won’t always go according to plan, in particular if it turns out that the expectations of teacher and student do not match after all, and renegotiating goals is necessary;
- learning from mistakes and adapting;
- being honest where power imbalances might lie (think for example of institutional constraints in decision making or standardized format or procedures, for example)

My personal goals and expectations

I was very curious to experience how it would be for me to ‘let go’ the power inherent to my role, and if I would find a good balance between steering the discussion of the literature and the translation of the

ideas gained into pedagogy as ‘the’ expert on the one hand, and letting the course design develop in a truly bottom-up process where we would negotiate and incorporate everyone’s ideas, even if the outcome would be different from a course that I would design on my own.

Students’ goals and expectations

Together with individual goals, most students expressed goals such as meeting like-minded thinkers in the community to actively **discuss about students’ role in global society; reflecting** on one’s own intercultural experiences; getting an **insight into the learning process** from the perspective of course designers and “**giving back**” something to the college that creates value for other students.

One student wrote: *“I believe that my involvement in this course will make me more aware of my limitations as a student as well as encouraging me to think critically about not only my own value system but also about how my own value system reflects my wider experience as a student and as an agent of my own community.”*

Another student wrote: *“Co-designing a course I think could change my role as a student in the sense that my participation and input are key and challenge me to be involved as much as possible. Contributing to a new course allows me to reflect on what I have learned and experienced during my time at UCU and create from some of that a course that others can benefit and take something from”.*

In terms of expected challenges, students mentioned not being familiar with the study field of Intercultural Communication and Intercultural Education; not having formally learned any theory on teaching and learning, nor any theory on communication, time management, and learning to work with a teacher on an equal level, thus changing their perception of teacher and student roles.

The partnership started in March 2017.

Process

We had nine 4-hour long sessions from March to June, always in the evening, with some drinks and snack, and a break to have a quick dinner. In the final session we also evaluated together the process and the product of our work. The first four sessions were very conceptual: students needed to dive into literature in fields unfamiliar to them, and we needed to agree on terms and concepts we would be using.

Our starting point has been to look at what the official documents of the college say about educating for global citizenship and about intercultural communicative competence, and compare the vision of the college with programs in other universities, the UNESCO document on Intercultural Education and literature in the field. We found that, in comparison to the college documents, in the other documents, in particular those from US and Canada, there is a stronger focus on community engagement and taking action for social justice. The next step was to create our own working definition of Global Citizenship, from which we would derive the intended learning outcome for a course in Intercultural Communication that would fit the curriculum. This is what we wrote:

"A global citizen is someone who feels connected to humanity, is open-minded, and respects diverse views by being critical, empathetic and reflective, of both his own views and standing and of others. The individual also feels responsible for, and engages with issues of global importance."

In pairs, we studied the literature around Global Citizenship, Cosmopolitanism, Intercultural Communicative Competence and Intercultural Communication; on decolonizing (Intercultural) education and on non-Western perspectives on Intercultural Communication. Besides dealing with theories and concepts for the content of the course, we also looked at literature on pedagogy, such as how to teach and assess Intercultural Communicative Competence; how to write and assess course learning outcomes, and how to align learning aims, content, activities and assessment in course design.

Each pair wrote notes that were uploaded in our shared Google Docs folder as preparation for class discussion.

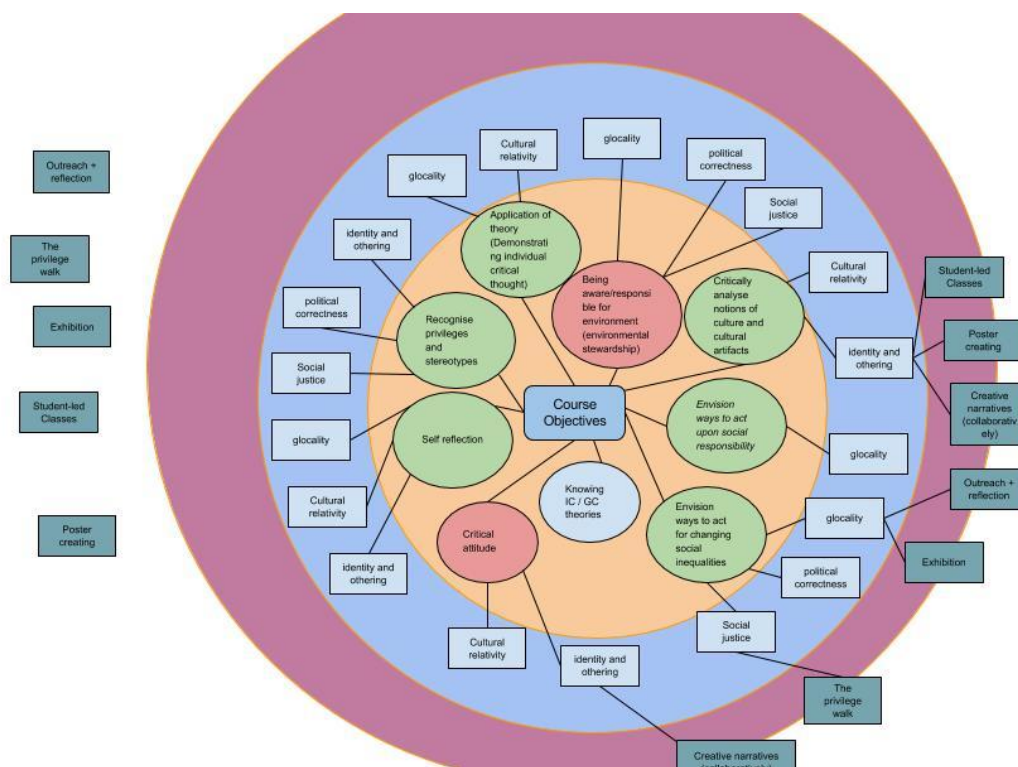
These first four meetings were so conceptual that students started wondering how we would ever be able to translate the ideas that were generated into a course design. They didn't convey that to me, but I could read that concern on messages that they sent each other in our WhatsApp group. At this stage Karin Scager (COLUU) and I designed a practical activity that would help students in understanding the different elements of course design, and how those need to be cognitively aligned. In meeting 5 Karin supervised a brainstorm activity that we named "the alignment exercise": we took 15 minutes to brainstorm on ideas that would fit one of the following four categories: course objectives, content matter, learning activities and assessment methods. We wrote our ideas on strokes of coloured paper, and the strokes for the four categories were laid out on a grid on the floor. Strokes were moved around or discarded if we sensed that they would not fit in with the main ideas. This gave us a full picture of our emerging course framework.



