

Cultures of knowledge, learning and assessment: an encounter between two Education Studies programmes

Suanne Gibson and Joanna Haynes with Deborah Bell, Keil Brown, Claire Jones, Laura Joyce, Rob Sharman and Martin Stepney

University of Plymouth

Correspondence: joanna.haynes@plymouth.ac.uk

Abstract

In 2007 a joint writing project was established between groups of second year BA Education Studies students working collaboratively across the universities of York and Plymouth. The project would involve students in the production a book for which they would collectively have responsibility for compiling, editing and producing. The York tutor has a special interest in the history of the book, experience of publishing previous books of student work and a National Teaching Fellowship in recognition of these projects. The Plymouth tutors have also held two Teaching Fellowships, the first of which explored the value of conflict in learning and the second enabled the collaboration between York and Plymouth. This paper tells the story of the collaborative project from the Plymouth perspective. At intervals throughout the project, semi-structured conversations between the tutors and students at Plymouth were recorded. Drawing on some of the themes identified in these conversations, this paper focuses on critical insights into cultures of knowledge, learning and assessment that emerged over our rich time together.

Our students acted as peer reviewers of the original paper compiled by their tutors. Their review takes the form of a series of comments on the tutors' manuscript, written at the end of the year and enabling them to look back on the whole experience. All reviewer comments have been incorporated into the body of the paper. The extracts from the structured conversation data, presented here in text boxes, were selected by the tutors to highlight the issues that arose during the course of the project. This multi-layered presentation reflects the spirit of the project, illustrating the rich impact of our collaborative work.

Key Words: Peer learning, peer reviewing, collaborative writing

Introduction

Second year students at Plymouth who had elected to do an Independent Study Module were invited to take part in the project. This module allows students to research a topic of their own choice. Students were asked to consider prospective Education Studies students and their peers as the audience for their writing. However feedback from participating students indicates that this idea of 'audience' did not have the prominence it should have held from the outset. Commenting on this aspect of the project, students wrote:

'I feel this was not focused on enough during the introduction. Perhaps it was just myself that felt this but I would rather have had a clearer objective and discussion on writing for an audience' (Martin).

'MS is correct, there was no real focus on how to write for an audience for the Plymouth students, we wrote our chapters the same way we would write an essay for any other module' (Keil).

'I agree with the comments above. As our writing was always intended to be assessed as in essay form and not in the form of a chapter, this was our priority and the goal for the deadline. We didn't ever discuss writing for a particular audience' (Debbie).

Each student's paper would form a chapter of a book to be published in a limited edition, with copies held at each university library and used in subsequent teaching and learning for new undergraduate students of Education Studies. Each student was to become an author and together they would develop their knowledge and understanding of writing, editing and the practical aspects of book production. Whatever our intentions, two of the students commented:

'Personally I felt that much of the work for the book, researching an area of interest, writing chapters, editing and so on were carried out on a more individual basis, the only collaborative parts were the very rushed meetings for decision making' (Debbie).

'We developed our knowledge and understanding without any real taught sessions; it was really through conversation and practical experience' (Keil).

In the early stages, our goals seemed quite straightforward and unproblematic to the tutors. The students did not necessarily share this perception:

'I think there were anxieties and fears at the very start of the project. Certainly individuals felt that perceived status of each university may cause unease and caution before we all met' (Debbie).

The deeper dimension of this project was the bringing together of students and tutors, institutional learning and assessment cultures and systems. In the unfolding of the project the meeting of the two institutions was to reveal subtle and significant differences in the perceptions of tutors and students in each institution regarding academic writing, as well as wider discourses of knowledge and pedagogy, as a number of students wrote:

'Personally I found the differences were profound and the cause of much confusion' (Rob).

'I agree. We found the differences between institutions to be vast!' (Keil)

'This is certainly noticeable in the final book and we were all a little surprised by the variety in student writing across institutions' (Martin).

