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Linking research and teaching through student-led module evaluation

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This paper outlines the processes and outcomes from two innovative student-led projects to evaluate education research modules on a Masters level programme in Professional Education at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh. Both projects were underpinned by the overall programme philosophy emphasising learner-centred approaches and strong research-teaching linkages. One project was an Action Research Evaluation project where students guided all stages of evaluating a module. The second project involved the students critiquing existing institutional module evaluation forms and then designing their own module evaluation form.

Outcomes from the projects include increased student knowledge, skills and confidence in using education research methodologies and undertaking small-scale collaborative research projects. In addition, staff have gained a greater awareness of which aspects of the modules students consider should be evaluated. Students are still actively involved in the Action Research Evaluation project and are currently collaborating to write a journal article and present their findings at a seminar. The students are also directly informing the redesign of modules for the next academic year.

Keywords: research-teaching linkages, learner-centred approaches, education research

Introduction

This paper outlines the process and outcomes of an initiative to link research and teaching, and to emphasise student-centred teaching within two new masters level research modules. The background and context of the Professional Education programme at Queen Margaret University is presented. The paper then describes the innovative approaches to module evaluation that were designed into the new modules. The first example was an Action Research Evaluation Project and the second was a student-designed module evaluation questionnaire. Finally the paper outlines the encouraging outcomes from the work, which included improved student knowledge of research methodologies, opportunities for staff – student collaboration in writing a journal article and enhanced module evaluation information.

Background

At Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, there are a number of masters level awards available on the Professional Education programme. When this programme was first validated in 2001, a Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Education was offered. However, the success of the programme led to the development of other awards that now include a Postgraduate Diploma and an MSc in Professional Education. This programme is currently not a compulsory requirement for academic staff in the institution but there is growing demand from academic staff within and outside Queen Margaret University, and also from

other professional staff with an education remit, such as practice education facilitators in nursing.

In 2006-2007, two new research modules were developed and offered within the Professional Education programme to replace a previous larger education research module. In designing these modules, the programme team aimed to emphasise some of the key underlying principles of the programme in terms of student-centred teaching (Biggs, 2003; Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983; Giles et al, 2006), key strategies for effective learning (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Ramsden, 2004) and research-teaching linkages (Brew, 2006; Jenkins & Healey, 2005). Indeed, two of the overall programme aims are to: 'be a learner-centred multi-disciplinary programme which will enable participants to develop knowledge and skills...to advance the education of others', and 'develop participants' abilities to use research...as the basis for professional practice and continuing professional development' (QMU, 2004:14).

Designing new modules or other elements of the curriculum is a real opportunity to make links between teaching and research (Jenkins et al, 2002). Teaching educational research provides key opportunities to make both implicit and explicit connections between teaching and research. By the very act of teaching on an educationally focused course, there is a heightened awareness of the need to practise what we preach: promoting good practice in student-centred teaching approaches, encouraging student engagement and making it easier for students to adopt 'deep learning strategies' (Biggs, 2003). Through teaching about research methodologies that are useful in researching education, relevant examples and illustrations lead to constant reference to the here and now, and can result in a greater reflexivity within teaching praxis (Moon, 2004). Critical connections are made between the act of what we are doing and the methodologies that enable us to gain greater understanding of what is happening. Teaching about education research is the ultimate meta-analytical viewpoint where the aim is to increase learning about research into educational research.

The modules aimed to achieve learning outcomes that included the students being able to 'critically appraise a range of theoretical frameworks most appropriate for education research...' and to be able to 'critically reflect and evaluate on the experience of applying research methods...and articulate their appropriateness for future research designs' (QMU, 2006a & 2006b). The students, therefore, needed to learn about different research paradigms and needed to have an opportunity to try out different education research approaches in practice. Alongside these module and programme aims, the programme team was keen to evaluate the new modules. This background provides the context to the innovative projects that were adopted in the new modules and which are outlined in the following section.

Student-led Module Evaluation

There were two main projects undertaken that were focused on enhancing student knowledge of, and skills in using, appropriate education research methodologies. Both projects focused on evaluation of the modules and are explained here.

