

From the International Desk

Student as Producer: Research-engaged Teaching Frames University-wide Curriculum Development

Student as Producer, has been the organizing principle for teaching and learning at the University of Lincoln, England, since 2010. The model is based on the concept of research-engaged teaching that promotes research and research-like activities across the entire undergraduate curriculum at the institution.

Student as Producer, however, is about more than teaching and learning. It also seeks to raise fundamental questions about the nature and purpose of higher education (Brew 2006; Neary and Winn 2009). These questions are pertinent at a time when higher education in the United Kingdom and around the world is being reduced to the financial imperatives of “academic capitalism” (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004; McGettigan 2013) based on the notion of the student as consumer (Boden and Epstein 2006) and the pedagogy of debt (Williams 2006). These market-driven policies have been interpreted as part of a reactionary campaign to “un-make” the public university’s democratizing influence on political society (Newfield 2011). Student as Producer seeks to re-engineer the relationship between teaching and research to consolidate and restate the public values of academic life, emphasizing the role of students as collaborators with academics in the production and representation of knowledge and meaning.

Planning for Student as Producer has been ongoing at Lincoln since 2007. It involves working with academics, students, and professional and support staff in a collaborative and consultative fashion, generating processes and protocols, as well as supportive and developmental frameworks, through which research-engaged teaching can be delivered across the university. This process has resulted in a number of changes in infrastructure through which Student as Producer has been institutionalized. These include the creation of bureaucratic processes to facilitate research-engaged teaching; an institutional program for teacher support, education, and training; a digital-education strategy that involves students as digital developers; the design of classrooms and other learning environments to support research-engaged teaching; and systematic engagement with students on assuring and enhancing teaching quality. And all of this is grounded in an intellectual debate about the meaning and purpose of higher education.

The process has been overseen by a project-management

group that includes students and other representatives from across the university, chaired by a deputy vice-chancellor and reporting to university committees at the college and the university levels. As director of the project for incorporating the model into curricular development, I chaired the substantive university Committees for Teaching and Learning and the Committee on the Student Experience. My other key tasks have included running workshops for academics and for professional support staff at Lincoln on the practices and principles embodied in viewing students as producers of research; working closely with student representatives and the Students’ Union to maintain close involvement with the student body; and delivering keynote presentations on Student as Producer to other university conferences on teaching and learning in the U.K. and internationally.

Creating Infrastructure Processes

One of the main ways in which Student as Producer has been embedded at Lincoln is through the processes and protocols for quality assurance and enhancement established by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), a government-funded body to ensure teaching quality in higher education, which were redrafted at Lincoln to include the principles and practices of Student as Producer. On applying to establish or continue a particular academic program, academics are asked to consider how the principles underlying Student as Producer can be incorporated into the program. These include the extent of research-engaged teaching and learning in the curriculum; student involvement in the design and delivery of the program; an awareness of the significance of learning space in their teaching practice; how technologies for teaching are used to enhance staff-student research collaboration; and the ways in which the program prepares students for the world of work and to make a positive contribution to society.

Academic staff are asked to report on these aspects in their annual reports, commenting on developments from previous years and future plans. External examiners are asked to comment on the principles of Student as Producer in their end-of-year reports. A recent evaluation of these reporting procedures shows that the undergraduate curriculum at Lincoln is full of research-engaged curricular activities across all disciplines (Neary et al. 2014). In 2012, following an in-

stitutional QAA review, Lincoln was commended for its support of learning enhancements, with Student as Producer identified as a model of good practice (<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/ImprovingHigherEducation/GoodPractice/Documents/GPKB-case-study-Lincoln-2.pdf>).

