

A PEDAGOGY OF CO-CREATION: WHAT IMPROVEMENTS DOES CO-CREATION BRING TO VOCATIONAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS?

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An individual can't create anything itself. All of our dreams come true with the cooperation and co-creation of other souls (Hashmi, 2014).

INTRODUCTION

We start from the premise that education involves more than achievement of academic outcomes, development of graduate capabilities and delivery of 'work-ready' graduates to our ever-needy industries. There are also profound social and personal outcomes to which our students aspire – to foster fulfilling relationships and make meaningful contributions to their communities that will ultimately enhance the quality of living in our societies.

In this article, we describe how co-creation projects provide rich opportunities for students' social and personal development. In an editorial on Māori education, Russel Bishop describes the moral imperative by means of which educators are asked to take a three-layered view, where educational outcomes include social and personal outcomes, as well as academic outcomes (Bishop, R., editorial in Timperley et al., 2007). Personal education outcomes include self-actualisation, improved confidence and self-esteem, and enhanced career prospects. Social outcomes include enhanced teacher and peer relationships and development of interpersonal and networking skills. Suffice to say, academic outcomes (discipline-specific knowledge, acquisition of new skills and graduate capabilities) are given the highest priority by most education providers, while the priority given to social and personal outcomes is dependent on the importance placed on these by individual educators.

For educators wishing to extend their repertoire and engage with students in co-creation or partnership projects, we present the pros and cons of these pedagogical approaches and arrive at partnership learning communities as a preferred model. This article is a reflection on our shared experience as a staff member and a student; in it we hope to capture examples of best practice co-creation in vocational education and generate a sense of optimism that barriers to working in student–staff partnerships can be overcome.

BACKGROUND

We are now entering a student-centred era in tertiary education in Aotearoa New Zealand, ushered in by the reform of vocational education, resulting in the merger of 16 Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics into a single national institution, now known as Te Pūkenga – New Zealand Institute of Skills and Technology. A primary objective of Te Pūkenga – New Zealand Institute of Skills and Technology is to operate with the learner experience at the centre, aiming in part to “ensure the unique needs of ākonga, including Māori, Pacific Peoples, disabled and other under-served learners, are met through co-design with ākonga, their whānau and our stakeholders”

(Te Pūkenga, 2021). One way to achieve this objective is to keep the “Student Voice” at the forefront. Another way that we explore in this article is through staff–student partnerships.

Here we describe the development of a staff–student partnership to create the inaugural Student Voice Symposium (SVS), Te Reo Tuatahi, at Otago Polytechnic (OP) in 2020. A subgroup of OP’s Learning and Teaching Development (LTD) team worked with third-year OP students undertaking internships to deliver the SVS in September 2020. This co-creation project incorporated aspects of professional practice into the students’ learning environment. By modelling professional behaviours and creating a trusting, high-performance environment, the team observed that the students responded well to LTD’s non-hierarchical approach.

In 2020, former OP student Nathan Laurie was in his final year of the Bachelor of Applied Management, with an event management major. As his research project, the SVS was a collaborative effort between OP students and staff; it displayed concepts of collaborative learning, experiential learning, partnership, critical thinking and exploring what it means to be a student in the modern world. During this process, Nathan was encouraged to co-author a research article with Amy Benians of LTD on co-creation between staff and students in vocational education.

The aims of this reflective article are to:

1. Investigate the pedagogical models relating to co-creation in contemporary research.
2. Reflect on shared experiences as a staff member and a student in order to capture examples of best practice co-creation in vocational education.
3. Finally, share the findings and recommendations of Nathan’s internship report on SVS.

We begin by exploring the benefits of co-creation projects to students, staff and the wider institution. Next, in the discussion section we reflect on the pedagogical models that have enabled co-creation in our vocational learning environment. Then, we consider a model of “partnership learning communities” in supporting both staff and students undertaking co-creation projects and internships, which offer the advantages of being scalable, inclusive and sustainable.

MAKING THE CASE FOR CO-CREATION PROJECTS AS STAFF–STUDENT PARTNERSHIPS

The benefits of co-creation projects in vocational education – firstly, for students, then staff and, finally, for the wider institution – are discussed in this section.

