Implementing a Co-Created Classroom Model

Sabbatical Report Winter/Spring 2024

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Introduction

Co-creation of learning and teaching is where students and staff share decision-making about the whole curriculum or elements of curriculum and has been described as one of the key pedagogical ideas in higher education (Bovill, 2020a). Many different forms of co-creation exist, from involving a small number of students to the involvement of a whole class of students. Co-creation recognizes that students have valuable perspectives and contributions to teaching and learning, implying deeper engagement than in common forms of active learning and interaction (Bovill, 2020b). Co-creating a curriculum, which entails involving students in the creation of content, has been shown in the literature to have many benefits for students and instructors, such as gaining a deeper understanding of learning, enhanced engagement, motivation, and enthusiasm, as well as building confidence and competence (Doyle et al., 2019). Despite the benefits, a co-created curriculum model is not widely implemented in the United States higher education system.

Purpose

I have been interested in working with students as partners (SaP) for some time and have implemented small items within my courses. However, I had never done a comprehensive co-created curriculum. For this study, I looked at the implementation process and student feedback on their participation in this pedagogical model to enhance my teaching practices.

During my sabbatical, I analyzed the quantitative and qualitative survey and journal data collected from courses, during which I implemented a co-created pedagogical model. The data analysis allowed me to find themes regarding implementation, benefits, and the challenges of co-creation.

Goals

Higher education is an increasingly complex environment. Students are coming to study, and at the same time, resources are being reduced at many institutions. Colleges face growing pressures to maintain or enhance the quality of what they offer while being challenged to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse range of students. Faculty and staff in higher education face the challenge of supporting students to feel they belong and are valued.

According to the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) (2017), students are more likely to succeed when certain conditions are in place. Described as the "Success Factors Framework," students must be directed, focused, nurtured, engaged, connected, and valued. Co-creation of teaching and learning has been described as one of the key pedagogical ideas in higher education (Bovill, 2020a) and is one model in which we may be able to meet higher education challenges.

The first goal of the sabbatical was to explore the process of implementing a co-created curriculum model in the higher education classroom.

The second goal was to analyze student and researcher data to find themes regarding the process, challenges, and benefits of using a co-created curriculum model.

Process

Field notes were analyzed to find themes regarding the three research questions involving the process of implementing a co-created model and its challenges and benefits. Notes were read the first time in their entirety. A second and third, more detailed reading highlighted keywords and phrases and were added to a data analysis chart aligning research questions. The data analysis chart was used to determine common themes in the data relating to the research questions.

The student survey data were analyzed first by course so a comparison between classes could be made, and then the data was analyzed per question for overarching themes. Several data readings were made to note keywords and phrases on a data analysis chart from which themes were identified.

The collected data were organized and sorted by research question into a data grid. Student surveys were entered into the grid using an identifier for each student. For example, a fall student would be coded F1, a winter student W1, and a spring student S1. This allowed for comparing experiences between the three classes, and the overall coding aligned with research questions. Words and phrases were highlighted and color-coded, such as feelings coded as yellow, time and workload as blue, and conflict and decision-making as purple. Overarching themes, such as negative feelings, were identified using the highlighted words and phrases. Direct quotations from student surveys and researcher field notes were used to elaborate on the data. The data was used to compare and contrast students' experiences with the teacher-researcher, the findings from previous literature, and to answer the study's three research questions.

Results

The Process of Co-Creation

Students offered advice about the process for future terms, including ensuring all students are heard. Bron and Veugelers (2014) argued that students are not a homogenous group, and we must include diverse student voices. Students' ability to collaborate effectively eventually led to their ability to negotiate. However, as students in this study noted, louder voices can overpower others. Ensuring everyone gets a say and is involved in the process is important.

Second, students commented on the voting process. Students felt that having open voting might "make some students follow the majority" instead of voting how they felt. Students suggested making voting anonymous or voting outside of class time. One of Bron and Veugelers' (2014) five arguments for involving students in co-creating teaching and learning is that students should

have a say in designing their own education. Ensuring a fair and anonymous voting system is integral to students having a say in the process.