It is the dynamics of the encounter between these elements that form the substance of this paper.

Writing from the Plymouth University perspective, our concern is to highlight and evaluate certain features of our students' learning experience and to consider how we can support learning through independent study more effectively in future. We are interested in

approaches that support students' autonomous learning whilst contributing to the development of a community of critical independent learners in our faculty. Through this project we have been exploring interpretations of independence, autonomy and criticality in the academic setting.

Methodology

We adopted a qualitative approach in this study, building on our previous practitioner research into learning through group work, (Gibson and Haynes, 2005). Methodologically, the earlier enquiry had drawn strongly on the investigation of what appears salient in teaching, articulated in Tripp's "critical incidents" approach to practitioner research (1996), and on cultivating sensitivity and awareness in practice, expressed in Mason's "noticing" paradigm (2002).

In the study described in this paper, participating students and tutors gathered at intervals throughout the year to discuss their expectations, hopes and concerns about each step in the collaborative writing project, and to evaluate and reflect on their experiences. These recorded conversations were semi-structured, with tutors providing initial prompts and occasionally probing for further elaboration or discussion. Analysis of the transcripts took the form of a search by each tutor for themes related to the main aims of the project, highlighting significant episodes (perhaps issues that were emotionally charged, contradictory or troublesome), as well as a logging of similarities and differences in individual students' accounts of their experiences. Themes and episodes identified were referred back to the students for further comment in the final conversation. The tutors took responsibility for drafting the first version of this paper, which included extracts from our conversations. The first draft was circulated and each of the participants offered his/her comments. In the revised paper, students' contributions were incorporated into the analysis and discussion and referred back a final time for verification. Processes of data collection, analysis, drafting and editing aimed to mirror the collaborative, recursive and participatory principles of the writing project as a whole.

Thinking and learning through writing

Approaches to teaching in higher education that actively and explicitly promote the skills of academic writing are increasingly popular (Lillis and Turner, 2001; Mitchell and Riddle, 2001). Writing for a real or imagined audience can provide additional motivation for learners as well as the opportunity to experience the processes that established writers use to strengthen and improve their work and develop confidence in writing itself, such as drafting, responding to feedback, editing and redrafting. Our students have been encouraged to make use of these processes and to use writing to develop their powers of thinking and analysis. We saw this collaborative project as enabling participation in peer writing processes and allowing students to experience the benefits of working at writing itself, in a challenging and enjoyable way. Writing for peers was demanding:

'I found this part of the project particularly hard, in terms of managing time. Perhaps if we had scheduled the time better for peer reviews. I felt rushed, and with only one-way discourse, I felt we didn't get as much out of the experience as we could have. If we met in person and could discuss our views on the pieces, give comments, receive feedback and repeat the process, we could have achieved more' (Debbie).

We believed that these approaches to the writing process would be “empowering” for students and, although it added pressure, students’ comments appear to endorse this belief:

‘It gave us an added responsibility, depending upon each other and not only ourselves’ (Rob).

‘I think it was empowering for ourselves but also gave me a sense of really wanting the team to do well and each achieve a high level of writing (Martin).

‘I would have to agree with the other 2 comments as we all knew that at the end of the day if we did not contribute or do our part in the project then we would not only let ourselves down but we would let everyone else down in the team - I believe that was one of the main driving powers for all of us to get on with the necessary work needed’ (Claire).

At the start of the project, views of making writing public to other students were mixed. Some expressed enthusiasm for this extra feature of the module and relished the opportunity for feedback. Keil wrote:

‘It was very 50:50, we were all very enthusiastic but some of us were a little apprehensive, because we had never done anything like this before’.

The structured conversations recorded during the project showed a range of responses to making writing public.

