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A model of active student participation in curriculum design: exploring desirability and possibility

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Abstract

This paper explores the desirability and possibility of active student participation (ASP) in curriculum design. Rationales for pursuing ASP in curriculum design are outlined. A conceptual model from community planning literature is then presented – Sherry Arnstein’s ‘Eight rungs on a ladder of participation’ – a model that has been used widely in various disciplines but rarely in higher education. Arnstein’s model is adapted to enable exploration of different possible levels of ASP in curriculum design in higher education. Key features of this adapted ‘Ladder of student participation in curriculum design’ model are outlined and illustrated through the use of examples. Discussion focuses on contextualising the desirability and possibility of different levels of student participation in curriculum design, and explores the utility of the adapted model. The paper concludes with some suggested areas of ASP in curriculum design that need further investigation.

Keywords: curriculum, curriculum design, participation, collaborative learning, co-creation

Introduction

Higher education policies and literature have recently called for students to become co-creators, co-producers and co-designers of their own learning (Collis and Moonen 2005; ESU 2008; McCulloch 2009). This paper responds by exploring the desirability and possibility of active student participation in curriculum design.

In this paper we use the term ‘Active student participation’ (ASP), which is intended to encompass several other definitions. ‘Active’ learning implies that students engage with learning, for example, through discussion or critical questioning (Entwistle 1988; Marton and Saljo 1997). It challenges the idea that students are passive, and simply absorb knowledge transmitted by their teacher.

The addition of ‘active’ to ‘student participation’ differentiates the latter from its use within some widening access literature, where ‘student participation’ often refers to acceptance of an offer to study at a particular institution (Quinn 2006), or strategies aiming to facilitate disadvantaged students in accessing tertiary education (Furlong and Cartmel 2009). ‘Participation’ also increasingly refers to student representation in university committees and audit processes. ASP implies that students are engaged in an experience - whether that is university life, committee representation, or taking part in learning activities. In this paper, ASP is emphasised in relation to students designing modular and programme curricula, affecting their own learning.

ASP in curriculum design has the potential to strongly influence students' experiences of learning. Yet, apparently in contradiction to this, curriculum is traditionally viewed as the territory of academic staff and curriculum planners, rather than that of the student (Giroux 1981). However, Mann (2008) argues that current students are passive in current forms of curriculum planning, while Barnett and Coate (2005) claim that within higher education, '...there is – largely, if not entirely – a silence about curriculum...' (Barnett and Coate 2005: 6).

Curriculum is defined in various ways. Fraser and Bosanquet explored ways in which academic staff define 'curriculum' and outlined four definitions, 'a: the structure and content of a unit (subject); b: the structure and content of a programme of study; c: the students' experience of learning; d: a dynamic and interactive process of teaching and learning' (Fraser and Bosanquet 2006, p.272). The first and second of these definitions focus on commonly understood study 'units' and they distinguish between module and programme/degree curricula. The third and fourth definitions start to capture some of the essence of ASP in curriculum design.

The models outlined in this paper help to create broader understandings of curricula that combine several of Fraser and Bosanquet's (2006) definitions. We outline arguments that support the desirability of ASP in curriculum design, and present an illustrative model that demonstrates some of the possible levels and types of ASP in curriculum design. Discussion focuses on contextualising the desirability and possibility of ASP in curriculum design and explores the utility of the 'Ladder of student participation in curriculum design' model before we outline some conclusions.

Is active student participation in curriculum design desirable?

In community planning and international development discourse there is a strong case for active participation of citizens and their communities on the basis of social justice (Hickey and Mohan 2004; Morgan 2001). This enables individuals and communities to understand their own circumstances and be better able to change power relations and thereby improve their own situation (Freire 1993). Strong arguments are made for key stakeholders - in this case, community members - to actively participate in decisions affecting their lives (Hickey and Mohan 2004; Nelson and Wright 2005).

