Student choice in the curriculum
An investigation into existing practices in theatre and drama
Pedro de Senna
January 2014
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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, my thanks to Dr Paul Kleiman, HEA Discipline Lead for Dance, Drama and Music, for his continued support, and to the Higher Education Academy more broadly for funding this project.

I am grateful to my colleagues across the sector, whose institutions are listed at the end of this report, and who took the time to respond to my questionnaire and nagging emails, contributing to the picture I present here. I am particularly indebted to those who gave their time to be interviewed by me: George Burrows (University of Portsmouth), David Henson (London College of Music - University of West London), Paul Johnson (University of Wolverhampton), Tom Maguire (University of Ulster at Magee), and David Ian Rabey, Richard Cheshire, Charmian Savill and Nick Strong (Aberystwyth University).

I am also grateful to those colleagues who sent me further information via email: Gavin Baker (University of Cumbria), Jason Benson (Swansea Metropolitan University), Gianna Bouchard (Anglia Ruskin University), Kerry Irvine (Bath Spa University), Jane Milling (University of Exeter), Victor Ramirez Ladron de Guevara (University of Plymouth), Carmen Szabo (Sheffield University), and Kurt Taroff (Queen’s University Belfast).

My gratitude also goes to the students from these and other institutions who responded to my questions, either in person or electronically: Laura Ball, James Barton, Scott Bird, Joanna Collins, Sarah Culver, Emily Johnson, Steph Nilüfer Johnson and Fran Richards.

Special thanks are owed to Claire Cochrane of the Standing Conference of University Drama Departments (SCUDD), for providing me with a list of member institutions and their representatives.

Finally, to my colleagues at Middlesex University for their logistical help and moral support: thank you.

About the author

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Section One: Introduction

One of the most common sources of debate in curriculum development and course design has always been the need to accommodate both breadth of experience and depth of knowledge in the syllabus. Within a framework where students are in contact with lecturers for a decreasing number of weekly hours the problem becomes even more pressing.

One of the ways in which curriculum designers have attempted to resolve this conundrum is through offering a measure of flexibility in course structures, allowing students to have some degree of choice and control over their studies. The question that arises, though, is: without abrogating our responsibility as educators, is it possible (or even desirable) to transfer at least some content choice to students?

This report documents a small-scale research project proposed to the Higher Education Authority by the author and undertaken between March and June 2013. The project aimed at mapping the provision of student choice in theatre and drama courses across the sector in the UK. It is aligned with the key HEA thematic area of students as partners, and has yielded findings relevant also for the areas of assessment and feedback and employability. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there are many institutions where students may choose optional modules, or dissertation and project-based units where the content is indeed determined by students’ interests; but what about content choices that are internal to specific taught modules?

In order to find out about these practices, a questionnaire was sent to HE institutions which are members of the Standing Conference of University Drama Departments (SCUDD); this first quantitative exercise was followed by interviews with staff and students from some of these institutions. The picture that emerged was varied in terms of practices and opinions, though generally the research found there is broad agreement in principle that some degree of student choice is desirable. This is not, however, universally accepted, and even where there is a positive response to the idea some of the observations from staff and students in interviews were rather nuanced.

This report consists of three parts:

Section One (this section) sets out the rationale and presents some assumptions relating to curriculum design and student engagement, which underpin the research. It also gives a brief account of an experiment previously undertaken by the author, in which students were asked to elect content to be delivered inside a module, in an attempt to negotiate the breadth versus depth question. That experiment serves as background for some of the reflections made in Section Three.

Section Two deals with the method of research and points to some misconceptions in the questionnaire’s original design, which became apparent as responses were tallied; it proceeds to summarise the findings of the questionnaire, and highlight some of the observations made in interviews, establishing a few patterns and thematic threads.

In the third and final section, some reflections are made on the various moments, instances and processes involved in student choice; the conclusion draws attention to the environment in which courses operate, on notions of autonomy, learning and the fundamental role of the teacher.
Framework

Two important notions underpin the thinking behind this research project: the first one, which is directly related to the concept of students as partners, is that of student engagement. Indeed, Ronald Barnett suggests that engagement entails a long-term partnership, and that “[i]n such a sense of engagement lie notions of commitment, of seriousness and of mutuality” (Barnett 2003:254).

In this sense, engagement and partnership are interchangeable here, and are assumed to be a desirable state of affairs, notwithstanding Barnett’s own caveat that “we cannot assume [...] that virtue is on the side of engagement.” (Barnett 2003:258) His reservations with regards to the notion stem from a stated need for there to be, first and foremost, engagement with the self on the part of the student (and the institution), a degree of self-knowledge and confidence, the absence of which undermines any possibility of meaningful engagement in education. The evidence presented here, however, suggests that often these processes of acquisition of self-knowledge and confidence are concomitant with processes of engagement and partnership, rather than a prerequisite for the latter. Statements reported here would seem to corroborate this idea of correlation, rather than causality.

The second notion is that while the idea of engagement “cannot be adequately construed in mechanical or operational terms” (Barnett 2003:255), there are strategies in curriculum design and structuring which can be employed to facilitate and foment engagement. To disavow that would lead to a nihilistic position whereby curriculum designers are powerless to affect student experience, and one might as well dismiss the whole exercise. In other words: curriculum design, even at its most mechanical or operational – for example, in the provision (or not) of optional modules, or in the enlisting of assessment procedures – can, and indeed does, bear relation to the level of engagement students have with their education.2

Here, Paul Kleiman’s assertion that “[e]nhancing the utility of any curriculum has to be considered in relation to all those who interact with it – students, teaching staff, and administrators” (Kleiman 2009:5) becomes particularly relevant: the findings of this research confirm the notion that curricular strategies and structures impinge upon a variety of stakeholders. Kleiman proceeds to state that “a curriculum that provides a potentially wonderful learning experience for the student yet is highly problematical to administer or assess is only partially useful” (Kleiman 2009:5), and it is the present author’s contention that this ‘utility’ is, in fact, a measure of the quality of the engagement, or partnership, established between the parties.