R: ‘I just think it’s going to be great for all of us to get out there and meet new people and share ideas with everyone else, because the banter and things we have in like lectures, like last term and things, firing ideas across at each other and arguing with each other is priceless, it’s brilliant, but then to do it and to see how students from other universities and things that may have been taught slightly different, like different teaching techniques and things, it’s going to be quite interesting to see how they go together, because we’re quite a vocal group’. (Interview one)

X: ‘I’m not very good (laughs) at managing my time or like organising myself really. So if I was just doing that on my own then I probably wouldn’t and I’d leave it ‘til the last minute and rubbish stuff like that, but because other people are relying on me, that’s a good thing, I think, so that will sort of motivate me to do it more. And also the whole book idea sold me, because I’d like to write books, too’. (Interview one)

?: ‘The reason why I decided to do this module is I suppose I wanted to push myself a little bit more, and I think it’s such a fantastic opportunity for us at such a young age to experience writing a book. And I do agree with L, I don’t like other people reading my work, but I think I’ve got to get used to it. I suppose if it’s good criticism then it helps at the end of the day’. (Interview one)

Another student expressed reservations about the idea of drafting and editing her work. She said she usually worked close to her deadline and that this provided a certain creative energy. Writing in a more planned and deliberate way might result in her “losing her edge”. In the event this student reports on what actually happened in her case:

'Unfortunately due to lack of planning, this new way of working lost me my chapter in the book' (Debbie).

Another expressed some anxiety about going public with her writing. She said it would be difficult and stultifying having her peers critique her work:

L: 'the only people that I've ever been okay with reading my work are me and the people who it's directed at, so my lecturers, I've never ever had a problem. [...] when it comes to being critiqued by people sort of on the same level as me, I just ... I just can't cope with it'. (Interview four)

She also asserted what she perceived as a difference in writing for her tutor for formative feedback as opposed to writing for her peers with the same intent.

L: 'Actually I've always said this, the only people that I've ever been okay with reading my work are me and the people who it's directed at, so my lecturers, I've never ever had a problem. And I've never had negative feedback, all the essays I've done since I started university and, in fact, really since I started writing, because I've always been a writer, I've always enjoyed doing it, from people like teachers and lecturers they've never been negative, I never did badly in English or anything like that, and I don't know what it is, but when it comes to, for example, peer critiquing, even not just sort of when it comes to writing, anything like that, when it comes to being critiqued by people sort of on the same level as me, I just ... I just can't cope with it'. (Interview four)

These reservations do raise doubts about the imposition of additional writing requirements and their impact on student voice. However, even those students who expressed anxiety were keen to overcome these fears. The following extract reflects this.

L: 'I think once I've received all my feedback and once I've really looked at it and really rationalised and dealt with it, then probably it will be the best thing that's ever happened to me as far as my writing goes, because I will be able to ... when I think about it move on from it and really take things in. It's just the initial thing of receiving it and then being like, my God, I have to re-write the whole thing'. (Interview 4)

The value of collaboration and peer learning

Boud, Cohen and Sampson (2001) have documented the growing academic interest in peer learning as a key feature of independent thinking and inter-dependent learning. Informal reciprocal learning from and with peers has long been recognised as a lasting and formative part of a university education. They suggest that financial and resource based pressures, including the demands of employers, have led academics to seek active management and experimentation with peer learning, as a means to reduce student dependence on direct staff input and to encourage other forms of 'independent' learning. One student reflects on this:

'I find independent learning an exciting form of education but on one hand it can become very lonely and I did feel this during the module. I hope it is not used just because of budgets and time restraints as some students will eventually suffer academically using this style' (Martin).

This interest in peer learning has also been driven by greater recognition of in cultural and social diversity students' approaches to learning, as well as the emotional climate of learning, and by developments in technology. One student seems to endorse this view:

'I agree completely, we have learned so much from each other, and the differences in personalities and previous experiences made our peer learning so much richer, we all bring something different to the group' (Keil).

