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# Co-Creating a Blended Learning Curriculum in Transition to Higher Education: A Student Viewpoint

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## Abstract

**Involving students in the design and development of their curriculum is well established in Higher Education but comes with challenges and concerns for both the staff and students. This is not a simple concept and understanding more about the experiences of the student co-creators supports others in developing this aspect of curriculum design. This small scale project uses the individual and collective voices of five second year students who worked with one programme team to co-create a transition module to support new learners entering university. The study explores the co-creation experience and the student's response to the feedback their co-created curriculum received when it was run for the first time. The study was designed to consider if co-creation of a module was beneficial to the students involved in its co-creation. The findings explored issues in relation to the experience, the actual design of the materials and how this could be developed. The students enjoyed the co-creation, felt appreciated and listened to and felt that this was a positive learning experience. They realised how difficult it is to please everybody and gained a much better appreciation of building learning experiences for others to use. The research highlights the fact that with regards to curriculum development within universities that students should be involved in co-creation as they have an understanding of the requirements of learning form a student perspective. Whilst student satisfaction cannot be necessarily be measured directly, the anecdotal comments from students involved in this project as they graduate are the values they place on the opportunities afforded to them.**

## Keywords

**Students Co-Creating the Curriculum, Blended Learning, Students' Engagement**

## 1. Introduction

One of the increasing focuses across universities is the idea that students should be involved in the co-creation of the curriculum. This means that students are not just expected to react to their learning experience by giving their comments and ideas, but they are also expected to proactively create that experience. Pedagogical approaches to supporting student learning experiences are well documented throughout international literature (Bovill & Bulley, 2011; Torenbeek et al., 2013; Allan, 2007). Students are learning for unknown futures that require innovative curriculum design and pedagogical changes (Barnett & Coate, 2005). The idea of involving students in designing their own learning is not a new concept but is an area that warrants further exploration, as both Higher Education and the needs and wants of the student continue to evolve over time. According to a Higher Education Academy report "Engaging students and staff effectively as partners in learning and teaching is arguably one of the most important issues facing higher education in the 21st century" (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014: p. 4).

The literature on involving students in the design and development of their curriculum is well established with an emphasis on students becoming more engaged in the learning process (Carini et al., 2006, cited in Bovill et al., 2009), thereby becoming active co-creators of both their own learning and that of others. This paper is based on the experiences of five students on one programme at a UK university who co-created learning materials designed to support the transition of new students entering university. The self-selected group of second year students had experienced a blended-learning transition module when they entered university (Dinning et al., 2015). The group of students worked with the programme team as co-creators of the same module for the following year group. The students met weekly with the staff team and focused on different elements of the transition curriculum, they talked to the wider staff team, amended the content and re-designed the processes the students would go through to engage with the material. The voices of this student group are used in the paper to understand their perceptions and understanding of being co-creators and partners in a learning experience.

Cook and Leckey (1999: 157) consider transition to be the "greatest hurdle" in higher education and the literature on students' transition to university is burgeoning (Pampaka, Williams, & Hutcheson, 2012), dealing with various aspects of transition including both social and pedagogic. This study adds to this body of work with a focus on the students working with staff to re-design the transitional period for their peers. Within the programme in this study, there has been significant focus on student transition into university (Vinson et al., 2010) and more latterly on a blended approach to transition (Dinning et al., 2015). Within this context blended learning was seen as a pedagogic approach which combines and aligns learning undertaken in face-to-face sessions with those created online (Littlejohn & Pegler, 2006). When the team first used a blended approach in transition very little student advice, guidance or opinion was garnered. Thereafter, with the support of university based project funding the programme team set out, with a group of then first year students, to co-create the blended transition for the following year. The development of partnerships between staff and students is well researched (Bovill et al., 2009; Bovill et al., 2011; Bovill & Bulley, 2011) and students acting as active collaborators and co-producers of curricula have the potential to transform the higher education experience (Healey, 2014). This study specifically examines the perceptions of students' involvement within curriculum design and the impact that this opportunity has upon student engagement, integration of blended learning activities and co-creation of learning experiences. The findings have been used to inform future curriculum delivery across programmes in the school and faculty.