This has been a real turning-point in the experience of students. From this moment on, they felt confident that we would be able to translate conceptual work into pedagogy, and started realizing how content, assignment and assessment should relate to, and help achieve, the stated learning goals of a course.

At this stage we could thus start working on defining the learning outcomes for the new course by brainstorming on possible class activities, reading, community engagement options, assessment types, as well as on fields to draw on from, possible prerequisites and level of the course.

This is a visualization of this stage the student made:



We decided that the course would take a critical perspective on Intercultural Communication, and that it:

- should be an interdisciplinary, interdepartmental course, at level 2, open to second and third year students
- should adopt a perspective of intercultural communication that focus on power-relations to highlight structural social injustices and their impact on interpersonal communication acts
- should be taught in a **democratic and interactive way**, and students should be **active and critical participants**
- should involve **knowledge; experiential learning** (both in class through student-taught classes and in the community) and **continuous (self-)reflection**
- should offer students the opportunity to engage with the local society through a community outreach project
- should mainly be assessed through peer- and co-assessment.

In the final session, we wrote a draft course outline to be presented to the stakeholders for feedback and approval, and we evaluated the partnership experience together. Over the summer we communicated with each other to finalize the course proposal, which has now been submitted to the Board of Studies. Also, student submitted written reflective essays on their individual experience, which are a great source of information about how they experienced being partners.

Evaluation of the partnership

As we already expected, two major challenges have been my expertise in the discipline and in pedagogy, and the power-relations between teacher and students. Students acknowledged that even if I have been able to create an open and safe space for them to ventilate their ideas and opinions, they

somehow still felt intimidated by the disparity in knowledge, and by my (attributed) expert-role. This changed when we started to design the course: from that moment on, they all felt very much in control of the process, and acknowledged that all opinions were equally negotiated and incorporated.

A reflection that I didn't expect was that some of them felt that this was my project, and that, because of this, I knew already where I wanted to be heading (by choosing the literature for example). It turned out that even if we thought that we discussed our goals extensively, somehow individual expectations differed. From my point of view, I felt that I succeeded in not steering too much, in not claiming the product, so I was quite surprised by this comment. Considering the suggestions mentioned in the first part of this article for starting and sustaining a partnership, a learning point here is, as the student and I discussed, to keep checking expectations throughout the project, and put on the table any doubts or issues people may have. Student also felt that if they would have been the initiators of a project, this aspect would have played a less prominent role. At UCU, we have the honours seminars that I mention in the first article, where students can come up with an interdisciplinary topic of their interest and design a course on that topic that they teach each other. I wonder what other options do we, or could we offer, as UU, to students to initiate bottom-up curricular change and or innovation.

On the other side, we all gained valuable insights and knowledge from this experience, in terms of mutual understanding of the role of teacher and student and how to develop in your role by engaging with the other. It has also been a very entertaining project, where we had some heated discussions and exchanged life stories and experiences. This is a short and by no means exhaustive overview of reflections from the evaluation talks we had:

New perspective on one's own position as a global citizen:

- The importance of involvement in community, and acting on your responsibilities
- Realization that you can affect the lives of others;
- Pride in the work we accomplished, and the effect it will have on the college and the community;
- Seeing citizenship not as an on-off switch, but rather as a lifelong endeavor and process

New perspective on one's own position as a learner

- *“Knowledge of what happens beneath the surface of a course”* this is empowering
- Critical skills, useful for both our roles as citizens and as learners
- Being an active participant, rather than passive: becoming *“the boss of my own education”*

Furthermore, they are proud of the ‘product’ we generated, that is the course design, and they believe that the course will be attractive for several students.

To me, this has been a powerful exercise in participatory pedagogy, and an instrument of reflection on my teaching philosophy and practice, and on how (far I am able) to reflect on, and change them. I also got very interested and active in the field of Student Engagement, by presenting a poster that the student and I created on our collaboration at two conferences of the [RAISE Network](#) (Researching, Advancing and Inspiring Student Engagement). This network, which connects academics, practitioners and student representatives, foster student engagement at all levels. Curriculum co-design is only one of the fields.

Please feel free to contact me if you would like to know more, or experiment with curricular co-design yourself.