

Action research and the improvement of student engagement: A summary report



2020

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This material has been supported by the British International Studies Association Learning and Teaching Small Research Grant; the views expressed are those of the author.

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Executive Summary

Student engagement is an issue of major concern, and its link to active learning has been a concept explored extensively due to its connection with retention, learning and academic success (Krause and Armitage, 2016; Trowler, 2016; Kuh, 2009). In 2010 alone, a review of the literature concerning student engagement located over 1,000 peer reviewed papers devoted to the topic (Trowler, 2016). The impact of student engagement and a sense of belonging have played a vital role in the retention of students. According to a series of surveys conducted by ‘What works’ in collaboration with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (Thomas, 2012), 1 in 12 students, or approximately over 8% in the UK, drop out of Higher Education within their first year of study. The survey comprising of 873 respondents further found that 37% or 1 in 3 students and 42% or 2 in 5 students in another survey of approximately 237 students think about withdrawing from Higher Education. Based on their study, which draws on data from seven randomly selected higher education institutions, improving student engagement and a sense of belonging is integral for retention of students for teaching staff and the institutions. This is more so because their study highlights the fact that a significant minority of students contemplate potential withdrawal.

Following the increased emphasis on ‘value for money’, and students as ‘fee paying customers’ there has been a renewed vigour in government policies addressing higher education, especially in countries such as the United Kingdom. Agencies, including the Office for Students and the Teaching Excellent Framework, highlight the increased pressure on universities to deliver excellent and engaged teaching as they are ranked on the quality of teaching and students’ successful transition to further stages of education or employment.

Our ability to effectively address the issue of student engagement is hampered by the fact that lots of recommendations, which tends to be generic, and not specific exist. As Trowler and Trowler (2010; 64) aptly stated,

Student engagement is generally an area where research interest [...] is sparked by a desire for enhancement. Yet many of the recommendations for practice based on the research conducted tend to be general and nonspecific.

Central to the debate on student engagement and its generic recommendations has been the use of Action research in enhancing teaching and learning. Implementing evidence-based practice is central to improving teaching, learning and the engagement of students in the Higher Education context. Action research arguably possesses potential to generate new knowledge and improve teaching practice and learning by collaborating with the students as stakeholders in planning the design of teaching content and its effective delivery to engage the students. Action research entails a tripartite method that integrates theory, research and practice (Wallace, 1987; Carr 1989; Holter and Barcott, 1993) and serves as a framework that helps close the practice gap from an evidence-based perspective. A systematic review of definitions of Action research conducted by Waterman et al. (2001:11) defines it as follows:

A period of inquiry which describes, interprets and explores social situations while executing a change intervention aimed at improvement and involvement. It is problem-focused, context specific and future-oriented. Action research is a group activity with an explicit critical value basis and is founded in a partnership between action researchers and participants, all of whom are involved in the change process.

Being a problem-specific and context-focussed approach, the defining characteristics of the action research process is the continuous reflection between this process and evaluation to ascertain what works or needs further improvement (Elizabeth, 1996). This approach has the potential to generate new knowledge. Action research has been used in several disciplines, including the health sciences, nursing, psychology, and education (Holter and Barcott, 2013; Jidong, 2019). However, there seems to be paucity of research using Action research in the context of Criminology and Criminal Justice discipline. Service learning, the use of internships, experiential learning and team-based learning seems to dominate this discipline (Davis, et al., 2014; Stamatel, et al., 2013). This report highlights the use of Action research in informing the improvement of student engagement in two test-case modules.

Action research and the case for a student-centred approach

An extensive body of research suggests that one of the ways of improving learning and teaching is to involve teachers in conducting research in their own classes, a product of which promotes inquiry, reflection and actual problem solving that results in positive action and change (Berliner and Casanova, 1989; Darling-Hammond, 1996; Lieberman, 1995; Ogberg and McCutcheon, 1987). However, despite studies suggesting the importance of Action research,