Continuing professional development has been provided to staff involved with teaching and learning. Initially, colleagues involved in the project attended staff meetings to explain the basic principles of the approach and ran staff workshops to raise awareness. These processes of education and training have now been consolidated at the institutional level through a requirement that all staff involved in teaching have a teaching qualification or accreditation from the Higher Education Academy (HEA). The HEA is a government sponsored organization to promote teaching excellence in higher education. The university provides teacher-education programs for teaching staff at appropriate levels of experience and status through a Post Graduate Certificate in Higher Education, and it has been accredited to award its own HEA fellowships offering programs of mentoring and support. The university established a teaching academy as an informal network of support for teaching staff outside of the formal university networks, to further encourage academic staff and students to experiment with innovative pedagogic practices, including research-engaged teaching and learning (<http://teachingacademy.blogs.lincoln.ac.uk/>).

Designing Learning Landscapes

Viewing students as producers of research and knowledge is not only about curriculum design, but also includes an awareness of the importance of space in learning and teaching environments. In 2008-2010 Lincoln led a funded national research project called Learning Landscapes in Higher Education (Neary et al 2010). The research looked at effective design of learning spaces, with a particular focus on spaces that promoted research-engaged teaching and learning (Neary and Saunders 2011). Lessons learned from this research have been used to inform the design and development of teaching and learning spaces at Lincoln (Neary and Williams 2013). These lessons include recognizing the importance of research-based decision-making; understanding the need to provide support for staff to use new spaces; involving students in the design of teaching spaces as clients and collaborators; evaluating teaching spaces in ways that are academically credible—for example, not simply looking at occupancy rates but also reflecting about the nature of the pedagogical activity that is taking place; creating formal and informal management structures that promote experimentation in classroom design; working to develop supportive rela-

tionships across professional groups; and generating a debate about learning landscapes based on academic values linked to the meaning and purpose of higher education (Neary et al. 2010).

A Learning Landscapes Working Group that I chaired, including staff and students from across the university, focused on ways to consider how students can be producers of knowledge in particular spaces used for teaching and learning. The group has set up workshops with academics and students to generate innovative thinking for classroom design. All of this is sustained by an ongoing cycle of reviews of existing facilities used for teaching and learning. Student as Producer principles have been used to inform the design of the new research and teaching facilities for life science, chemistry, and pharmacy at Lincoln. The design of the new facility, to be known as the Sir Joseph Banks Laboratories, integrates research, teaching, and social space into a single connected learning landscape. Undergraduates, postgraduates, and staff share formal and informal spaces distributed throughout the facility (<http://learninglandscapes.blogs.lincoln.ac.uk/projects/joseph-banks-laboratories/>).

Technology: Hacking the University

The university has utilized the skills of students as computer developers to produce useful technologies for research and teaching at Lincoln, making links between the concept of “hacking” and students as producers of knowledge (JISC 2012). The impact of this work has been enhanced through the implementation of the university’s strategy for digital education, 2011-2016, which incorporates lessons learned during the implementation of the plan for developing curricula that focus on students as producers of knowledge. Key areas planned for the new digital strategy involve setting up an interdisciplinary master’s program that focuses on research into alternatives to lectures through the re-imagining of pedagogical time and space, as well as educational programs for students and academics to enhance their digital literacy. This work is being consolidated at a strategic level through a steering committee reporting to the university’s Education Committee, now chaired by the deputy vice-chancellor for teaching quality and the student experience. In the meantime, the university’s computer services department has continued to employ students as developers and as support staff for students and academics, with very positive results.

Student as Producer underpins all aspects of student engagement at the university. The overall strategy for engaging students requires that students play an active part in the enhancement of quality by working together with staff,

recognizing that students are experts on their own experience (<http://www.lincoln.ac.uk/home/media/universityoflincoln/globalmedia/documents/SES.pdf>). The university has created a Student Engagement Team with strong links to the Students' Union. This team has allowed for the development of systematic schemes to embed this model of student engagement, including a comprehensive student representation system; the creation and support, including training, of a group of students advising on academic quality; student-led committees, student members on university committees, and students on panels making staff appointments. The university has successfully experimented with new structures for committee meetings, based on a workshop model developed by staff and students at Lincoln to promote and support student involvement (Bishop et al. 2012).

