**Do Dialogue Days Work? SEDA Final Report**

**Mandy Asghar**

Introduction

At York St John University, “Dialogue Days” are either half or whole days when students and staff are brought together in an environment for the primary purpose of exploring collaboratively views about a particular part of the curriculum. Dialogue days have explored the assessment experiences of students, research as it is embedded in the curriculum, employability and enhancing potential, and general expectations about the programme etc. The days are structured into tasks and activities that provide opportunities for participants to explore their understandings and to put forward suggestions about how things could be different. Anecdotally the feedback painted a positive reaction to this type of student engagement activity from both staff and students but it was felt to be important to explore the purported effectiveness in a more rigorous manner. As a consequence the following research study was carried out.

What was done?

A qualitative research study was conducted to explore the effectiveness of Dialogue Days by listening to both the staff and student voice. It was hoped that by exploring their experiences, through primarily a phenomenology approach, we would gain an understanding of individuals’ situations and contexts and insights into the beliefs, values and culture of those individuals’ life worlds.

The key questions posed included:

* Do dialogue days promote better shared meanings between staff and students?
* Do dialogue days facilitate change? That change might be in the design of curriculum or simply better appreciation of each other’s needs and concerns.
* What are the barriers or enablers that hinder or facilitate student engagement activities such as dialogue days?

How was it done?

A purposive sample of staff and students was selected by inviting those who had attended a dialogue day to participate in the research project. Eight students and six members of staff, from a range of disciplines (theatre, counselling, physiotherapy, sports science and occupational therapy) participated. The data was collected through semi structured interviews and transcribed to allow for closer examination of the findings. It was subsequently analysed in two different ways, thematically to consider commonalities and differences, and secondly, interpreting meaning in interaction. A student research assistant also collected data, transcribed mp3 files and analysed some of the data. All participants were provided with information about the research, reassurance of confidentiality and asked to sign a consent form. The project was given ethical approval by York St John University ethics committee.

Why was it done?

The project was conducted to try to understand more fully the impact of this type of student engagement activity on both staff and students and if such events prompted change and what that change might be. It was important from an institutional perspective to be able to understand fully the value of such activities as it is part of our institutional learning and teaching strategy. Additionally it was an opportunity to be able to share more widely across the sector the value of this type of activity.

What effect did it have?

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. Additionally the findings suggest that it is important to consider how the spaces for these activities need to be unfamiliar to both staff and students so they step outside their usual classroom roles.

How are people hearing about it?

At York St John University there is general acknowledgement of the value of dialogue days with many happening across the institution. A consultancy approach is taken with interested staff discussing their requirements with the head of learning and teaching development who in some instances will chair a dialogue day and provide resources. A lunchtime forum provided an opportunity for discussion about how to run a dialogue day and its potential effects.

Outside of YSJ, a workshop was facilitated at SEDA , May 2012 with a subsequent article in Educational Development January 2013. The research was presented at the Society for Research into Higher Education Conference December 2012.

What has been learnt?

Dialogue days provide a different type of educational development for both staff and students together, with both reporting changed perspectives about each other and a reappraisal of each other’s views about aspects of learning in higher education. Students in particular felt valued by staff in being given this opportunity and for those who went off site they saw it as a special day that allowed them to engage differently in more of a social and informal context.

Engaging students in participating in dialogue days continues to be challenging and it is important to have an effective marketing strategy to encourage students that it is worthwhile attending. Alternatively there has been more success where it is embedded as an expectation within a programme. It is also important to close the loop and for that to be an opportunity to share from both parties what they got out of the day by e.g. producing a shared newsletter.

Where might it lead? What next?

The research is being written up for publication in a peer reviewed journal. A submission to ISOTL 2013 in North Carolina is planned.

Axelson, R. & Flick, A. (2011) Defining Student Engagement. *Change.* Jan/Feb 2011