Finally, students noted that co-creation was unfamiliar to them, which caused some negative feelings, such as confusion, stress, and tension during the process. However, most students who reported negative feelings also noted that those feelings occurred at the beginning of the co-creation process and did not last. As prior research has shown, not all students or faculty will likely embrace a partnership model (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). Working and learning in partnership is rarely automatic and can present significant challenges to existing ways of being, doing, and thinking (Healey et al., 2014). Faculty and students will have different motivations for engaging in a curriculum development partnership. As sometimes occurred in this study, the different positions occupied by students and faculty may create tensions around differences in power, reward, and recognition of participation, identity, and responsibility for partnership work (Healey et al., 2014). What was different in this study was the leadership from former students who took a second co-created class. Returning students helped other students understand the process and gave examples from other courses on how they created those classes. The peer-to-peer collaboration with students familiar with co-creation helped ease tensions and confusion, allowing for a smoother process.

The second area of the process is preparation. While a large amount of literature exists about co-creation in teaching and learning, the literature on the practical application or how-to of co-creation is slim. In the book *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning in Teaching: A Guide for Faculty*, Cook-Sather et al. (2014) note that patience is one strategy for getting started, warning, "However well you prepare for student-faculty partnerships, things will not always go according to plan" (p. 146). These authors note that, just as the teacher-researcher in this study noted, faculty need to be prepared for expectation mismatches, differing perspectives, resistance, and creating partnerships takes longer than you may expect and does not go as smoothly as it could.

The teacher-researcher's notes used the terms prepared and unprepared several times. First, there was preparation to understand the co-created curriculum model (professional development), done through research. Second, there was preparation for the course before the term(s) began (pre-preparation). Third, there was preparation with students to construct a co-created curriculum. Fourth, there was preparation to ensure student participation. Finally, the course was prepared after completing the co-creation process (post-preparation). Figure 2 shows the five-step process in more detail.

Figure 2
Five-Step Co-Creation Process

1	Professional Development Research of Co-Creation
2	Pre-Preparation Prior to course start
3	Preparation with Students Constructing the co-created curriculum
4	Ensuring Student Participation Discussions, voting, etc.
5	Post-Preparation Finalizing the co-created curriculum
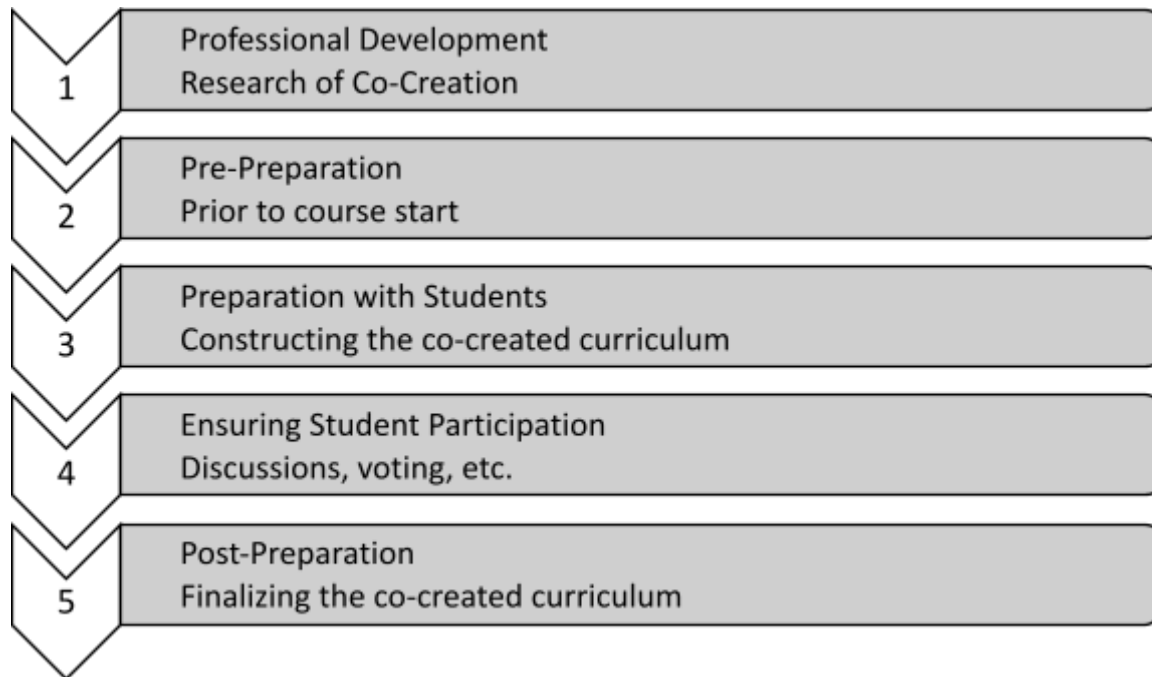
Note. The process repeats for each co-created course to refine, revise, and implement the process.