In considering co-creation projects – such as in event planning, research and community-based initiatives – we consider these as part of a broader set of staff–student partnerships in which students can engage as partners with academic staff in higher education (Healy et al., 2014). In vocational education there is a heavy emphasis on producing work-ready and capable graduates, and opportunities for work experience are built into OP’s programmes of study. These include **field-based education** (clinical and industry placements, occupational therapy fieldwork, and so on) and **work-based learning** (such as Aotearoa New Zealand’s managed apprenticeships, or the independent learning pathways for in-work learners offered by the College of Work-based Learning). Hence, it is necessary to distinguish these forms of work experience from co-creation projects and staff–student partnerships, in which the work experience occurs within the educational setting.

Benefits for students

Co-creation projects need to be inbuilt into programmes of study and incorporated into existing curricula and assessments. This has been done for the Bachelor of Applied Management final-year internship, which resulted in the successful SVS co-creation project. Co-creation projects between OP’s students, local businesses and community

groups have led to many exciting collaborations over the years – for example, the Interactive Experience Project (2018) between the Otago Museum and Communication Design Year 3 students. Similar co-creation projects are underway at other Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics such as the Southern Institute of Technology (Cathcart, 2019).

Like field-based learning and work-based learning, co-creation projects allow students opportunities to build their graduate capabilities, albeit in a familiar and safe environment, and to develop interpersonal and professional skills by creating a workplace-like learning environment. Clearly, building on student capabilities or ‘soft skills’ will support their future employability and professionalism. Other aspects of professionalism are learned – for example, time-keeping, being proactive, accountable and self-managing, and taking initiative and responsibility for the success of a project.

Benefits for staff

At the moment, we find ourselves in a neutral predicament characterised by a general apathy towards participation in community-building events that may arise from co-creation projects. Students may see these as surplus to their core education, and many staff are reluctant to take on extra-curricular commitments. To make the case for co-creation projects and engage staff in these important learning opportunities, benefits for staff are outlined below. Furthermore, in the discussion section, the theoretical basis on which learning should occur is examined for co-creation projects and internships through the lens of an alternative pedagogical framework.

Students can engage as partners with academic staff in many areas in higher and tertiary education, with multiple benefits for staff:

- Where students are engaged in learning and teaching – for example, by co-construction of an assessment – the student is given greater visibility into the inner workings of academia and learning and teaching, and achieves a fuller understanding of what was assessed and the purposes of assessment (Nister & Abd Latif, 2020).
- Where students are engaged in curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy, the students’ involvement exceeds mere end-of-course evaluations; they become change agents. In an initiative at the U.K.’s Birmingham City University from 2009 onwards, students (who were paid for up to 100 hours) were involved in creating new learning resources, developing content in new areas and evaluating existing innovations (Nygaard et al., 2013).
- Where students are engaged in inquiry-based research projects, staff can benefit from significant advances in their areas of discipline-specific research. In such a model, students become co-inquirers where staff take the lead, but students are active collaborators. Different levels of student autonomy in directing the research and deciding on the activities engaged in have been explored, creating a model where “student-framed inquiry” is the preferred mode (Levy, 2011, p. 38).
- Where students are engaged in partnership with staff in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL), an academic can extend their own research, hear a different voice and gain a broader perspective. SOTL involves taking a scholarly approach to ensure that one’s teaching is research-informed, evidence-based and shared with one’s peers through publication. Trigwell and Shale (2004) have reimagined SOTL with students as our collaborators, “not just as objects but as connoisseurs” (p. 528) of teaching and learning. Tai Pasetta describes her role as a learning and teaching specialist at an Australian university where she engaged a group of students to organise, scribe, then reflect on an annual assessment symposium (they were paid for 60 hours each but, in reality, did much more). In her dual role, firstly, to support academic staff to adopt an inquiry-based, active learning and teaching approach, and secondly, to support student learning overall at the university, she reflects that “[t]hat disposition – caring for student learning” was the glue that held her network of fellow academics together (Pasetta, 2013).