It is therefore within this framework that the research project was conducted: one in which student engagement is considered essential (though not sufficient) to learning, and one that assumes curriculum design is an important factor determining the quality of that engagement. An important assumption that stems from this framework is that students, lecturers and institutions become partners in learning when there is an adequate balance between breadth and depth in the curriculum. As one of the lecturers interviewed put it: “a complete proliferation of ‘pick-and-mix’ [...] can be frustrating for students and staff alike.” What that balance might be, however, and what degree of choice students should have in determining it, is at the crux of this research project.

2 It must be made clear that no assumption is made here though, that the availability of options is in itself conducive to engagement.
Background

In order to try and reach that balance, in 2007 the author developed the notion of a focus topic, with the idea of opening up one module, allowing students to, after an introductory period in which an overview of the field is given, choose the topic they wish to focus on for five weeks. The result of that experiment was generally positive: in a questionnaire circulated at the time, two-thirds of students interviewed agreed with the statement that “Having a focus topic is a good way to deal with this dilemma”, with only 10% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing (de Senna 2009).

An interesting result of that experiment was that the breadth versus depth question is one that plagues curriculum designers more than it does students:

• “The number of topics addressed by the tutor within a module should be limited, so that he or she can deal with them in depth."

• “A tutor should introduce as many topics as possible, it is down to the students to research further those in which they are interested.”

In response to the above statements, an overwhelming majority of students were in favour of fewer topics covered in more depth (de Senna 2009). This corroborates Professor Peter Knight’s call for:

“An emphasis on learning for understanding rather than learning for extensive content mastery. There is evidence that an emphasis on coverage encourages superficiality. Superficiality is not conducive to creativity. Understanding, which comes from covering less ground with more emphasis on the underlying concepts, strategies and assumptions, is conducive to creativity. Put it another way: cover less material but in ways that help students to understand more about the domain and its complex learning outcomes.” (Knight 2002:4)

What the findings do point towards, though, is the fact that, given the opportunity, students do like the idea of having a stake in deciding what that content will be. Again, to the question “Who do you believe should choose the focus topic for the module?” the responses were as follows:

a) The students 66.6%

b) The module tutor 33.3%

It is clear then, that a desire for choice does not necessarily equate to a desire for breadth on the part of the students. That granted, one cannot deny that some degree of variety is an inevitable consequence of student choice: by definition, choosing implies alternatives and a consequent opening up of the syllabus.

Interestingly, Susan Toohey points to a correlation between student choice and in-depth learning:

“Students who make their own choice of units are more likely to take a deep approach to learning because they are choosing to pursue an area in which they already have some interest. Within prescribed units a similar level of motivation can often be achieved by allowing students the choice of topic for a major
assignment. Choice helps to promote ownership and responsibility. It is unlikely that students will take responsibility for their own learning when all the decisions about what topics or skills are more relevant, and what evidence of learning might be presented, have already been made by someone else. Where the unit is prescribed, where there is little or no choice in assessable work and all of the assessment requires a similar response, students are more likely to opt for a surface approach in order to meet requirements that they feel little commitment to.” (Toohey 1999:15)

This may at first seem like a contradiction: that offering variety is conducive to deep learning. However, in setting out what a creative curriculum (ie a curriculum that fosters creativity) should look like, Professor Knight states that, among other things, it “also needs to contain spaces for people, both staff and students to do things that are chosen by them and new to them. In addition to spaces for reflection the creative curriculum needs opportunities for other creative constructions”. (3) The shape and nature of these “other creative constructions” are the object of this research.
Section Two: Questionnaire and interviews

As reported above, the research project had two phases: the first, quantitative exercise attempted to map the provision of student choice in the curriculum across SCUDD affiliated institutions. To that end, a questionnaire was designed, with questions divided into four sections (see Appendix 1). The second, qualitative phase consisted of interviews with staff and students of some of these institutions, both online and in person. The focus was on institutions offering single honours degrees, as combined honours introduce a level of choice which goes beyond the scope of the discipline.

Institutions/interviewees in the qualitative phase were selected to represent the variety of practices and opinions presented in the questionnaire responses, and instances where further clarification was needed as a result of problems in the questionnaire design.

One of the problems encountered in the quantitative exercise was that of definitions. While the questionnaire attempted to unpick the types of choice made available to students, responses to questions 2.1 and 2.5 (see below) revealed that more clarity in phrasing was needed, particularly in relation to “Content choice as part of a taught module”.

Section Two (only if YES to question 1.5)

1. What form(s) does this choice take? (please mark as appropriate)
   a. Optional modules. [   ]
   b. Dissertation or project-based modules. [   ]
   c. Content choice as part of a taught module. [   ]
   d. Other. [   ]

5. Still in relation to “c. Content choice as part of a taught module”, please mark as appropriate:
   • Students have a choice on the form and/or content of assessment. [   ]
   • Students have a choice of taught content within the parameters of the module. [   ]

The second bullet in question 5 assumed option c to refer to instances akin to that experimented with in the Focus Topic, where students determine what is being taught. Many respondents marking that option, however, went on to describe modules where, after a brief introductory set of sessions, students could choose a particular strand to follow, effectively splitting the module in two or three predetermined syllabi.

This is typified by the following response (Plymouth University):

“There are some 'parent' modules which have different pathways (options). For example, within the module 'Crafting Theatre' (a module in which students explore the stylistic, historical and ideological characteristics of a specific theatrical genre/style) students may be offered the choice of being part of a group looking at 'Physical Theatre' or being part of a group looking at 'Post-modern Theatre'."

Another typical response referred to modules which are “student-led but staff supported” (University of Cumbria), and where the input of the tutor is mostly on a supervisory capacity. So content is chosen by students, but also researched and explored by them,
rather than taught. It is clear that while students had control over their learning, this did not necessarily mean they had control over the teaching.