Within the higher education literature, student's active participation in curriculum design has been highlighted as having a significant impact upon student engagement and learning (Bovill, 2014). Students are not submissive, silent individuals in learning environments, they are instead motivated partners willing to work with staff in order to develop a collaborative curriculum (Haggis, 2006). Co-creation can bring staff and students together in a cooperative way for the enhancement of learning and teaching (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011). In a study by Healey (2014) feedback from students suggested that the collaborative approach of co-creation allowed them to feel involved in designing the curriculum enhancing and challenging the power imbalance between staff and students can encourage the movement away from traditional teaching and learning approaches to a more shared responsibility. This collective approach has been found to improve the quality of work and students motivation towards their studies whilst increasing participation and engagement in professional practice appropriate to programmes of study (Healey, 2014).

The term Active Student Participation (ASP) (Bovill & Bulley, 2011: p. 3/4), (where "active" implies that

studentsengage in their learning through questioning and critical discussions) was adapted from Arnstein's (1969) community planning model in which she described eight levels of participation. On the lowest rung of the ladder, the power holders were able to maintain control and at the top rung, the opposite occurred, the participants were able to gain "substantial power to make decisions", in fact they are actually in complete control of making decisions. With this adapted model in mind, the ASP for this research was based on rung five of the adapted model where students were in "control of prescribed areas". Here there was some level of choice and control for the students, though it was within the framework set by the academic staff and related to the blended learning aspect of the transition section of a module.

It is evident that the involvement of staff and students when designing and supporting programme curriculums can be successful (Bovill, 2014) as there are several approaches that can be used to promote curriculum design. Healey (2014) suggests that one approach is to engage students as pedagogical consultants. In doing so students review the approaches to be used by staff and discuss if such methods would work with particular groups. Whilst the value and positive outcomes of this approach has been recognised (Healey, 2014), it is acknowledged that staff provided the experience and knowledge regarding to the range of teaching and learning approaches and were in many ways the prime consultants. This paper explores the students' thoughts and feelings whilst undertaking this type of work and also considers the perceptions of the students who used the learning approaches.

Whilst evidence suggests that staff and student partnerships enhance the development of aco-created curricula (Bovill, 2014) it has been recognised that such processes present challenges for both staff and students (Bovill et al., 2011). In a recent study students and academic staff at an American university experimented in a variety of approaches when co-creating the curriculum (Healey, 2014). As in this study, engagement in the collaborative approach to programme design was proposed by the academic staff at the institution, who invited students to be involved in the construction process (Healey, 2014). Regular dialogue between staff and students was found to be the important component that ensured success within collaborative design. Yet, students often doubted that they would be taken seriously throughout the re-design process and often needed time to develop their language and confidence skills to allow then to express pedagogical ideas successfully (Bovill, 2014). What is significant from this finding is that both staff and students recognised the "liminal moment" when the boundary had been crossed between staff authority for the course design and students claiming the power in the process. Bovill (2014), discovered that academic staff and students developed negotiation skills through discussion, compromise and agreement when making curriculum design decisions. This outcome enabled students to gain a greater responsibility for their learning and feel valued members of the collaborative design approach.

## 2. Research Design

This study uses a qualitative design with individual interviews and focus groups used as the method of data collection. The research was split into two parts; firstly interviews were used to collect data from the co-creation group (second year students) that directly related to their thoughts and feelings towards their involvement in the co-created curriculum design experience (phase 1). Secondly a focus group of the co-creation students was undertaken to capture the thoughts on the feedback from the first year students after the co-created curriculum had been delivered (phase 2). Ethical approval was gained for the project and all students were made aware that they could withdraw from the process at any time without this impacting on their studies. The interviews and focus group were conducted by a member of staff who was not directly involved with the students to try to address any issues related to power balance.

