

B3. Graduate contribution to teaching and learning: A case study in sustainable process and content

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There is general agreement, both globally and across disciplines, that citizen involvement is key to the pursuit and delivery of sustainable development. As the noted environmentalist, Jonathon Porritt argues, 'sustainable development and community participation *must* go hand in hand' (1998: xi).

Our Common Future (also known as the *Brundtland Report*) states that sustainable development 'meet(s) the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.' (WCED 1987: 43). This case study illustrates, in a simple and practical way, how students and graduates can interact to pursue sustainable working. This is in relation to the applied academic discipline of Community Development, where 'empowerment' of students and citizens is a focus. In particular it emphasises the 'needs of the present' – for current students (and graduates) – plus how to contribute towards equipping them to help citizens, in the future, 'to meet their own needs.'

Students studying Community Development at the University of Gloucestershire can exit with staged awards, from the Certificate in Higher Education, through the Diploma to an Honours degree. The study of community development encourages citizen involvement in decision-making that contributes towards the pursuit of sustainability and an improved quality of life.

Aims

The aim is to involve graduates in teaching and learning. This case study was developed for the Community Development curriculum, but the approach could be used more generally in disciplines and in undergraduate and postgraduate courses.

By involving graduates from the university in teaching and learning, the approach enables students, graduates and staff to share knowledge and perspectives on sustainable development (thereby contributing to intra-generational aspects of sustainability). Furthermore, it facilitates the construction of social capital amongst students, staff and graduates. This is valuable because, as Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998: 242) comment, social capital highlights 'the significance of relationships as a resource for social action'. There is also an opportunity for graduates to present 'live' case studies of community development delivery and aspects of sustainability; enabling students to connect theory with practice, and graduates to reflect on their day-to-day work.

Through graduate-led teaching and learning, students develop an appreciation of the range of community development jobs available and their connection to sustainability. They also realise possibilities for work placements and the range of public, voluntary and private sector careers post-graduation. In addition, students build up an understanding of the skills necessary for sustainable and community development practice in the twenty-first century. But equally important is the fact that graduates can develop their communication skills in order to convey complex information to a 'lay' audience – in this case a group of students.

Rationale

The direct involvement of University of Gloucestershire graduates in current student teaching and learning was developed for a number of reasons: First, community development is a 'live' subject intended to make a positive difference to the lives of citizens, and to the sustainability of the planet. As the practitioners Francis and Henderson (1992: 2) note, community development is

about 'getting things done' – building a children's play area...caring for people with a disability – but it is also about the creative development of people – people working together to support each other, involving and giving power and responsibility to disadvantaged people, growing in confidence and competence through active participation, confronting inequalities in society

A second reason for 'recycling' our graduates' life and working experiences back into undergraduate teaching and learning is to aid students so they can make practical sense of delivering across the aspects of sustainability,

covering social, cultural, economic and environmental principles, policies, programmes and projects. Graduate inputs to teaching and learning therefore contribute towards understanding how to seek balance and reconciliation between these (often contradictory) factors, in pursuit of sustainability.

A third reason is to open graduates' eyes to the need for effective communication, and the possibilities for career progression into training, teaching and higher education. It also highlights the importance of learning to inform effective action towards sustainability.

Implementation

Maintaining a long-term friendly and interested relationship with graduates is important, so that eventually it is possible for a faculty member to approach them for teaching and learning inputs. It is also essential to ensure the right contributor, on the right topic, at the right time in a lecture series. Tutor input is straightforward but crucial: providing the graduate with a clear brief, a copy of the module guide, assignment details, date, time and duration of the session. And in terms of preparatory activities, it is important to lead up to the session in a structured manner – for example giving internet and other resources for students to read pre-session, and ensuring a healthy attendance by students on the day, plus a willingness to engage and ask questions.

Sustainability focus

The activity contributes to students' knowledge and skills of the three aspects of sustainability. In addition there are contributions, often in the same module/session, on facets of social, economic and environmental sustainability and, importantly, how these may be recognised and reconciled. Integration is a key principle of community development, so that case studies and inputs tend to look for the application of skills and knowledge for holistic progress.