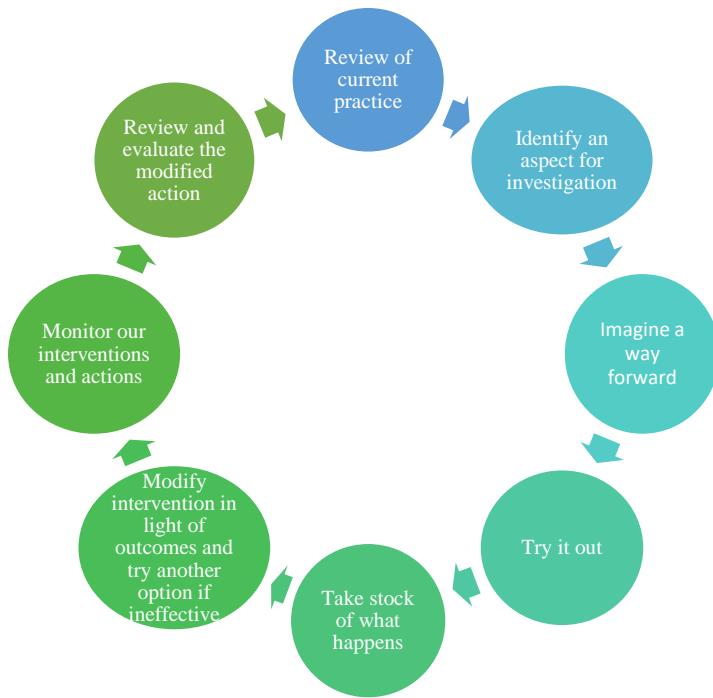
there exists a paucity of research that explore how engagement in learning and teaching can be significantly improve through Interactive and Action Oriented Learning (IAOL) and teaching content.

Specific aspect of student engagement such as ‘student as partners in learning (SPL)’ tend to dominate evidence. More specifically, the ‘subject based research and inquiry’ aspect of SPL does not focus on engaging students in their active inquiry as to how best to improve their engagement but rather focuses on using them more as research assistants or allowing students to pursue research in some specialist undergraduate programme (Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014). Its implication provides a generic result that might not be specifically applicable to learning and teaching with one’s own practice or modules.

Interactive Action Oriented Learning and the improvement of student engagement – A Test Case

A variety of Action research approaches exist, all of which highlight common characteristics of reflective practice and evaluation of the intervention to determine what works. The Jean McNiff (2016; 2017) model of Action research was used to inform the design of an interactive action-oriented learning (IAOL) intervention in two test case modules (Social Research Methods – Level 7 masters and Explaining Punishment – Level 6 undergraduate). The rationale for incorporating this was the existing awareness of students’ disengagement and poor level of attendance, which, existing literature highlights, could have an impact on limiting students’ learning and successfully passing the modules.

Data relied on including three focus group discussions comprising eight students each, students’ feedback from module evaluations, peer observation and course grades to monitor the impact. Ethical approval was initially sought and granted by the researcher’s institution, and participation was purely voluntary. The action research adopted Jean McNiff (2016;2017) process as delineated in the figure below:



Preliminary findings from the focus group of the master's students of Social Research Methods highlight issues such as external factors limiting student engagement, a more virtual learning-oriented approach to meet the students' needs, and indifference towards institutional approach to addressing perceived low level of attendance. However, for the final year students of Explaining Punishment, issues such as information overload, perceived repetitive approach of the module as a sub-component of the previous module undertaken in the first year of the programme were raised. Issues including indifference towards students' background as a requisite for engagement and the use of VLE to enhance learning and improve the channel of communication, were also identified.

The Interventions

The Explaining Punishment module teaching content and delivery were redesigned to incorporate a mixture of engaging interactive lecture, assigned readings, group-based learning and videos, including case studies that connect with real-life contexts. These lectures were delivered once a week and were tailored to address specific issues and concepts that constructively aligned with the course aims. These were carried out to provide the students with achievable and measurable output during the lectures (Mladenovic 2000). Activities conducted during the lectures include a recap of prior lectures and a brief reminder of the assessment task, alongside brainstorming sessions, peer discussions, debates, and a short formative quiz which test learning. Quizzes were introduced at the end of the lectures using

Kahoot, a software, that allows for the incorporation of videos where necessary. The quizzes served a diagnostic purpose to find areas that students find challenging and need further clarity on. The students' responses to the quizzes were kept anonymous, and the cumulative score at the end of each question enabled the lecturer to ascertain the number of students who got a specific answer right or wrong. A clarification of areas of difficulty was provided in light of the Kahoot results.