Boud et al (2001, p. 7) argue that peer learning shares theoretical roots with both cooperative and collaborative learning. The common assumption is that 'adult learners are experienced social beings who can act in a collaborative manner, organise themselves, have some intrinsic motivation ...and do not require the imposed structures of the facilitator to inspire learning'.

Peer learning is not a single approach and encompasses a wide variety of practice (Anderson and Boud, 1996). These authors take a pragmatic approach, recognising the 'external' economic and social drivers whilst seeking to maintain the focus on the pedagogical: the socio-cultural contexts of learning, the value of emotional support, the criticality that can emerge from peer dialogue. In our project we were particularly interested in moving away from a model of independent learning as learning alone and developing structures that would encourage peer support and challenge. As Debbie explains:

'I feel that much of the learning that took place on our project was in fact independent. There were certainly elements of peer criticality that were put in place as part of our module, but not enough centred on individual topics or areas of study. The peer support focused more on how an essay read, how it was laid out, and brief suggestions of elaboration. I felt we didn't know enough about each other's areas of interest to facilitate educational comments of use'.

The following extracts allude to this process of peer support and challenge:

K: 'I'm quite looking forward to people reading through my work, 'cos anything that they give you is going to be a positive, isn't it, so I'm not going to take it as negative, anything that anyone says, 'cos I'm just going to work on it then. That's just going to help.' (Interview two)

K: 'with working as a group I've tried to like help everyone out and sort of like take this project on and do like my best to help the project itself'. (Interview five)

K: 'I sort of stepped in and tried to help, is that what everyone wants? And everyone was sort of like, well, yeah. Well, why are we arguing? Just write it down. And then that was it, it was done'. (Interview five)

C: 'And like reading others', just seeing their writing skills and styles and everything was quite useful, because then not only you could help them, because you'd used your own words, but they helped you as well with their feedback. So that was quite helpful'. (Interview six)

As well as strengthening students' resilience and criticality through this approach to their academic writing, we hoped that the collaboration would provide them with opportunities for much greater participation and decision making with regard to their learning than they would

normally have on a tutor-made module, increasing their autonomy and independence in other ways. Martin commented:

'This was one of the most exciting moments, and also a valuable skill to learn'.

It was envisaged that the students would make all the decisions about the content and production of the book and we anticipated that there would be significant learning through teamwork and problem solving. We would provide support but leave the decisions to them. This proved problematic at times and liberating at other moments, for students and tutors alike:

'I believe one of the greatest lessons we learnt was through us working together and working out the conflicting issues between institutions, not only did teach us academic skills, but we all learnt a little about ourselves (Keil).

This was one of my favourite parts of the project. I loved coming together as a large group (or arguably, two smaller groups from separate institutions), trying to make sure everyone had a voice and their ideas were heard by the group, but also with time constraints coming up with quick snappy decisions about what we wanted, felt was achievable and ultimately what we would all be proud to say we had produced' (Debbie).

A: *'There was the teacher part of me wanting to take control and possibly try and do some kind of Chair, but then there was the other part of me thinking, well, actually this is all a part of the learning experience'. (Interview two Plymouth tutor)*

B: *'I felt this kind of euphoria myself at the end of that first day, which I think comes from being in a different place and doing things differently and also just handing it over and the tutors shutting up, I thought that that was quite remarkable for me, just watching the effect of that, sort of giving the space. And there was actually no need for any tutor to comment on any of the presentations, because that was done by the students themselves. And so I found that very powerful to witness'. (Interview two Plymouth tutor)*

D: *'Yeah. It's always very difficult, though, with new groups, isn't it, because I think once you establish yourself in a group you've always kind of got a hierarchy without it being said – certain people talk, certain people don't talk, certain people need to be encouraged to say things'. (Interview two Plymouth student)*

K: *'We all do get on well, but we are all very different individuals, aren't we? And you saw that on the days, where people were feeding from their history and their previous experiences or their knowledge to help each other out. And I think the variety of people that were on there was excellent and it gave us another resource, didn't it, to gain information from these people and their experiences'. (Interview two Plymouth student)*

