**Let’s Talk: Staff and Student Experiences of Dialogue Days, a Student Engagement Activity.**

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A growing tradition of using, what has been locally termed, “Dialogue Days” to facilitate shared understanding between staff and students has grown over the last five years at York St John University. The days have iteratively developed to provide different spaces to engage with students in environments separate from that used for everyday teaching and learning. Identifying that there is limited research within the UK in the area of student engagement (Trowler 2010), this study aimed to provide better understanding of the effectiveness of dialogue days, their perceived value for staff and students and to inform future practice.

A qualitative methodology was used to explore the lived experience of a purposive sample of eight students and six members of staff, from a range of disciplines (theatre, counselling, physiotherapy, sports science and occupational therapy). The data was collected through semi structured interviews. It was subsequently analysed using a phenomenological approach exploring individual experiences through the lens of the lifeworld as divided into fractions, “not as independent categories but as mutually entailed with interpenetrating meanings” (Ashworth 2003, p27). These fractions include *selfhood, sociality, embodiment, temporality, spatiality, project* and *discourse.* The findings focused on the following fractions:

*Sociality* considers the relationships between staff and students during this event and the impact it had on their view of each other. Dialogue days were reported by students to break down barriers brought about by issues of power and expertise through students describing staff as behaving in different modes to that they had experienced in class. *Spatiality* considers the physical environment of the day and the window of opportunity that it created in the teaching calendar. It became space to behave and do things differently. It raised the importance of unfamiliarity of surroundings and how this influences behaviour by association within “other” spaces. *Project* explores how the dialogue developed over the day prompting reconsideration of views by both staff and students. It represented the initial uncertainty that students had about the day, initially feeling as outsiders but who through their engagement gradually become part of the community. *Discourse* interpreted the use of the direct and indirect meaning conveyed through attendees’ utterances. The possibility of participants generating conveyed meaning when questioned is an attempt to preserve (and not threaten) Face – the act of keeping one’s (or another’s) self-image intact (Goffman, 1967). The two significant ones explored were “disclaimers”, saying something problematic in a polite way in order to build desirable identities, and “brown nosing”, being excessively positive towards a question in order to gain approval (Tracy, 2002). This suggested in some instances that it was important to be careful when interpreting what the participants were saying as there may have been hidden meanings to what they were trying to convey about their experiences. This raises the importance in qualitative research to consider as much what is not said as is.

This student engagement activity had, overall, a powerful effect in building different relationships between staff and students and was an effective means to prompt self-reflection for both. Interpreting meaning in interaction allowed the researchers to explore the unsaid aspects of the conversations and consider what individuals really thought about the day. The findings support the effectiveness of providing spaces for “dialogue” in a way that is wider than the usual student representation system, so that all students can develop their academic identities and become more connected to the institution and to each other (Axelson and Flick, 2011) in a way that positively influences learning.

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Development Outcomes

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