

A Learning & Teaching Research Collaboration

Imaginative Empathy: Towards Inclusive Pedagogies

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Imaginative Empathy: Towards Inclusive Pedagogies

Executive Summary

In the context of developing compassionate and inclusive pedagogies, empathy is a key skill that can be practiced, but is not often identified or explored in the context of HE 'learning and teaching'. Beyond distinct disciplinary relevant research, we were interested in a broader application of an 'empathic approach' in HE dialogues between students and educators; considering the ways in which modules are delivered, assessments are conceived of, and processes realised. Our primary research question was to determine in which ways practicing empathy, imaginative empathy or engaging in empathic communication as part of learning and teaching (L&T) practices could help to diversify the curricula and support more inclusive pedagogic approaches. To realise this, we organised weekly "co-creator" research sessions, captured and shared lived-experiences and reflections, and ran two focus groups: all of which contributed to design, dissemination, analysis and interpretation of data collected via questionnaire. The value of empathy as part of our (n=43) respondents learning and teaching experiences, highlighted that more than 60% considered it an essential component of our practices. Almost 8000 words captured in free-text responses highlighted a strong focus on students and teaching (our goal and target group) and our subject: empathy. This was true whether experiences, their impact or strategies proposed to benefit our working practices were detailed. Further coding of the experiential details described enabled broad categorisation of responses into themes (each of which had overlapping sub-themes underneath it) where 'actions' or 'reactions' may be of most benefit. The richness of the data gathered, and discussions held to consider this, enabled development of a framework for a L&T workshop which can be tailored and re-(co-)created with and for different schools or specific learning environments, to suit defined and unique requirements. Future workshops informed by this work will aim to explore, develop and archive (for future access) shared inclusive L&T languages, techniques, and ideas for transformed practices. They will focus on imaginative or communicative empathy and the empathic imagination, as skills that could be elucidated and nurtured to improve student empowerment through inclusion of diverse cultural values (in L&T generally and in relation to disciplinary specific learning environments).

Background and Aims

This CETI ‘students-as-co-creators’ learning and teaching research collaboration (LTRC) was developed as an interdisciplinary research collaboration between the Schools of Architecture and Cities, Life Sciences and Disability Learning Support at the University of Westminster (UoW). Its overarching aim was to develop new insights into learning and teaching (L&T) practices, bringing inclusivity and diversification to the forefront. The project had one main research question:

- In which ways can practicing empathy, imaginative empathy or engaging in empathic communication as part of L&T practices help to diversify the curricula and support more inclusive pedagogic approaches?

In the context of developing compassionate and inclusive pedagogies’, empathy is a key skill that can be practiced, but is seldom identified or explored in the context of Higher Education (HE) L&T. We were interested in broad applications of an ‘empathic approach’ evidenced in dialogues between students and educators, linking to how modules are delivered, assessments are conceived, and processes implemented. The project aimed to contribute to development of sustainable approaches to decolonise and diversify the curricula, building inclusive learning environments (UoW, 2020). Despite an alternative angle, this work aligns to calls elsewhere for transformed practices (Waddington, 2021) and draws on themes including ‘awareness’ and ‘motivation’ (Aherne, 2019), utilising concepts of ‘imaginative empathy’, ‘empathic transportation’ or ‘empathic communication’ outlined by Margulies (1989) to inform explorations of the wider implications and possibilities within curricula and communication.

This project was completed alongside a disciplinary CETI ‘students-as-co-creators’ project: ‘Architecture Design Studios: Re-framing with the Empathic Imagination in Mind’ which explored how empathic imagination can be utilised in architecture design processes. Together, an EDI-education workshop held in the School of Architecture and Cities (July 2021) will showcase the combined outcomes of these projects.

This project had three main aims:

- A. To delineate how and/or where empathy, imaginative empathy or empathic communication is **experienced** within HE (at UoW);
- B. To explore how these experiences **impact** student learning, empowerment and value places in the inclusion of diverse cultural values in L&T practices; and
- C. To propose specific areas for improved L&T practices and suggest ways to effect change in support of ‘sustainable approaches’ to **developing equal, diverse and inclusive learning environments**.

Methods

To achieve these goals, methods designed to emphasise benefits offered by student-educator co-creation were utilised. These are described sequentially, highlighting integration of scaffolded learning using results gathered as we progressed. All data captured and presented within this report was obtained using protocols compliant with the Data Protection Act 2018 and methods approved by the UoW ethics committee (CETI-LTRC-2021-02, 19th March 2021).

