

‘Livin and learnin’, tellin’ stories, challengin’ narratives: Critical reflections on engaging students, especially from BAME and other marginalised groups, in academic research activities.

Introduction

The following is a case study which focuses on staff-student research collaborations and on the benefits of this approach, particularly to students from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups. More specifically, I reflect upon how this was undertaken as part of the work in our Applied Sociology Research Group (ASRG). To begin with, I discuss literature advocating staff-student research collaborations and why these are important for enhancing the sense of ‘belonging’ of students at university, especially those from BAME backgrounds. I describe our approach to involving students in the research and our methods for supporting them. I also consider challenges and benefits and make suggestions for future work.

Why staff-student collaborations are valuable – the case of the Applied Sociology Research Group

As indicated, I belong to the ASRG, which draws sociologists from a range of disciplines, including Business, Education and Community Studies. The group seeks to create opportunities for staff/student research collaborations in order to develop the University’s research environment, an integral part of the Research Excellence Framework (REF). Including students in research projects also improves research and enquiry skills (through the identification of research problems and strategies to address them), enables more active engagement in learning and enhances overall educational experiences, within and beyond the academic curriculum (Walkington, 2016; Allin, 2014; Healey, 2005). The ‘students as researchers’ pedagogy is also now a key facet of students’ university educational experience, which entails understanding that:

“...enquiry investigation and discovery are at the heart of the enterprise, whether this is through funded research project [as the Applied Sociology group is], or in undergraduate classrooms. It is also the pedagogy required for the 21st century...” (Healey and Flint, 2014, p.25)

There is also direct correspondence to attributes that students are expected to gain from undertaking a degree at our institution, particularly those related to ‘Scholarship and Autonomy’, which include *“an informed understanding of their discipline or professional practice, and the ability to question its principles, practices and boundaries; think[ing] independently, analytically and creatively, and engag[ing] imaginatively with new areas of investigation¹”* The ideas of Paulo Freire (1968), who was an advocate of students’ active and critical engagement/participation in teaching and learning, are reflected in this approach. Freire encouraged educators to welcome and incorporate students’ perspectives as part of the process and criticised

GraduateAttributes

https://docs.gre.ac.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0003/832044/GraduateAttributeStatements.pdf

narrative forms of education, wherein students are viewed simply as receptacles of knowledge, who receive and record information without fully understanding it or being able to apply it elsewhere. Such an approach results in the ‘depositing’ of knowledge, not allowing for students’ creativity to be utilised.

Engaging students in research presents an excellent opportunity for the development of a range of useful, transferable skills which are beneficial in terms of employability and/or graduate studies. These include the ability to: formulate a research question; identify relevant literature; undertake interviews, sometimes in sensitive areas; code and analyse research data; work to an allotted deadline. They also reflect the following Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Sociology benchmarks relating to subject-specific skills:

- *the ability to plan and conduct sociological research using quantitative and qualitative data sources whether using secondary analysis of previous research, naturally occurring data or gathering new data;*
- *the ability to formulate and investigate sociologically informed questions;*
- *competence in using major theoretical perspectives and concepts in Sociology, and their application to social life;*
- *the capacity to identify, assess and analyse sources of evidence in building a sociological argument.*

(QAA Sociology, 2016)

Additionally, encouraging students to be researchers as part of their learning experiences allows them to make comparisons between what they learn and how they are evaluated/assessed by their lecturers (and also by peers). This then can empower them in the research process as they are knowledge generators, who draw on their own individual perspectives to develop it. Overall, participating in these activities may also enhance their sense of self-worth and belonging at university, as well as their general wellbeing.

The benefits of staff-student research collaborations for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students

Research highlights disparities between white students’ degree attainment and that of BAME students. For instance, Zwysen and Longhi (2016, p.1), report that, nationally, BAME students are twenty per cent less likely to obtain a 2:1 or first-class degree classification compared to their white counterparts “*even if they come to university with similar, if not the same A-level grades*”. Not attaining these grades has ramifications for graduate prospects, since to have them is a minimum requirement for postgraduate degrees and/or graduate training schemes.

BAME students’ experiences within institutions – which often include racist marginalisation and poor relationships with white peers and staff – contribute significantly to these gaps. Several case studies illustrate how BAME students perceived that their lecturers had lower academic expectations of them – sometimes resulting in the internalisation of these beliefs and lack of interest in classes and

contributing to poorer academic results than they would have liked (Cotton *et al.*, 2013; NUS, 2011). Taken together, these factors can result, for BAME students, in a limited sense of belonging at university (Mountford-Zindars *et al* 2015). By helping students to examine/focus upon their own experiences and to carry out research relating to this, we can then directly address some of these issues. Our approach is described below.

