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Reconciling perspectives: Reflecting on the usage of NSS feedback in the 'Making a Difference' project

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Abstract

This article reflects on my experiences as both a recent graduate and new member of staff at UAL and explores a project involving student feedback. By discussing an exercise in which staff mapped the 'journey' undertaken by students throughout the course of their degree, it reflects on the different experiences of staff and students to consider how feedback can bridge this divide. The 'mapping the student journey' exercise resembled a 'crit' and because it capitalised on the creative strengths of the institution, using teaching methods that resemble those applied in the classroom, it provides an instructive case study that could be applied by other specialist institutions.

Introduction

In September 2016 I switched places, and went from being a full time university student to being a full time member of UAL staff. As the first of my 'Ambitious Futures' placements (a graduate trainee scheme that aims to provide a transition into working in the higher education sector) I spent 5 months working at the UAL Teaching and Learning Exchange, where I was assigned to a specific project which focused on analysing and responding effectively to student feedback. Only 4 months before, I had completed the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) myself, and a year before that the National Student Survey (NSS), and so I found myself in the novel position of having a real and immediate link to both sides of the academic institution. I was curious to learn how things worked on 'the other side', and this project provided an interesting transition for me, as I felt a strong link with the students whose feedback I was now reading from a new perspective.

The Making A Difference (MAD) project has been run by the UAL Teaching and Learning Exchange for the past four years, working with all courses across the university's six colleges that score 60% and below in 'overall satisfaction' in the National Student Survey. A 3 hour event is organised for each course (during the Autumn Term), to which all members of staff associated with the course (academic, technical, managerial and administrative) are invited. Feedback from students completing the NSS at the end of the previous academic year, as well as unit feedback and course data, are then used as an impetus for staff discussions around course content, structure and the student experience more widely. The project enables staff to address student feedback head-on and straight away, encouraging them to step into students' shoes and consider the ways in which the course, college and wider learning environment can support them during their time at the institution.

My role within this project was to analyse and summarise major themes within the qualitative student feedback prior to the events, to take minutes during and document the outcomes of the events, and produce a summary report. This role gave me a rich overview of the discussions and ideas that arose during these sessions and a measure of balance in my exposure to the views of university students and the views of university staff. As my new professional role was primarily to observe, I learnt a great

deal from the staff about how feedback can be used and what sort of changes can be made. At the same time, I was comparing my own recent experience of giving programme feedback with the voices of students contained in the scores and comments.

As the project progressed there was one exercise – mapping the student journey – that stood out to me in both my positions as a recent graduate and as a new member of staff. I felt this exercise foregrounded the differences between staff members' experience of higher education when compared with their students, and that feedback is an effective way of bridging these two distinct experiences. Student feedback encourages both students and staff to reflect on their experiences over the previous academic year(s) and to consider how it can be developed and improved in years to come. The fact that this exercise was being undertaken in a specialist art and design institution, led to several unique and interesting features and outputs that set it apart from similar initiatives and provided an instructive case study for other specialist institutions in particular.

Mapping the student journey
In the academic year 2016/17, a new exercise was included in the Making A Difference sessions for each course. As part of this, staff attendees were encouraged to map out the journey of the students on their course from enrolment to graduation. Raines suggests that 'the student journey is arguably one of the most complex user mapping exercises, as it involves a significant number of stakeholders, concurrent processes, and spans over many years' (2015). For MAD it was therefore crucial to involve a large range of staff members with various insights and expertise.

After a framing discussion of the student comments and some context-setting to supplement the NSS comments, staff worked in three groups, with a course team member in each group, to map out each year of the course on three large sheets of paper. Staff were encouraged to map the structure of the course with an emphasis on marking assessments, deadlines, contact hours, teaching type and pressure points. This exercise created three large diagrams which were used in the session as prompts for discussion around curriculum design, course identity, previous successes and difficulties and as frameworks on which new suggestions could be placed, to test their suitability in relation to the rest of the course. The outcome of the session was an action plan of interventions, changes and strategies to be taken forward by the appropriate members of staff.

It was felt to be important that all staff members, whether directly associated with the teaching of the course or based centrally in other departments – such as the library, the careers service or estates – looked for ways in which they could make a positive change or contribution that responded to issues raised in the student feedback. In this way, the project aimed to encourage all staff to take responsibility for their portion of the student experience whilst at the same time emphasising the importance of dividing actions and responsibilities, so as to support the academic staff who have the most direct contact with students.