Work was initiated in hour-long, weekly ‘co-creator’ sessions (April to June). It became evident that the diversity of our group (including academics and students from Architecture and Life Sciences and an SpLD advisor) contributed to

differences in how we understood empathy in the context of L&T and interpreted the potential of what we could aim to achieve. Examples of lived experiences and insights shared in these meetings led to creation of physical records in a series of vignettes (accessible [here](#)). Addressing research aims A and B, we expanded capture using a questionnaire designed to explore ways in which practicing empathy, imaginative empathy or engaging in empathic communication as part of L&T can embrace the student voice, enable diversification of the curricula and enhance inclusive pedagogic approaches. Our intention was to capture details enabling address of these questions while building a complex, holistic picture using detailed views of respondents. A pilot session with eight 'critical friends' gathered feedback on the questionnaire design and its potential to capture details used to inform work required for aim C. Attendees were introduced to the project and lived experience vignettes, then completed the draft questionnaire prior to sharing insights and suggestions on MIRO (Figure 1) and in small group discussions. Following updates, targeted dissemination of the questionnaire utilising purposive convenience sampling methods (Trochim, 2021) facilitated capture of responses from 43 individuals.

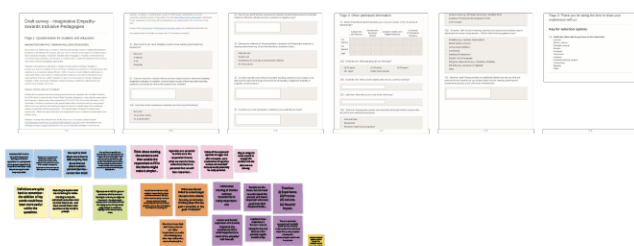
A



NOTES FROM SUMMING UP

- educational framework and its limitations is important when we consider empathy
- //good will or acknowledged and rewarded...
- student voice, language, diversification
- happy with Q - more context and examples

B



NOTES FROM SUMMING UP

- on questionnaire
- respondents did not understand what we were looking for until we got to inclusivity questions and their backgrounds... order?
- opportunity to go back or add a vignette... linking of details... template or free-reign?
- vignettes v important, helped... real live experience reflections - how IE it works and where
- process from context, experience, process, obstacles, barriers, actions, results moving forward... need visuals...

C



NOTES FROM SUMMING UP

- Q - vignettes v helpful... not guiding but as enabling recording of own experiences
- certain questions re-wording / inclusion of definitions?
- Page 2 expand some tick boxes / drop-downs and including areas such as teaching... research / not teacher etc
- 4-5 - split 5 to incorporate a negative experience and then follow up with HOW could be improved.

ADDITIONAL NOTES FROM GROUP C DISCUSSION

broad but also particular... not enough time to complete / after processing the information email - give brief synopsis vignettes... vignettes v helpful JH - can assume everything you need in email so do not leave things out...

LP easier for her as she has talked about the topic before... hard if not thought about it before...

length of time / short-long / expectation of participants -

more vignette examples - eg JH - listening ability and ability to respond - what impacts that? culture, understanding... LP - good and less good use?... [what we want to do is make sure we enable those examples...]

definitions - helpful - in bold? yes helpful include in questions...

split definitions after consent to introduce Q and then on EVERY PAGE to remind...

JH - TAB on each Q for each Q as a reminder

JH - lets put a negative example... in Vignettes... expectations on lecturers...

Purpose of Q? to collect vignettes of something already in mind OR to see how people understand the concepts - really as research it is the later SO YOU CAN SET THE SCENE and then analyse and see what these things mean in practice... TL

vignettes are not constraining or leading but seen as helpful...

word limits are stressful - time limit or suggestion is good but not word limit

all

ADDITIONAL NOTES FROM SUMMING UP

Roudaina - important to reflect systematically on learning and teaching from course and assignment creation to delivery of modules to situations in the classroom... smaller and bigger interactions... emphasise the smaller interactions - hello, ask students, show interest - interpersonal skills... also shows empathy... not putting people in boxes/// see students as big potential...