Intellectual Links Among Teaching, Learning, Research

Viewing students as producers of knowledge challenges and invites academics to become involved in debates about the complexity of links among teaching, learning, and research in higher education. These debates are contextualized around the meaning and purpose of higher education or “the idea of the university” (Neary and Saunders 2011). Student as Producer is based on the understanding that research and teaching have become disengaged in ways that are detrimental to academic and student life (Boyer 1990; Boyer Commission 1998). The model is not simply about teaching and learning, but also asks fundamental questions about the nature and purpose of higher education, thus promoting “the idea of the university” as a radical pedagogic project. The approach is derived from a critique of “academic capitalism” (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004) and is an act of resistance to the concept of the student as consumer (Boden and Epstein 2008) and the pedagogy of debt, which teaches students that human values are best expressed in monetary terms (Williams 2006).

Student as Producer is grounded in a radical perspective on the history of higher education. To promote the re-engineering of the relationship between teaching and research, Student as Producer returns to the history of the modern university, with reference to Wilhelm von Humboldt's University of Berlin in 1810, the student protests of 1968, and the Occupy movement that began in 2011 out of concerns about social and economic inequality and led to a number of radical pedagogical projects.

Humboldt's plan was to establish “the idea of the univer-

sity” as a progressive political, liberal humanist project, providing the basis for civilizing the population as part of the process of building the emerging nation-state. This would be done by connecting teaching and research in a program to promote the expansive creation of new knowledge, breaking from the dogmatic medieval university, so that the European university embodied the highest level of consciousness of liberal society (Elton 2008).

Seeing students as producers of knowledge was inspired by student protests in Paris, France, and around the world in May 1968. At that time students were protesting the lack of democratic accountability in elitist institutions of higher education. These protests were linked to opposition to colonial and imperialist wars in Algeria and Vietnam (Ross 2002). The events surrounding May 1968 were a powerful example of student engagement in which students were at the heart of a major political event, with significant consequences for the future of higher education. This included the democratizing of university life and impacted curriculum development, for example, the idea that students are capable of carrying out research through their own independent projects (Pratt 1997). An important aspect of 1968 was the demystification by students of the elite practice of the production of knowledge, with “research becoming something that anyone can do” (Ross 2002).

The Occupy movement developed a number of radical pedagogical projects with a focus on higher education. For example, in England this included Tent City University at St. Paul's Cathedral in London, People's Political Economy in Oxford, and the Social Science Centre in Lincoln (Stanistreet 2012). Student as Producer asserts that much can be learned by academics from students involved with these projects concerning how to frame higher education in ways that deal with current global emergencies—for example, climate change and the collapse of market-based economic systems (McNally 2011; Orr 2010).

The radical nature of Student as Producer is further underlined by its affinity with the writings of Walter Benjamin, notably “*Author as Producer*” (1934), in which Benjamin asked, “How do radical intellectuals act in a moment of crisis?” Following the ideas of Brecht and the Russian Constructivists, Benjamin argued that progressive social revolution depends upon the transformation of the social relations of capitalist production. He argued that ways should be found in the production of social life for those who are normally regarded as objects of history to see themselves as subjects of history—as teachers, writers, and performers—thus enabling them to recognize themselves in a social world of their own design.

Not all academics at Lincoln concur with this political philosophy. Many have sought to implement the concept of Student as Producer by reinterpreting it through their own disciplinary customs and traditions, both at the level of their own teaching practice and at an organizational level by customizing it to fit the culture of their particular school, department, and college. Yet what connects all of this practice and theory is the attempt to infuse an approach to teaching and learning with the dynamic sense of enquiry and experiment that applies to research activity—recognizing that research, by its very nature, is an inherently subversive activity (Neary 2012).

