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Co-creation at DMU

#DMUFREEDOMTOACHIEVE
EMBRACING CULTURAL DIVERSITY FOR SUCCESS

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What is co-creation?

Within the Freedom to Achieve project, co-creation is understood as students and lecturers acting as joint constructors of knowledge, working as equal partners in a co-operative process of finding new knowledge and perspectives in the classroom (Willis and Gregory 2016).

“Being able to tailor your degree to your own interests undoubtedly makes for a more engaging experience”

- Third year marketing student

Co-creative practices allow for a more dynamic learning experience and are crucial to the development of an inclusive curriculum that is more rounded, relevant and meaningful (Hockings 2010). Student involvement in the design of their own learning landscape ensures for higher levels of engagement and often improved attainment.

The attainment gap between Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) and white students within UK Higher Education is well documented and DMU are part of a ground-breaking project to positively address this issue. The Freedom to Achieve project places an explicit focus on the experiences of BAME students at DMU and the ways in which positive change can be evoked through a variety of means, including the recognition and use of co-creation practices.



Why co-create?

At De Montfort University we strive to create and maintain an inclusive learning environment that equips all students from all backgrounds with the tools needed to succeed here and beyond. No-one is more well-informed as to the challenges being faced in the struggle to meet this goal than students themselves. Each with a unique viewpoint shaped by their background and experiences, every student has useful and individual insight and in this way co-creation practices provides opportunity for continued innovation.



Co-creation is an approach that can take many forms across different disciplines and institutions. Staff and students may collaborate to evaluate course content, learning and teaching processes, work together to design assessments such as essay questions or choose between different assessment methods; all on individual, course or institutional levels (Bovill et al. 2016).

The Attainment Gap

Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students across the nation are finding themselves at an institutional level disadvantage. The likelihood of students from this group achieving first class or upper second honours degree certifications has been found to be consistently lower than that of their white counterparts and identifying the reasons behind this bias is an ongoing journey. Universities nationwide have pledged their dedication to working to improve, and eventually close, the attainment gap. Here at De Montfort University this takes shape in the form of the Freedom to Achieve (FTA) project, an initiative designed to ensure there is an equal playing field and level of opportunity for every student, irrespective of their ethnic background.



Hope for the future

The attainment gap is an issue being recognised at higher education institutions worldwide, with DMU being at the forefront of tackling the issue through working to ensure learning curriculums, environments and assessment methods are reflective of the increasingly diverse make up of our student body. Through the Freedom to Achieve project we are working to improve the BAME attainment gap by analysing the accessibility of course materials from a BAME perspective, encouraging the wider-implementation of co-creative teaching methods and increasing the numbers of opportunities for BAME student opinions to be heard in both formal and informal settings. All work on the FTA project is in partnership with six institutions with whom DMU have united in the fight to close the attainment gap.

Best practice at DMU

Staff and students have been working side by side to implement co-creation practices across the university. The following case studies should provide inspiration and ideas as to how you too can diversify your teaching methods and allow students a greater sense of ownership within their own learning.

Joint textbook in BSc Biomedical Science

Second year students studying Inflammation and Immunobiology worked alongside module lead Dr Ruta Furmonaviciene over the academic year to produce a joint textbook to be used by subsequent cohorts studying the module. Contributions to the guide were collected online using Blackboard discussion boards as well as in person during some lectures and dedicated timetabled seminars. Students were permitted to submit not only textbased contributions but also any useful diagrams, word clouds and flow charts they may have come across during study. This exercise proved to be extremely beneficial as a form of ongoing revision throughout the year, with one student crediting her 85% performance in the unseen exam largely down to the textbook scheme forcing her to not only retain the information but truly understand it also.

“Somehow we must incorporate an ‘intellectual adventure’ into modern day teaching and research. We need structure and direction, but also digestion and reflection.”

- Dr Ruta Furmonaviciene

Best practice at DMU

Blogging assessment in BA English Language

Students studying the Structure and Meaning of Language module on this course are assessed using a unique blog assessment they work on over the course of the academic year. Students are instructed to produce three blog posts analysing the effects of language in a setting of their choice. A range of blog structures are welcomed, with audio-visual content encouraged also. Students upload their blogs to online class portfolios and are assessed not only for their written work but the quality of feedback and interaction they show with the work of their classmates.