LP sometimes lack of flexibility... uni as a learning environment that grows with the student, tutor, environment... feels like school sometimes... [impact of demands?] [structure: freedom-flexibility] not being point by one deadline or one assessment point... empathy in institutional frameworks... listening / hearing... [CAN WE ALSO ADD THIS...]

GROUP DISCUSSION ON PARTICIPANTS

JH - a mini-Q? or are we purposively sampling ourselves as researchers - which does the same?

Terry - can talk more - practicality and time - this is the start of the process... so it is exploratory... not a huge sweep of everybody - good thinking to focus on the ones we have suggested... think about the purpose of the questionnaire at this point - A / trying to understand how people perceive empathy... and relating that to practice and inclusion and B / wanting to get examples to populate and stimulate other people... - think about this and then how it will feed into future work... vignette is not necessarily for the blog, it is for the research-sharing practices...

LP - set out a number limit for amount of data - max no of questionnaires... and split between the groups... 50 from each...

RA - now collecting examples but make sure you are covering what you want - breakdown the situations of the scenarios - WHERE are we collecting experiences - AND AN OPEN SPACE... for new ideas...

Figure 1: Annotated MIRO board incorporating feedback collected in Focus Group 1

Results and Discussion

Rich data was obtained from the questionnaire, including empirical information which enabled summaries of our respondents to be presented. Responses were gained from a diverse sample including 23 students (53.5%) and 19 staff (44.2%). Although predominantly in the College of Design, Creative and Digital Industries (DCDI: n=28, 65.1% of all respondents), a broad selection of ages (students), job roles (staff) and inclusivity criterion recognised to affect capacity to deliver and receive L&T materials (Figure 2) were reported by our respondents.

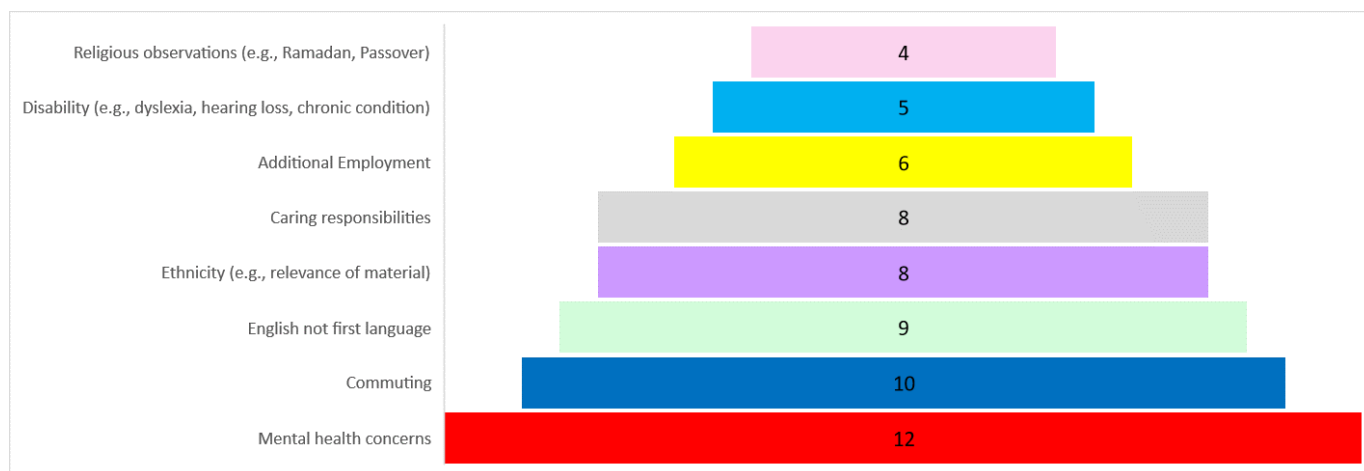


Figure 2: Funnel plot of characteristics which could impact learning, teaching and assessment needs our respondents (n=43) noted as relevant to them (number in each bar).

Three open response questions were also included. The first aimed to capture **experiences** of our respondents:

“Q2: Can you describe a situation where you have experienced, or observed, the presence or absence of empathy, imaginative empathy or empathic communication as part of learning and/or teaching practices?”

The second encouraged them to describe the **impact** of that experience:

“Q3. Do you feel that these situations impacted the student voice (e.g., confidence to speak out/ say what you think) or modified your perception of how inclusion of diverse cultural values, disability, prior knowledge or individual experiences could be valued in your University experiences? If you have both positive and negative perceptions, please feel free to include both.”

