THROUGH INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

IMPROVING THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

THE TEACHING QUALIFICATION IN FURTHER EDUCATION (TQFE) is a programme of study for Further Education (FE) lecturers who come from a wide range of academic backgrounds, and can opt to study at UG3 or PG level. The programme aims to expand their critical understanding of educational theory and practice.

For the second course, called ‘Embracing Change and Innovation in FE’, which explores the impact of wider societal change on education systems, students are expected to engage in a critical analysis of a societal or policy change relevant to the subject they teach.

Initially this task involved students being required to read a selection of policy documents and reports and discuss these in groups. Whilst students were often interested in the details of particular policies they found it hard to engage critically with these sources or to think about policy in more abstract terms. Some students described the task as alienating and difficult.

Students needed help to locate change at the local level within the bigger picture of social, political and educational change and to notice the permeable boundaries of their particular educational contexts. By making deliberate efforts to expose these we hoped, they would start to understand better that policies and initiatives rarely arise as neutral solutions to problems but have ideological underpinnings.

A practical way to do this is to explicitly compare educational contexts in different countries – something that was possible because of ongoing collaborative relationships team members had developed with researchers around the world.

GTCS standards for FE lecturers).

POSITIVE STUDENT FEEDBACK

noted that the experience helped them to understand their own context in a different light and see the similarities and differences between the Scottish vocational sector and others. Our international collaborators also found the learning experience stimulating.

In 2013, an activity was developed to enable a small group of TQFE students at the University of Aberdeen to collaborate online with counterparts in Finland (studying at Oulu University of Applied Sciences). Evaluation of this activity using an action research approach provided evidence of the outcomes, processes that worked successfully and challenges for learners (see Stevenson and Cornelius, 2014; Cornelius and Stevenson, forthcoming).

Whilst there were positive and sometimes unexpected outcomes, these were not achieved for all learners. Logistical issues made scaling up the activity to include larger numbers of students on the TQFE programme problematic. The activity was tutor-led with tutors deciding the areas of focus and so some students felt these areas were not as relevant to them.

Our approach is underpinned by the theoretical ideas of Communities of Practice (see Lave and Wenger, 1991) and boundary crossing.

We suggest that vocational educators are members of a global vocational education community of practice that has much to offer them in terms of professional development but that they can struggle to connect with this community.

We suggest that an explicit boundary-crossing exercise such as the one we have designed allows our students to reflect on their own context with reference to several others and that the resources we have created to facilitate this are ‘boundary objects’ (Akkerman and Bakker, 2011).

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A revised approach was designed to support inclusion of all learners on the TQFE. The range of international perspectives was also expanded so that insights could be gained from peers in England, Finland and South Africa as well as from across Scotland.

In this iteration, we employed a Flipped Classroom approach (see Crouch and Mazur, 2001) - students were asked to watch videos made by colleagues in England, Finland and South Africa and discuss these in synchronous online workshops and using the online discussion forums. Students were asked to think of their own professional challenges and make links to the video content.

The videos proved a more stimulating source than policy documents but the discussion forums did not promote as deep discussion as the online collaboration with students on an equivalent programme.

For more information about the TQFE programme please contact Aileen Ackland (a.ackland@abdn.ac.uk) or Sarah Cornelius (s.cornelius@abdn.ac.uk).

REFERENCES


> Cornelsius, S. & Stevenson, B. (2014). ‘Embracing Change and Innovation in FE’, which explores the impact of wider societal change on education systems, students are expected to engage in a critical analysis of a societal or policy change relevant to the subject they teach.