Within schools education and critical pedagogy literature, Rogers and Freiberg (1969) argue that active engagement of students in learning is critical in order for learning to be meaningful, and to encourage students to take responsibility within the learning process. Specific calls for active student involvement in the curriculum go back at least as far as Dewey (1916) at the beginning of the 20th Century, continuing during the student movement in the USA and Europe in the 1960s. Aronowitz (1994), Rogers and Freiberg (1969) and Shor (1992) concur that students should share responsibility for curriculum planning. As Shor argues,

'...to reverse this passive experience of learning, education for empowerment is not something done by teachers to students for their own good but is something students codevelop for themselves, led by a critical and democratic teacher' (Shor 1992:20).

Within higher education, active and participatory approaches are thought to enhance and support learning (Brown et al.1989). Increasingly, universities are supporting the pursuit of active global citizenship as a 'graduate attribute' (Barrie 2004; Furlong and Cartmel 2009). Indeed, some authors based in higher education, but informed by

popular education principles, suggest that meaningful ASP can contribute to transforming students into more active and critical citizens, with the potential to change their communities (Crowther et al. 2005; Wilkinson and Scandrett 2003). These authors also make specific calls for students to become active participants in the design of the curriculum (Furlong and Cartmel 2009; Grudens-Schuck 2003; Wilkinson and Scandrett 2003). One of the key differences in this literature to traditional 'delivery' styles of education is that the learner is viewed as a knowledgeable and critical partner in learning (Shor 1992). Encouraging this view of the student is essential for motivating curriculum designers to provide opportunities for students to actively participate in curriculum design.

ASP in curriculum design within higher education is often discussed in terms of tutors reacting and responding to student feedback to adapt existing module and programme curricula or to inform new curricula. Specific examples of ASP in curriculum design are less common, but are situated within language education (Bloor and Bloor 1988; Breen and Littlejohn 2000a; Clarke 1991), e-learning (Collis and Moonen 2005), teacher education (Bovill et al. 2011; Cook-Sather 2010; Delpish et al. 2010; Mihans et al. 2008) and academic development (Brew and Barrie 1999).

However, there is growing interest in ASP in curriculum design within the higher education sector, and discourse has exposed some barriers to more participative methodologies. These include lack of familiarity with ASP in curriculum design, implied changes to existing student-tutor relationships and time pressures (Bovill et al. 2009).

Many students are in favour of the chance to participate in designing and managing their own curricula (Bovill et al. 2008; Martyn 2000). Benefits include students discovering 'the depth of faculty commitment to their learning' (McKinney et al. 2010: 89), and enhanced knowledge about their discipline and the learning process, with increased confidence to express their views in academic settings (Delpish et al. 2010). Others report enhancements to group cohesion, collective responsibility, and student performance in assessments, as well as staff reports of transformed teaching practices (Bovill et al. 2011). These benefits support the need to examine the possibilities of ASP in curriculum design in different higher education contexts.

Possible levels and types of participation

When considering possible levels and types of ASP in curriculum design in higher education, a model of citizen participation from community planning literature was found informative. Sherry Arnstein, writing in 1969, described eight possible levels of participation at which citizens might operate in planning for their communities. Arnstein's ladder model contained rungs labelled from the bottom upwards: manipulation, therapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power, and citizen control. Arnstein argued that '...participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless...it maintains the status quo' (Arnstein 1969:216).

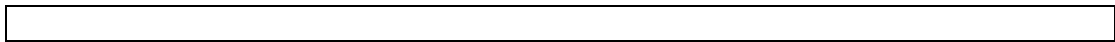
At the lower rungs of the ladder, processes are designed to enable powerholders to maintain control. Arnstein claims that '...the bottom rung of the ladder [manipulation] signifies the distortion of participation into a public relations vehicle by powerholders...' (Arnstein 1969:218). She adds that '...their real objective is not to