M2: *'We probably didn't realise that individually we were all taking on ... part of the progression and moving it along. I mean, myself and J took on a couple of tasks, so we did our presentation of these tasks, there was a discussion, a few decisions were made, which I sort of forced the point on,*

and then it moved on to someone else and they did their presentation. So we probably took the chair of our little sections and it did work out, didn't it, because it did get done'. (Interview five Plymouth student)

The shadow of assessment

The chapter each student wrote for the book was the writing they also submitted for formal assessment in the usual way. We had to negotiate with York about deadlines for submission to bring the two assessment systems into line. We learned how precariously many students managed the deadlines for assessment, balancing the demands of various modules along with other demands such as employment or family needs. This proved tricky, particularly when we got close to the final deadline, as Debbie testifies and the other interview extracts show:

'I really do think not enough discussion went into this part of the project, for obvious reasons. I feel that this was a big part of the institutional conflict as York had a deadline in their heads for the writing to be produced to a certain stage, which completely conflicted with ours. Yet we all believed we were working to the same brief, serious lack of communication, which resulted in my chapter not being submitted' (Debbie).

M2: 'But with the deadlines again, it's not so much of an issue with me, but for some people it probably will be. But moving the deadline forward by another 10 days, at the moment, thinking 18th January and before, always thinking it was 18th January from the start' .

'Yeah. But the whole talk of deadlines, when you think deadlines you think assessment, you think, oh Christ, you think, God! 18th January, I thought I could have continually enjoyed writing it bit-by-bit, bit-by-bit, and then send it off to Martin and things. But now it's like, Christ, do it, send it off to Martin, get it back, double-check it again, if I need to add any little bits, maybe send it back to Martin and get it back again, and that's it'.

'Yeah, the roller coaster's sped up by about 10 times and I don't like it, I just want to get off'. (Interview 5)

It resulted in real distress for students suddenly having to recalculate their work schedules and led to one student failing to make the deadline to have her writing included in the book, although it did not affect the assessment of her submitted assignment, whose deadline remained as originally set. However, as Debbie points out:

'This is not what the project was about. It was more than just another essay grade'.

Our colleagues from York were coming at the project with some common but also some different objectives. York students' work was to be assessed primarily on its appearance as a 'conventional' book chapter. Several Plymouth students felt strongly about these differences:

'When we found out that the York students were being assessed differently to us, in relation to the book itself, it took away much of the ownership of the book from us. We no longer felt it was ours, if we were not being assessed on it, and

they were, the Plymouth students felt less inclined to have an overall say on its production, and ultimately we handed it over at the final stages. I know this left some people feeling like we had done a great deal of work, just to hand it over before seeing it finished' (Debbie).

'This misunderstanding between institutions on the final assessment caused real tension between the groups and I particularly felt it affected morale within Plymouth students' (Martin).

'Morale was low. We thought we had double the work to do, whilst the York students were writing a very descriptive chapter and making the book look pretty, we were writing very in-depth critical chapters and still worrying about the format of the book' (Keil).

Students from York were able to make full use of material from earlier modules studied if they so wished and the emphasis was on the performance of writing, the presentation of the material in suitable book format and learning from their tutor's expertise on book production. The York tutor explained to the students that the addition of this publication could enhance their CV's and employability. Plymouth students were not being assessed on the book itself. The York group was focused on the end product of the book, gaining some knowledge about book production and the ability to write according to book writing conventions. The York tutor had already had experience of these and was keen to retain final control of book production in order to ensure that his students successfully met the deadline at his institution. Keil suggests that this was a critical moment in the book project:

'At this point many of us felt that the book was taken out of our hands and our input was no longer being considered useful'.

