**Storying Sheffield:** Setting up a new module in which UG students work alongside people from the city to produce narratives about Sheffield life and their experiences

Brendan Stone (School of English) and Juliet Storey (Learning and Teaching Services)

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**What's the issue?**

The School of English recognises that the lack of social diversity among its student body (students are predominantly white, female and middle class) may have an impact on students' learning and their preparation for life beyond the University. It also feels that this might discourage people from more diverse backgrounds from applying to study at the School.

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**What happened next?**

Undergraduate students began a module in which they worked alongside people who have tended to be socially excluded and whose voices are less likely to be heard and studied. This year, the ‘non-undergraduates’ have been long-term users of mental health services. The University waived their fees and they were registered as students for the duration of the course.

There were 32 students studying on the module; 17 short course (external participants) and 15 long course (undergraduates). Initial sessions covered many areas: narrative as a research method; listening skills; representing life stories using creative means; using images to represent narrative; telling stories through objects; and the history of the imagination. These sessions were led by a wide variety of speakers from within the University, providing short-course and long-course students with the same academic input.

After this, both sets of students worked together to produce works of narrative drawn from the lives and imaginations of the external participants. Outside of the seminars, the undergraduate students organised and promoted an exhibition at which the creative work was showcased and the short-course students received their university certificates. www.storyingsheffield.com has been set up to tell the story of the module and to host students’ work.

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**What can we learn?**

- It is crucial to consult colleagues in a variety of academic and professional areas, particularly in mental health services.
- It is difficult logistically to register students on short courses. Make sure a procedure is in place.
- There should be a role for a Key Worker, who has a pre-existing relationship with the service-users on the course, in order to provide support and expertise.

- Undergraduate students should feel prepared for the unstructured approach to the course. They need the right level of guidance at the outset to ensure that they can approach their work creatively while being reassured that they are on the right track.

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http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/lets/inclusive
Identifying ways to enhance the inclusivity of policies and practice in the School of Education

Terry Lamb, Michelle Moore (both Educational Studies) and Andrea Bath (Learning and Teaching Services)

What's the issue?

There are examples of good practice in some programmes relating to inclusion of disabled students, these could be shared across the School. We wanted to gather evidence from past students to provide a basis on which to identify gaps and areas for improvement in the School’s policies and practice.

In addition, the School offers a Foundation Degree programme, in Working with Communities, which attracts students from a different sector of the population – many of whom experience financial barriers to study. We wanted to understand the types of support that these students access, and what other areas of assistance might be beneficial to enable them to complete their studies and progress to the BA Honours Degree.

What did the students say?

**PGCE students:**

- "My dyslexia makes it difficult for me to express myself during group work, and when I'm writing on the board on placement."
- "If you have dyslexia, application forms can be difficult."
- "Before I applied, it was really helpful when a member of staff gave me specific advice about getting experience in different schools."
- "The clerical officers are very helpful."
- "Being dyslexic, it made me feel a lot more comfortable when one of my tutors disclosed to me their own dyslexia."
- "When I applied for jobs the support was brilliant."
- "I didn't know whether to disclose my disability at the application stage."

**Working with Communities Foundation Degree students:**

- "We want to know what support is available and how to access it, both financially and for the course."
- "I would like to stay on for a BA course, but finances will be difficult."
- "I've got children at home, and childcare costs a lot."
- "If you have dyslexia, application forms can be difficult."
- "I'm not sure I'd be able to balance a BA with my job."
- "If you have dyslexia, application forms can be difficult."

What can we learn?

- Departmental staff time and support time is vital – without the funding we would not be able to collect the interview data.
- Dyslexic students feel that peers and some staff in partner schools poorly understood their disability.
- Financial issues are the main challenge for students on the Working with Communities Foundation Degree and this impacts on their likelihood to continue with their academic studies.

What happened next?

The first strand explored the experience of PGCE students who had a declared disability from the point of application through to entering the workplace. Students from the past three years were interviewed by researchers between March and May 2009 and the results were collated and analysed.

The second strand looked at issues and financial barriers to study amongst students on the Working with Communities Foundation Degree, using an on-line survey for the current cohort of Year 1 and Year 2 students. Students were asked to indicate the type(s) of issues that affect them during their studies, such as unemployment, redundancy, low income, childcare costs, funding problems and ill health. The survey also explored what type of support they access, who helps them, what additional support might help and whether there were barriers to the continuation of their studies.

The findings from both projects were shared with the School, alongside some suggestions – made by students – for the enhancement of the students’ experience.

