

Evaluation through story-telling! – a tool for improving teaching

Does evaluation make any difference to improving teaching? **Gina Sherwood** describes her research among undergraduates, which indicates that a creative approach to evaluation through story-telling can be more fruitful.

■ ■ ■ The need for a more creative approach to evaluation

Collecting student evaluations are a feature of policy and practice within Higher Education (HE) in England and across the world. This article introduces a new way

to capture undergraduate's evaluation of their learning experiences through writing a story. The expected outcomes of student feedback are: to improve and develop teaching, to understand the current educational attainment of students, for quality assurance and human



resources purposes (Hoon, Oliver, Szpakowska, & Newton, 2015; Seale, 2010; Stein Spiller, Terry, Harris, Deaker, & Kennedy, 2013). Currently the most popular way to capture this feedback is through questionnaires such as Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) and the national student survey (NSS) that not only inform current practice but also impact on the overall ranking of the institution (Ashwin, 2017; Lenton, 2015). This is more pertinent since the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) which grades a university's standard of teaching as Bronze, Silver or Gold and the withdrawal of the student number cap which have led to the sector becoming more marketised.

However, despite the positive intentions of evaluation, scrutiny of the results often leaves the HE teacher with more questions than answers. A further problem is that its effectiveness relies on a positive response to the results. Research has shown that the interpretation of the results, sometimes leads to questions about the value of the student's contribution, a negative impact on the HE teacher's self-esteem and in some cases confusion as to what to do to change practice, all of which suggest that finding new ways to capture student views is useful (Arthur, 2009; Chan et al., 2014; Golding & Adam, 2016; Nasser-Abu Alhija, 2017; Stein et al., 2013; Surgenor, 2013; Winchester & Winchester, 2013).

In this research forty-seven undergraduates studying in England were asked to frame their views by writing a story about their learning experience. The results explain how applying this method of evaluation can shape teaching in HE because it provided additional information that would have otherwise been missed.

■■■ The traditional approach to student evaluation

Questionnaires using a combination of Likert scales and free-flow comments are given to students at the end of their studies in the NSS and used to gain feedback during the undergraduate's years at university which means that Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) surveys are completed at regular intervals during their studies. They are typically distributed at the end of modules which means that students are often asked to complete several questionnaires each linked to a unit

or subject of study within a very short space of time presenting a challenge in terms of reliability and validity (Chan, Luk, & Zeng, 2014). Spooren, Mortelmans, & Thijssen (2012) contend that this can mean that students fail to fully reflect on the statement they are grading.

However, the results are potentially significant because they are intended to shape improvements to the content, delivery and assessment of the module the following year (Dunworth & Santiago Sanchez, 2016; Flint et al., 2009). So, the purpose of student evaluations is to meet university requirements, shape and enhance teaching practice and to clarify effective performance facilitating:

... reflection, encouraging dialogue about learning, promoting self-esteem and providing opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance (Dunworth & Santiago Sanchez, 2016, p.3).

Research indicates that quality feedback from students can increase the HE teacher's understanding of what the learning experience was like for those engaged in the module (Dunworth & Santiago Sanchez, 2016; Flint et al., 2009, Garrett, 2011). So, when the HE teacher responds to student evaluations a partnership between the student and the member of staff that influences both teaching and learning becomes established (Jenkins, Jones & Ward 2001; Winchester & Winchester 2013). Engaging with the feedback from students 'pedagogic intelligence' is a possible outcome because teaching methods and objectives can be explained and undergraduates invited to feedback on their effectiveness (O'Donovan, Price & Rust, 2008). Caspersen (2017) explains how this contributes to the definition of education as "what teachers should be teaching (the *intent*) to what students should end up knowing (the *result*)" (p.3). In this context evaluation becomes an active procedure that Grebennikov & Shah (2013) report influences the priorities that are embedded in the university education strategy. For example, each institution communicates specific targets for teaching such as innovative, inspiring, transformational and raising expectations. To investigate this further the responses of the HE teacher need to be scrutinised.

HE teachers' responses to student evaluations

The attitude and responses of the HE teacher to the evaluation feedback has been a focus for many researchers (e.g. Arthur, 2009; Chan et al., 2014; Golding & Adam, 2016; Nasser-Abu Alhija, 2017; Stein et al., 2013; Surgenor, 2013; Winchester & Winchester, 2013). Participants in these research investigations share a variety of views and responses, some of them demonstrating a negative reaction to evaluation results that extends to the students who have completed them. For example, in Surgenor's (2013) research participants argued that students are unqualified to make a judgement making their responses invalid. Spooren et al., (2012) suggest that in some cases student feedback represents a popularity contest with undergraduates responding according to their relationship with the teacher. Additionally, Arthur (2009) found that for some HE teachers the results led to them feeling upset which then became a barrier to making a change to their practice.