The seminars component of the Explaining Punishment module was designed to include writing tasks to enable students to attempt the structure of their written reports whilst also getting feedback within the class from their peers and the lecturer. This teaching philosophy provides the students with opportunities to improve on their knowledge of key aspects of the course through the formative practice of the assessment which helps them progress towards the actual summative report and essays (Race 1996; Harris 2003).

For Social Research Methods, teaching activities were designed to achieve the aims of enabling student to present their research poster and final research report by adopting a lecture/workshop style model during the course of the three hours weekly session. Data incorporating real life case studies were drawn from the UK Data Service to enable students to have the opportunity to practically design a study and analyse the secondary data sources using a range of data analyses framework. Channel of communication was also improved through additional drop-in sessions to encourage student to engage in getting more support such as feedback from draft, structure and clarity on areas they struggle with. To address the students' diverse needs including issues relating to physical attendance, a Microsoft team virtual space was set up where students may ask questions and get support on areas relating to the course.

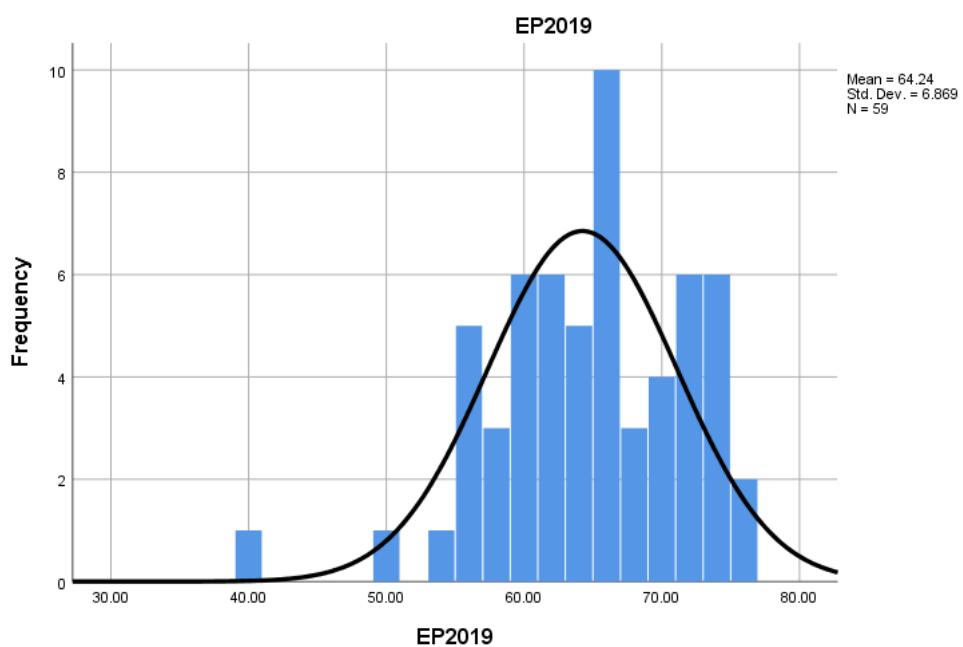
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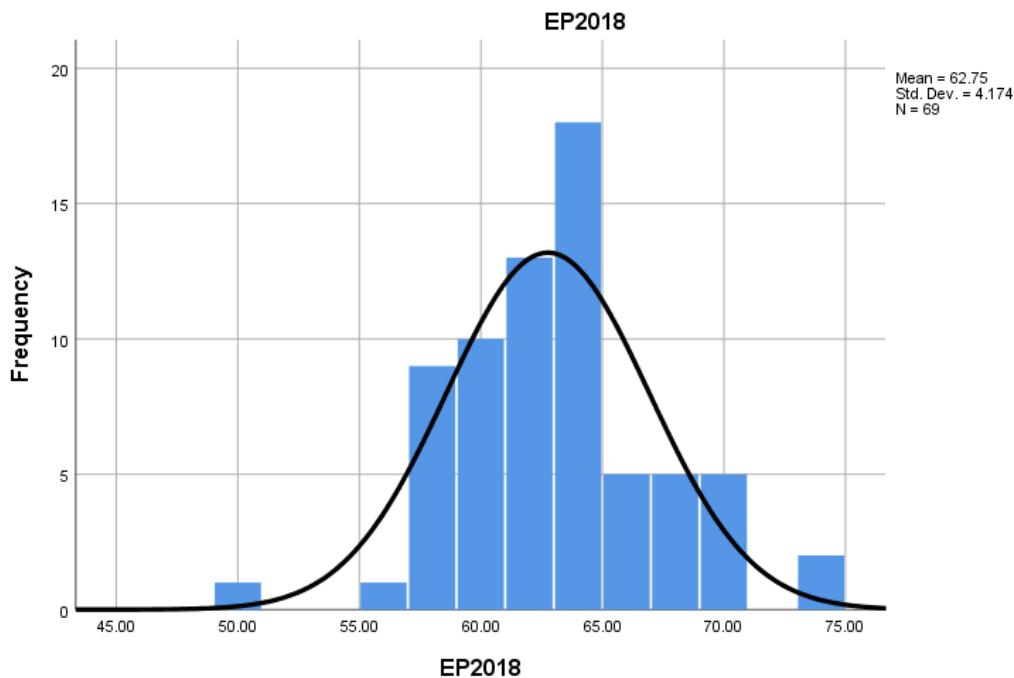
The process of action research adopted, and the interventions administered, met with a positive response based on the end term module evaluations and results. In addition, a follow up focus groups aimed at eliciting students' feedback and views of improving teaching highlight perceived satisfaction on the part of the students. As one student commented, 'I think an online survey is less personal whereas I am actually sat with the lecturer and it feels like you actually care about what I am saying'. Students were also particularly pleased with the opportunity of being actively involved in a process that informed the design of their learning. This represent a shift from the traditional approach to learning which seldom takes a predesign lectures and seminar without necessarily including the students' input.