### 2.1. Participants

The sample for this study was five second year students who had participated in the project to co-create the transition module. These five students were self-selected from an initial group of 12 first year student representatives who were invited to participate in the research. They attended regular workshop sessions over the period of eight months, made changes to the transition curricular and presented the information to the new first year students. The workshops took place on a Tuesday lunchtime (with food provided!) over a period of twelve weeks. Here the five students were regular attenders and they had complete ownership on the construction of the module, as they were given temporary permissions to the Virtual Learning Module site. All five participants agreed to be involved in the semi-structured interviews and focus group for this study.

## 2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected in phase 1 through semi-structured individual interviews lasting approximately 45 minutes. The research team ensured that the same questions were used throughout all interviews and each was carried out by the same person. The phase 2 data collection consisted of a focus group interview with all five participants, where they were presented with and asked to discuss the first year students' feedback on the changes that had been co-created. The reasons for using a focus group in the second phase, were based on both time constraints and the fact that hearing others' viewpoints would enhance the data captured. Whilst keeping to a semi-structured format, students made comments and were asked to offer ideas of how they thought they could change the curricular again to respond to the feedback presented to them. Dictaphones from the institution's ICT services were used to record all interviews and the focus group were all transcribed verbatim. Data was then analysed and coded using a typical approach to qualitative investigation, that of thematic analysis (Veal & Darcy, 2014). Thematic analysis is a method of identifying analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. Mind maps were used to map out the themes using associations and connections allowing the researchers to reduce the data in a meaningful way, giving a visual identification of themes and patterns.

## 3. Results and Discussion

From the face-to-face interviews three overarching themes became evident (Figure 1), "the student experience", "the doing" and "moving forward". Each of themes were broken down further in order to gain a greater understanding of situation (Figures 2-5).

## 3.1. Student Experience

Figure 2 demonstrates how students reported a variety of reasons for agreeing to be involved in the project, this ranged from being provided with a free lunch to the more serious points of supporting both the staff and themselves, "*it's important that students get involved in projects, because it's obviously going to help staff make it better for students next year' as well as seizing the opportunity of personal development*" (*Student C*). The individuals also acknowledged that being active in curriculum design was something they had not done before. They considered it to be an ideal opportunity to develop their own knowledge, skills and understanding. This supports the work of Bovill (2014) who believes that student's active participation within curriculum design has a significant impact upon the range of students' engagement. One student commented, …"*it was a completely new experience and challenge but it was something that I really enjoyed and felt that I thrived on, so I found it really good*" (*Student A*). Whist another referred to a previous collaboration project but added that in that experience "*we had our say, but they did not take it on board as much as this project has*" (*Student B*). As Healey (2014)
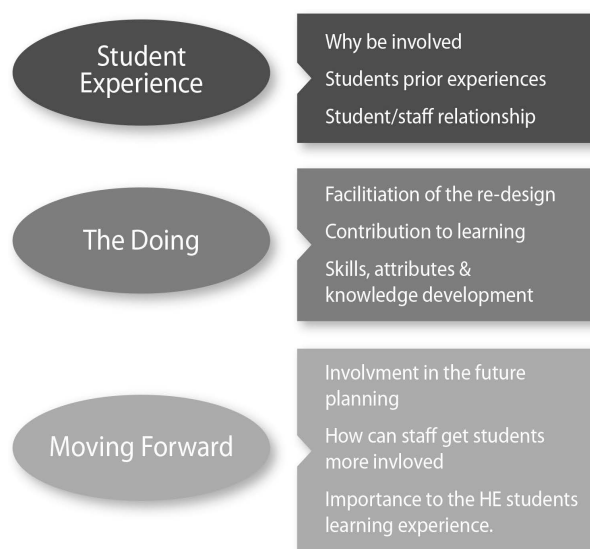