From a student's perspective, if an educator has a particular 'kaupapa' or knowledge that they wish to explore with students – for example, a social event or research question – the best approach is first to engage with students to gauge their interest in the given topic. One critical step is to discover the mutual curiosity, passion or interest which should pave the way to uncover aligned values and aspirations among the group. Another critical step for educators is to highlight their own challenges with learning and teaching; showing their vulnerability to a trusted group of students should balance the inherent scales of power that typically lean towards the educator or lecturer.

Benefits for the institution

In marketing terms, value arises from co-creation projects at two stages: first, during co-production and, secondly, during interactions between a consumer and the finished product –the “value-in-use” (Dollinger et al., 2018, p. 211). Co-production between teaching staff and students – for example, in the design and development of an event, product or research project – delivers value through the exchange of knowledge, increased interactions with teaching staff and the perception of achievement, empowerment and equity engendered through these interactions. The “value-in-use” of the end-product is enhanced when co-production has occurred as a result of the experience of personalising a product to one's own requirements, and from interactions with the organisation (Dollinger et al., 2018).

In educational terms, we often consider the value-in-use attached to a student's certificate, diploma, degree or postgraduate qualification – has it led them into employment or further study? With student partnerships and co-creation projects, value-in-use is amplified due to the ongoing relationships built on previous interactions during co-production. These can potentially offer elements of innovation, shared learnings and production of further outputs. Institutions engaging in co-creating educational offerings need to develop an awareness of these outputs, to incorporate them into their data collection and showcase them. In addition to student benefits, co-creation projects offer potential enhancements of an institution's reputation, culture and community involvement.

As an example, along with Nathan's internship report, a second report on SVS was written to provide recommendations to Te Pūkenga – New Zealand Institute of Skills and Technology and the Ministry of Education. These two reports provide current examples of co-creation and the learner experience. From Nathan's internship report on how events can enrich the learner experience at OP, valuable recommendations were made, which included:

1. Co-creating collaborative projects that further develop and enhance the OP community.
2. Recreating the intranet site available to OP students and expanding this to include an online calendar of activities available to students.
3. Hiring or assigning an OP staff member as dedicated liaison with the student union for more effective communication.
4. Establishing an OP events committee to meet regularly with Otago Polytechnic Students' Association to discuss short-term and long-term event plans.
5. Assisting the student union through improvements to funding, integration and communication to provide more meaningful events.

While highly specific to our current context, these recommendations provide a sound basis for future event co-creation projects at OP. They are one of many positive outcomes arising from this successful staff–student partnership. Other outcomes include staff and student satisfaction in bringing to completion this event co-creation project, amplification of the Student Voice at a time of change in the vocational education sector, and the enhancement of the reputation of OP as a student-centred and forward-thinking institution in supporting the Student Voice.

DISCUSSION

In this section, we draw on our experiences of co-creating the SVS to help inform future co-creation projects in Aotearoa New Zealand's vocational education sector. During the co-creation process, we adopted a **collaborative learning pedagogy**, in which students and learning and teaching specialists from the LTD unit worked together to share knowledge and learn from each other. This happened as we created a new website, planned a schedule of speakers and workshops and conceptualised the inaugural event. The two-day symposium, planned for September 2020, was offered both face-to-face and online, and would have been moved wholly online if COVID-19 restrictions had prevailed. Fortnightly meetings increased in frequency to weekly, as more responsibility was allocated to students to action items. In contrast, a more teacher-led pedagogical approach was taken with second-year Communication Design students, who were tasked with designing the SVS logo as part of their brand design workshops. This involved taking a **cooperative learning approach**, in which Communication Design students worked with SVS students as clients within a predetermined brief and a teacher-defined end goal (Dooley, 2008).

When designing learning environments for co-creation projects, it is worth considering using both co-operative and collaborative learning, as each draws different responses from the students involved. The collaborative learning space brought passion and enthusiasm from students, who remained committed, while the co-operative learning environment merely encouraged students to make a finite contribution, with no ongoing expectations from them for the rest of the co-creation project.