A third typical response to that question focused on assessment choices: “students can determine the focus of their essays in taught modules in the seminar room, and make creative choices in the studio-based modules” (University of Exeter). This highlights the difficulty to dissociate assessment from learning and teaching. Indeed, the notion of assessment for learning blurs the boundaries between the categories expressed in questions 2.1 and 2.5. A dissertation project is simultaneously an assessment and a learning tool.

In setting out the conditions for his creative curriculum, Professor Knight enumerates “openness to choice”. He proceeds to unpack this:

“There may be limited choice between modules, but there can be a lot of choice within modules if they are designed on a core-and-application basis. (Teachers introduce the key tools — concepts, strategies, information sources — and then have students practise them on problems that they, the students, choose/identify.)” (3)

This approach to teaching and learning is typical of Theatre and Drama courses across the UK, though sometimes there are modules entirely dedicated to ‘core’ or fully dedicated to ‘application’.

A final note about the limitations of questionnaire design: the question of number of credits carried by optional modules or projects became increasingly irrelevant, as the concept of choice itself became more fluid and encompassing. Thus, in most courses surveyed (the exception being drama schools) there is some degree of student choice across structures, and unpicking those is often impossible given that some choices are subsumed within others. It became apparent, therefore, that ascertaining the level of choice offered in terms of a percentage of the course, or a total number of ‘choice’ credits, was a moot exercise. Moreover, the variety in credit regimes and academic frameworks across and within institutions would render any such calculation too esoteric. Finally, the phrasing of the question, asking for the “Total number of credits in optional modules” left room for ambiguity.

These difficulties and flaws notwithstanding, some observations are possible. A summary of the findings is presented below.

**Summary of questionnaire findings**

A total of 75 questionnaires were sent, achieving a total of 34 responses from 32 institutions – Bath Spa University and the University of Glamorgan offer two degree awards within the fields covered, and therefore responded twice each. Four of these responses were emails addressing the issue of choice, but pointing out the inadequacy of the questionnaire to deal with their institutional/course structures.

The first general observation to be made about the questionnaire (and subsequently corroborated by interview with a student who studied in both types of institution) was the sense of a divide in provision of choice between conservatoire-style training and broader university education, with drama schools/conservatoires offering little or no optionality to students, and universities inevitably offering some choice, as suggested
above. This confirms Toohey’s observation that “professional education still tends to be very highly structured, with few electives, driven by a need to produce graduates who can safely be allowed to practise on the general public” (Toohey 1999:127) – even if the consequences of ‘unsafe’ performance practice may be arguably less serious than those of ‘unsafe’ medical practice, for example (with exceptions on both cases, of course).

None of the three conservatoires who responded offers any formalised degree of choice or optional modules. The respondent from Central School of Speech and Drama suggested (email response only) that there may be some choice in the content of units, but did not elaborate on the matter. All remaining 28 institutions responded that they did offer some degree of student choice in their curriculum.

The focus from now will be on questionnaire answers, representing 30 courses from 28 institutions, represented in the tables below. Table 1 emphatically illustrates the overwhelming incidence of student choice in higher education courses within the discipline.

Table 1 (total possible 30)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question 1.5</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is there any degree of student choice in the curriculum within this course?</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>1 (London College of Music – University of West London)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 illustrates the number of awards offering the different types of choice identified in question 2.1. While the problems of definition regarding [2.1.c.] have already been noted, it is interesting to observe that the vast majority of courses offer optional modules, as well as dissertation or project-based modules.

Table 2 (total possible 29)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What form(s) does this choice take?</th>
<th>Number of courses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Optional modules</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Dissertation or project-based modules</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Content choice as part of a taught module</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Other</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the courses responding “d. Other”, two did not specify; the remaining three listed choices of modules outside the discipline and work experience modules (University of Exeter); the choice to change mode of study/programme between Single, Major or Minor Honours (University of Ulster); and the splitting of the course into distinct pathways at level 5, with the pathways merging again at level 6 (University of Portsmouth). This last model will be further discussed in the summary interviews.
Table 3 breaks down the incidence of optional modules across course levels (one institution did not specify level(s) at which its optional modules run).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Number of courses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/SCQF</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/SCQF</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is clear that optional modules are mostly located in levels 5 and 6. This is aligned with Toohey’s assertion (1999:128) that “modularised programmes may be less ideal for entry level students who are still learning about their own interests and the possibilities within their discipline or profession”. There seems to be broad agreement in the sector that at level 4 students are generally not equipped to make choices in terms of modules. Eighteen out of 24 responding courses do not offer optional modules at level 4. Students are broadly introduced to aspects of the discipline in their first year of studies, before moving on to more specialised areas of knowledge in levels 5 and 6.

The answers to question 2.7 are tabulated in Table 4. Worth noting here is the fact that only half the courses represented listed “Catering for variety of interests from staff” as a benefit from implementing choice in the curriculum. Notwithstanding Kleiman’s and Knight’s assertions (above) about the need for lecturers to be as engaged by the curriculum as students, respondents ranked their own benefits below those of students (answers a. and c.), in spite of two-thirds of them later stating they are happy with the level of choice provided (Table 6). This confirms Barnett’s notion that “[i]n a pedagogy of engagement, the lecturer displaces his role as lecturer such that it takes a lesser place and brings the student forward, even at the risk of causing student anxiety” (Barnett 2003:265). In this respect, it is also interesting to compare the findings illustrated in Table 4 with those in Table 5: while 27 respondents list “Student satisfaction and retention” as one of the main benefits in implementing choice, the main challenge presented for this implementation (22 respondents) is managing student expectations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In your experience, what have been the main benefits in implementing student choice in the curriculum?</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Greater autonomy and personal development for students</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Marketing and recruitment</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Student satisfaction and retention</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Catering for variety of interests from staff</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Better balance in the curriculum</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Marketing and recruitment also feature prominently in the listed benefits. This was picked up again in interviews with staff; this time, however, not necessarily as something positive, perhaps because of the level of expectation created with regards to what a course can deliver. These expectations (and their frustration) have to be dealt with by course teams.