Examples of involving research students in research through modules

'Applying Sociology' is a 15-credit (one-term) level 4 (first year) module, focusing specifically on the ways in which communities shape the individual/self. In analysing these issues, traditional sociological theories are drawn on, alongside contemporary case studies relating to issues affecting communities. Examples include gang-related crime, neighbourhood nationalism and community cohesion. In their assessments, students undertake research on their neighbourhoods. They access Office of National Statistics data, and identify statistics to analyse (e.g. crime rates, educational qualifications and such baseline demographics as gender and ethnicity). Students can then begin to 'paint a picture' of their local areas. Then, drawing on personal experiences (and with reference to theories and case studies discussed on the course and current affairs relating to their areas), they write critical semi-autobiographical reflections of their experiences of life in those neighbourhoods. Some of the research produced by the students was developed into research papers for a symposium, '*Brexit and Boundaries in the Barrios (neighbourhoods)?...Are we Poles apart?*' which examined their experiences/observations of the impacts of Brexit in their neighbourhoods.

'Self in Society', also a 15-credit, one-term module, explores experiences of individuals and their roles in making and re-making their social lives. Again, with reference to sociological theories of the self and relevant case studies, students reflect on how they develop their personal identities through interactions with others, product consumption and perceptions of their ethnicity, class etc. This module also introduces them to autobiographical methods, an increasingly popular approach used within Sociology to analyse the self in society (Plummer, 2001). Autobiography is a powerful tool, since students can express their experiences in a creative manner. This is particularly important for marginalised groups – including BAME students – whose university experience can be difficult. A further issue faced by BAME students is the exclusion of their experiences and perspectives from class discussions, curriculums and more generally within broader societal contexts. Research (Windscheffel, 2018) and campaigns such as 'Why is my Curriculum White' (2015) have highlighted this problem. Although this is a longstanding, systemic issue, encouraging students to explore and share their experiences is important and drawing on students' autobiographical narratives is one way to do this. Zussman (2000, p.6) fully supports the shift towards using autobiography, or the 'narrative turns in sociology', since it means that the voices of marginalised groups such as BAME students can be heard:

“...autobiographical narratives have been taken as a way to create the selves for those – most importantly people of colour – to whom selfhood has been denied...”

A useful example of this can be found in an autobiographical collection produced by Sociology students at the University of Greenwich, entitled '**Twenty Years of Schooling: Student Reflections on Their Educational Journeys**' (Ainley, ed., 2008). Here, several BAME students recollected various experiences of marginalisation throughout their educational trajectories and how they managed, in spite of all, to succeed. As part of my work within the ASRG, I will work with my students to produce something similar, but incorporating broader social experiences beyond education. Encouraging them to give the papers based on their experiences at student-led symposia may also allow them to disseminate those experiences.

The case study: Developing symposia

Two student-led symposia have been hosted. As indicated previously, our symposium entitled '*Brexit and Boundaries in the Barrios (neighbourhoods)?...Are we Poles apart?*' focused on students' perspectives of impacts of Brexit at a national, local (neighbourhood) and individual level. This took place in May 2017. The second, '*Living and learning, critical reflections on staff and student educational experiences*' happened in May 2018. It explored the significance of education in people's lives with reference to their own or family members' biographies, locating them in local social, cultural and political contexts. It also considered ethnic/cultural, generational and gendered diversity of the place of education in students' lives and drew on autobiographical research papers undertaken by staff and undergraduate students, based on their experience. I focus on this event here.

Organising and advertising the symposia

I co-ordinated *Living and Learning* with another group member, a Sociologist within the field of Education and Community studies. In preparation, we emulated the processes involved in organising a traditional conference by setting out the brief, which recognised: the diversity of students' experience and how it is shaped by their social background, by previous experiences at home/school and by society more broadly; interactions with significant (or generalised) others and personal beliefs and attitudes towards education / the education system.

With regard to the target audience, we made this an open event and invited the general public and staff from within the University. We were particularly keen to have senior management representation, because although such people are aware of issues faced by students (e.g. through the Student Union and NSS statistics), hearing the students' stories directly would further enhance their understanding. So as to advertise the event, a poster was designed and disseminated via internal mail, University portals and our respective departmental and personal social media pages. We encouraged our colleagues within and beyond the institution to do the same. We also set up 'Eventbrite' and a guest list so that we could monitor numbers.