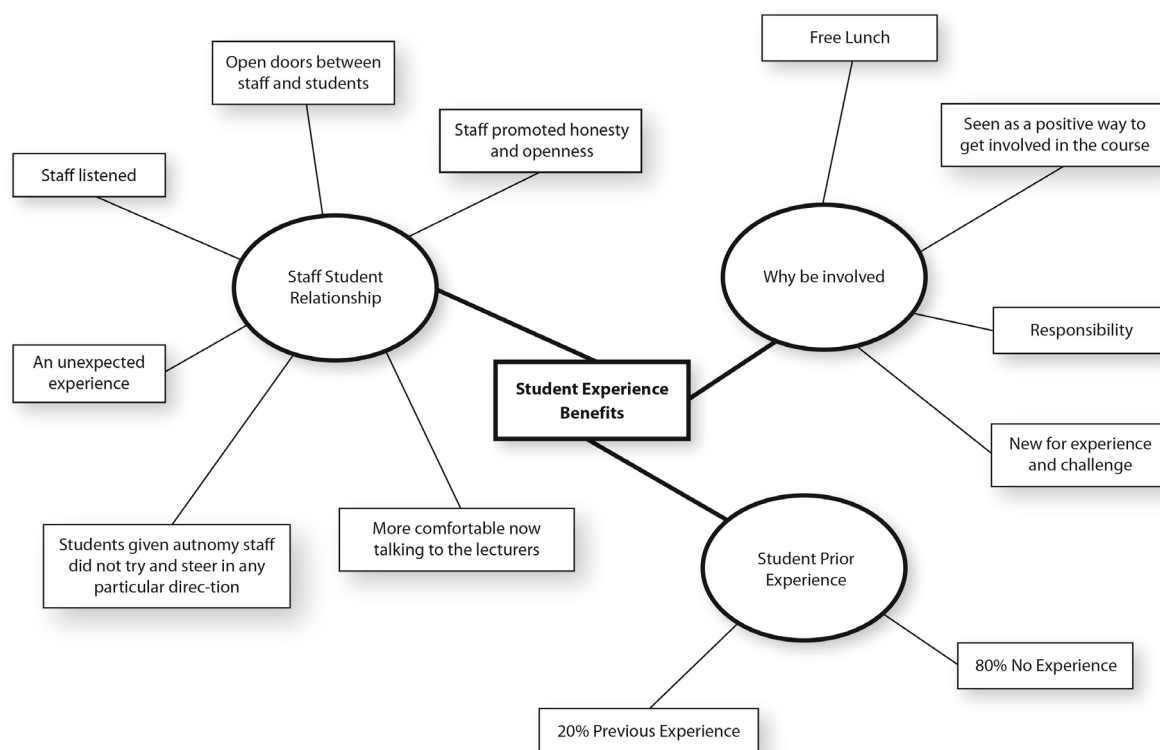**Figure 1.** Emerging themes from the one-to-one interviews.