Indeed, it is at departmental-/course-team level that most problems regarding student choice come to a head. Table 5 evidences timetabling and resource issues as important constraints. Alongside institutional frameworks, these are challenges that are often resolved at departmental level, with tactics such as cross-subsidising of modules, space-swaps and subsuming choices into modules. As one interviewee put it, often theatre courses “benefit from being a bit amorphous and being a bit under the radar, in that we do a lot of things in house, and that allows us to offer more optionality. [...] We benefit from the obscurity of our discipline”.

Table 5 (total possible 30)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What, in your experience, are the main challenges for, or problems with, implementing student choice in the curriculum?</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. The principle is flawed; it is an abrogation of tutors’ responsibility and expertise</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. The principle is flawed; students need a focused, structured learning experience</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Staffing issues (ie need for specialist visiting lecturers for specific choice modules)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Timetabling and other resource issues</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Institutional academic frameworks</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. Managing student expectations with regards to choice</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g. Other (please specify)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is noteworthy that one of those who responded “Other” specified that:

“with high levels of optionality it is sometimes difficult to address issues of quality control – modules are taught by other departments, HPL staff you may not meet or know much about – the option is often part of another degree programme for example”.

This need to strike a balance in the level of optionality on offer is indeed an important concern, one which framed question 3.2. While the concern remains, the evidence (Table 6) suggests that a substantial majority of respondents believe their courses have it right – including the one respondent whose answer [f.] indicates no choice is available in their institution.
Table 6 (total possible 30)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Would you consider implementing some degree of student choice in the curriculum?</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. I already do, and I am happy with the current level of student choice offered</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. I already do, and would like to increase the level of student choice offered</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. I already do, and would like to reduce the level of choice offered</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. I would, but staff and/or resource pressures prevent me from doing it</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. I would, but institutional regulations prevent me from doing it</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. I would not consider implementing student choice in the curriculum</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the five respondents who suggested they would like to increase the level of choice offered, one also marked [d.], citing the small size of the department as a constraint. Curiously, one of the respondents who marked [a.] also marked [d.] and [e.]. One respondent did not mark any answer to this question.

Both respondents who stated they would like to reduce the level of choice offered are currently undertaking processes of review and revalidation for their degrees, and are taking the opportunity to do so, “with a mind to implement more focus and identity to the course” (Section 4 response).

Finally, seven respondents chose to complete the discursive Section 4. As well as the one response mentioned above, two mentioned institutional difficulties (timetabling and academic frameworks) as factors affecting optionality. Two were broadly praising the notion of a “well-structured” level of choice; one suggested that “the course should be designed with the industry needs in mind”; and one focused on the students’ relation to the notion. All of the above issues, and especially the last two, emerged again and again in interviews, as shall be seen below.

**Summary of interviews**

While the findings of the quantitative exercise may be largely attributed to specific universities and courses (at least Sections One and Two), the interviews represent the opinions of individual students and staff members within those institutions, and should not be taken to represent the institutions. They have been amalgamated with email responses to requests for further information, made anonymous, and placed within the context of the broader discussion of issues surrounding choice. The only index of identity left is whether the opinion comes from a student or lecturer.

As suggested above, some number of issues recurred in the conversations, with some patterns emerging. This section is therefore organised thematically, presenting the breadth of opinions within each topic. Under each heading, a very short outline of the ideas presented is given, followed by a number of representative extracts from the
interviews, and brief comments. As with any categorisation, these headings are bound to be permeable, and extracts might easily have been placed within a different grouping. The extensive number of extracts will allow the reader to gauge the breadth of opinion presented and to reorganise their own patterns and associations if they so wish.

Identity and choice

The issue of identity emerges as key here, whether it be suggesting that offering choice to students allows them to forge their identities, or, to the contrary, to claim that students have not yet developed a degree of autonomous identity sufficient to enable conscious choice. Choice is also related to course identities, and alignments with student-led or tutor-led paradigms of education. All opinions represented here are from lecturers:

“Actually some students don’t know what they want, so they’re actually trusting you to put the best programme on, because they haven’t yet clearly established their identity.”

“The philosophy that underpins our course is towards developing independent creative practitioners. In order to give students the opportunity to emerge as such we have sought to develop a programme that, like many other degree programmes, relinquishes the need for direct tutor–learner teaching towards supervision of students working autonomously. Alongside this is an increase in responsibility for creative choice and selection.”

“sometimes we do know better; [...] sometimes they [students] are not in the best position to make the best choice”.

“I’m all for students having the opportunity to explore different things and pursue and develop their enthusiasms; I think where that could lead to a less than ideal set of circumstances would be if someone were claiming the right to come in to, shall we say, a third-year advanced production project and saying I should be allowed to make a very specialist form of contribution into this advanced production module in a field in which they’d had no introductory training in the second year, for example.”

“I don’t think choice per se is a good thing [...] degrees have to have clearly defined pathways.”

“There has to be an intent within a degree that it has a purpose, and it has a place within the profession and it has a place within the development of the student, so that they know that if they go on this course that they’re going to be given a direction.”

“I think [choice] dilutes the uniqueness of the qualification, to a certain extent; and you then can no longer be secure.”

One lecturer also suggested that offering students choice in the curriculum is perhaps the result of insecurity from institutions, who in a competitive market want to be everything to everyone, rather than firmly establishing an identity, needed “in order to be honest, to enable the student to make some choice [of degree]”. On the other hand, offering choice to students is also seen as confidence-building: in institutions where students come from
less privileged backgrounds, giving them the option to choose something they are comfortable with may be a way in to engagement with the discipline, so that then expectations can be challenged and subverted. Exposing students to things they don’t know often informs their future choices.

