'Willing to learn': Undergraduate students' perceptions of their current learning experiences, including of Learning Futures curriculum innovations

(findings from Year 2 of a cross-University evaluative study)
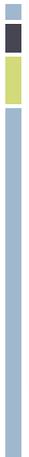
Sibyl Coldham, Steven Cranfield & Charlotte Behzadifar
Department of Leadership and Professional Development
Westminster Business School
University of Westminster

Acknowledgements

- Emma Whiting, Learning Futures Programme Manager
- Sara Panek, Learning Futures Programme Administrator
- Student Engagement Leads
- University of Westminster Students Union (UWSU), including VPs
- Course leaders
- Participating student interviewees
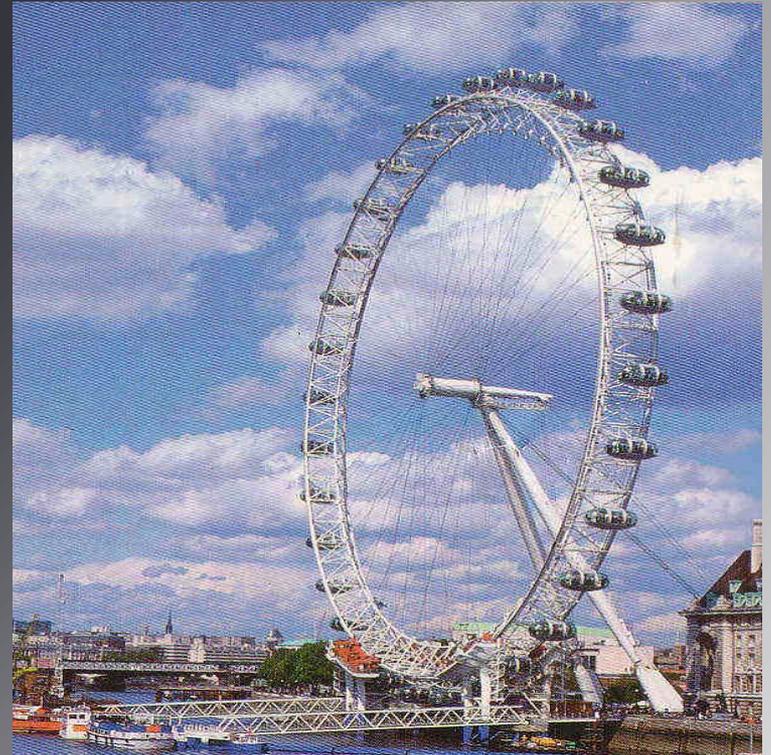
Study design at a glance

- Stage 3/3 of longitudinal study (2016-17) of the views of L4-L5 Westminster undergraduate students across all 5 Faculties

- Stage 1 - Mar 2016 | Stage 2 - Dec 2016 | Stage 3 - Mar 2017 using probability sampling and typical focus group techniques

- Qualitative interviews to capture student experiences and perceptions – as distinct from evaluative judgments – in semester *before* and two semesters *during* roll out of Learning Futures curriculum initiatives

- Views sought on 4 aspects of the student experience:
  course structure; **teaching and assessment**;
  student support; and **employability**

- 29 x 1-hour focus groups with L4 and L5 students (n=129) across all Faculties

- Initial 'raw' data will be presented from Stage 3 (n=57) **course structure**; **teaching**

L&T Symposium 2016 Stage 1

- Students' perceptions of teaching and assessment as they experience them in current programmes:
  - Teaching approaches and use of TEL
  - Collaborative working and activities
  - Assessment formats and their learning
  - How they use feedback (or not)
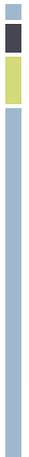
Stage 1 – What were we finding?

- Students as co-creators – learning as co-creation?
  - Activities that make them think and that are goal-orientated
  - It easier to learn when you have to work things out together – and the tutor structures this in
  - Industry-relevant practice
  - Assessments drive their learning so they have to see the point

Stage 1 – What were we finding?

- Students understand constraints of different teaching contexts – and their particular discipline
- They know they learn better through interaction –
  - Breaks in the monotony of one-to-many talk
  - Personal interaction with and from teachers
  - Talking, problem-solving, arguing in small groups
  - Assessments where they have to 'think like their profession' and that are developmental - not just report on reading

Stage 3 – What are we finding?