Within this module more often than not students will analyse prescribed texts or case studies and so this assessment has equipped students with autonomy they were yet to experience academically. In lectures, students learn the theory that informs their understanding before utilising this to analyse a text of their own choice that is relevant to them personally. Guidance is offered for those students who are unsure of a subject to focus upon, however it is noted the majority of students find this assessment extremely engaging and enjoy the chance to focus on different content. One student used the assessment to combine her extracurricular activity in theatre at DMU with her academic passion for language as she chose to blog from the viewpoint of her own fictional talent agent.

“Because I was allowed to choose my topic I was really engaged and found myself spending more time perfecting the work before handing it in than I usually would which really improved my grade.”

- Second year Game Art student

Best practice at DMU

Student involvement in #DMUGlobal trip design

The #DMUGlobal scheme has allowed for thousands of students to internationalise their academic mindset whilst experiencing new corners of the world, and these trips are a huge opportunity for staff and students to co-create. The mere act of incorporating free time into daily schedules allows students the chance to shape their trip and the experiences they encounter.

The 2017 trip to San Francisco organised by Mark Prescod and a former student of his is a perfect example of co-creation. Alumnus Dion McKenzie went on to work in the US and founded company Colorintech, a non-profit aiming to make the landscape of the tech industry more diverse and inclusive. Dion worked alongside Mark when designing the trip itinerary which included visiting Google HQ, speaking with start-ups and visiting the Oakland area; home to the beginnings of the Black Lives Matter movement. Mark drew on the experiences of his students and designed a trip that would be inspiring, engaging and relevant.

"It was the most inspiring thing I've ever done in my life."

- San Francisco trip participant

Best practice at DMU

Self-directed projects in BSc Game Art

On this programme students are allowed to single-handedly architect the subject and nature of their second-year project, allowing students real creative freedom and the chance to tailor their studies to their own aims and express their identity.

Within this discipline students are asked for feedback frequently and feel truly listened to as they've seen said feedback reflected in changes made to assessments and lecture content. It was noted that amongst the cohort there is real encouragement of individuality, with the self-directed assessment being a key channel for students to funnel their ideas.

Collecting, analysing and where feasible acting upon student feedback is, arguably, the easiest form of co-creation. Although a more long-term approach this allows for a course to be modernised and hybridised over the years as the nature of incoming students, the classroom and the working world continue to change.

"A lot of our projects are like 'hey here's a theme, go and do what you want with it', so you can kind of interpret it however you want. There are all different artists from different backgrounds for inspiration, they don't give you a set artist or set person it's all about your choice."

- Second year Game Art student

Best practice at DMU

Lawyer in the Marketplace module in LLB Law

The Lawyer in the Marketplace is an optional module available to second year students. The module begins with lectures supported by a few seminars, with the remainder of the year given as time for students to work on their group projects. The task is to work in small groups to decide upon a business plan of your own choice. Once this has been done, groups must conduct extensive market research before planning and delivering a pitch to professionals at the DMU Innovation Centre as well as writing up an 1000-word group project. The module culminates with the last phase of assessment: an individual 1500-word peer and self-reflection.

This assessment style opens up opportunity for students to co-create both horizontally and vertically, working alongside one another to shape the content of their project, the nature of which has been prescribed. Students are able to come together, pick a business they feel is relevant to themselves and work consistently over the academic year to produce the best work possible, all the whilst developing key skills such as teamwork, communication and critical thinking. In this way, this assessment addresses all four themes of the Freedom to Achieve project:

Community,
Development,
Teaching & Learning
and Relationships.



Where to begin

Co-creation is an approach that is both vast and diverse in nature. Here at DMU, we have focused on the implementation of co-creative practices along four key themes: community, development, teaching and learning, and relationships (Atkins 2018; Mountford-Zimdars et al. 2015).

Community refers to the creation of an inclusive learning environment in which all feel welcomed, respected and represented. Co-creation within this theme might include working with students to organise extra-curricular activities within your programme.