The chapters as presented in the book itself would be assessed by colleagues in the York tutor's department, with reference to their institutional assessment criteria. Interpretations of such criteria are generated and sustained within institutions such that, whilst generic criteria may appear similar when compared between institutions, their application is likely to differ. It had not been part of our preparation to compare each institution's paperwork in terms of assessment criteria or learning outcomes for the programmes. In hindsight this was both an omission and a missed opportunity for the tutors to explore deeper dimensions of assessment.

Plymouth students were interested in learning about book production, and we engaged colleagues from our MA Publishing course to talk to them about how the project could be taken forward to professional production. However, this was never the main focus of their interest. Our students were required to research a new topic, although the question might emerge in the first instance from another module. They had to use their research skills to locate appropriate material with their studies supervised in the usual way. Put simply, we were concerned with students' independent research and study skills and strengthening criticality through collaborative writing, decision-making and teamwork. The assessment regimes of the respective institution's modules were pulling in slightly different directions. This had an impact on the students' experiences and the kinds of interventions made by tutors. It had not been anticipated that these modest differences in emphasis could have such an impact on the students' orientation towards the project. However these very differences, whilst creating tension at the time, made the learning so rich, as we struggled to deal with shifting deadlines and issues of control over the production of the book. As Martin illustrates with hindsight:

'This experience was priceless and I am glad we had these obstacles to overcome and learn from. It developed new skills we perhaps didn't know we had...'

The interview extracts indicate the preoccupations in the moment:

K: 'There seemed to be no understanding, because we did sort of maybe ... well, we didn't impose, it was just we do 5,000 words because it's our module, it's how it's written into our module here at Plymouth, so that's how we've got to do it, we can't do it any other way'. (Interview two Plymouth student)

S: '[...] these assignments, these chapters, are written as an independent study module assignment, to be marked as an independent study module assignment, then to be published in the same shape, form and content as a chapter in that particular book'. (Interview five Plymouth tutor)

M: 'You see, I don't think it was so much a case of if there were more guidelines so to speak, it was just ... not guidelines, [...] but if the deadlines had been clear from the start and not changed around like they have done, if we'd said 18th January, which we always thought it was until last Wednesday morning, then that's fine, and we had a deadline for the first drafts and that's fine'.

'When I know I've got a deadline for something that's fine, I know it's got to be done, but when things start shifting around it just sends me into a panic, it just sends me into ... like I said, I don't enjoy writing any more'. (Interview five Plymouth student)

M: 'It's the most organised I've been for any project/module. So it was ... nice to have the essay done long before the 8th, to have a few days free and then ... it gave me then just a few days to work on the cover, the artwork, and then just be able to hand it in before the 18th was really nice. It almost paid off to have that early deadline'. (Interview six Plymouth student)

Learning from uncertainty and conflict

The value of disequilibrium became apparent for the Plymouth tutors as part of a previous teaching fellowship project exploring the student experience of conflict as emergent in groupwork. We had become sensitised to the learning opportunities such moments of conflict could provide for all involved, qualities of learning that Britzman, drawing on Freud, terms '#after-education' (Britzman, 2003). An example of this was an occasion when a Plymouth tutor proposed tutors step out of a meeting that had become heated and difficult, to enable the students to make decisions independently of tutor imposition. Debbie comments on this tutor's initiative:

'This proved to be a very successful proposition. It enabled all of us students to find our voice, to create a student 'peer' group away from the tutors. I felt very empowered by this event, and believe this is where I got the most out of this experience, as I was able to guide the group through discussions and facilitate decision-making'.

Analysis of our transcripts shows a variety of student responses to such events. Following the first conference that brought the two groups together at York the students made the following observations.

J: 'Yes, 'cos you expressed various kind of expectations and concerns before we went, so it would be quite interesting to just see how far those expectations and concerns were realised and what you think you got out of it...'

D: 'Er, I felt completely differently after both days sort of thing, I thought the first day was really exciting, it was quite nice to hear everybody's ideas, everything like that.'

K: 'Was that the Tuesday?'