**Factors affecting choice**

Indeed the factors that inform student choices were variously described. The very notion of identity and autonomy is challenged here: social pressures (conscious or unconscious), pragmatic and tactical considerations as well as taste play an important role:

“Choice is exercised within a social position. [...] Students are not in that sense isolated as individuals.” [lecturer]

“I took the modules that would benefit me in the future [...]. I chose the modules that require individual learning because I work well when I have my own schedule as I have a busy life outside of university.” [student]

“One of the interesting things about the way they make choices is that a lot of it happens in the social environment, but also as a result of extra-curricular activities, which has a strong social dimension, and that’s something that often gets lost in talking about universities.” [lecturer]

“I feel like there’s a lot of choice in my course; I also feel like a lot of the choice happens because of good rapport with the lecturers, and that sometimes students don’t understand that and they plump for an assessment that doesn’t really suit them. [...] It’s about knowing how to use the choice within our course.” [student]

“Staff interests and enthusiasms play a something of a part.” [lecturer]

“I made choices based on which skill or module I felt I could or wanted to learn more about; I chose a directing module as I felt it could be challenging and I had heard from previous years that it was fun and I liked the idea of collaborating with first years. In third year I made most of my performance choices based on people I didn’t/did want to work with, because having spent two years with them I knew which people were unreliable and those which worked hard. As we had the most artistic freedom in our third year most of my choices came from the skills I had learnt and the challenges I had done over the last two years.” [student]

“Their creative choices are always in relation to feedback they’re getting from myself or another lecturer or their peers, and that conditions the kind of choices that they’re making.” [lecturer]

“If you know that people who don’t turn up all the time or are unreliable pick something, you’d pick up the other.” [student]

“I think it comes down to how strongly you feel about something: like, I would never choose comedy over physical theatre, because I really love physical theatre.” [student]
“With regards to choices within modules, I started by doing what I wanted – especially in terms of the art and creating something amazing. However, the further into the course we got, I ended up just making the choices that I knew would get me the grades... As bad as that is.” [student]

Students show a nuanced understanding of choice, and often do evidence a high level of self-awareness in this exercise. It is interesting to note, too, how choice is often informed negatively: rather than an active, positive decision to take a module or work with a particular group, choices are made on the basis of avoiding something (assessment format, topic) or someone (student or lecturer).

Constraints to choice

Indeed, a number of factors might be at play, preventing positive choice. Institutional frameworks (including degree classification structures that place greater weight on level 6 credits), resource and timetabling issues, students’ own personalities and backgrounds are constraining factors, effectively limiting the level of choice available, even if ostensibly choice is still there:

“Often, in effect, that’s what we end up doing: we’re offering a choice to express a preference, but then there are some many other constraints upon that choice that, you know, it’s not that straightforward.” [lecturer]

“They [optional modules] are available but they get booked up fast, so making decisions early on is incredibly important, and mind-changing isn’t always an option.” [student]

“Normally it’s worked out that everyone who’s replied by the deadline has been able to get the one they want.” [lecturer]

“While I really enjoyed my second year module choice, it was not my first option and I was almost forced to take the directing module as the option I had chosen was not popular enough. Again I understand the teaching constraints but this was very frustrating, considering that I was paying to do the course and thought I had the option.” [student]

“Students in the last five years have come with a narrower knowledge of the subject and also maybe a narrower historical knowledge [...] students are often not good at making connections between modules, so those two factors combined I think make it difficult for them to make meaningful choices, because I think they don’t have enough contextual information to make that choice.” [lecturer]

“They’re often making choices for the group, rather than for themselves [...] so that people that are more wilful will get their way, rather than people who are more group-focused.” [lecturer]

“I think also when there are fewer choices available, in a way those choices become more significant [...] so the reduction of choices that we had makes those choices more difficult for the students to make.” [lecturer]
“That [How well you think you’ll do] “is a very big factor, particularly in the final year.” [student]

“They’re much braver by the third year in terms of departing from that which they know, or if they’ve been challenged in the second year [...] they’re more ready to take on or experience something different.” [lecturer]

The contrast between the last two statements is interesting. Students often choose ‘safely’, in spite of what lecturers may wish to think. There was a strong sense among students that the third year in particular is not to be messed with, as the consequences of a bad choice are greater, in terms of what degree classification students will get. This finding qualifies notions of progressive autonomy within courses. Still, as evidenced in the questionnaire (Table 3, above), optional modules are offered at level 6 in almost the same number of institutions as they are at level 5 (the caveat remains regarding the proportion of the course/year those modules occupy).

Consequences of choice, and chance

Choice is perceived by students and lecturers alike as not being consequence-free. This is taken to apply to both the consequences of choices made, and to the very fact of there being choice in the first place. Even when the stakes are high, though, chance and serendipity play a significant part. Barnett’s assertion that, for there to be true engagement, “[p]arties come together voluntarily but also self-knowingly [...] being aware of their own strengths and weaknesses” (Barnett 2003:254) does not necessarily hold true with regards to being a priority condition for choice:

“The nice thing in terms of optionality is that it gives people the option to do those sorts of things and to discover things that way, by accident or by design.” [lecturer]

“I think you just have to be lucky: sometimes you find your path, some people don’t – some people go: ok, I’ll do this one for the sake of it, because I don’t know, they’re all great paths or they’re all shit paths.” [student]

“The choices they make quite often disrupt the reason why they made that choice in the beginning – they make new choices as a result of being in the project.” [lecturer]

“I wasn’t sure about the choice, I don’t think anyone’s sure when they make it, but that’s a good thing, I think.” [student]

“At level 4 most students say they want to be performers; almost all students have changed their mind by the time they reach level 6.” [lecturer]

“I think you learn through your mistakes, even if possibly in hindsight you didn’t pick the right one.” [student]

“[Choosing something implies excluding something else, but] it depends on what you are like as a student, because I think if it’s something that interests you, you will, whether it’s in university or not, delve into it more.” [student]
“We also had the opportunity to choose our own modules: while this was good for a more in-depth learning of a particular skill, I did feel like I missed out on learning other skills which could have been more beneficial to me now.”

[student]

Chance plays a bigger part in determining the outcomes of choices than one might want to admit. One student mentioned that collaborations often happened because of the random group split, so people had little choice but to work within a particular class. Examples were also given of careers developed on the back of choices made, consolidating friendships and expertise into enterprise. This has been the case when friends have made the same choices and developed a working relationship within a series of modules, for instance; but equally when choices diverged, and skills and expertise were diversified within friendship groups, which later developed into professional collaborations. Findings relating to this will be addressed in the concluding section of this report.