In addition, feedback from the module evaluation reflects student perceptions of the overall module which were mainly positive. A comment from one of the students in the Explaining Punishment module evaluation highlights one such moment:

The lecturer provides all the information needed with [the] use of numerous examples enabling a complete understanding of the difficult lecture topics, also the repeated mentioning of the ICA and ECA is perfect for my organisation of the research materials. The module is well led with informative lectures and seminars.

The inclusion of the interactive action-oriented learning interventions encouraged students to take part in their studies while, simultaneously, encouraging engagement with several activities and a follow-up of improved channels of communications to support the students. The impact of the interventions compared to the module's results the previous year, highlight some improvement in student performance in Explaining punishment end course assessment results as delineated in the figures below.





Based on exploratory data analysis and descriptive statistics employing the measure of central tendencies, the data suggest that there was a slight improvement in student performance in comparison to the previous year 2018. This is delineated in the mean of 62.75 for 2018 while that of 2019 saw a slight increase of 64. 24 when compared to the former. This result could be interpreted as highlighting some significance despite the differences in the number of students which is 59 for the year 2019 and 69 for the year 2018.

In essence, the pedagogic intervention to aid student engagement highlight some academic improvement in the level 6 students on Explaining Punishment module. In terms of the Level 7 module the intervention also demonstrated an improve level 7 students' engagement and performance in the Research Methods module in comparison with the previous year. However, it seems partly limited by their choice. In essence, anticipated challenges that were associated with level 7 students are mostly (i) limited chances of funding or students' loans, and (ii) part- or full-time work demands plus academic or learning expectations. It was also found that learning needs and responsibilities for learning had an impact as, at the Master's level, students felt they had to decide whether to attend classes according to individual needs. This contrasts with the level 6 students with findings highlighting improved engagement and higher level of attendance.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

- Encourage pedagogically oriented Action research into one's teaching and practice through the provision of dedicated institutional funding's for such research streams.
- Engage in the creation of learning that is collaborative, active and encourages learning relationships among students and the tutor.
- Co-create educational experiences that are informed by the students' needs and also provide challenging and enriching academic content and teaching activities that extend their academic abilities.
- Engage in reflective practice that improves teaching in light of feedback gathered from interventions. As McNiff (2016) surmised, while it is impossible to change the world, if we all change our little bits, massive changes occur.

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