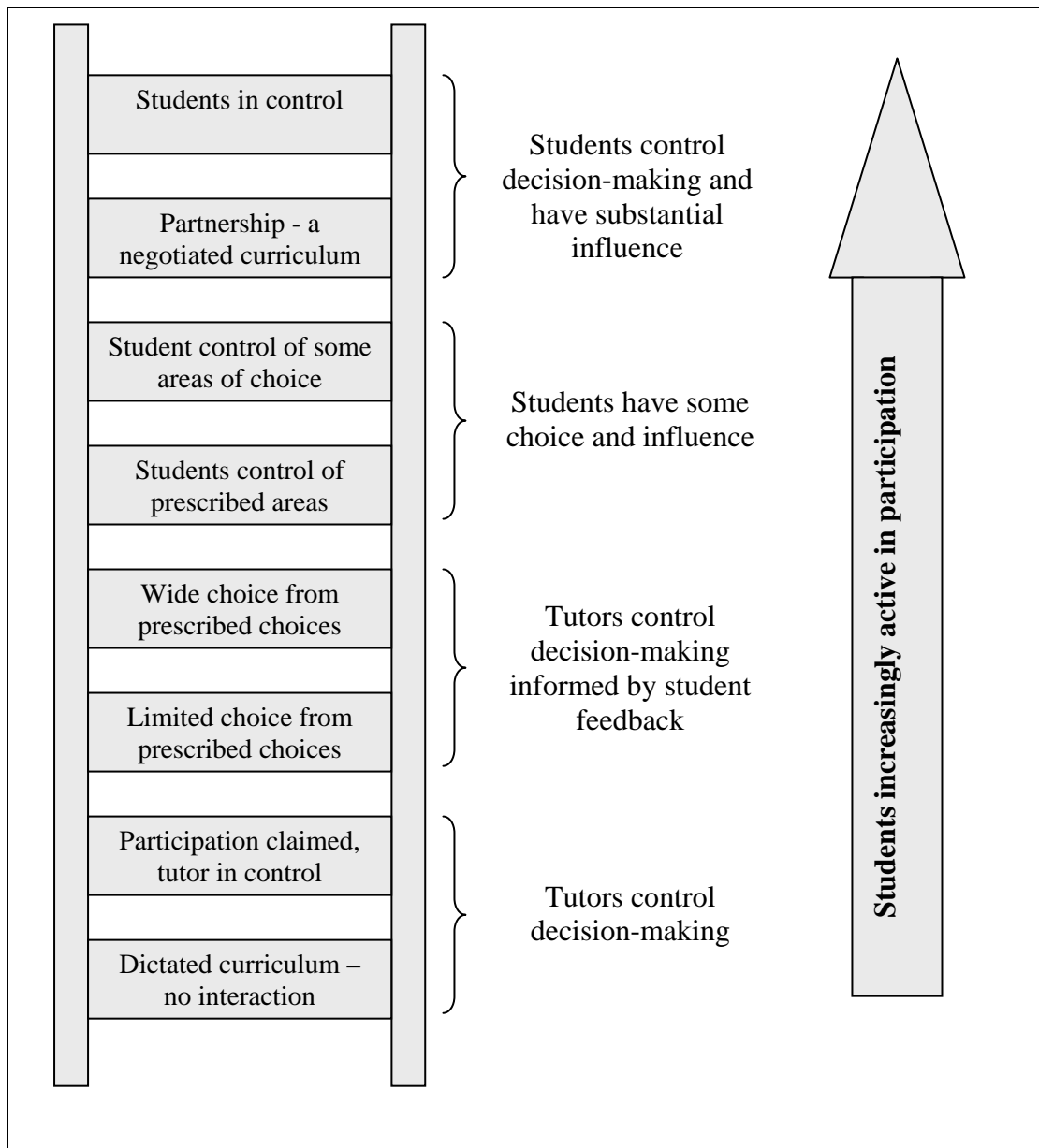
enable people to participate...but to enable powerholders to 'educate' or 'cure' the participants' (Arnstein 1969:217). Moving up to the third and fourth rungs, individuals and communities '...may hear and be heard...' (Arnstein 1969:217) but there is unlikely to be resulting action. The fifth rung, 'placation,' is considered to be tokenism because power-holders continue to maintain decision-making power. At the sixth rung, 'partnership' enables citizens to '...negotiate and engage in trade-offs with traditional powerholders' (Arnstein 1969:217), whilst at the highest rungs citizens gain substantial power to make decisions. Indeed, the top rung implies that citizens are in complete control of decision-making.