This intellectual work has been substantiated by academics at Lincoln who have further developed the theoretical underpinnings of the model (Neary 2008; Neary and Winn 2009; Neary 2012a; 2012b; 2012c; Neary and Amsler 2012; Neary and Hagyard 2011; Neary 2013; Neary et al. 2014). This work emphasizes the dysfunctional relationship between teaching and research that lies at the core of higher education, and how this dysfunctionality might be re-engineered to create a form of higher education based on a more democratic relationship between students and their universities. Work is now beginning by academics and students outside of Lincoln using the perspective as a substantive intervention in the debates about higher education (EliSS 2012).

Case-study: Students as Producers of History

The model of students as researchers and producers of historical knowledge has been written into the history degree at Lincoln. This pedagogical approach is exemplified by a large first-year history module in which almost a hundred students, working in small groups of between four and five students, create digital historical objects using primary sources. After one training session on the basics of using Xerte, an online development tool, the students were able to develop projects relating to the subjects being taught that exceeded their tutors' expectations. The tutors report that the students were able to engage with sources in ways that would not have been imaginable when writing an essay. The students have now taken this activity to another level, creating online support tools for students who will be enrolled in this module in future, for example, producing referencing guides so that students are now teaching each other research and writing skills.

The development of this module was facilitated by a grant from the Higher Education Academy Student as Partners Fund, technical support from the university's coordinators of learning development, and the encouragement of senior staff in the history department who wanted to align the history curriculum more closely with the perspective of Student

as Producer. There are plans to extend this method of working in three distinct ways: first, by using it as the pedagogic framework for other modules, including at the masters level; second, by delivering the materials through other digitalized formats, including documentary film; and, finally, by engaging more directly in the over-arching ideology and politics of the approach in terms of how students producing new knowledge affects the relationship between students and tutors, developing a conceptual framework for students to think reflectively about themselves as historians and as people. (see <http://makingdigitalhistory.co.uk/>)

Evaluation

Student as Producer has recently been evaluated using a theory of change research methodology (Hart et al. 2009). The evaluation took the form of participatory action research with evaluators interviewing 150 students and 20 academics, as well as senior managers and professional and support staff. The key research question was what has been the impact of Student as Producer at Lincoln. The evaluation included analysis of relevant documents and reports (Neary et al. 2014). The evaluation found that Student as Producer met its main targets as set out as the basis for a Higher Education Academy funding award in 2010-2013. It is embedded across the University of Lincoln, and it has established a framework that other institutions of higher education can use to establish research-engaged teaching, while also supporting and developing an international network to promote research-engaged teaching.

Student as Producer has been successful in meeting a further set of internal targets established at the beginning of the project funded by the grant from the Higher Education Academy. These targets include redrafting the documents used to assess quality assurance and enhancement, providing genuine research opportunities for students, and creating a culture that accepts the importance of undergraduate research and the role of undergraduates in producing research at the university inside and outside of the curriculum. The educational outcomes from research-engaged teaching require further investigation, and should come increasingly into focus as the project matures across the university.

One of the strongest features of the project is the impact it has had externally. The QAA commendation noted earlier is a recognition of its sector-leading nature and the significance of its work beyond Lincoln. The HEA has recognized the role that the project has played in promoting student engagement across the higher-education sector. Student as Producer has been adopted and adapted by providers of higher education in the U.K. and internationally. In the U.K. this includes the University of Hertfordshire, where it is used as a mod-

el for curriculum development in the business school, and internationally at Vanderbilt University in the U.S. where it provides the framework for a project (<http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/2013/09/students-as-producers-an-introduction/>), as well as at the University of British Columbia in Canada where the educational philosophy that underpins the project continues to emerge in a number of flexible-learning-based projects across the institution (<http://flexible.learning.ubc.ca/showcase/ubc-course-offerings-feature-students-as-producers-of-content/>). Staff involved with Student as Producer participate in the steering groups of the British Conference for Undergraduate Research (bcur.org.uk) and the Australian Conference for Undergraduate Research (acur.org.au). Student as Producer was cited as an example of significant future trends in higher education in the United States by the influential New Media Consortium report on higher education (NMC 2014).