Figure 2. Mind map of comments relating to the "student experience".
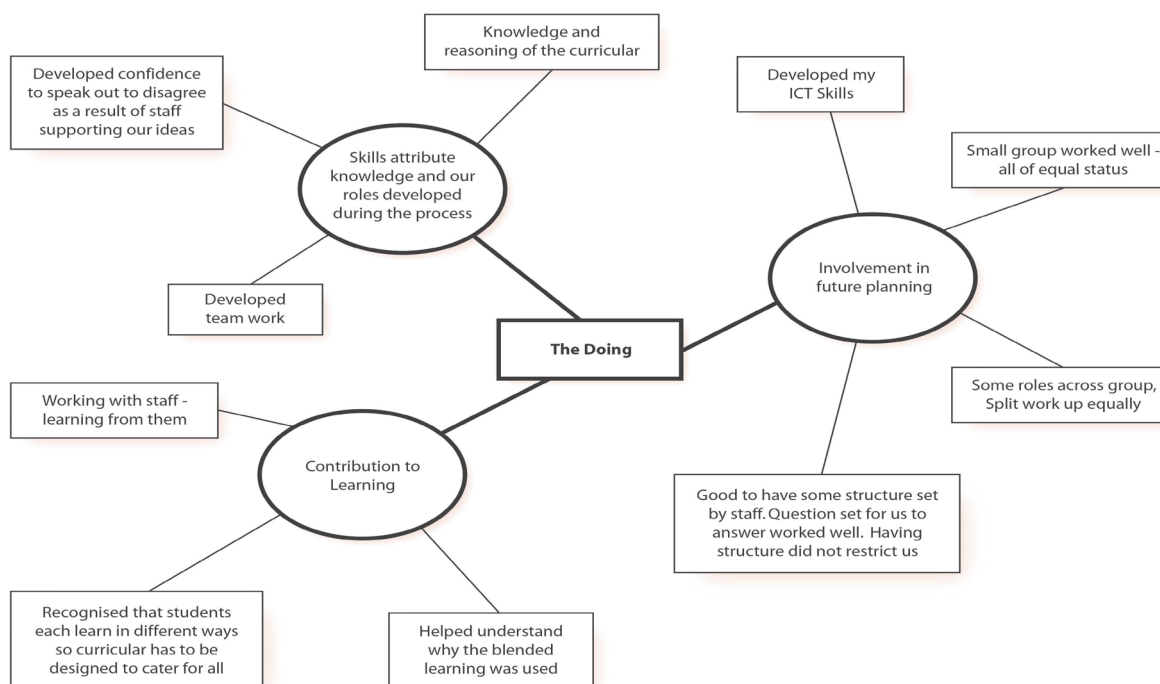
Figure 3. Mind map of comments relating to "the doing".

states, regular dialogue between staff and students is an important component of success within collaborative design, which helps the co-designer element and this was certainly the case in this study.

A prevalent theme in the study was that of student perceptions regarding staff-student relationships. Some