The third provided an opportunity to share their **insights** into how solutions or next steps could be developed to overcome any experiences disclosed, enabling integration of their voice(s) within our proposed solution(s):

“Q5. Are there specific areas of learning and/or teaching practices in your subject area that could be improved through enhanced use of empathy, imaginative empathy or empathic communication? (For example; in interpersonal exchanges, curricula/assessments or the learning environment).”

Almost 8000 words were captured in responses to these questions, the majority (46.4%/ 3508 words) describing experiences. Using a five-step framework analysis process (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994), the co-creators first

familiarised themselves with the data, independently reading responses to the open questions. In weekly discussions, **a thematic framework** from which to address our core project aim was then developed.

Acknowledging that each co-creator, critical friend and respondent involved may have a set of a priori issues, all processes focused on open review: not forcing the data to fit expected issues and respecting the varied perspectives of all contributors. The initial framework was therefore used in a tentative way, remaining open to refinement throughout all stages of our analysis. Reactive to our overall ambition to prepare a L&T workshop framework that can be offered to different Schools and tailored to different learning environments, to **index details** included within these survey responses (and add those captured in tailored sessions) to inform **charting of results** and **mapping/interpretation** of these to inform strategic actions, we categorised responses as described in Table 1.

Table 1: Process used to categorise details captured within open-text responses to our questionnaire

Category	Details enables us to...	Functionality of the excerpts includes...
Contextualisation	identify the form and nature of the examples/ details provided	Provision of a 'filter' variable which enables evaluation of the environments within which the commentary detailed is relevant e.g., personal tutoring, disability support, registry, design studio, laboratory practice.
Diagnostic	examine the reasons for what is described	Responses include both positive and negative experiences, often highlighting barriers (linked to processes, communication and judgement for example) and offer the capacity to outline which 'things' could be amended.
Evaluative	appraise the effectiveness of what is described	Solutions may be outlined, yet processes and procedures (e.g., academic regulations) may limit capacity for address/ change. Some changes may be more difficult to instigate than others, however the potential need for review of all raised issues will be considered.
Strategic	learn from and utilise responses to inform new processes	Our goal is to learn from experiences and create a framework from which others can facilitate positive change. The necessity for integration of new voices and perspectives will be integral to communication of our data interpretation.

The value of empathy as part of respondents L&T experiences was overwhelming: more than 60% considered it an essential component of our practices. Within simple word clouds (no filters applied) generated from free-text responses (Table 2), the focus on students and teaching (our goal and target group) and our subject: empathy was consistent whether experience, impact or strategies were detailed. Further coding of the experiences described enabled broad categorisation into themes (each of which had overlapping sub-themes underneath it).

Ultimately, design of workshops informed by this work will aim to explore, develop and archive (for future access) shared inclusive L&T languages, techniques, and ideas for transformed practices. They will focus on imaginative or communicative empathy and the empathic imagination, as skills that could be elucidated and nurtured to improve student empowerment through inclusion of diverse cultural values (in L&T generally and in relation to discipline-specific learning environments). On completion of preliminary analyses from our survey responses, a second focus group with six critical friends enabled this development. The 'framework' status of all plans described here remains

vital however: 'Buy-in' from schools and academic teams using this process to improve L&T practices and find ways to effect change in support of 'sustainable approaches' to develop equal, diverse and inclusive learning environments is essential.

Table 2: Summary of analysis from questionnaire responses and use for Framework development.

	Simple word clouds (to initiate discussions)	Themes (To understand & inform)
A. Experience		<p>Barriers were a central theme in experiences (and impact descriptions), detailing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Restrictive processes; - Narrow opportunities for personalisation; - Limited appreciation for why/ how values alter; - Communication issues; and - Judgement.
B. Impact		<p>Communication was also central, highlighting reasons for difficulties faced (in understanding and reacting to experiences). The relevance of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Making a difference; and - Being heard <p>Were key: both with regard how experiences were recalled, who impacted this and whether resolutions were positive (or not).</p>
C. Strategy		<p>Reactive to all commentary – within responses and Focus Group discussions, finding solutions which integrated address of barriers and improved communication (and language) used prioritised:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Flexibility; - Accessibility; and - Skill-focused outcomes.