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As part of a broader drive to improve the quality of the learning experience for its students, the Department sees the need to develop an understanding of what makes students feel part of a community. Building on changes already undertaken, it is identified that one of the ways in which this community can be developed is through the integration of more contact time for Level 1 students through seminars.

Focus groups were initiated in order to identify required changes and recognise the success of existing examples of good practice.

The respondents were engaged on a number of issues: induction; contact time; personal support and dissertation supervision; student mentors; learning and teaching and assessment methods; greater challenges in Level 1; a sense of community; changes already undertaken within the Department. The responses to these areas were crucial in informing the Department’s approach to inclusion.

Seminars can be increased to foster a sense of community from staff to students.

Inductions are important; using them to encourage community between Levels 1, 2 and 3 students can be really beneficial.

Student mentors can be crucial in smoothing the transition to University life, but connections must be made early and frequently.

Learning and teaching methods can be deployed to get students working together and develop community in academic interactions.

Student ambassadors can be created to work on induction and ‘welcome’ activities; encouraging peer-to-peer support and engendering community from the outset.

Postgraduates can play a key role in supporting undergraduate students.

Personal tutors should contact students as soon as possible prior to intro week.

Personal tutors should set out their role early on, and let their students know what they can offer.

Personal tutors can encourage their students to meet each other, holding small sessions to encourage social and communal aspects of induction.
Using digital audio interventions to enhance the student learning experience in the Department of Automatic Control and Systems Engineering

Anthony Rossiter (Department of Automatic Control and Systems Engineering) and Alison Griffin (Learning and Teaching Services)

What's the issue?

The use of digital audio recorders is widespread amongst students with learning disabilities or with English as an additional language. By enabling the use of recorders for all students the learning experience can be enhanced. It’s also important to see how student generated audio can be embedded into the curriculum and to explore what benefits that can bring.

What did the students say?

"I can listen back to lectures at my own pace. As a student with English as an additional language, this is very helpful."

"At university, you need to take responsibility for your own learning and so you need to find out what works best for you."

"There was a time when I thought I had lost it and felt like some part of myself was missing because I was so used to using it. When I found it I was really happy."

"If I misunderstand things I can listen back to my recordings for clarification, rather than immediately having to ask the tutor."

"We can tailor the use of the recordings for our own needs."

"When a tutor gives me advice on the way to approach an assessment, I can record it and share the information with my course mates."

What happened next?

This project temporarily extended the provision of recorders to all Level 1 students, encouraging the use of the devices to allow students to support, enhance and personalise their learning. Students were encouraged to play back and listen to recordings of all learning interactions, enabling them to reflect, refresh their memories; re-engage their thoughts; and deepen their level of learning.

Students decided for themselves which situations they recorded and how they used their recordings to benefit their experiences. This led to the creation of an online resource that made students aware of the full range of possibilities to enhance their learning, as identified by their peers in focus groups.

What can we learn?

- Ensure recorders are available from the beginning of Semester 1 so students can start to use them from the outset and they become an integrated part of learning in the Department.
- In a situation where many students are likely to be recording, e.g. guest lectures, consider producing a single recording available to all students via MOLE.
- Students recognised that this was a tool to supplement and enhance their learning and planned to download visual learning resources such as lecture notes and slides to complement their recordings.
- Because of the frequent use of equations and symbols in calculations, students emphasised the importance of visual learning and recordings were not always helpful.
- Students were clear that recording lectures was not a substitute for note taking as they would still take notes when listening back to lectures. In fact, students emphasised that note taking would become more focussed and targeted than in a lecture situation where students tended to write everything down.
- Taking notes retrospectively allowed students to consider the entirety of the lecture first.

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Students arrive at university with vastly differing educational experiences and we need to take a more pro-active stance in managing the transition. We need to help students to settle in by being clear about what is expected of them. A key strategy is to get students to engage with the idea of taking responsibility for their own learning, offering them a range of means to develop their study skills.

**What's the issue?**

Students need support during the transition from school to university; they need guidance in the ways that they can take responsibility for their own learning.

**What the students say?**

**What happened next?**

Plato Kapranos, a lecturer in the Department of Materials Engineering, had been offering a questionnaire to students on his modules to help them discover their learning and thinking styles. However, many of the students who took part were already in Level 3 and he wanted to introduce the concept to students at the start of their university career and extend the questionnaire across the Department.