**Figure 4.** Mind map of comments relating to "moving forward".

**Figure 5.** Mind map of key comments from the second year focus group.

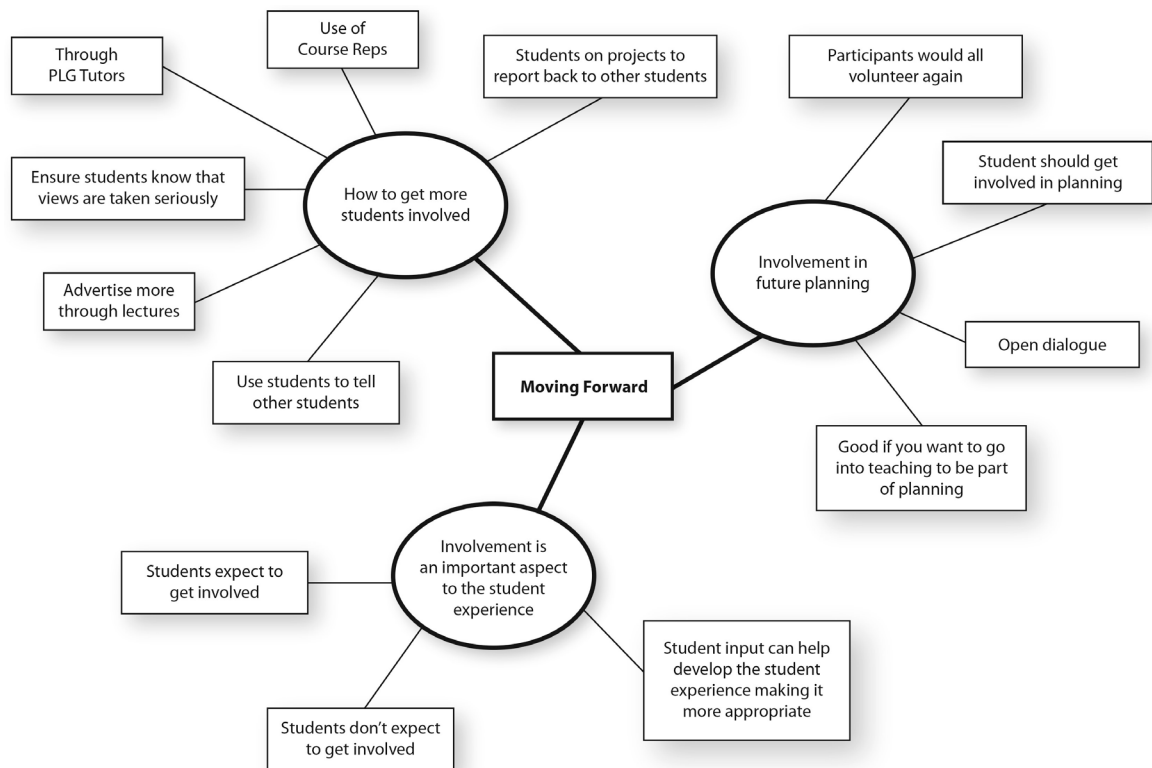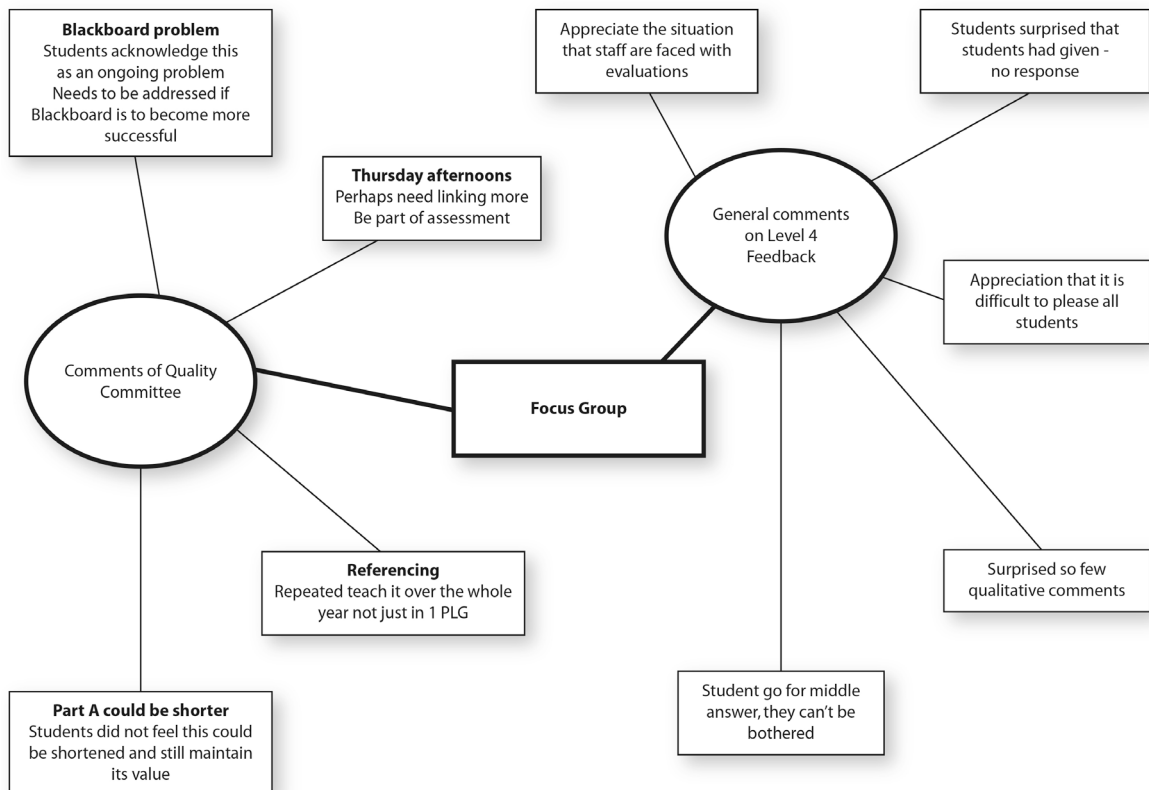students experienced apprehension at first and then surprise at how much the staff listened to their views and gave them the permission to make changes to the curricular based on their experiences and reflections. Students' comments included "*I realised after the first couple of meetings that staff wanted us to be as honest as possible*", "*staff were willing to listen (Student C)*". The fact that staff did listen and take on board the student comments was seen as a positive feature of the project, with one student commenting "*I think it's really helpful that staff can ask the students*" and that "*students get their voices heard*" (*Student D*). Bovill (2014) reflected that students often question whether or not they will actually be "taken seriously" through the curriculum design process. Additionally, Haggis (2006) claims that students are not always passive individuals in their learning environments. When they are provided with opportunities they are willing and eager to work alongside staff collaboratively in order to improve the curriculum for future cohorts. It appears from this study, the power shift from staff to students actually created what Healey (2014) highlights as the shared responsibility of teaching and learning.