Working with and supporting the students through the process

In terms of facilitating student participation once the brief was agreed, we issued a call for papers. This was specifically targeted at students in subjects corresponding with those falling under the ASRG (e.g. Sociology, Education and Community studies, Psychology). The call was placed on subject Moodle pages and advertised in classes and tutorials. Initially, securing students to participate was challenging, partly because they wanted further clarity in terms of what it entailed, partly because of their fear of speaking in public in front of strangers and partly owing to concerns that they would have to produce papers by themselves, with little assistance from staff. After conversations about exactly what was involved and the benefits associated with participating (e.g. skills development, networking, assurance that we would support them throughout the process), students felt more reassured.

Eventually, we received eight student proposals, which were assessed against the brief. Whilst most proposals reflected what was required, some needed slight tweaks. We reviewed them further and accepted them. This was, admittedly, a time-consuming process, but the proposals were as a result much clearer.

Following this, we divided our students into groups based on subject areas. Thus, those studying Sociology formed one group, led by me, and those undertaking degrees in Education were supervised by my colleague. Within the groups, we worked to turn their reflections into conference papers. We also: worked on time management, specifically; discussed content in the allotted time for the papers (twenty minutes each); provided guidance on enhancing public-speaking skills. Students also presented parts of their papers to each other and received peer feedback, which was also useful.

Given that we both have numerous responsibilities besides teaching, we were constrained, timewise. However, we set the students mini tasks related to the structuring of their papers and met them approximately every three or four weeks to review and develop these areas. Most of the students engaged well and these meetings were effective. Students gained more confidence in themselves, the content of the papers and their general presentation skills. Working together like this facilitated the *“creation of [a] more inclusive and supportive environment”* and *“supportive peer relations and meaningful interactions between students and staff”*, issues which Mountford-Zindars *et al.* (2015, p.iv) had identified as important in improving belonging.

As the event drew near, however, there were some unforeseen circumstances, such as students dropping out unexpectedly. We therefore re-organised the order of the day and amended publicity to include only those who were presenting.

The symposium and reflections on the benefits of our approach

Approximately forty people attended the symposium, including academic and professional staff, senior management representatives (we achieved our objective in this respect), students from other universities and members of the public with an interest in areas being discussed. The symposium was received positively, with some really excellent feedback, both written and oral – the former captured on a brief evaluation form. Students were praised for their wide-ranging, excellent papers, the

work undertaken to produce them and their delivery of them. Positive responses were received from the Pro Vice-Chancellor, who attended, and from other staff, some of whom sought advice on how better to engage their students in similar events. Areas suggested for improvement were that it should have been a full-day event, rather than a half day, with more students involved. We have taken these points into consideration for our next event in May 2019.

There were other particularly positive outcomes. For instance, on introducing the symposium, I emphasised the importance of considering the diverse and complex range of students' experience, instead of assuming that they are homogeneous. Staff acknowledged these points and were keen to discuss how to make this happen. However, arguably there is still a long way to go.

As noted, a considerable problem faced by some (especially BAME) students is a limited sense of belonging underpinned by difficult staff-student relationships. That the students worked closely with us in preparation for the event helped them to bond with us and with each other. One BAME student presenter spoke about how she had benefited from these things and that, as a result, she had developed confidence in her ability to write and present ideas more concisely, which would be of great use in her second year. A white working-class student, who struggled with self-confidence as a result of previous negative educational experiences, also reported that, as a result of this experience, she had surpassed her own expectations and now had the confidence to present in other arenas.

What next?

Broader, deep-seated and entrenched social inequalities, such as discrimination on the grounds of race, class, gender, sexuality and disability will continue to be reflected in the education system, with consequent negative impact upon the experiences of some students. However, as Morris (2015, p.6) notes, "*practitioners of higher education nevertheless have a commitment to their students.*" Thus, steps must be taken to increase the sense of belonging, especially for students from marginalised groups. At an institutional level, the development of more staff-student research collaborations must be encouraged, as this means that they can work together more closely and, in so doing, develop a greater understanding of each other and reduce barriers. This can be done by mapping staff and student research interests and linking them together, so that staff can mentor students and work on building projects that are of mutual interest. Morris (*op.cit.*, p.7) also explains that, "*our institution has great ambitions for the future*". We must therefore ensure that we carry our students with us, so that they benefit from the outcomes and develop skills that will enhance their self-confidence and also employment prospects. As shown, BAME students in particular face disadvantage in terms of graduate employment and so engaging them in research projects facilitates their opportunities to enhance transferable skills.

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