Golding & Adam (2016) also found that there were limited outcomes because sometimes the HE teacher believes that they do not need to alter their practice or understand what they need to do to improve. These findings reinforce the notion that the response

of the HE teacher to the grading and comments on the evaluation is likely to affect whether and how they respond to the feedback (Arthur 2009; Golding & Adam, 2016). Simultaneously, the argument that student feedback is important is robust suggesting that investigating different methods and approaches of finding out about students' learning experiences is a worthwhile pursuit. So, given these reservations, there seemed to be scope for exploring alternatives ways of evaluating student experiences which would lead to a greater change in teaching practices.

Story-telling

Using stories as a tool to communicate key messages has a long history characterised within fables, fairy tales and parables. This observation may explain the coherence that is often demonstrated in this type of writing. Bolton (2011) suggests that the process of story-telling enables the writer to choose a personal context to convey information. Telling stories is described by Lambert (2010) as a different and less formal way to communicate using a natural voice. Bruner (2002, cited by Bolton, 2014, p.70) explains that "Our stories impose a structure, a compelling reality on what we experience," they offer access to and articulate what we know, think, believe, feel and remember. The process of writing in



this way provides the writer with self-purpose because they identify personal values in their story (Bolton, 2007; Sherwood & Nind, 2014). This literature shaped the rationale to ask students to write a story about their learning experiences in order to add to and enrich their feedback.

Evaluation through story-telling – the research project

Forty-seven students were asked to hand write a story that focused on an evaluation of their learning with no direction concerning format or length so that they could decide on how to communicate their key messages. It was clearly explained that it was not an assessed task. Forty-one of the students were female, six, male and their ages ranged between nineteen and forty. Groups 1 and 2 worked individually; Group 3 formed clusters of five students and were provided with flip chart pens and large sheets of paper. The lack of boundaries and direction could have potentially led to anxiety for some students but in this research each individual and group entered into the writing process willingly and with enthusiasm.

The participants are presented in three groups:

Group 1: First-year students who wrote a story about their learning experiences over the previous year at university (N=15).

Group 2: Third-year students who wrote a story about a single lecture (N=12).

Group 3: Third-year students who formed small groups to compose a story about their learning experiences from one module they had studied over the previous year (N=20).

The location of this research was the Humanities and Social Science Faculty in a university in England. For the purposes of anonymity and privacy the specific degree and module titles are not used. Permission to publish the content of their story in a journal was requested from each student. They were all told that the paper would accurately represent their story through the use of verbatim extracts and that any individual identifying features would be removed. The procedure

was ratified by the university ethics committee. All forty-seven students agreed that their stories be included.

The analysis of the stories was completed in stages, firstly becoming familiar with the data by reading it repeatedly and asking a colleague to read it out loud. The next stage involved data reduction through a process of making detailed notes following Silverman's (2014) recommendation to record norms, orders, patterns, rules and structures. Similarities and differences in themes were identified, for example, in the first round of analysis information was clustered into specific aspects of the students' learning experience, the role of feelings, making connections with others and changes over time. The intention was to use the categories that aligned with these themes to inform and enhance teaching in higher education.

Extracts from the stories are presented in the findings that are discussed to explain how they can shape teaching in practice.

What was discovered

The purpose of analysing students' stories was to identify information about teaching that facilitates pedagogical reflection; identifying methods that are effective and developments that can be made to enhance practice (Chan et al., 2014; Winchester & Winchester, 2013).

When I started university I didn't know what to expect. Once I had moved into halls I felt sad and weird as it was my first time away from home. My first day was awkward as I didn't know anyone. Group 1

A shy girl decided to come to university. She was a very quiet individual and didn't know anybody else that was attending. Group 1

Tears were visible on their faces, feelings of fear, uncertainty and despair in their expressions. Group 3

These students' extracts illustrated the role of their emotions including anxiety and feelings of isolation that according to Mackenzie (2008, p.81) are natural because "learning is emotionally charged and far

from safe.” On reflection it seemed possible that these negative feelings may have become a barrier to their learning. One way to address this would be to apply a constructivist approach, planning focused group work in the first session (ibid). The purpose of this activity is to facilitate connections and support systems within student relationships. Further individual support could be introduced via a mentoring system with students from years two and three supporting those who have recently arrived at university. These actions would move beyond the pedagogic practice of transferring knowledge to focus on building positive relationships between students and students and the HE teacher with the intention to make teaching more effective (Arthur, 2009; Hagenauer & Volet, 2014; Surgenor, 2013; Dunworth & Santiago Sanchez, 2016).

The opportunity of writing a story led to some students applying creativity introducing characters to illustrate what they had learnt.

Once upon a time, there lived a prince who was learning his alphabet. Many scholars tried and failed to teach the prince, who hated learning. But then the phonics fairy spread and sprinkled her magic dust teaching the boy phonics. And he loved the fairy and her fairy dust and became the phonics prince. Group 2

Once upon a time there was an exhausted lady. She was exhausted but didn't know she was. ...Along the way she reached a crossroads where she found new, surprising and inspiring objects. She longed to add them to her bags, but had no room. Suddenly she found herself in a situation; she had to make a choice; does she continue on her path with her once most precious things or embrace the new surprisingly inspiring objects? She poured the old things, no longer shiny and precious on the ground and scooped up the new inspiring objects, placing them carefully in her bags. She confidently continued on the path excited by what she might find and who she would meet. Group 3

This style of writing, independently chosen, illustrated the benefit of providing choice and creative opportunities to explain their learning experience. This could be developed through more consistent use of story-telling and in order for this to be successful the HE teacher

would need to convey their passion for the subject and a positive attitude to the results (Derounian 2017).