Based on the findings revealed in this study, one process for co-creating teaching and learning in the college classroom involves ensuring student participation and preparing before, during, and after the implementation of co-creation.

Benefits

Lubicz-Nawrocka (2020) found many benefits to students and faculty from the processes and outcomes of co-creation, which include increased engagement and empowerment, enhanced teaching and learning, and students gaining transferable skills personally and professionally. Similar to previous research, this study's results show the benefits of autonomy, gaining experience and skills, and motivation and engagement.

Autonomy

The first major theme was autonomy, which included students having a choice, voice, and control over the curriculum and their learning. Students in this study discussed the importance of having a say in their learning and having choices and flexibility. Researcher notes also commented on giving students a voice and choice, which included robust discussions, generating ideas, and offering choices to students. Other studies affirm that, through co-creation, students have freedom and independence, and this autonomy carries with it a sense of control (Meinking & Hall, 2020), increased self-regulation, responsibility (Bovill, 2020; Deeley & Bovill, 2017), and confidence (Bovill, 2020; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017).

Gaining Experience and Skills

The second theme from this study that coincides with previous research is the benefit of students gaining experience and transferable skills. While not widely discussed in previous literature, in this study, students listed gaining experience with course creation by understanding that there are many different ways to run a class, that much thinking goes into laying out a course, and that planning and preparing a new course can be quite difficult for teachers. Students in the study also noted that they learned that it is possible for professors to let their students create the class they want and gained a new appreciation for teachers making a good class by listening to students.

Participants also specified skills they gained through the co-creation experience. Previous research has shown that participation in co-creation improves academic performance or higher quality of work from students (Bovill, 2014; Deeley & Bovill, 2017), which can transfer to a professional work setting or in higher academic endeavors. Other enhanced skills for future professional development include building teamwork (Bovill, 2020; Deeley, 2014;), leadership (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2019), and negotiation skills (Bovill, 2020; Bovill, 2014; Deeley, 2014; Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2019). Increasing critical thinking, reflection, and communication skills (Bovill, 2014; Deeley, 2014; Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2019). Like previous research, students in this study reported gaining problem-solving, time management, and conflict management skills in this study. Other skills participants in this study discussed were time management, perspective-taking, collaboration, and personal accountability.

Engagement and Motivation

The final theme, student engagement and motivation, addressed comments regarding students' perceptions of a co-created class. Research has shown that students and academic faculty negotiating the curriculum experience enhanced engagement, motivation, and enthusiasm (Bovill, 2020; Bovill et al., 2011; Cook-Sather et al., 2014). This enhanced engagement comes from the co-creation process itself, not just from the learning outcomes that result (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). As noted in this study, students involved in co-creating teaching and learning experiences demonstrate significantly higher levels of engagement and a stronger sense of community within the course (Bovill, 2020; Bovill, 2019; Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Curtis et al., 2020; Dollinger & Lodge, 2020; Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2019; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). Increased engagement comes in the forms of enhanced motivation, enthusiasm, and more significant learning (Bergmark & Westman, 2016; Bovill, 2020; Bovill, 2014; Bovill et al., 2010; Deeley, 2014; Deeley & Bovill, 2017) because students feel empowered to engage due to the trust and respect that come from co-creation (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2018).

In keeping with other studies that have been conducted on the topic of co-created curriculum, students in this study stated that they felt more engaged in class and assignments and "got more out of it" than they believed that would have in a traditionally taught class. Students also reported feeling less stressed and more curious and excited about the content than they would have in a traditional class model. Several students noted that they felt more engaged due to the strong community built at the beginning of the class and were more motivated to come to class because they created it themselves. Similarly, the teacher-researcher observations noted that

students were likelier to attend class, engage with each other and course material, and do the required work because they were invested in what they had created and wanted to see it succeed.

Challenges

The literature identifies challenges to implementing a co-created curriculum model, including resistance and institutional practices and norms. Resistance can come from students and faculty as it is something new, shifts in power and decision-making, and a perceived loss of control (Acai et al., 2017; Curtis et al., 2020; Healey et al., 2014; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). As co-creation differs from a typical pedagogical approach, the implementation may be challenging within institutional structures, practices, and norms (Bovill, 2019; hooks, 1995; Meinking, 2017; Serrano et al., 2018).