Section Three: Instances, moments and processes of choice

This project started with relatively narrow remit – namely to look into optional modules and the level of optionality within modules in terms of content and assessment, under the title of Student Choice in the Curriculum. It soon became apparent, however, that the word choice is loaded with a number of expectations, and elicits responses that go well beyond the original intents of the project. Institutions may be inclined to determine particular moments of choice, but these moments are often determined by other, earlier factors and it is hard to establish what those might be. Questionnaire responses, and particularly interviews revealed the pervasiveness and slippery nature of the word.

One of these instances is that of strands inside modules: one of the students interviewed mentioned that using this model, rather than electing a whole module, gave them the impression of not losing out on so much. Another stated: “I quite like it, as someone who isn’t the best at making decisions, so the decisions were in a way already made for me.”

There is still a similar level of choice, but the mechanisms through which the choice is exercised change. From an institutional point of view, this is good (management of boards, second-marking, etc, all happen within the module). Not all choice is good all the time, though. While, as a lecturer put it, “we may want to have different types of choice that operate at different points”, a level of procedural consistency might benefit students and staff, in terms of knowing what’s going on and how things work.

This is particularly relevant, for example, when taking into account the moment when choices are made. One of the problems encountered with a strands model is that students making choices internally to modules – often after teaching has started – means sometimes the staff expertise is not in place. On the other hand, asking for strand choices to be made before the module starts can be a source of stress and insecurity to students, who feel they don’t have enough information to make an informed choice. “so it’s really where you put the difficulty, whether you put the difficulty onto the students or whether you put the difficulty onto the staff.” [lecturer] One of the students interviewed suggested that bureaucracies and hierarchies make choice come too early.
In spite of bureaucracies and hierarchies (or perhaps because of them), processes for making choices can often be informal. In one instance, students made a suggestion regarding the final sessions (post-assessment) of a module, which the tutor followed. This has now been included in module outlines for subsequent years. The fact that this happened post-assessment is significant. The research found that the relationship between choice and assessment and feedback is complex. As well as at times being a determining factor on whether a student will choose a particular module, feedback given on assessments informs strategic future choices, as we have seen. Moreover, types of assessment within a module may in some cases be chosen by students, making assessment an instance of choice worthy of analysis.

One common type of assessment within the discipline is that of production projects, which follow the core and application model proposed by Knight in his Notes on a Creative Curriculum. This type of assessment is particularly conducive to choice. In one such instance:

“[students] are free to work individually, in pairs, small groups, an entire cohort. The parameters are only really managed by supervising tutors in respect of logistics, creative integrity, intellectual rigour, clarity. Even here, the students are in effect free to experiment. There is also room for students to negotiate the weighting of their assessment to rest more or less between process and final performance (whatever that might mean in this instance).”

Here, students choose not only the nature of the project but their role within it, and even the weighting of the assessment criteria, following a model akin to Paul Kleiman’s negotiated assessment (Kleiman 2007). This is not unique. A few other examples are listed below:

“Students again can always develop a choice of material in the studio, in the seminar room both the content and focus of presentations and essays has a large component of choice within it - although the functional tasks in all cases are set as parameters.” [lecturer]

“Within all of our performance modules you get to choose a role and take on that role, and your assessment at the end should take into consideration your role within the piece.” [student]

“They are provided with a variety of five texts from different periods and allowed to choose either one of the provided texts or one which has not been worked on in class for their final performance.” [lecturer]

“I have managed to negotiate with my lecturers a way in which they can assess me, but I can be assessed in the role that I work best in, and that’s not necessarily part of our module choices or our pathway choices, but it’s still sort of an important part of our course.” [student]

The level of freedom and variety of instances of choice offers procedural challenges. One of the problems mentioned with regards to optional modules, for example, is making sure all options are conducive to all the course learning outcomes, ensuring coverage without duplication. Some thoughts in relation to the managing the processes involved in student choice are listed below (all from lecturers):
“[pathways] provide a cumulative knowledge and discourse which equips the student better to go into that, and maintains or raises the discourse of that particular module.”

“One of the things you can’t predict is how the year group is going to split [between strands].”

“In a few instances, there are some modules when students can ask the tutor to explore themes, materials and/or bibliographical sources not originally contemplated in the syllabus but which belong to the remit of the module in question.”

“Choices are made on an individual basis and we try to avoid then constraining them, as this can cause upset for the students (we offer a choice and then potentially take it away from them!).”

“If there’s an imbalance in terms of numbers of students in different pathways, this may cause tensions among staff in terms of equitable distribution of workload.”

“You can determine the dimensions of choice by how you set the task.”

Assessment design appears here again, this time as a tool to mitigate for “friendship networks heavily influenc[ing] those choices”, and providing for groups formed around tasks within a project, for example.

Section Four: Conclusion

One cannot dissociate the research presented in this report from the conditions under which universities currently operate in the UK. Though education is, primarily, about learning and teaching, it is perhaps telling that the responsibility for higher education within government comes within the remit of Department of Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS) rather than the Department for Education. The widely respected academic and writer on the state of higher education Stefan Collini describes this as “a dispiriting indication of official attitudes” (Collini 2012:174). There has been a significant, many would argue transformative, shift towards the marketisation and privatisation of the sector, and the current higher education environment is awash with buzzwords: marketing; student achievement; employability and enterprise. Each of these bears a relation to the issue of student choice and deserves a closer look.

Marketing

It was clear from the interviews that the level of choice within a course is a factor in determining which university students will decide to apply for. This is true for those candidates who do want a great degree of choice, and for those who would rather follow a more pre-determined path in their studies. With this in mind, marketing departments make great efforts to exalt each course’s particular level and style of student choice, at times at the cost of slight misrepresentation of the course’s design and structures. As suggested by Paul Kleiman: “Honest design can be compromised by less-than scrupulous
marketing.” (Kleiman 2009:7). Paradoxically, attempts to sell ‘uniqueness’ often make courses look indistinguishable. As one of the interviewees stated, there are too many universities and courses offering similar courses, and being differentiated on the basis of “I have a prettier dance studio.”