...I can see myself now as a person who is able enough to better communicate through better language skills. Group 1

In this extract the student communicates how the role of learning and reflection influenced their feelings of self-esteem. Weiner-Levy (2008) identifies how the university experience changes an undergraduate's attitude towards themselves and others. In teaching this can be promoted through applying a student-centred approach that acknowledges individual progress. Garratt (2011), Mackenzie (2008) and Menis' (2017) suggest that when students become engaged as active participants in their own learning they become equipped to recognise and value their progress. A key part of this pedagogical practice involves building positive relationships with the students which Hagenauer & Volet, (2014) claim enhances their satisfaction, commitment and motivation to the learning process.

In class we discussed the partnership between counting and stories/songs, the relationship between all of these areas and the language used. It became apparent that there are a very large number of songs that involve number. This was discussed in class and we came to an agreement that children learn well through rhyme. Then we explored different types of song/ rhyme/ story. Group 2

As I was introduced to the idea of phonics and language I began to consider how language and intonation is used in story-telling, how repetition helps children become excited in their knowledge by the story. Group 2

These stories contained examples of how the objectives within the lecture had led to students merging knowledge and an understanding of practice with children. Although positive, a review of omissions in students' stories highlighted how teaching could be enhanced. For example, a key outcome for undergraduates is to include references to the indicative reading that is shared within the lecture. The rationale for this follows Arthur (2009) and Mackenzie's advice to integrate literature to



facilitate an in-depth approach to the subject. An additional benefit of this approach is to broaden students' awareness and deepen their interest (Jenkins et al, 2001).

To improve and encourage interest and investment in students' learning thought-provoking topics that produce unclear answers are recommended (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Derounian, 2017). Deciding to encourage students to evaluate and think critically rather than restate facts and ideas for practice requires careful scrutiny of planning and identifying opportunities to integrate this into lectures and seminars more consistently. In summary analysis of the stories merges personal and professional aspects of practice and can lead to adopting a more challenging pedagogy that encourages collaborative co-learning and a candid exchange of ideas, openness, dialogue and debate (Garratt, 2011; Golubchikov, 2015; Hagenauer & Volet, 2014; Weiner-Levy, 2008).

■ ■ ■ **Conclusions – capturing and communicating learning experiences**

The extracts from stories that were written by

undergraduates and interpreted above explain how this evaluation method provides opportunities to reconfigure pedagogic practice. Story-telling also applies reflective practice recommended by Bolton, 2011 and Briggs & Tang 2011. Although the findings within this research were useful in eliciting student evaluation of their learning in a different way to the traditional surveys the process of story-telling also has its limitations. For example, students may hide their true feelings, thoughts and experiences for a variety of reasons such as, their lack of confidence, or due to fear that there will be consequences to sharing negative observations (Golubchikov, 2015; Khan, 2013).

This research began with a review of the current methods of gathering written evaluation using NSS and SET surveys and noting that the information they contain is limited (Chan et al., 2014; Lenton, 2015). The three groups of students whose stories are contained in this research provided information that led to a clearer understanding of what had worked well in teaching and how this could be enhanced in future. The role of professional development is to find ways



to go beyond the transmission of information (Biggs & Tang, 2011).

Although, in congruence with Flanagan's (2014) research, the students who took part in this research were positive and in many cases excited by the activity of story-telling the results are limited to one faculty within a single university. It is unlikely that students would respond in the same way across all subject disciplines. Some students may be confused by the idea of telling a story about their learning, unsure of its purpose and it may make them feel uncomfortable. Where students are unfamiliar or reticent to try story-telling, finding ways to be flexible, involving them in solutions such as offering greater anonymity or perhaps using the university's virtual learning environment, journals, film, audio or building with

LEGO ® may be helpful (Brown, 2017; Carless, 2014; Winchester & Winchester, 2014).

The research described took place within a higher education context but may also have clear implication for earlier phases of education. For example, where story-telling is used to shape teaching, outcomes such as enabling students to make connections with each other and utilize support systems mean that they are better equipped to manage the demands of secondary education and beyond. Additionally, when teachers introduce the opportunity for students to write stories they become a springboard for debate, exchanging ideas and questioning texts. As students begin to find a voice for their ideas there is the potential for them to develop confidence and view learning in a wider context.

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This article recommends further research, particularly in discovering students' views on the process of story-telling. Although the NSS and SET surveys have and continue to provide useful and easily analysed snapshots of the student evaluation of learning, a wider range of options for capturing qualitative information is recommended (Hoon et al., 2015). When students write stories about their learning experience they are likely to include different information to that recorded on evaluation surveys. In this research story-telling provided an insight into the minds of students which communicated information about their

learning experiences that might otherwise have been overlooked or missed.

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