## 3.2. The Doing

Students reported (from **Figure 3**) that through working on the project they had developed their skill base in a number of ways. Students were enabled and encouraged to make direct changes with the Virtual learning Environment (VLE), with comments including "*.....I mean even just the fact that we were allowed to go onto Blackboard and edit work ourselves was really good*" (Student B) and "the *ICT skills I have learnt on the project and the use of blackboard will support me in my future at university*" (Student A). An increase in confidence levels was discussed by all the students and this was attributed to the staff promoting openness and honesty "*....we began to feel more confident, as staff didn't mind if we disagreed with them, they seemed to support our new ideas*" (Student E). Team work through to enhancing subject knowledge was discussed, with one of the students beginning to appreciate how people learn differently commenting that "many *people have different ways to learn, this was shown as we looked at the different tasks throughout the project*" (Student D).

The findings from the study agreed with the work of Bovill (2014) and Healey (2014), with communication, and in particular negotiation skills, being essential in developing a co-designed curriculum. "*Having been part of the blended learning project, I now realise that students learn in different ways and that staff make every effort to design a curriculum to cater for all, this is hard to do, I'm sure!*" (Student B). By developing communication skills students feel more valued in relation to the collaborative nature of the curriculum design (Bovill 2014). Student c remarked that "*...I was so surprised how open to change the staff were, I'd imagined them to speak to us as though we were in school*" (Student D). According to Healey (2014) both staff and students develop a range of "learning experiences" from designing a curriculum collaboratively, student estated "*.....I think about the content of lectures and associated learning in different ways now that I have looked at this module*" (*Student A*).

## 3.3. Moving Forward

The results demonstrated, in **Figure 4**, that whilst the students had mixed views at the beginning of the project as to whether they should be part of co-creating the curriculum, all five agreed that they would happily volunteer to be involved again due to the "*open dialogue*" afforded to them. This suggests that listening and enabling is a crucial component in the success of co-creation. There were some interesting comments related to staff/student relationships, these included "*it is important to ensure that students know that their views will be taken seriously*" (*Student A*). Participants suggested that co-creation "*projects of this nature need to be advertised more frequently to students*" presenting a case to do this through a range of channel*s "through peer learning groups; lectures and via course reps*" (*Student B*). Healey (2014) found that challenging the power imbalance between staff and students encourages the movement away from traditional teaching and learning approaches to shared responsibility, which students in this study seem to want.