Development of key skills both inside and outside of the classroom: feedback from students on what they feel they lack can open a door to co-creative practices and inform the direction of what skills may be focused on.

Teaching & learning refers to the cultural inclusivity of the curriculum and the extent to which it reflects the diversity of our student body. Creating opportunities for students to collaborate on learning materials, assessment styles and feedback methods gives students more responsibility within their own learning.

Relationships are at the heart of the student experience at DMU. We encourage you to facilitate opportunities between students and staff for team building, group work and networking in industry as well as the chance to hear from guest speakers from all academic and ethnic backgrounds.

Co-creation: top tips

Place value upon student feedback

Take note of responses in student surveys, feedback boxes and course representative meetings. Keep student feedback at the forefront of your mind and do not hesitate to escalate the most frequently raised issues.

Look for opportunities to collaborate

Co-creation is all about bringing heads together to work towards common goals. The planning and introduction of co-creative teaching activities need not be a completely autonomous task: brainstorming alongside colleagues – some of whom may have already been involved in similar initiatives or consulting the DMU Student Curriculum Advisors and staff on the Freedom to Achieve project can equip you with more support.

Encourage student involvement with extracurricular activities

Engaging with extra-curricular activities can greatly improve student networking and communication skills and bringing this new found confidence into the classroom can be key in ensuring the efficiency of co-creative schemes.



Co-creation: top tips

Give students a greater sense of ownership of their learning

Having chosen their course, upon arriving at university students will naturally find areas of the curriculum they favour over others. Giving students some input in either what is studied or how it is assessed can enable them to feel a greater sense of ownership of their learning, and in turn a greater sense of responsibility to self-motivate, engage and produce work of their best quality.

Start small, think big

Starting small can mean you have some natural momentum and buzz on your side before embarking upon larger projects. For example, before pitching a new #DMUGlobal trip to a location proposed by a small group of highly engaged students one may create a bi-weekly discussion group in which course-related current affairs, literature, media and their impact are discussed. After the initial few months you may find you have a larger group of students than expected and you now have a captive audience to consult about aspects of the trip and their potential application.

Offer incentives

The minds and e-mail inboxes of students are often inundated, meaning offering attractive incentives can often be the simplest and easiest way to ensure students are truly present and engaged during the time you have with them. In the classroom, these incentives can be in the form of RPS credits for high level participation, recognition and acknowledgement in employment references & HEAR document or priority over other students when it comes to the allocation of dissertation projects.

Sports, societies and the SU



There are over 160 different sports clubs and societies here at De Montfort. Involvement in sports, societies and the students' union aid students in the creation of a diverse and well-rounded university

experience. The opportunity to become a part of something greater than oneself and belong to a community of people with a shared interest can wholly aid in the aim of creating a more inclusive university environment.

Involvement in sports clubs and societies open up the opportunity for students to run to be committee members. Committee members are responsible for key decisions as well as the day to day business of running a successful society or sports team. In these roles students develop key skills such as time management, leadership, communication and teamwork.

Learning more about the activities of the students' union and potentially becoming involved not only allows students to engage with yet another avenue of university life, but also ensures students are aware of a large source of support during their time at DMU. Support and advice is available regarding student welfare and financial issues, mental health and academic queries or issues.

Overall, involvement with extra-curricular activities outside of their course helps students to evolve: developing new skills, forming new relationships and becoming more knowledgeable and well-rounded individuals. Bringing such personal improvement into the classroom can improve not only the level of engagement from students but the quality of their contributions.

Final note

Higher education: an ever changing landscape

The profile of those studying at higher education institutions has changed dramatically over the past century, with UK statistics showing year on year record numbers of students entering university, with an increasing number of these being BAME students. These facts along with continuous worldwide developments in technology, legislation and the world of work mean that teaching methods require careful review and consideration. It is our responsibility as education providers to ensure every student in the classroom has equal opportunity and all are free to achieve to the best of their ability.

Co-creation is about staff and students coming together to make decisions about how and what is taught, this will aid efforts to close the attainment gap and create an atmosphere of respect, trust and community and dramatically improve student experience, paving the way for further improvements downstream.



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