Possible workshop sequences

Design of an EDI-Education workshop (to be held in the School of Architecture and Cities, July 2021) will showcase the combined outcomes of these projects. A draft framework (design of which was informed by results presented above and outcomes of the '*Architecture Design Studios: Re-framing with the Empathic Imagination in Mind*' project) for use in this process is outlined in Table 3.

Table 3: Draft framework for workshop tailored for use within a school

Section		Rationale
A	INTRODUCTION	To the co-creators project and the subject of imaginative empathy.
		Aims and ambitions (refine to emphasise goals of school/ group).
		Adapting/ using the questionnaire/ theoretical introduction to the work proposed.
		Explain how the workshop has been tailored for this school.
B	EXPLORATIONS	Introduce devices, tools, games. Open conversations/ small group explorations.
		General understandings/ shared experiences of imaginative empathy.
C	FOCUSING	Small group discussions. Relate themes to altered practice/ enablers and disablers of empathic practices (within chosen learning environment).
		Use simple visualisation and selection methods, for example:
		- listing actions or suggestions; rank in order of importance/ urgency;
		- place actions/ suggestions on difficulty vs. impact graph;
		- identify short, medium or long-term goals.
D	COMMITMENTS	Each participant encouraged to commit to making a move towards (up to) three altered practices. This could be interpersonal, individual or with a colleague, focused on delivery, processes used to receive (and use) critical feedback, change course content/ delivery, reconsider a timetable, push for institutional process changes (etc.)

Conclusions, Recommendations and Dissemination

Our intentions were to create and use a blogsite as a live record of data collection during this project. Ultimately, this was not achievable within this project however the space currently provides a mini-description of the project and a link to the questionnaire (access [here](#)) and this may be utilised in the future.

The workshop framework developed (Table 3) was informed by themes drawn out in analyses presented above and will be piloted at the end of July 2021 with the School of Architecture + Cities. This trial workshop will aim to explore, develop and archive (for future access) experiences captured from staff and students within the School of Architecture and Cities, with additional insights gained from members of this co-creator group and other interested parties, aiming to develop and share insights into the potential need for improved shared languages in HE, inclusive techniques and ideas for transformed practices – within this first example, in the context of “the design studio”. From a L&T perspective, a focus on imaginative or communicative empathy and the empathic imagination will prevail, centred as skills which could be elucidated and nurtured to improve student empowerment and inclusion of diverse cultural values.

Collaboration with the Disciplinary Research Collaboration (DRC) group ‘Architecture Design Studios: Re-framing with the Empathic Imagination in Mind’, which has produced a series of conversational, provocative ‘divisive devices’ or tools that will be used as part of the workshop (Table 3). Their use will enable creation of a disciplinary link to Architecture and will instigate interrogation and shared understanding of the subject area (which can – and hopefully will – be further developed within Life Sciences and beyond over time) using the framework modelled in Figure 3 for the planned EDI-Education workshop.

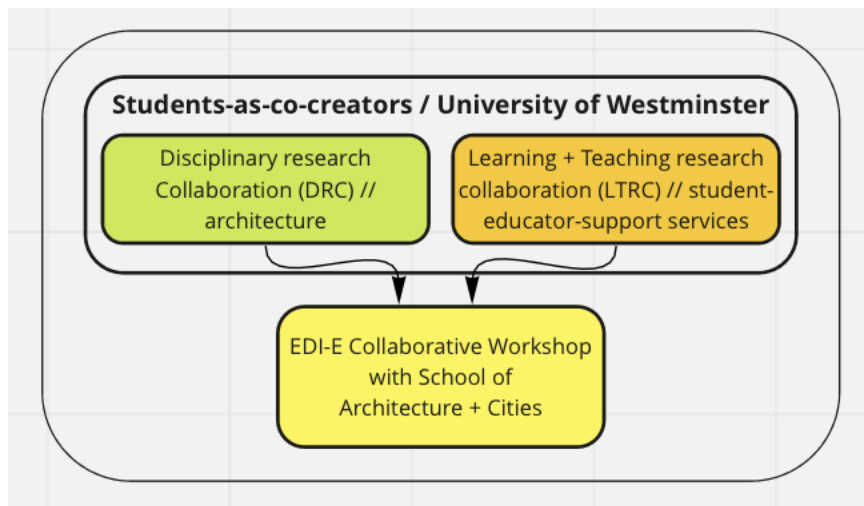


Figure 3: Framework for collaboration with schools/ groups in EDI: Education workshops

Beyond this, our vision is to utilise the ‘divisive devices’ created in the DRC group for this workshop - tailoring them for a series of future workshops created for a variety of different learning environments and integrating themes from this LTRC project to unifying workshop approaches (Figure 4).