All of this is underpinned by what staff and students say (Neary et al 2014). The recent evaluation has revealed that students recognize the value of research-engaged teaching for their learning, their earning potential, and their ability to meet life's challenges. There is evidence that they are coming to Lincoln because of the opportunities to engage in research and research-like activities, and that they would like to have more opportunities than are currently available to engage in research. There is some cynicism from students about claims made about the approach at Lincoln, as well as some disappointment about their experience of research in the curriculum, but students overwhelmingly are very positive about their opportunities to be involved with programs based on research-engaged teaching and learning.

The response by academic staff has been equally positive. Staff members appreciate the way in which allowing students to participate in research enables them to share the "intellectual buzz" they get from their research with students in a practical and creative way. Many academics at Lincoln were already involved with forms of research-engaged teaching, but they appreciate the intellectual and pedagogical framework that Student as Producer provides, supporting them in the further development of their work in this area. Academics interviewed reported that not all of their fellow faculty at Lincoln are committed to student research, but they were uncertain as to why this is the case. There is some disappointment among academics and senior managers that not more has been achieved across the institution, and some negativity about the way in which its implementation across the university has been undertaken through bureaucratic processes rather than more inspirational change-management techniques and more case-study examples.

Other critical comments were that the project was "too aca-

demical" or that academic staff "were doing this already" or that the publicity material was "not student-friendly." The response to staff who were struggling to understand the concept was to support them in finding ways to engage with the intellectual ideas that underpin the approach through discussion and by encouraging them to read the growing number of related academic publications. If staff felt they were already doing research-engaged teaching, they were encouraged to find ways to extend the principles into other aspects of their teaching practice, for example, thinking about how students can be involved in the design and delivery of their teaching programs. Student as Producer became more "student friendly" through the university's campaign for students to become engaged not only as producers of the curriculum, but also as producers of other aspects of university life, including assisting with improving teaching quality and staff recruitment.

Understandably, after a project of this longevity, there is some concern that it has lost some of its original dynamism and needs to recover its original momentum, although there is no sign of institutional fatigue about the concept either at Lincoln or across the sector (Neary et al. 2014).

Challenges

There is no doubt that Student as Producer has been successful in promoting research-engaged teaching and has been influential in debates about the nature of higher education. The challenges are, as the evaluation has revealed, how to maintain its intellectual energy and practical applications in ways that correspond to the needs and capacities of students, academics and other university staff, while avoiding the trap of being perceived as yet another top-down management initiative. This can be achieved by ensuring that academics and professional and support staff at all levels feel they have ownership of the program and have some stake in its design and delivery. It is vital that Student as Producer be susceptible to the critical intelligence of students and that students are involved with developments in the curriculum as collaborators, rather than simply as consumers of knowledge. It is important that the language through which proponents communicate their message challenges the managerial discourse that underpins the consumerist culture of "academic capitalism," and that it provides the possibility of a real alternative for higher education based on academic rather than business values.

The intellectual dynamism can be further maintained by refreshing and revitalizing the conceptual framework through academic publications so that Student as Producer can assert its core purposes in ways that are academically credible. This

means maintaining strong external links by working with other providers of higher education and key stakeholders, helping them to find ways of making use of student research opportunities that suit their own institutional priorities. And finally, intellectual vitality can be maintained by recognizing that projects of the scale and ambition of Student as Producer are never completely finished, but must constantly find ways to challenge the political and economic conditions out which they have emerged. The expectation is that Student as Producer will be able to sustain the practical application of this radical intellectual framework in ways that further challenge the current mainstream orthodoxies of higher education. 

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