In terms of sustainability *per se* in the university and beyond, the incorporation of graduates and their knowledge into undergraduate teaching and learning is intrinsically sustainable: promoting intra-generational benefits and linkage; sparking ideas (in students and graduates) for future careers in sustainability-related jobs; and demonstrating that degree programmes can lead to relevant employment in the field of sustainable and community development. These links have

been furthered through work 'placements' – for example, Gloucestershire graduates at Tewkesbury Borough Council (in the English W. Midlands) have 'hosted' a student in relation to town and country planning practice. In 2007 the author organised 'The State we're in: The British Countryside in 2007 and beyond'. The conference hinged on graduate contributions from those engaged in social, economic, environmental and cultural work in the countryside. Although open to all, the conference doubled as a reunion for graduates from the University's 'environmental' courses (Heritage Management, Local Policy, Geography and Community Development). The event itself aimed to foster networking between academics, practitioners, students and stakeholders.

Active learning

This activity, in a simple fashion, links thinking, doing and reflection in relation to sustainability, for students, graduates and staff alike. Furthermore it represents an innovative means of connecting theory to practice, thereby promoting reflection and networking by all participants. Graduate contributions to undergraduate teaching also constitute embedded active learning in teaching, in the sense that some graduates have made several inputs, spanning a period of years. In addition, this activity fosters blended learning by 'capturing' graduate inputs as podcasts or video clips, which are available to broadcast as a lasting resource *via* WebCT (in itself demonstrating sustainable resource use). It also fosters inclusivity since distant/absent students can access these materials rather than having to be physically present in the classroom.

This activity centres on the active involvement of external agencies – graduates from local authorities, quangos and voluntary bodies. Practitioners have also commented on the new ideas contributed by undergraduates, so the transfer of ideas can be a two-way process: graduates-to-students and students-to-graduates. This demonstrates the potential for a symbiotic relationship rather than 'one way traffic'.

This activity is, in addition, underpinned by pedagogic research – the experience of recycling graduate contributions back in to undergraduate teaching forms part of (2007) research and data capture *via* the University of Gloucestershire's *Centre for Active Learning in Geography, Environment and Related Disciplines*. The involvement of graduates and contributions from around England and Wales also widens students' horizons and provides concrete examples to highlight the sustainability mantra of 'think

global, act local'. In addition the activity promotes a key tenet of community development, namely that fun and enjoyment are powerful aids to learning. Finally, the activity enables different voices to be heard, and exposes students to a variety of views and contributions from practitioners at differing levels – across policy development, programme delivery and project management.

Feedback

Feedback from students *via* module evaluations indicates that they enjoy and value contact with recent graduates. Graduate contributors were systematically asked for feedback directly following their inputs: a sample of completed semi-structured interviews is below (See Appendix 1). The feedback highlighted gains in terms of continuing professional development, an opportunity to critique graduates' own practice in relation to the theory of community development; ideas for the next time they deliver to a 'lay' audience; the process of presenting was found to be of personal benefit; and a boost to self-confidence was acknowledged in terms of realising the knowledge and skills that they possess or have gained post-graduation. The activity also constituted an opportunity for graduates to come back to the 'old place' and renew contact with their lecturers. Students and stakeholders have noted the benefits of 'triangulation': being exposed to a range of (graduate) inputs and perspectives related to the pursuit of sustainability.

I saw it as a challenge, and good CPD. I also wanted to put something back; when I was studying, it was the outside speakers that I found most interesting. They gave me a chance to put theory in to a real context.

Graduate and Market Towns Officer, Staffordshire Moorlands District Council

Student module evaluations consistently highlight the importance of active and reflective learning to the discipline. Students have enjoyed 'learning by doing', for example undertaking 'live' participatory consultation exercises (on the future of local health services) as part of a final year undergraduate module *Participation and Consultation*; or trialling a prototype participatory 'game' (Deliberative Meetings of Citizens DEMOCS) for the New Economics Foundation.