D: 'Yeah, the first day. Yeah, I thought it was lovely and really easy to get on with everybody. And I didn't find that a problem, we mingled quite well. But then the second day (laughs) was just very, very stressful, it was quite hard, the whole logistics thing just ... I think just from the fact that perhaps it's two different universities ...'

K: 'It was very us and them, wasn't it?'

D: 'Yeah, it was a bit ... ooooooh! Crazy. Just about different workouts and things like that, wasn't it, and perhaps some people thinking that particular universities were forcing things on other people that they didn't agree with.'

K: 'Yeah, I agree completely. I think the Tuesday was great; everyone's ideas were really ... there were a lot of original ideas and there was a nice overlap between ideas – which I expected. But I thought, as D says, the Wednesday morning was just ... it was just chaos at one point, it was just a lot of shouting and no one could talk. To be fair, I know you let us get on with it ourselves and that, but you could have really done with like a Chair of the discussion to just try and calm everyone down and (refusing to get out of hand?). But it all got resolved in the end, everything was sorted, so ... I think we all managed to hold strong'. (Interview two)

Following the second conference, based at Plymouth, this theme of working through conflict was also evident.

M: 'I get the feeling that people felt awkward because there was that confrontation on ...'

D: 'But I usually love confrontation, this is the thing.'

M: 'Because it's from other people on our patch as such, in our university, on Exmouth turf, I can probably assume that they felt it when we were up there and there was tension in the air for those 2 days that things were being sorted out. But, again, because they were all down here we were like, oh, we've got to stand up to them, we've got to get our opinion across, then it just got bombarded with things. And I think that's why like ... perhaps yourself ... like took a step back, because it was very different on our turf.'

M2: 'I just think I'd have been wasting my breath if I'd have spoken on Tuesday.'

K: 'A lot of people were being very stubborn about their views. And everyone had points; they were just arguing the same cause and just wanted to get the last say. So I was just sort of saying like ... I sort of stepped in and tried to help, is that what everyone wants? And everyone was sort of like, well, yeah. Well, why are we arguing? Just write it down. And then that was it, it was done. And it was just ... people seemed to be arguing for the sake of it at some points, didn't they?'

M: 'Yeah. Because there was no real chair of the meetings and stuff. And it was really odd because we did get a lot more done, seemed to get a lot more progress when the lecturers were out. But there was still not one person there to chair the sessions and that's what caused the conflict'. (Interview four)

When things became heated it was noticed that students seemed to retreat to their "home-turf". The transcript above illustrates the way in which the students resolved practical problems and power struggles moving beyond disharmony to collective ownership.

Conclusions

O'Doherty (2006) suggests that a consequence of failing to define independent learning adequately in the conditions of higher education is an inability to discriminate between independent study as an activity and as a capacity to be developed. As an activity, independent study entails study skills. Capacity for independent learning implies both a certain psychological disposition and the socio-political status of the student in society, in keeping with ideas about what a university is and about "graduateness". Our project contained elements of independent study as an activity and as a capacity. The activity of individual research is something that is exceptionally well supported through a programme of work led by our subject librarian and well integrated into the modules. The building of resilience, as discussed above in relation to student anxiety about going public, was something we hoped would emerge through practice. The strengthening of student participation through responsibility for the book was a further aspect of this "capacity building".

Whether independence is a prerequisite or a goal of higher education is disputed among educators in higher education (O'Doherty, 2006). These perceptions are significant, because they often determine whether the orientation of teaching is towards skill building or towards the exercise of freedom, choice and responsibility. While these are necessarily exclusive, the emphasis given strongly influences the teaching and learning space and the character of conversation between and among academics and students. Our claim would be that in our project we tended to favour the exercise of freedom and extension of our students' participation. Rob suggests that 'this is how the students also felt'.