This model is by no means a perfect representation of reality. Arnstein conceded that the powerless and the powerholders are not homogenous groups, although they may sometimes perceive each other in this way. Different people will define and order the rungs differently. Nevertheless, this does not detract from the utility of the model, which is evident through frequent reference to Arnstein's model in literature from a range of disciplines including: the environment; health; housing and social care; and governance and international development. However, Arnstein's model appears to have been used less within higher education literature in relation to student participation.

We have adapted the rungs of Arnstein's ladder to make them more specific to ASP in curriculum design, using ideas and phrases that were informed by literature (Fraser and Bosanquet 2006), discussions with colleagues, and findings from curriculum-related projects in which we have been involved (Bovill et al. 2008). Our aim was not to directly map over rungs from the original model, but rather to use the concept of a ladder continuum with its different levels as a useful illustrative tool. This adapted model is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Ladder of student participation in curriculum design





Rather than suggesting a perfect representation through this model, we have followed Arnstein's lead by aiming to stimulate discussion of some of the levels and types of student participation that might be possible and desirable. New or alternative rungs of the ladder might be proposed by others.

The first rung on the ladder: 'dictated curriculum – no interaction' is the curriculum design equivalent of Freire's banking concept of education (Freire 1993). This suggests the tutor has created a curriculum that is 'delivered' to the students, who have no role in designing or commenting on the curriculum. The second rung, 'participation claimed but tutor in control' is particularly concerning. Students are led to believe falsely that they can participate in a process. For example, students feed back their views to tutors, but never see appropriate changes. Participation that is claimed but not genuine can be damaging to the participative process and can lead to mistrust of participatory initiatives or individuals and groups feeling alienated from the aims of participation (Arnstein 1969). Some might argue that the second rung

could be placed lower than the first, because the ‘dictated curriculum’ does not deceive students with an empty claim of participation.

The third rung of the ladder, ‘limited choice from prescribed choices,’ implies that a tutor has considered specific areas of the curriculum where students can participate: for example, choices of day and time for classes, or selection of teaching topics from a range of possibilities. The fourth rung, ‘wide choice from prescribed choices,’ describes a higher level of freedom within the prescribed limits of the curriculum. For example, selection of the topic for a research project, topics to focus on within the curriculum over the length of the module or programme, or the assessment format - perhaps within some limitations.

The fifth rung, ‘student control of prescribed areas,’ indicates specific areas of the curriculum are designed and controlled by students, such as the virtual learning environment (VLE) for a module (Bovill et al. 2011), or designing, conducting and analysing the module evaluation (Bovill et al. 2010). The sixth rung, ‘student control of some areas of choice,’ suggests that students can choose the areas of the curriculum they would like to design. This demonstrates a higher level of choice and control than tutor selection of the area for student design and control. For example, students may choose a project they will undertake in order to meet learning outcomes.

The seventh rung, ‘partnership – a negotiated curriculum’, implies that tutor and students work collaboratively to negotiate and create the curriculum. Fraser and Bosanquet’s fourth definition of the curriculum as ‘...a dynamic, emergent and collaborative process of learning for both student and teacher’ (Fraser and Bosanquet 2006:272) equates to this level of the ladder, which moves towards a view of the ‘teacher and student acting as co-constructors of knowledge’ (Fraser & Bosanquet 2006:275). There are some examples where curriculum design work takes place at this level (Bovill et al. 2011); Delpish et al. 2010).