This study found similar challenges that fall under both categories. Students' feelings of resistance included issues of control, conflict, and decision-making. Students' discomfort with changes that differed from established institutional practices and norms included the process, workload and time, and negative feelings.

Resistance

Prior research on negotiated teaching and learning noted that faculty may be concerned about relinquishing control over pedagogical planning (Bovill et al.,2011; Cook-Sather et al., 2014). This study, however, found that control was not related to relinquishing control of planning to students, but rather control was equated to a sense of preparedness. Because co-creation requires not having a class fully prepared, the teacher-researcher felt that she did not have control over the class. This differs from previous research in that allowing students control was not where the resistance came from. The resistance came from a perception of lack of control due to the nature of co-creation, which may have less preparation for the instructor.

A co-created curriculum model requires that the power of decision-making about teaching and learning is shared between instructor and students (Bovill, 2020); however, working and learning in partnership can present significant challenges to existing ways of being, doing, and thinking (Healey et al., 2014). This supports this study's second theme of resistance: conflict and decision-making. A co-created curriculum model requires that the power of decision-making about teaching and learning is shared (Bovill, 2020a). Students may also have a lack of familiarity with a co-created curriculum model (Bergmark & Westman, 2016; Bovill, 2014; Dollinger & Lodge, 2020; Mercer-Mapstone & Marie, 2019) and may feel doubtful that their recommendations will be included in the curriculum design since faculty are the ones who make the final decisions in curriculum design (Dollinger & Lodge, 2020; Tuhkala et al., 2021). These student perceptions may lead to hesitation toward students' willingness to participate (Tuhkala et al., 2021) and difficulty with participant buy-in (Acai et al., 2017). While students gained skills in conflict management, several students and the researcher found challenges with disagreements and decision-making, causing tension, less outgoing students participating, and students going along with the majority rather than speaking up.

Institutional Practices and Norms

Like resistance to something new, institutional structures and norms were challenged by the teacher-researcher's decision to engage students in the co-created teaching and learning model over three full terms. Institutional practices and norms include dealing with structures already in place, the time-consuming nature, and the discomfort caused by changing practices (Acai et al., 2017; Curtis et al., 2020; Healey et al., 2014; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). This study found challenges that conflicted with institutional practices and norms related to workload, time issues, and negative feelings.

First, implementing a co-created curriculum model takes time (Bovill, 2020; Bovill et al., 2011), and many faculty members experience time and resource pressures (Serrano et al., 2018), even without trying an unfamiliar and challenging pedagogical practice. This study found that it took approximately 20-plus hours to prepare the class before, during, and after the implementation of co-creation, and it took time from the beginning of class (two to three class periods) to explain and negotiate the co-creation process. While the study found that the time taken at the beginning of class did not take away from students' overall learning, the time and resources required for faculty members to engage in co-creation can be a challenge to implementation.

Second, the process of implementing a co-created curriculum model can cause negative feelings for students and faculty. Students may perceive a lack of necessary expertise to carry out curriculum design (Tuhkala et al., 2021), and they may also experience fear or antipathy toward a new style of learning (Serrano et al., 2018). Students may also have a lack of familiarity with a co-created curriculum model (Bergmark & Westman, 2016; Bovill, 2014; Dollinger & Lodge, 2020; Mercer-Mapstone & Marie, 2019) and may feel doubtful that their recommendations will be included in the curriculum design since faculty are the ones who make the final decisions in curriculum design (Dollinger & Lodge, 2020; Tuhkala et al., 2021). These student perceptions may lead to hesitation toward students' willingness to participate (Tuhkala et al., 2021) and difficulty with participant buy-in (Acai et al., 2017).

The different positions occupied by students and faculty may create tensions around differences in power, reward, and recognition of participation, identity, and responsibility for partnership work (Healey et al., 2014). A 2017 study by Mercer-Mapstone et al. found that students, faculty, and staff reported stress, anxiety, and other negative feelings during co-creation. This study had similar findings, with students and the researcher reporting feelings of stress, confusion, and discomfort during the process. However, negative feelings were reported by students and the researcher to be short-term.