The Action Research Evaluation Project

In the first of the education research modules, there were 21 students in the class. The students were invited to take part in an action research project to evaluate the module. Individual students or small groups volunteered to choose what they would like to evaluate about the module at each face-to-face teaching session. Evaluation topics suggested by students were in no way influenced or censored by the module co-ordinator, and topics

chosen were those of most interest to the students. The students then organised whatever materials they needed with support from the module co-ordinator and carried out evaluation on their fellow class members. Students were free to choose whether they led evaluation activities or just took part in activities organised by their colleagues.

Students chose to evaluate many elements of the module including: desired contact hours; the effectiveness of teaching and learning approaches; and the usefulness of the suggested reading for the module. Students used a variety of data collection methods including the use of the university's virtual learning environment to post short questionnaires and collect responses, or through voting cards in class and by getting participants to post 'sticky notes' on flip charts. Most elements of the evaluation were collated and analysed by the students.

Students were given information sheets and asked to sign consent forms to take part in this action research project. If a student did not wish to take part they were invited to leave the session at the point when evaluation was taking place and they would receive instead a standard module evaluation form at the end of the module. All students chose to take part in the project. After the assessment for the module was completed, students were invited to continue meeting with a view to disseminating useful lessons from the project. Some students have chosen to continue, while others have selected to withdraw.

The student-designed module evaluation questionnaire

In the second education research module there were 16 students in the class. In this module, the students built upon their knowledge from the first research module and continued to have opportunities to apply their knowledge of education research methods and methodologies. In order to enhance students' experience of questionnaire design, this topic is examined in class face-to-face sessions and the students also design the module evaluation form.

The evaluation initiative in this module coincided with the development of a new institutional module evaluation form at Queen Margaret University. The change was being instigated due to poor feedback about the usability and quality of the previous form. Therefore, with the permission of the working group that was developing the new form, the students were given both the old and new module evaluation questionnaires and asked to work in groups to critique these and to say how they would improve them or replace them.

Discussions took place both in class time and also using the virtual learning environment. The students came up with a design that most closely matched the content of the new module evaluation, but that used the structure of the old module evaluation form. Only one question about preparation and organisation of classes, was included from the old evaluation form. Only two questions were added by the students, one about the value of peer feedback and one about the influence of the course on self-reflection. Otherwise, discussion focused on which questions to include from the new institutional module evaluation form. A substantial proportion of the questions included were about teaching approaches and influences on learning, suggesting the importance placed on these elements by students on a Professional Education programme. All students completed the form that they designed at the end of the module.

Project Outcomes

There is no previous data available for comparison with the outcomes of these new modules. Therefore, we have not gathered specific data to try to compare previous and current module

outcomes. However, the new module evaluation projects appear to have had a number of beneficial outcomes.

Students have gained a sound understanding of the principles and practicalities of action research methodology and evaluation research through involvement in the projects. Students have anecdotally reported increased confidence in carrying out small-scale collaborative research projects due to taking part in this work. Currently, ten of the students from the first module are meeting regularly with the module co-ordinator to write a journal article and organise a seminar presentation based on the student experiences of taking part in the project. The project team is carrying out further evaluation to elicit student views of being involved in the action research project.

Other benefits have included an increase in student control over what is evaluated. Indeed, students have evaluated parts of the module that might not normally have been focused upon and consequently staff have gained understanding of issues that are important to students. For example, one question focused on views of the desirable number of face-to-face contact hours within the module - an issue staff had not considered evaluating.

The two projects have provided valuable information to inform the way these modules will run in the future. Continuing work with students provides an opportunity for students' voices to be heard more clearly within evaluation processes. The increased student ownership and control of module evaluation processes contributes to enhancing the quality and quantity of information gathered about these new modules.

Many of these outcomes contribute to a view of 'research as a social practice' (Brew, 2006:84) and begin to encourage academics to engage students in the world of research. Early student feedback about the project has included the following comments: "It made me realise how much I had learned in a short time", "I liked the whole process as it seemed to make sense to me", and "It made me realise that I had actually understood quite a lot."

Conclusions

These small scale module evaluation projects offer many beneficial outcomes as outlined above. Currently many of the benefits are reported anecdotally, and there is a need for further evaluation of the outcomes of these projects. The further evaluation planned by students will be a valuable contribution to the information already collected.

These module evaluation projects have also embraced the aims of student-centred teaching and the challenge of making research-teaching linkages. The key to success in these projects is the handing over of control to students to direct their own learning and to 'learn by doing'. The significant opportunities provided for students to apply their knowledge in practice has enabled them to make significant research-teaching linkages for themselves.

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