The top rung ‘students in control’ implies the tutor is absent - uncommon in the current higher education context where tutors generally maintain at least some control. Nevertheless, it may be possible, for example, in some vocational courses students are given the freedom to design a work-based audit project for which they write their own learning outcomes, design a project plan, and then implement and evaluate the work. It may also be easier to achieve ASP at module rather than programme level. Locating examples of this top rung is challenging within the current higher education context, where our systems of quality assurance require courses to be validated and reviewed on the basis of clear intended learning outcomes and assessments. This highest level of ASP also seems contrary to what we know about effective learning and teaching, to entirely remove any role for the expert tutor (Tsui 2009); in most circumstances the tutor would still act as a guide/facilitator to students (Breen and Littlejohn, 2000b). In Table 1 we summarise some suggested examples of different levels of student participation in curriculum design relating to each rung of the ladder.

Table 1: Examples of possible levels of student participation in curriculum design

Rung and label	Examples
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8) Students in control	- Student designed learning outcomes and projects. Student led journal clubs, student led journals
7) Partnership – a negotiated curriculum	- student experience and work used as basis for curriculum - students actively and meaningfully negotiating curriculum with tutor
6) Student control of some areas of choice	- students choose areas of curriculum they want to design – eg Students design a project to achieve set learning outcomes.
5) Student control of prescribed areas	- students offered control of specific tutor-selected areas of the curriculum eg students design their own assessment or VLE
4) Wide choice from prescribed choices	- students choose their assessment type from a range of choices (assessment regulations still dictated)
3) Limited choice from prescribed choices	- students offered choice over small elements of curriculum – eg choice of two readings for the next class
2) Participation claimed but tutor in control	- student feedback forms gathered to inform curricula design but not used
1) Dictated curriculum – no interaction	- students turn up for class (or not)

Readers may disagree with where we have placed examples, or may be aware of alternative examples. There could be inter-relating sets of rungs distinguishing different levels of ASP in curriculum design at module level and at programme level. The placement of examples will be influenced by individuals' different conceptualisations of curricula at module or at programme level. We present the model in the hope that it will contribute to debate, enhance understanding and raise new possibilities of ASP in curriculum design.

Discussion

Having presented Arnstein's model and the adapted 'Ladder of student participation in curriculum design' model, discussion focuses on two key areas: 1) contextualising desirability and possibility of ASP in curriculum design and 2) the utility of the Ladder of student participation in the curriculum.

Contextualising desirability and possibility of ASP in curriculum design

Although there is support from the literature for ASP in curriculum design, the desirability of adopting this collaborative approach is likely to be highly influenced by specific contexts. The models presented here are not intended to suggest that it is always desirable. What might be desirable or possible with a small Masters level class may differ widely from a large undergraduate class. Other influencing factors include: tutor experience; available time; the level of support for student participation within the institution; the discipline; and pressure to cover specific content in order to meet requirements from professional bodies.

A key point worthy of emphasis is that on the ‘Ladder of student participation in curriculum design’, higher is not always better. Guijt and Shah (1998) criticise ladder models of participation for suggesting that all participation should aim for an apparent ‘nirvana’ at the top of the ladder (Guijt and Shah 1998: 10). There will be contexts where some lower levels of student participation may be viewed as more desirable. However, we are opposed in principle to lower levels of participation involving manipulation of students or empty claims of participation. We also need to acknowledge that some students and staff may find new learning experiences uncomfortable:

“students are accustomed to, and often comfortable with, assuming a relatively powerless role in the classroom, just as faculty are trained to believe that their disciplinary expertise gives them complete authority over the learning process” (Delpish et al, 2010: 111).

Indeed, a new class of inexperienced students might be confused if a tutor hands over total control of the curriculum to them without preparation or guidance (Shor, 1992).

There is some concern about whether all students, particularly first year undergraduates, have the expertise necessary to contribute to curriculum design (Furlong and Cartmel 2009; Huberman 1970). However, in relation to other academic knowledge and skills we often support students to develop their capabilities, for example, with academic writing and presentation skills. Therefore, if a particular level of ASP in curriculum design is considered desirable and beneficial, equivalent support and guidance for students (and staff) may be necessary.