- Students' perceptions as they experience them in current programmes:
  - Electives (L4, L5)
  - Initial impact of Learning Futures (L5)
  - Increased emphasis on group and peer learning strategies (L4, L5)

Electives L4

- 'Everyone's just doing the same thing. It would be nice if it was more split, smaller classes or something' *SMAD*

- 'Tutors are encouraging us to pick *their* module' *SMAD*

- 'I loved it, you had all the information on the PDF. It was less exam. If it's all based on exam that increased the stress for me.' *FST*

Electives L4

- 'I'm doing a Polylang course, I think everyone who is doing [this language] in my group is quite happy because everything is quite clear and we know what we're being assessed on and what we have to study.' *FSSH*

- 'I got in my first choice, but a lot of people didn't get in to the first choices.' *FST*

Electives L5

- 'It would be so much better if someone comes to the class and gives a short presentation, like two minutes [instead of information cards]' *SMAD*

- 'We could have chosen X, and the majority of my course did choose X, but nobody told us that X is going to be the exact thing that we have learned first semester of first year.' *SMAD*

- 'We had no information whatsoever, until 2 weeks before, and then they were "Oh, choose your modules as quick as you can so that the spaces don't get taken away"'*SMAD*

Electives L5

- 'When you have 100 to 200 people on an elective, they just don't care at all' *WBS*

- 'The electives should have less credit than the core modules' *WBS*

- 'Some of them find the elective modules really easy, because they did something similar before, and for others, it's really hard' *WBS*

- 'When it comes to the electives [what's required to pass and how] it's not as clear' *WBS*

Electives L5

- 'In my elective, I learnt to think critically. How could I cross-transfer these skills in other academic disciplines?' *FST*

- 'I don't think most people would have taken an elective outside of the Department' *FSSH*

Learning Futures L5

- 'I think that a lot of it is selective regurgitation' *FABE*

- 'The seminars seem a lot less structured than last year. It's a bit more "If you need our help, then we're here"'*FABE*

- 'A lot of the things that Learning Futures is trying to achieve was actually being met before, but now the tutors have to actively be seen doing it' *FABE*

Learning Futures L5

- 'The first semester was really a mess, all of the deadlines were clashing' *SMAD*

- 'The good thing is exams in the January, so we don't have six exams at the end' *WBS*

- 'Learning Futures is about learning more in a shorter amount of time, you just learn a lot. You're not being bombarded with information like last year.' *FST*

- 'You understand your subject in more depth, and there would be less assessments - but the timetabling to do that is not good' *FST*

Learning Futures L5

- 'Some modules have changed to having only one exam at the very end of the year, and, at first, from a student's perspective, I thought that was great because, oh, it meant I didn't have to do anything until the end of the year, but what it actually turned out is that I've realised how valuable having multiple assessments can be because it puts pressure on the students to really take the course seriously. Whereas the modules now, with only one exam, those are by far their weakest subjects. They simply have been pushing them away, while focusing on the other modules.' *FSSH*

Group and peer learning L4

- 'I enjoy group work when other people want to do well as well, not just pass, when it's a group with people who are ambitious' *FABE*

- 'I would have liked to have a bit more guidance. Obviously, it's really nice and I like the fact that we can interact with each other and we can say our ideas, loud and clear, but also, if you don't have ideas, … it's the lack of knowledge, at the end of the day. It would be nice to have background from the teacher' *SMAD*

Group and peer learning L4

- 'I've got into the worst group I could ever go into and people just didn't text me back or just didn't do their part, so I ended up doing their part and put everything in the work. After, some, they were saying "Thank you, thank you, thank you", but I had to do it because this credit will transfer into my undergraduate course in [my home country]' *WBS*

- 'Sometimes not all of us want to raise the issue about a non-cooperating person to the tutor' *FST*

Group and peer learning L4

- 'Group assessment … it's *kind* of unfair, and it's *kind* of annoying' *FST*

- 'We're all paying the same – "paying", you know, student finance. But the level of teaching isn't the same for everyone. The lecture, that's true, it's the same for everyone, but tutorials and groups are different.' *FSSH*

- 'It's quite nerve-wracking, and my group is not very interactive because everybody is really nervous and nobody wants to share. Maybe at the beginning of the year, have a bit more time of getting to know each other?' *FSSH*

Group and peer learning L5

- 'Lecturers try to engage you as well, in some theory, like just to talk to each other. Those usually aren't that successful really.' *SMAD*

- 'It's still rare that we work in groups' *SMAD*

- 'Group critique would be great. But it's more like… teachers just …nod away and just critique it, rather than the students getting involved.' *SMAD*

Group and peer learning L5

- 'The teacher makes the effort to come and prepare for the seminar and only two people turn up' *WBS*

- 'We don't get instructions for how to work as a group, they leave you to it, really' *FST*