Personal Reflection

In retrospect, implementing the co-created curriculum model was messy and chaotic compared to the traditional model. I went into the first week of classes, not with a complete syllabus and schedule but armed with poster-sized papers filled with grading examples, attendance policy examples, an incomplete schedule, and content to be (or not be) covered.

Students roamed around the room outfitted with the papers taped to the walls. They wrote ideas,

voted on topics, added to the schedule, and discussed grading and assignments. It was organized chaos, collaboration, confusion, and community building. For the teacher-researcher and for the students, it was a learning experience that needed to be shared.

There are many benefits to students and faculty using a co-created curriculum in the research. For faculty, there may be a greater awareness of why they make particular choices in their teaching and the impact of those choices on students (Bovill, 2020a). Having discussions with students about their learning, goals, and needs will allow me to transform my idea of teaching from something done to students to something done with students. Becoming partners with students will allow me to grow as an instructor as I value and implement student perspectives.

I believe that trying a new pedagogical approach to teaching will be more engaging for students and me, as there are many benefits from the perspectives students bring to the learning process. The co-creation of the curriculum is also a way to democratize the classroom and enable students to engage in negotiation and shared decision-making (Bovill, 2020a). Actively seeking and utilizing students' perspectives will allow me to grow as an educator as I see the curriculum from the student perspective rather than relying solely on my own perspective.

Through this research and the application of a co-created curriculum model, I will be able to determine the best practices for implementing this pedagogical approach. With the experience I gain, I will be in a position to work with faculty across the campus who wish to implement changes to their pedagogy and utilize students as partners. Having implemented a whole-course approach, I can offer advice and leadership to other faculty members who may wish to start with small steps to co-creation and potentially work toward a whole-course approach.

Impacts

Colleges are faced with growing pressures to maintain or enhance the quality of what they offer while also being challenged to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse range of students. The co-creation of teaching and learning is one model in which we may be able to meet those challenges.

Having the opportunity to work collaboratively with faculty in developing pedagogical approaches inspires students to experience an increased sense of engagement in the form of enhanced motivation and greater learning (Bovill, 2020a; Bovill, 2019a; Bovill et al., 2011b; Dollinger & Lodge, 2020; Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bovill, 2021; Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2019; Owusu-Agyeman & Fourie-Malherbe, 2019). Co-creation fosters enhanced awareness as students gain a greater meta-cognitive awareness of how they and their peers learn, helping them develop a stronger sense of identity, competence, and confidence (Bovill, 2020a). Students gain higher-order skills and attributes required for students to work effectively in successful partnerships (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2019). Students' development as reflective and active learners who can articulate their leadership skills and other transferable skills are powerful benefits that can be transformative for students (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2019) in their personal and professional lives. Co-creating the curriculum has an impact on developing students' professional skills in leadership (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2019;), teamwork (Bovill, 2020a; Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2019), independent and critical thinking (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2019;), communication and negotiation

(Bovill, 2020a; Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2019), resilience (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2019), and willingness to embrace challenges (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2019).

The curriculum becomes more relevant not only for students but also for staff (Bovill, 2014). Faculty have reported a greater awareness of why they make particular choices in their teaching and the impact those choices have (Bovill, 2020), thus allowing faculty to develop new or better teaching or curriculum methods (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017) as they gain an increased understanding of students' experiences and new beliefs about teaching and learning that change practices for the better (Dollinger, & Lodge, 2020; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). The collaborative learning environment allows faculty to become more reflective and responsive while also creating more democratic classrooms in which partnership becomes the norm (Felten et al., 2019; Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2018). Faculty are able to transform their thinking about teaching and their practices as teachers with a changed understanding of teaching and learning by experiencing different viewpoints and reconceptualizing teaching and learning as a collaborative process (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2018). Strong positive relationships are often built during co-creation processes because teaching and learning become a shared endeavor where the teacher is learning, and the students often contribute to teaching. This overlapping and redefining of roles means that teachers often learn as much from students as students learn from teachers (Bovill, 2020).

The ability to create partnerships, negotiate ownership and responsibility, and empower and engage students and faculty brings value to the college as a whole. As students become more engaged in their learning, retention and completion increase. As faculty implement pedagogical models that see students as partners, a positive relationship and attitude toward teaching and learning emerge, thus increasing faculty satisfaction and collaboration. Actively engaging students as partners has the potential to bring value to students, faculty, divisions, and the college community.

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