However, reluctance to adopt ASP in curriculum design may be based on our assumptions about the rigidity of curriculum planning processes, our pedagogic habits and traditions underpinning the ways we relate to students (Cook-Sather 2010; McKinney et al. 2010; Rudduck and Fielding 2006). For example, a regulatory body might stipulate competencies for a clinical skill in order to evidence an individual’s fitness to practice, but there may be a reasonable degree of freedom in how competency is taught and assessed that could involve some level of ASP in curriculum design. Similarly, a tutor aiming to involve students actively in curriculum design may be faced with unexpected factors such as cancellation of classes due to bad weather that may limit possibilities. These examples illustrate connections between the desirable and the possible. However, when a range of levels and types of participation are explored, there are more subtle and responsive possibilities available in different contexts to those who view ASP in curriculum design as desirable.

As Shor (1992) suggests, it can be beneficial to increase participation in stages, students could start by being involved on a smaller scale and on lower rungs of the ladder, for example at module level rather than at programme level (relating to Fraser and Bosanquet’s (2006) first and second definitions of curriculum, respectively). Key to these early experiences of participation is for students to consider their role as real, meaningful and directly related to their learning (Mihans et al. 2008; Bovill et al. 2011).

We need to acknowledge that tutors act as gatekeepers to the curriculum, choosing whether or not to allow students to become participants in curriculum design and gain

access to this process which is so pivotal in their learning. This idea will make some academic staff uncomfortable, as it threatens their status as 'expert' and implies the possibility of relinquishing total control over the curriculum. In contrast, tutors who view education as being of a political nature may see ASP in curriculum design as one part of challenging the acceptance that students are passive within curricula processes and may welcome this development.

The utility of the 'Ladder of student participation in the curriculum'

The ladder of student participation in the curriculum is intended to facilitate discussion of the desirability and possibility of ASP in curriculum design. One of the authors has used the model to support tutors in discussing examples of ASP in curriculum design within research interviews and as a stimulus to eliciting examples of ASP in curriculum design from conference participants. The model could also be used to help groups of tutors and students discuss curriculum design plans and to reveal whether individuals and groups hold similar or differing conceptualisations of the current nature of ASP in curriculum design within a particular course or programme. It could be used within research into the curriculum or student voice.

Participation tends to be viewed as a uniformly positive concept. Lyotard warns us to beware of simply accepting broad, widely accepted definitions and narratives unquestioningly (Lyotard 1984): hence, this model is intended to challenge practice and stimulate discussion to deepen our understanding of the possibilities of co-created curricula.

Conclusions

This paper has presented support for ASP in curriculum design, whilst acknowledging that there might be different levels and types of ASP that are desirable and possible in different contexts. In the current policy context that calls for students to become co-creators of their learning, ASP in curriculum design is one way to achieve co-created learning experiences. The model we have presented aims to facilitate discussion, supporting tutors and students to develop ASP initiatives in higher education.

Without such participative opportunities early in the university experience, we reduce the possibility of students developing a deeper understanding and ownership of the content and processes of their learning experiences. As Delpish and colleagues argue '...collaborative course design may not be appropriate in all contexts, it can be powerful when the timing is right and the necessary institutional support is available' (Delpish et al. 2010: 111). Within the current global financial context, the discussion of different possible levels of ASP in curriculum design is useful in highlighting opportunities for small scale student participation that do not necessarily require substantial time commitments and other resources.

Further research is needed to evaluate outcomes from different levels of ASP in curriculum design; to explore tutor and student experiences of ASP in curriculum design; and to investigate implications for the tutor-student relationship.

Breen and Littlejohn claim that, 'sometimes we may be more held back by our own imaginations or assumptions than by any other constraints' (Breen and Littlejohn 2000b: 282). The challenge remains for us to ensure that students have greater agency in curricular discourse. Then perhaps we can move towards a vision of shared

curriculum planning that is not a radical new proposition, but rather one which Dewey posed back in the early 20th Century, but which has not yet been substantively addressed in higher education.

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