O'Doherty (2006) suggests that the use of the term "self-directed learning", in the tradition of adult education, is that which most clearly expresses the necessity of interaction between persons, the inter-relatedness of learning activities and a self-motivated and self-reliant learning disposition. Self-directed learning does involve doing things on one's own but is an interdependent process, taking place in association with teachers, tutors, mentors, resource providers and peers. It's instrumental, dialogic and self-reflective.

Independent learning can be construed as a challenge to traditional academicism (Jordan and Yeomans, 1991). The disputed ground appears in a period of rapid expansion of higher education, the common credit scheme, the widening participation agenda, the skills orientation and vocationalism. This trend has been steady for three or four decades. There is increasing competition between institutions and the student is often portrayed as a consumer whose custom must be won through the display of "learning packages" in the higher education marketplace. This leads to greater emphasis on "flexibility", "distance" and "independence" in the design of programmes. It may be that some of these shifting priorities were expressed in our project through differences of emphasis between the two universities. The students certainly voiced their awareness of the differences between the two institutions.

The idea of autonomy is central to discussion of independent learning because of its historical association, in the rational tradition, with criticality, personal motivation and self-reliance. It is also associated with wider values such as freedom of expression in general and academic freedom in particular.

Lessons for the future

As always, with hindsight, the tutors can see there are details to which more attention should have been paid at the outset. This project illustrates the complexity of the writing process and has strengthened our belief in the value of teaching academic writing explicitly, as part and parcel of all university teaching. This particular example suggests that we needed to engage more clearly with the concepts of 'audience' and 'criticality'.

Finding the courage and confidence to question, challenge and speak and developing the "powers" of argument is a relational process that expresses the inter-dependence of learning, shot through with conflict, risk, and struggle. This project is a clear depiction of these rich dimensions of learning, including the loneliness of some aspects of independent study. To what extent were students empowered by the experience? Their comments both during and following the experience indicate that it was the responsibility to others that increased their commitment and that they found particularly motivating:

'Teamwork played a key role in determining how people found the confidence and courage, because I think we got it from each other!' (Rob)

'I believe that we all grew in confidence not only with the people we were working with but also in our writing styles and I think that this showed in the end result.' (Claire).

'I believe every student grew in confidence throughout this module more than any other due to the opportunities it gave us in exploration of ourselves and each other.' (Martin).

In spite of difficulties and disappointments, the shared ownership of the production process proved empowering. It will be of interest to us all to see ways in which this experience informs students' final year of study, which includes at least one major piece of independent research.

References

- Anderson, G. and Boud, D. (1996) Extending the role of peer learning in Higher Education. *Research and Development in Higher Education*, 19, 15-19.
- Boud D. (1999) Situating academic development in professional work: using peer learning. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 4,1, 3-10.
- Boud, D., Cohen, R. and Sampson J. (2001) *Peer learning in higher education: learning from and with each other*. London: Kogan Page.
- Britzman, D. (2003) *After-education: Anna Freud, Melanie Klein and psychoanalytic histories of learning*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Gibson, S. and Haynes, J. (2005), Working with the contemporary undergraduate, group work and Graduate Attributes and Skills. *Paper presented at the International Practitioner Research and Collaborative Action Research Network Conference, Fontys University, Utrecht*.
- Jordan S. and Yeomans, D. (1991) Whither independent learning? The politics of curricular and pedagogical change in a polytechnic department. *Studies in Higher Education*, 16, 3, 291-308.
- Lillis, T. and Turner, J. (2001) Student writing in Higher Education: contemporary confusion, traditional concerns. *Teaching in Higher Education* 6, (1)
- Mason, J. (2002) *Researching your own practice: the discipline of noticing*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Mitchell, S. and Riddle, M. (2001) *Essays in Argument*. London: Middlesex University
- O'Doherty, M., (2006) *Definitions of Independent Learning – Initial Overview*. The University of Manchester: Learn Higher
- Tripp, D. (1996) *Critical Incidents in Teaching*. London: Routledge.