It was refreshing not to have 'political hats' in the audience, people who think they know everything; the students seemed genuinely keen and willing to learn, but equally knew something of their subject.

Graduate feedback on presentation experience

Strengths and weaknesses

It can be argued that a key strength lies in the approach's simplicity, in terms of development, administration, delivery and monitoring. It has the added benefit of connecting students to potential career paths, by demonstrating possibilities for work after university. The variety of graduate inputs exemplifies the many faces of sustainability, in terms of cultural, economic, social and environmental concerns. The graduates do not come to these sessions in any sense constrained by teacher training or convention, hence the activities are usually highly interactive. A further reason may be that because these are community development professionals (trained at the University of Gloucestershire) they tend to adopt an interactive approach.

Graduate contributions connect theory to practice. Furthermore these practice sessions contribute up to date case study materials, many of which are too recent to have been written up. There are various by-products from such teaching inputs in terms of student placement opportunities, live assignment projects, and specialist contributions, for example to dissertations. There is also an opportunity to quiz peers (often close in age to many students) about what their job entails. Finally, and importantly, graduates (usually) make their contributions free of charge or at minimal cost, for example covering the cost of travel. The author has, however, ensured that graduates additionally receive a book token from a student in class; the latter also makes a short address at the end of an activity, by way of thanks to the graduate.

There are however a number of potential weaknesses. There may be uncertainty over an individual's ability to communicate effectively with students. Equally, and occasionally, the focus and timing can drift away from the module, programme or session aims. There is furthermore, a danger of listening to a series of anecdotes, which are not rigorous or more generally applicable. Then there is the possibility that students or the invited guest do not turn up, causing embarrassment, wasted time and

effort. 'One off' sessions are of course notoriously unpredictable and subject to the vagaries of weather, traffic jams and other impediments.

Programmes

Graduate contributions to teaching and learning have been made at Level 1 in the 12 CATS modules *Action with Communities* and *Community and Locality*; at Level 2 in the 15 CATS modules *Community Development Theory and Practice* and *Settlement Planning*; and at Level 3 in the 15 CATS modules *Participation and Consultation*, *Local Economic Development*, and *Dissertation* double module (valued at 30 CATS points).

Graduate contributions have also featured in the postgraduate module *Rural Social and Community Development*, which forms part of the MSc European Rural Development.

Most of the above modules are delivered through flexible learning: involving a course book, WebCT exchange, plus residential school inputs. All (excepting *Local Economic Development*) are provided to student cohorts across the age range (from teenagers to retired people), part and full-timers.

Key words:

Graduate contributions to teaching; active learning; reflective practice

References

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Appendix 1

Sample interview with the Market Towns Officer (Staffordshire Moorlands District Council), a graduate who presented to University of Gloucestershire students on Market Towns Regeneration (December 2005)

Q: *Why did you accept the invitation to do a session at the University?*

A: 'I saw it as a challenge, and good CPD. I also wanted to put something back; when I was studying, it was the outside speakers that I found most interesting. They gave me a chance to put theory in to a real context.'

Q: *What was your experience of preparing for this session?*

A: 'Again it was a challenge. It gave an opportunity to critique my own practice in relation to the theory of community development. At first I found it hard to get in to; but once I'd cracked the structure, the content seemed to flow.'

Q: *What was your experience of actually delivering this session?*

A: 'I thought it went well. The students got involved and didn't have to be spoon-fed.'

Q: *Do you feel that you gained anything from preparing and delivering this session?*

A: 'Yes. It provided an opportunity to step back and critique what I'm doing from day-to-day. For example in my market towns work we never did undertake an 'exit strategy'. I quite enjoyed the research for the session and the presenting itself. I just can't say 'no' to a challenge! And I've learnt some ideas for next time I present. It was refreshing not to have 'political hats' in the audience, people who think they know everything; the students seemed genuinely keen and willing to learn, but equally knew something of their subject. I really enjoyed doing the session; it made me question the processes involved in my day-to-day activity, and what career direction I might take.'