Event co-creation projects can be seen in the tradition of John Dewey's **experiential learning** (1938) which pairs an active approach in which students are involved in direct experiences with guided reflection, in which they assimilate learnings from those experiences. The advantage of this pedagogical approach is that educators "increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop people's capacity to contribute to their communities" (Association for Experiential Education, 2013, para. 2). In this way, experiential learning experiences have the potential for empowerment of learners, where they not only develop enhanced capabilities, but may also be motivated to put these into action in their communities (Shellman, 2016).

Experiential learning also offers a more holistic, deeper understanding of new knowledge, as it involves immersion in real-life experiences, compared to simulated experiences such as scenarios. In his Bachelor's degree in event management, Nathan carried out practice event planning scenarios as well as planning real events. He notes clear differences between the two, mainly where a higher sense of responsibility was present for the real events. The responsibility here was to actual stakeholders and interested parties, so the consequences were more far-reaching than a mere grade outcome. Many more factors needed to be considered, making for a more accurate depiction of the event planning experience. Hence, we conclude that responsibility, accountability and complexity are incorporated into experiential learning when it is coupled with co-creation.

As a final pedagogical model, we structured our SVS planning committee on a **community of practice (CoP) framework**, with a common purpose/passion; mutual engagement in shared tasks; a shared repository or kete of resources; and distinct roles within the community (Wenger, 1998). Fluid membership allowed for a core community and also more peripheral members with a common interest in the SVS, but with less commitment. For example, two third-year marketing students advised, pitched and implemented the social media marketing of the SVS event. As "legitimate peripheral participants" (Lave & Wenger, 1991), they could easily access resources from our shared repository (e.g., SVS logo and branding); they made a strong contribution to marketing the event, but did not need to take further responsibility for it. The core members brought diverse skills and experience which were vital for the success of the student-led symposium, SVS, in September 2020. Positive feedback was received from the around 40 staff members and 70 students who attended, including national student union representatives from Wellington and Nelson, and a senior Ministry of Education official.

Following the inaugural event, we were left to ponder the future. Firstly, how could the Student Voice be elevated, amplified and harnessed in this changing landscape of vocational education? Secondly, how could we improve equity and engage more students in co-creation projects?

In our imagined future, by creating a community of students and staff working in partnership, we could propel the Student Voice forward into an annual symposium, each year informed by data collection, thematic analysis and reflective learnings from previous events. A pedagogical model that supports enduring and sustainable student partnerships, beyond one-off events and projects, is the building of “**partnership learning communities**” based on a CoP framework of creating learning communities of students and staff (Healey et al., 2014). Notably, shorter-duration programmes in vocational education would require newcomers to be inducted into the community by longer-serving members, which would ensure that collective memories of past events are carried forward. In this way, the continuity and sustainability of this event would be ensured by successive waves of committed students and staff.

Our second question asked if we could improve equity and engage more students in co-creation projects. Kuh (2007) found that, while student partnerships in American universities can deepen student engagement, participation in these can be perceived as elitist or “boutique,” where rich opportunities for student learning are limited to a select few. The creation of partnership learning communities could address issues of **inclusivity, sustainability and scalability** and improve the equity of future co-creation projects by opening these up to more than just a few privileged students.

- For an inclusive model, the advantages for institutions need to be made clear. By opening partnerships up to more students, educational institutions benefit by providing a more equitable student experience, greater opportunities to interact and gain feedback from students, and generate more value through co-creation processes (Dollinger et al. 2018). Notably, staff–student partnerships provide access to the inner workings of educational institutions, which requires an institutional culture of transparency.
- For a sustainable model, student–staff partnerships or co-creation projects need to become part of the curriculum and students’ assessments. Otherwise, these projects will not be prioritised by students, staff or institutions.
- For a scalable model, of the pedagogical models discussed above (collaborative learning, experiential learning, etc.), only partnership learning communities afford the scalability that would be required to extend partnerships and co-creation projects to large numbers of students.