Discussion
Reflecting on my own time as a student, I experienced my course in a largely linear fashion. During this time I moved through a series of stages as part of a journey towards a final goal (a degree). Contrastingly, for staff – administrative and academic – the University experience is one of cycles; an iterative process where the patterns of one year are largely repeated during the next, where each year represents an opportunity to enhance the course and the student experience more widely. Mapping the student journey emerged as an interesting exercise for the very reason that it aims to reconcile these two contrasting experiences; feeding the thoughts of students at the end of their linear journey into that of the next cohort, creating a positive feedback system in which university staff use their pedagogical experience and expertise to make continual improvements.

The exercise involved adding student comments and suggestions on to the journey maps drawn by staff members. Students views and experiences were thus interpreted and brought into the staff sphere, which is important as any changes to the student experience also mean changes to that of the staff. A common comment was that staff felt that the students may not be able to see the links between different parts of the course as clearly as they could. A more explicit and detailed overview of the course would address this gap in communication and give a stronger articulation to the course narrative.

Across the university sector there have been a number of projects and initiatives to map the student journey (Mutton, 2016). The Making A Difference project follows this trend towards 'service design', where a holistic approach aims to capture the many facets of the student experience. One example of this approach being used effectively is in the Library and Learning Resources Department at Birmingham City University (BCU, 2014), which aimed to provide excellence in customer service and boost student satisfaction in National Student Survey scores. This involved asking for student feedback on where they felt there were problems within the current student experience, particularly when they interacted with these library services. This developed a new student journey map, with actions that ultimately led to a number of improvements, including improved signage, reducing jargon and improving fine payment (BCU, 2014, slides 14/18/19). Staff suggested that one key benefit was that '[e]valuating a service from the student perspective often leads to a reduction in complexity and, in making those changes, both students and staff benefit.' (BCU, 2014, slide 22).

UAL has benefitted in similar ways by using this technique in the Making A Difference project. MAD sessions offer a rare opportunity for staff members to come together to think about strategy, vision and ideals: topics which are often side-lined in the day-to-day delivery of a course. However, because this exercise was used in a specialist art and design context, there are several positive features and outcomes that mark it out as unique and potentially instructive for other institutions, particularly those with a specialist focus in a particular field or subject area.

Interestingly, the exercise contained many of the same features as a 'crit'. This method is defined by Day as 'a formative and immediate view of students' work to be shared and good and bad practice to be disseminated amongst the group. It is immediate, dynamic, spontaneous and an opportunity for students to benchmark visually' (2012). When staff presented their maps of the student journey through a course, it enabled open discussion about the merits, faults and possible omissions from their maps, and suggestions, comments and actions were made in a similar way to that used to engage with the work of students in the classroom. It became clear to me that curriculum design, and teaching and learning more widely, can be a highly creative process, and does not differ as widely from the content of other courses as may be expected. Both can benefit from being presented, discussed and critically examined by a group of peers and specialist staff members. Staff at the institution were familiar with this format and saw the value of expressing and discussing ideas visually as well as verbally. As an observer, I felt that the success of this process was in part due to the fact that the exercise utilised existing strengths, styles of teaching practice already in place at UAL. By working within this familiar and creative set of practices the exercise was able to work 'with the grain' to address often difficult topics and propose possible ways forward.

Conclusion

Because I had so recently crossed the gap between the student community and the staff community, the similarities and differences between the two groups stood out to me clearly. The Making A Difference project sits at a crucial point between these two communities, initiating important conversations about how staff can creatively, collaboratively and realistically enhance the student experience at UAL. As a method and exercise, student journey mapping has been largely successful in taking a step towards reconciling student and the staff experiences, precisely because it harnessed the institution's strengths by finding positive ways to utilise the NSS as a starting point for action.

A report by the Higher Education Academy notes that across the HE sector many individual institutions are utilising the NSS for teaching and learning enhancement, but that 'there is a lack of shared practice and discussion about how that can be achieved' (Buckley, 2012, p.8). At UAL, the Making A Difference project offers useful example approaches, precisely as a result of the University's creative stance, providing interesting methods that could be applied at other specialist institutions, capitalising on their pre-existing strengths in teaching and learning in productively responding to, and addressing, student feedback.

References

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Biography
Sarah Wooley is a trainee on the Ambitious Futures graduate programme for university leadership at the University of the Arts London. Having graduated from Oxford University in 2016 with a Masters degree in MSc Social Anthropology (and BA Geography in 2015), she has completed placements in the Teaching and Learning Exchange at UAL, in the Department of Computing at Goldsmiths, University of London, and is currently working with Library and Academic Support at UAL.