This market mentality has led to attitudes similar to that of the student quoted above (p19), who was prevented from taking a particular optional module and expressed frustration at the fact they were paying for something without getting what they wanted. This attitude is increasingly common. One of the lecturers interviewed said: “We recognize they [students] have a stake in our decision-making, but it’s not entirely customer-led – we’ve had some students come back to us and say ‘I’m paying your wages’.” They also admitted:

“For example, in our course publicity and our online presence, we might well list all of the modules we will have on offer, so that might include a module in musical theatre. We have a module validated in musical theatre which has never been offered. [...] One of the things we do when we get students in person as applicants is to say to them: in a given year, these will vary.”

Some of the procedures mentioned under the previous heading may complicate things further. For example, making choices into strands within modules, rather than full optional modules makes that choice more difficult to communicate to prospective students. In the end, one interviewee stated: “I think that universities really have a great duty to say: ‘this is what we do, we promise to do this and we will do our best to achieve this.’” Only this gives the opportunity for a candidate to choose their course accordingly.

**Student achievement**

Once a course is chosen, students need to achieve to prove their investment in education was worth the money it cost. It is possible that the correlation between student choice and student achievement may be less well established than Toohey has suggested (see p11). One of the lecturers interviewed asserted that students are motivated by interesting work, whether they chose it or not:

“We’ve had no experience where they’ve done better in optional modules than they have in compulsory modules. Actually there’s a consistency, if they’re good students they will do as well in each, and when they’re weaker students they’ll perform at more or less the same level, so the idea that choice motivates learning I think is one that is propagated, and maybe spurious.”

However, other lecturers interviewed pointed out that added pressure from parents makes students want to get a good degree and to be seen to be doing well, and their choices are affected by that. This pressure to achieve often measures success in pre-determined ways. Exploration and variety of experience, often associated with choice, become perhaps less welcome, even as “the opportunity to have a choice gets more varied as [students] advance in their degree”. A student, however, stated:

“In regards to specialisms, I think that was an extensive range. Having said this, I personally would have preferred more time focused on each subject to see myself develop, maybe the same specialisms each year to see a natural progression through each year.”
While Barnett expresses that “educational processes that engage students prove themselves in those same students being more able and more prepared to engage with their worlds” (Barnett 2003:251), the expected conclusion and consequence of this engagement and progression is, of course, employment.

**Employability and enterprise**

The lexicon of employability and enterprise is deeply ingrained in higher education discourses, and employability is a major thematic area of the Higher Education Academy. Student choice, in whatever format that may take, is closely associated with these concepts. Even when little or no choice is offered, this is justified in terms of the future professional lives of students. It is in this context that Bowden and Marton’s (2004) instrumentalist call for a description of curriculum and teaching “primarily in terms of the capabilities to be developed and the patterns of experiences it takes to develop them” (Bowden and Marton 2004:114) becomes pertinent. The extracts from interviews below speak for themselves:

“There’s room for people to choose anything that they want to put together, so people have done things like a fashion show, or put together a magazine, and we’re really open to that. It doesn’t have to be a theatre company of some sort. So people go and they do all kinds of different things in that, because it’s all about enterprise and employability, and we understand that people after the university experience of this sort don’t necessarily want to go and seek Arts Council funding to do a small show touring regional venues or go on to the West End; they may well want to set up a small magazine selling bridal wear. Well, why shouldn’t they start developing those skills during that ‘forming a company’?” [lecturer]

“I like that, because it’s choices you’d have to make in any situation outside of uni.” [student]

“Information needs to be multidimensional: it’s not enough to publish the module guide; it’s not enough to say this is what the industry is looking for, this is where your career path might lead; it’s also about that reflective process with the student so that they are aware of the implications for them, in that they take on a new area, or they have an interest they want to pursue, or a skill that they want to develop – against what they’re going to need.” [lecturer]

“[drama school] was more in depth. However, drama school had such a strict, austere, approach that I wanted to study at university after my foundation program. [...] University] offered more independent work, research, devised performances, flexibility, more of a relaxed atmosphere.” [student]

“What happens once they’ve made those choices is that they [...] start getting ideas about different careers.” [lecturer]

“[when I started the course] I had absolutely no idea: I knew that I loved drama.[...] but I had no idea quite how much this course would change me and shape my future.” [student]

“That’s the mark of a good education: when you virtually know where they [students] have come from, because of how they work.” [lecturer]
“In terms of how I decided to shape my career as a producer, is that in my second year, I learned quickly that not everyone is going to give you the acting opportunity you want. So I decided to use my student loan as a theatre investment and take my first show to Edinburgh. It was the number of people competing for the same modules and roles at uni that made me want to do something for myself that I was in control of.” [student]

The evidence points to employability and enterprise being fully integrated in higher education courses in a number of ways, and that student choice is closely associated with that. While Bowden and Marton’s assertion that “university education has to be [...] about learning for an unknown future” (Bowden and Marton 2004:115) may seem perhaps too industry-serving, its emphasis on the unknown and on learning rather than training in a set of skills is refreshing.

Learning

Indeed, learning takes place in a variety ways, associated with choice. For example, students reported that when friends took different strands within a same module, conversations between them allowed for crossovers of content. Furthermore, students learn from working with each other on projects, facilitated by specialisation brought about by optional routes for learning: “That performance [...] wouldn’t have been what it was [...] if it hadn’t been for all the people with all the different skills being put together at the end of the third year.”; and informally, through watching each other’s shows: “Eventually we all get to the end result, you get to the same place in the end, even though you’ve approached it slightly differently.”

Of course, the goal of every Theatre and Drama education is to produce autonomous, creative artists. And the ability to make choices, a crucial element in artistic development, is in itself among the things learned by students: “As you do get older and you get more into the university and the studying, you make more informed decisions, and you’re able to make those decisions because of what you’ve done before.”

