



Levels of student participation in research

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Introduction

This resource is for academic staff who wish to develop a 'students as researchers' pedagogic approach, as well as for those who are already working with or supporting this approach but who wish to increase the level of active engagement of their students with the research process. The resource introduces the idea of different levels of participation in research that students can achieve, describes each level, and promotes reflection on the tutor's role in facilitating greater engagement with all aspects of the research process, including the dissemination of student research findings.

Levels of engagement and participation

There are differing levels of participation in higher education research that students can experience as they take increasing control over the research process. These can be thought of as stages that students' progress through as they become more experienced researchers over the course of their studies. Some course design allows students the freedom to take control of their research from an early stage (Walkington et al., 2011). For example, *first year seminars and experiences* (recognised by Kuh (2008) as a 'High Impact practice') could be based on research, involving students in framing research questions and generating or gathering data. Unfortunately for some students, engagement in research is reserved for their final year. The levels described here are determined by factors such as ownership of the research question, the level of guidance that students receive, the degree of autonomy that students hold to modify the research as it progresses, and the choices made about the dissemination of outcomes.

How to use this resource

Activity 1

Your first task is to sequence the progression in student engagement with research by populating Table 1 below with the descriptors in the five boxes overleaf (the titles of each level are adapted from Hart's 1992 Ladder of participation in Citizenship) with level 1 at the base, working up to level 5 at the top. You will now have created a 'ladder' of increasing participation and autonomy in student research (You can check your answers against page 10 in [Walkington, 2015](#)).

Activity 2

Using your 'ladder', look at the material in Table 2 and for each example align it with a level on the ladder, and make a suggestion of how you could move student engagement up the ladder.

Activity 3

Audience: Students are motivated by authentic audiences for their research findings (not just the tutors who are going to grade them). For example, their findings may be suitable to inform next year's cohort, for a discipline audience beyond their own university, for sharing through a multidisciplinary student research conference, or for online publishing where the work is made fully public. The audience which you encourage your students to engage with will make a difference to the motivation of your students and the quality of the work that they produce (Walkington, 2015). Your task is to think of a way in which you could widen the audience for student research findings for each of the projects in Table 2.

Activity 4

Now for an aspect of your own practice: what level are your students currently engaged at? How can you increase the level of participation in research for your own students? How can you and your students work in partnership to expose the results of their research more widely and to different audiences?

Activity 5

Using the framework for partnership learning (HEA, 2014), what do you need to do next to get this partnership project off the ground?

Table 1: Five levels of student participation in research

Level 5

Level 4

Level 3

Level 2

Level 1

Student-initiated, decisions shared with university staff

Students initiate the research themselves, they frame their own enquiry and carry out the research, but all of this is done in consultation with university staff at a level determined by the student. This allows the student to gain ongoing feedback when they want it and allows them to develop a relationship with a university supervisor or mentor. This work is usually carried out for individual final year research and the outputs can vary according to the context, for example while students may be compelled to produce a dissertation or thesis, the research could also be presented in alternative formats, for example as research papers or through undergraduate research conferences.

Student-initiated and directed

This may be a relatively unusual situation. Students here make the all decisions and do not consult with university staff. Some students adopt this approach to their dissertation or final project and choose to work unsupervised. This lone worker model may have produced more effective results if the student had received feedback during the process.

Students are consulted and informed

Students are consulted and informed about the research. An example is where students join an existing staff research project, perhaps as part of a summer scholarship scheme. In some cases the results of this style of tutor-directed research lead to co-authored papers and allow students to work as part of research teams. The research is heavily directed but students have the ability to influence the project and contribute to its dissemination.

Staff-initiated; decisions shared with students

Academic staff frame the enquiry initially but students have a role to play in decision making with respect to the development of methods, reframing, determining courses of action and taking responsibility for the outcomes and dissemination. An example is a module where the tutor sets up a series of consultancy projects with local community contacts for groups of students to work on. The tutor and community group may have already established research agendas but the students have the flexibility to renegotiate these as appropriate.

Students are assigned but informed

Students are assigned to research tasks, they are informed about the research and why they are doing it. An example of this level, frequently adopted as an initiation into the laboratory-based sciences, is where students carry out routine research tasks following established methods. This is an important step in learning the methods of a discipline and practising them. Ownership of the assignment remains with a staff member who controls the scope of the research dissemination.

Table 2: Examples of final year projects and dissertations

Art and Design, Nottingham Trent University An ‘authentic’ enquiry involving creative art and design practice in which the final assessment includes a seminar presentation which frames the research for a live audience, where the student responds to questions which arise from the research.

Liverpool Institute for the Performing Arts A student-led conference on Contemporary Issues in Arts Management, students contact speakers, host sessions, prepare papers, network and design some assessment criteria.

Sports Development Consultancy, UCLAN Provide consultancy briefs with a partner agency. Students must recommend strategies to the agencies that can be employed to support community sport and coaching initiatives.

BA (Ed.) Chichester Student teachers are challenged to ‘make change happen’ on their teaching practice or placement by engaging in group environmental projects in schools/museums. All groups contribute to a newsletter to share ideas and show that the module itself is a creative, professional initiative. Students agree how their group mark will be divided between group members.

Environmental Science, Kingston Students are provided with an environmental problem and asked to role play being a consultant to solve it. Assessed through a solo presentation to an ‘open public meeting of councillors and members of the lay public’, played by staff and students.

Tourism Live Virtual Conference, Lincoln and Wolverhampton Students are assessed on their participation in the conference. They submit a full conference paper of which summaries appear on the public conference website. During the specified timeframe of one week, students can participate at any time. Each student is required to post a comment on another person’s conference paper.

Micro-History, Victoria University, Canada Archival research on life in Victoria in 1843-1900. Students contribute research findings to a student-designed public website.

Business and Management, Bradford Charity fundraising task with an assessed formal ‘Apprentice’-style presentation, analysing what they had done and why, in front of three employers and a number of tutors.

Public sociology, Birmingham City University Students choose a piece of research in an area of interest to them, informed by ‘public sociology’. Assessed work includes a project plan and reflective log. For example, a blog on asylum seekers that partly included information obtained from the organisation the student worked with, as well as from the academic literature. Checked by tutor. The blog went live and was so successful that part of it was put on a local council website.

All the projects in this table are taken from the ‘Rethinking Final Year Projects and Dissertations’ National Teaching Fellowship project.

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