- 'Revising together happens quite often I think, in groups, but you only do work together, I find, if you've been told to do it' *FST*

Group and peer learning L5

- 'There isn't a culture of getting together and just, on your own, making your own study groups' *FSSH*

- 'There's general lack of just student engagement' *FSSH*

- 'In groups you end up meeting most people … but you still float around … I mostly get like "I don't have a clue what's going on"' *FSSH*

Group and peer learning L5

- 'Student interaction is incredible for development, the tutors can't always give you ideas' *FABE*

- 'We'll interact with the younger years and start to teach them skills that we've learned, but one tutor has gone out of their way to organise these' *FABE*

- 'It creates that kind of … that bit of tension, … for showing skills' *FABE*

Stages1/3 – What are we finding?

- Students as co-creators – learning as co-creation?
  - Activities that make them think and that are goal-orientated
    Yes, and important to get the level of scaffolding right
  - It is easier to learn when you have to work things out together – and the tutor structures this in
    Yes, and how the tutor structures this in could be (even) more explicit, consistent or enabling

Stages 1/3 – What are we finding?

- Students understand constraints of different teaching contexts – and their particular discipline
  Yes, and not all students convinced teachers act in awareness of this in a way that works for all students

- They know they learn better through interaction –
  - Breaks in the monotony of one-to-many talk
    Yes, and interactivity needs to be core rather and patchy or half-hearted
  - Personal interaction with and from teachers
    Yes, and concern this is less frequent or intense
  - Talking, problem-solving, arguing in small groups
    Yes, and there needs to be a group working and learning culture that supports and prepares for this from the outset

THE COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY MODEL
A framework for practice-orientated course design (Garrison et al., 1999)

This model underpins the new Learning and Teaching strategy .

Social presence
Mutual engagement is crucial to learning because participation and interaction (student/student and student/teacher student/external factors) is fundamental to knowledge construction.
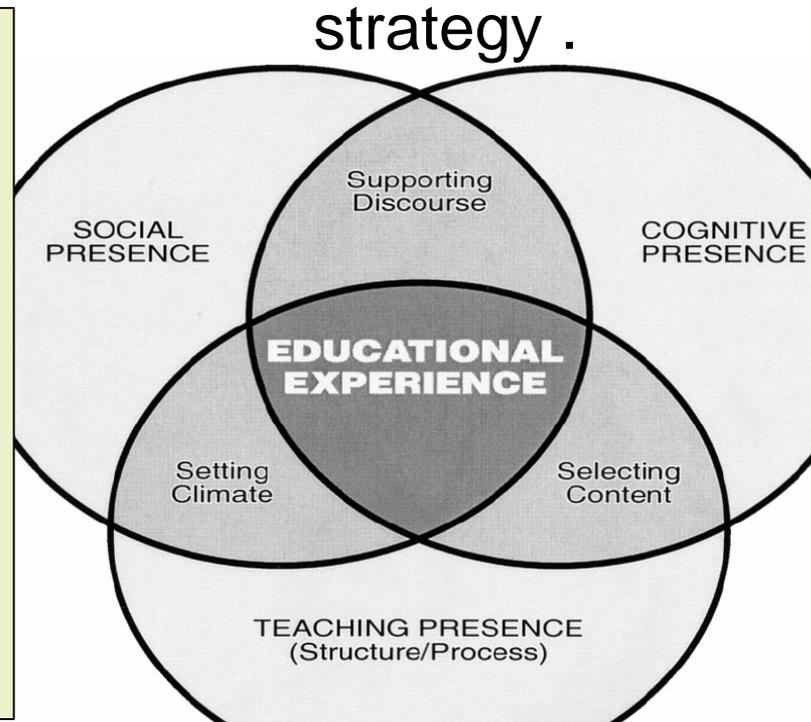
Cognitive presence
Critical thinking: higher-order reflection and discourse. The process of inquiry (purposeful critical (practice-orientated) discourse and reflection to construct personal meaning and confirm mutual understanding) is fundamental to HE.

SOCIAL PRESENCE

COGNITIVE PRESENCE

Supporting Discourse

EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Setting Climate

Selecting Content

TEACHING PRESENCE
(Structure/Process)

Teaching presence
The teacher shapes the transactional balance of the educational experience and manages the achievement of learning outcomes. The teacher designs experiences that will facilitate learning behaviours including planning, research and analysis, formulating, evaluating, team working etc to demonstrate (capabilities captured in the LOs, and feeds back/forward).

How would these findings be useful to you?

Learning and teaching design?

Collaborative research?

Interdisciplinary working and research?

Communities of learning?