This shows a degree of self-awareness expressed by the student bears out a lecturer’s observation that “[s]tudents are not clients or customers, they are members of a learning community, and that dimension is absolutely what governs their choosing”. That is the case even if students don’t sometimes realise the choice is there, because of institutional frameworks – they didn’t tick an options form, for instance; but the choice was present, and an indispensable part of their learning.

Teaching

In all of this, what transpires is that for students to be partners, they need counterparts to partner with. The role of the lecturer, or teacher, is crucial in shaping the broader educational and learning experience and, specifically choices that students make. At its most pragmatic, this is manifested in Toohey’s highlighting the need for individual guidance of students putting together programmes of study (Toohey 1999:128). At its most poetic, “a pedagogy of engagement – of whatever kind – calls for generosity and a self-denying ordinance on the part of the teacher” (Barnett 2003:265).
A student interviewed stated: “I also believe that it really depends on the teacher itself as they can shape your enjoyment of the module and degree.” This sentiment was echoed in various interviews. Unfortunately, the scale of this project did not allow for a desirable wider consultation with students across a greater number of institutions.

The findings of this project bear relevance for curriculum design, and learning and teaching within the subject areas of Theatre and Drama specifically, but also more broadly to other fields in Arts and Humanities, and further discussion of the issues surrounding student choice in these broader fields is welcome. Whatever the discipline, and wherever one places oneself within the debate surrounding student choice, though, the role of the teacher should be, in the words of one of the generous lecturers interviewed: “To give everything that they have and own to the students, to make the students better than they could be – I think that’s our responsibility.”

With this kind of generosity, one can develop integrity, creativity and autonomy in learners through the implementation of choice, but equally through – for want of a better analogy – diving into something to such an extent, that when you come out for breath you are renewed.

References


Appendix 1: Questionnaire - Student choice in the curriculum

This questionnaire is designed to help ascertain the level of student choice available in undergraduate single honours Theatre and Drama courses across the HE sector. Anecdotal evidence suggests that student choice occurs in three forms: optional modules; dissertation and project-based units where the content is determined by students’ interests; and content choices internal to taught modules.

It should take you fewer than 15 minutes to complete this questionnaire. As a follow-up, I may wish to contact you for further enquiries or a short interview.

Please mark this box with an X if you would NOT like me to contact you. [   ]

Section 1

1. Name:
2. Email address:
3. University/department:
4. Course name:
5. Is there any degree of student choice in the curriculum within this course?  
   (please delete as appropriate)  YES  NO

   If NO, please go to Section 3. If YES, please proceed to Section 2.

Section 2 (only if YES to question 1.5)

1. What form(s) does this choice take? (please mark as appropriate)
   a. Optional modules [   ]  b. Dissertation or project-based modules [   ]
   c. Content choice as part of a taught module [   ]  d. Other [   ]

2. For ”a. Optional modules”, please state:
   a. Name and level of the modules.
   b. Total number of credits in optional modules.
   c. Any conditions on choice (ie recruitment, number of options, pre-requisites, degree pathways etc.)

3. For ”b. Dissertation or project-based modules”, please state:
   a. Name and level of the module(s).
   b. Credits carried by each module.
   c. Any conditions on choice (ie supervising expertise, resourcing, pre-requisites, degree pathways etc.)

4. For ”c. Content choice as part of a taught module”, please state:
   a. Name and level of the module(s).
   b. Credits carried by each module.

5. Still in relation to “c. Content choice as part of a taught module”, please mark as appropriate:
   o Students have a choice on the form and/or content of assessment. [   ]
   o Students have a choice of taught content within the parameters of the module. [   ]

6. For ”d. Other”, please specify, addressing level, credits carried and any conditions.
7. In your experience, what have been the main benefits in implementing student choice in the curriculum? (please mark as appropriate)

   a. Greater autonomy and personal development for students. [ ]
   b. Marketing and recruitment. [ ]
   c. Student satisfaction and retention. [ ]
   d. Catering for variety of interests from staff. [ ]
   e. Better balance in the curriculum. [ ]

Section 3 (All respondents)

1. What, in your experience, are the main challenges for, or problems with implementing student choice in the curriculum? (please mark as appropriate)

   a. The principle is flawed; it is an abrogation of tutors’ responsibility and expertise. [ ]
   b. The principle is flawed; students need a focused, structured learning experience. [ ]
   c. Staffing issues (ie need for specialist visiting lecturers for specific choice modules). [ ]
   d. Timetabling and other resource issues. [ ]
   e. Institutional academic frameworks. [ ]
   f. Managing student expectations with regards to choice. [ ]
   g. Other (please specify). [ ]

2. Would you consider implementing some degree of student choice in the curriculum? (please mark as appropriate)

   a. I already do, and I am happy with the current level of student choice offered. [ ]
   b. I already do, and would like to increase the level of student choice offered. [ ]
   c. I already do, and would like to reduce the level of choice offered. [ ]
   d. I would, but staff and/or resource pressures prevent me from doing it. [ ]
   e. I would, but institutional regulations prevent me from doing it. [ ]
   f. I would not consider implementing student choice in the curriculum. [ ]

Section 4

Any other comments or additional information?

Thank you for taking the time to answer this survey. The results of this research project will be disseminated in June/July 2013.
Appendix 2: List of responding institutions

Aberystwyth University
Anglia Ruskin University
Bath Spa University
Birmingham School of Acting, Birmingham City University [email only]
University of Bristol
Brunel University
Bucks New University
Canterbury Christ Church University
Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London [email only]
University of Cumbria
De Montfort University
University of Exeter
University of Glamorgan
University of Leeds [email only]
University of Lincoln
Liverpool Hope University
Liverpool John Moores University
London College of Music, University of West London
Manchester Metropolitan University
Middlesex University
Northbrook College
Oxford Brookes University
University of Plymouth
University of Portsmouth
Queen's University Belfast
University of Sheffield
University of Sussex [email only]
Swansea Metropolitan University of Wales Trinity Saint David
University of the West of Scotland
University of Ulster
University of South Wales (previously University of Wales Newport)
University of Wolverhampton
York St John University
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