## 3.4. Reflecting on Feedback from the Co-Created Curriculum

**Figure 5** shows the themes that emerged from the second year students (n = 5) within the focus group.

After being presented with the evaluations of the co-created curricular the participants showed an appreciation of what teaching staff are faced with when they design curricular for students and the amount of planning that goes into the design. The second year students appreciated that first year students were at times motivated by

receiving grades and not on the completion of the task. As student noted, "*if you're willing to put in the effort, even if it's not for a grade, but just to develop your learning, then you should do it to the best of your ability*" (*Student E*). Whilst, the second year co-creation group were not involved in the assessment of the module, overall they were disappointed with the first years' level of response; with one student commenting "*you can't please everyone*" (Student D). This comment alluded to the changes made to reduce the amount of work needed to be done in one section of a task, however, feedback from the first years felt that this needed be reduced even further. The subsequent response by a student was, "*it could not have been shortened any further whilst still maintaining its value*" (*Student B*), thus demonstrating a real understanding of the design and learning element. As a group the co-designers commented "*we tried to make sure that the different parts linked together*", and added "*we tried to keep to short and sweet*" (Student B)… "*we got rid of the big things that took up all the time*" (*Student C*) "*…but there's no point doing it if we've made it so short*". Student concluded that "*…..if things are made so short at the start, in the future when they have to read along journal article for example, they will say that the module hadn't prepared them for it*" (*Student B*). This again shows a depth of understanding by the second year students of how the learning experience was trying to guide the first year students.

There was a view by the second years that some of the first years were "lazy". Student B claimed that "*the whole point of us doing it was to encourage them* [*first years*] *to engage with the module more*"… student C added…"*it's just laziness isn't it*?!" The concern made by Furlong and Cartmel (2009 cited in Bovill & Bulley, 2011) as to whether first year undergraduates had the expertise to contribute to curriculum design would be disputed with the comments made by the students (as second years) in this study.

## 4. Conclusions

Engaging students and staff effectively as partners in learning and teaching is arguably one of the most important issues facing higher education in the 21$^{st}$ Century. This study discovered that relationships between staff and students are made stronger as a result of co-creating the curriculum, where students and staff who work together in planning their curricular feel that they revise their sense of relationship with one another. Students and staff in this study collaborated in a reciprocal process where all participants had the opportunity to contribute equally to pedagogical approaches, decision making and changes to content. Working with academic staff in approaching different pedagogical approaches "inspires students to experience an increased sense of engagement, motivation and enthusiasm" (Bovill et al., 2011: p. 138). Some authors suggest that meaningful active student participation "can contribute to transforming students into more active and crucial citizens, with the potential to change their communities" (Crowther et al., 2005 cited in Bovill & Bulley, 2011: p. 3).

The study shows that being involved in the process of co-creation deepened the students own self-awareness and their understanding of others' experiences and perspectives in planning and learning. As a result of gaining these insights they were more inclined to embrace and engage in collaborative approaches to learning and teaching. Students felt empowered and engaged in the programme when they felt their voice was heard some showing surprise when this was the case. The involvement of the students was only in one module (of five modules within the first year) and not a whole programme, nevertheless the students gained a different and improved and responsible approach to their learning.

There was a mismatch of expectations between the students who co–created the curriculum and the first year students who were on the receiving end of the co-created curriculum. This is an on-going issue in relation to student feedback on aspects of the curriculum; where one student body suggest changes in one year, and the following year's cohort provide other feedback that is different. These second year students understood the benefits of co-creating the module and also had the opportunity to consider how the content of the programme fitted into future aspects of the programme.

Co-creating the curriculum brings together the perspectives of students as learners with the expertise of teaching staff and helps them understand what each other wants and expects from their learning experiences. The end result was a learning experience where students feel like they were the owners and partners in the design. Finally, the co-created module offered positive outcomes to both staff and students in understanding how learning needs are constantly changing. The students consistently describe gaining new insights as a result of their interactions and experiences. The study has challenged traditional structures in higher education, which supports the separation between staff and students' perspectives on classroom practice.

An acknowledged limitation of this study was the small number of year 2 students involved in this co-creation

project. The study may have been enhanced by exploring the views of the year 1 students who were part of the "co-created curriculum" and this is an area for further research.

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