The Inclusive Learning and Teaching Project held a focus group for students who had already completed the questionnaire. They confirmed that it was beneficial and offered more points of interest. After the consultation, it was suggested to academic staff in the Department that there should be a session on learning and teaching styles for all incoming students during the induction period.

Plato led a short session during Induction Week which introduced key ideas and then followed up with a longer session during the Department’s Study Skills Week, later in Semester 1.

**What can we learn?**

- Students need support during the transition from school to university; they need guidance in the ways that they can take responsibility for their own learning.
- It’s important that students are able to perceive the connections and the value to be derived from this exercise.
- Students need support during the transition from school to university; they need guidance in the ways that they can take responsibility for their own learning.
- Students thrive on being involved in their own education.
- Students welcome being consulted about their education.
- An active dialogue about learning and teaching between staff and students can help to avoid misunderstandings and create common aims.

"It's good to have 'learning and thinking styles' included in Skills Week."

"We would like to test these ideas with 'hands on' activities."

"We want to see our needs and concerns reflected."

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The way in which teaching material is communicated to students is an obvious area for development. Most teaching materials are available online via MOLE but in many cases they are in limited formats, for example, online handouts or publications. Using podcasts and screencasts to add to the range of teaching methods would allow students to choose how they access the material. This approach would benefit all students by raising accessibility and taking into account individual learning styles.

The School of Law decided to review its methods of teaching delivery as well as its student support mechanisms to ensure that they are as inclusive as possible and in line with best practice for the sector.

An audit was carried out to establish what learning and teaching methods were already being used and how much academic staff knew about the subject. The project team then set about researching the inclusive teaching strategies in other Russell Group universities, with the Open University being identified for its comprehensive and sympathetic treatment of the subject. Details of the relevant links to the Open University website were included in the material made available to the School of Law.

Material was made available in both electronic and hard copy format and it was agreed that three booklets should be produced for distribution to teaching staff, on the subjects of inclusive learning and teaching methods; podcasting; and screencasting.

Members of staff in the School were briefed on the use of screencasting and podcasting by Dr Kate Campbell-Pilling (School of Law) and Dr Graham McElearney (Learning and Teaching Services). The staff were impressed by the relatively easy means of integrating and deploying these methods into their teaching, and identified numerous benefits for their students’ learning, particularly on issues of clarification and revision.

Dr Adrian Powell (Learning and Teaching Services) then led a demonstration of a new software system, Echo360, which captures a lecture at the time of delivery and makes it available in a number of formats. Students can either watch or listen to the lecture again in conjunction with any powerpoint slides or they can download it as a podcast.

The Inclusive Learning and Teaching Project is a benefit to all students, not just those with disabilities.

Be prepared to encounter opposition if trying to change the established teaching methods.

Be flexible and realistic about what you are trying to achieve.

Bringing together academic, technical and support staff allows for a collaborative exchange of skills.

Web 2.0 has many benefits for learning and teaching; it is important to keep up with the latest developments in technology.

The greater the variety of teaching methods, the more inclusive teaching becomes.

What's the issue?

What happened next?

What did the students say?

What can we learn?

“I find screencasts really useful for reminding myself of key points from lectures.”

“Podcasts are an accessible and engaging way of learning.”

“Using these methods is really helpful for revision during the exam period.”

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What did the students say?

**Level 1 tutorial system students:**

"If I'm having difficulties I'll contact the Department first; the staff and tutors are approachable."

"We like having regular tutor meetings and learning in small groups."

**Erasmus/Year Abroad and non-standard entry and mature students:**

"It's so useful being able to do more core reading through online resources, it would be great to have more digital resources."

"As an Erasmus student, it's really good to be consulted on modules even though we don't register until we arrive back; it shows the Department is thinking of our needs and requirements."

What can we learn?

- Tutorials should be closely integrated into the curriculum of the module, specifically linking the topics covered in lectures with the tutorials and essays.
- Keep Erasmus/Year Abroad students ‘in the loop’ on module choices and registration when they are away from the University.
- ‘Welcome’ is vital for enabling students to feel relaxed and well informed about their learning. This does not only apply to Level 1 students, but those who may be returning from a year abroad, a leave of absence, joining from another institution, or from non-traditional backgrounds.
- Structures should be developed so that when mature/part-time students have an issue, there is appropriate tutorial provision.
- A ‘welcome pack’ could be devised for returning students, and students entering the Department at a level other than Level 1.
- The Departmental website would benefit from a revamp, with particular attention paid to the Erasmus/Year Abroad pages.

What happened next?