Before entering into partnership learning communities, Healey and colleagues (2014) urge us to reflect on issues of power relationships; remuneration, reward and recognition; and identity. These factors all contribute to – or potentially detract from – the quality of the co-creative process and the overall learner experience.

Power relationships

Power imbalances are innate to the student–staff relationship and will persist in partnership learning communities. Tensions may arise if students are co-producing work for their own assessment or an academic’s research, requiring them to adhere to academic standards or ethical processes, respectively. Conversely, tensions may be eased when students are engaged with staff to co-create assessments, whereby students are given insights into the subject, learning and teaching, and the role of assessment in their learning (Nistor & Abd Latif, 2020). Because educators typically possess the power in a learning environment, they can also redistribute power and enter a more democratic partnership with students (Fielding, 2011). Through our observations, we believe this can be achieved by educators breaking down the status quo, showing their vulnerabilities and treating their students as equals in a co-creative context.

Additionally, this can contribute to culturally inclusive learning environments. Bishop and colleagues have found that educators who proactively build power-sharing into their practice are better able to engage previously marginalised students, who can then “more successfully participate and engage in educational systems on their own culturally constituted terms” (Bishop et al., 2009, p. 736).

Remuneration, reward and recognition

In our vocational educational context, clearly not all internships, fieldwork placements, work-based learning and co-creation projects are created equal! While some provide multiple opportunities for networking, learning and self-promotion, for others the work experience consists of more physical, practical work. Remuneration should be proportionate to the physical work involved. Like employees who are motivated by sufficient reward and recognition for their work, students are in training to become high-calibre employees, so their understanding of reward and recognition should be fostered through their work experience.

Another related issue is future employers' perceptions of students' work experience, where external work experience is more highly valued than work experience acquired within an educational institution (Irwin et al., 2019). The relevance of the work experience was also found to be an important factor. These are important considerations for our learners, who need to consider what work experience to choose, and where to take it.

Identity

Co-creation projects and staff–student partnerships tend to occur as students approach the end of their studies and start to consider the prospect of careers. As with many dramatic changes in life, this places the student in an identity crisis as they transition into a “liminal” phase between a student identity and a new, emerging identity. Named the “liminal phase” after the waxing phase of the moon, this represents a challenging time as students need to appropriate new professional identities (if starting work), move between social groups or attempt to resume further academic studies. Support for students' emergent identities has been shown to occur within communities of practice (CoP) and related partnership learning communities (Islam, 2008). This bolsters our preference for such models, where our students need continuing support from staff and their peers as they move from education into a brave new world of work.

Islam (2008) discusses identity and rituals in organisations, collating studies which link the concepts of individual and collective identity to a sense of commitment, increased motivation, group loyalty, and even the driving force behind effective practice. Through serving a collective purpose, CoPs provide a sense of direction to individuals, hence strengthening their career goals. They were also found to help the individual in realising their identity in relation to others, hence enhancing their interpersonal skills through working in a team (Islam, 2008).

Ultimately, this notion of working with others towards a greater goal is a cornerstone of many career fields, from marketing and construction to sports and social services. We surmise that students would be far more ready to enter team-oriented work environments if genuine processes of co-creation were implemented in their curricula.

CONCLUSION

In this article we have considered pedagogical models that support student learning in co-creation projects at OP. While co-operative and collaborative learning have their relative merits (Dooley, 2008), experiential learning forms the foundation of all real-life learning models (Kolb, 1984; Matsuo, 2015). Alongside experiential learning, our preferred model is to create sustainable, scalable, inclusive and equitable partnership learning communities, which harness the trusting, supportive structure of a CoP framework. For staff, these communities offer increased interaction with students and greater opportunities for productive exchanges, such as engaging in SOTL with students (Trigwell & Shale, 2004). For students, acts of co-creation present the possibility to learn from a range of dedicated staff and student peers, thus ensuring a breadth of knowledge and skills, an openness to a wider range of interpretations and deeper learning than that acquired in a traditional format.

Lastly, as educators move from a mindset of the “student as consumer” to “students as partners,” we are reminded that both parties are partners in a reciprocal learning relationship, Ako, in our bicultural context of Aotearoa New Zealand.

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