A project was conceived to develop a Welcome Diversity model for the Department of Archaeology. There was an emphasis on using induction to welcome students who may have a diverse range of needs and requirements, e.g. students who are returning from leave of absence, part-time students from the Institute of Life Long Learning, students transferring from other institutions, mature students, students for whom English is not their first language and students with disabilities, as well as standard entry students at Level 1. Student opinion was canvassed through questionnaires, focus groups and interviews, to identify and engage the student voice. This was done in order to extend the scope of the project and to ensure that the Department’s Welcome Diversity model therefore caters for incoming students from all backgrounds and levels of entry.

What's the issue?

A relatively large number of students enter their degree programmes through non-standard routes and therefore they have non-traditional requirements. The Department operates a flexible approach to students taking leave of absence and entering at non-standard entry points, it is felt that the induction of these students on their return would benefit from further attention. Induction for the relatively high number of mature students and Erasmus entrants also deserves special attention. While there is not a perceived problem with any particular area in the Department, there is a degree of uncertainty over the support levels for certain student groupings. It is also felt that the standard Level 1 personal and academic tutorial system would benefit from a similar review.
The biggest danger in asking students for feedback is not doing anything with it, or doing something but not communicating the actions back to the students. The Department of Mechanical Engineering has traditionally looked for ways to close the feedback loop e.g. email students the actions taken, etc. However, students often feel removed from the process and therefore disinclined to speak out, believing that nothing can be done. The value of feedback must be that it affects change or reflection, therefore when we, as a department, ask for feedback we must be seen to be acting upon it.

What's the issue?

Henry Brunskill, a final year MEng student, initiated a student forum, with the aim of capturing students' feedback to enhance the inclusive learning and teaching environment in the Department. Students were invited to drop in to the forum and leave any comments they had. The forum captured the thoughts of over 70 students in a period of two hours, with a total of over 120 comments. The comments were written up and divided between inclusive learning and teaching issues and curriculum issues, and were distributed to the relevant committees. Actions taken were communicated back to students.

Under the leadership of Dr Jen Rowson, and in partnership with the students, some ‘spin-out’ activities emerged. Class shout-outs took place regularly where student representatives encouraged their peers to provide feedback to the Department, and in turn, let the students know the responses. Staff were also encouraged to close the feedback loop by publically communicating any actions to students on the Department’s plasma screen and during lectures.

What happened next?

What did the students say?

"We value knowing what actions have been taken in response to our feedback and if no action has been taken we want to know what the reasons are."

What can we learn?

- Closing the feedback loop increases dialogue between students and the Department; enabling more students to come forward to help the improve their provision.
- Having a student working on a project of this nature from the start – like Henry Brunskill – shows the power of the student voice and enhances engagement.
- Students thrive on being involved in their own education.
- Creating an active dialogue about learning and teaching between staff and students can help to avoid misunderstanding and can create common aims.
The School of Nursing and Midwifery wanted to learn more about its students’ relationships with the University and their perceptions of what the University has to offer. The School’s students aren’t typical of the University; many of them are in work, often in mid-career. As a result, the modes of study are part-time or continuing professional development. In addition, the School is located in a non-central position. Naturally, these factors may contribute to a feeling of exclusion for Nursing and Midwifery students. With this in mind, the School wanted to know what their students’ expectations are, and whether a better sense of community could be developed within the School and with the University.

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**What did the students say?**

“We would be interested in participating in discussions about how the School is governed.”

“We feel remote from the rest of the University. It feels like the University facilities and information are for full-time, main-campus students.”

“If our feedback is having an impact we will get more involved.”

“A web resource – with information about our courses and the support that is available – would be very useful.”

**What happened next?**

Focus groups were set up with two different sets of students. They looked to find out what students wanted from their time at Sheffield and tried to identify barriers to student participation in the School and, more broadly, within the governance of the Faculty. The outcomes were collated and the School considered possible action points.

Web provision was developed to enable part-time and/or distance learning students to engage with student representation and governance activities. Further student consultations took place to develop the resource.

The resource holds key information and contacts and has a uSpace page specifically for part-time students, incorporating agendas and minutes from key committees in the School, and discussion threads and feedback on topics important to the students. These components are adaptable and can be developed and enhanced to meet new challenges.

**What can we learn?**

- Different types of students need different support.
- Assumptions should not be made about what students deem as important or see as issues.
- Students welcome being consulted about their education and being actively involved in shaping their learning experiences.

- The University still has work to do in communicating to students about how it operates and how they can be involved.

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