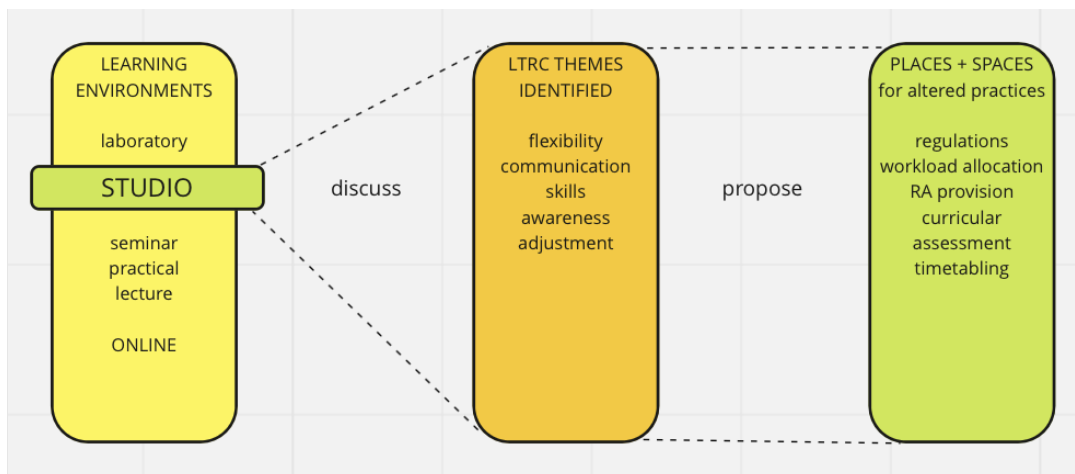


Figure 4: Schematic integrating DRC and LREC project outputs to tailor and refine future EDI: Education workshops

Long-term, we aim to ensure the principles of co-creation persist by ensuring wide dissemination of our results, facilitating direct engagement of students and colleagues in further workshops and knowledge generation from this work to enable initiation and development of long-term relationships and shared altered practices (Figure 5).

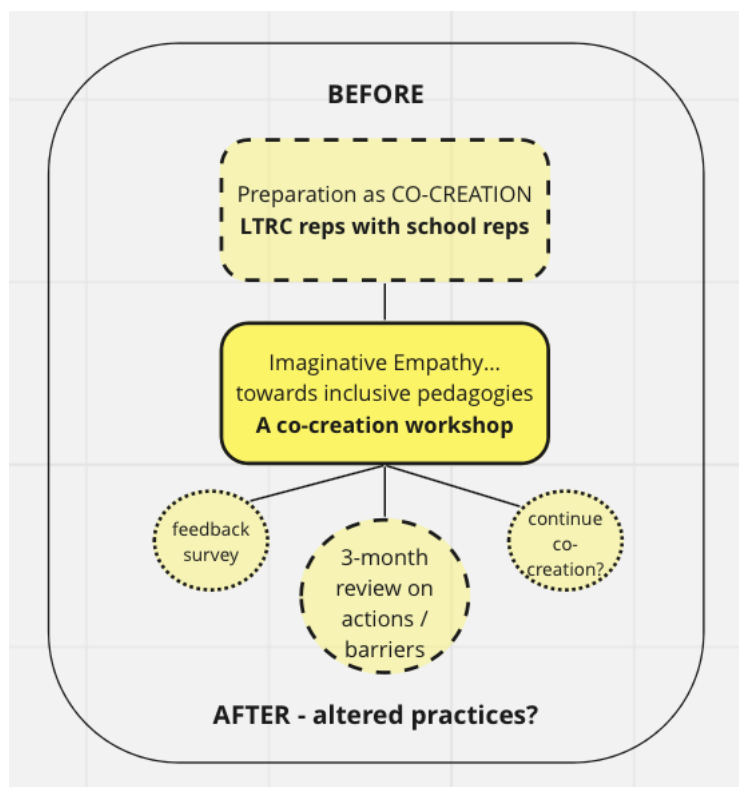
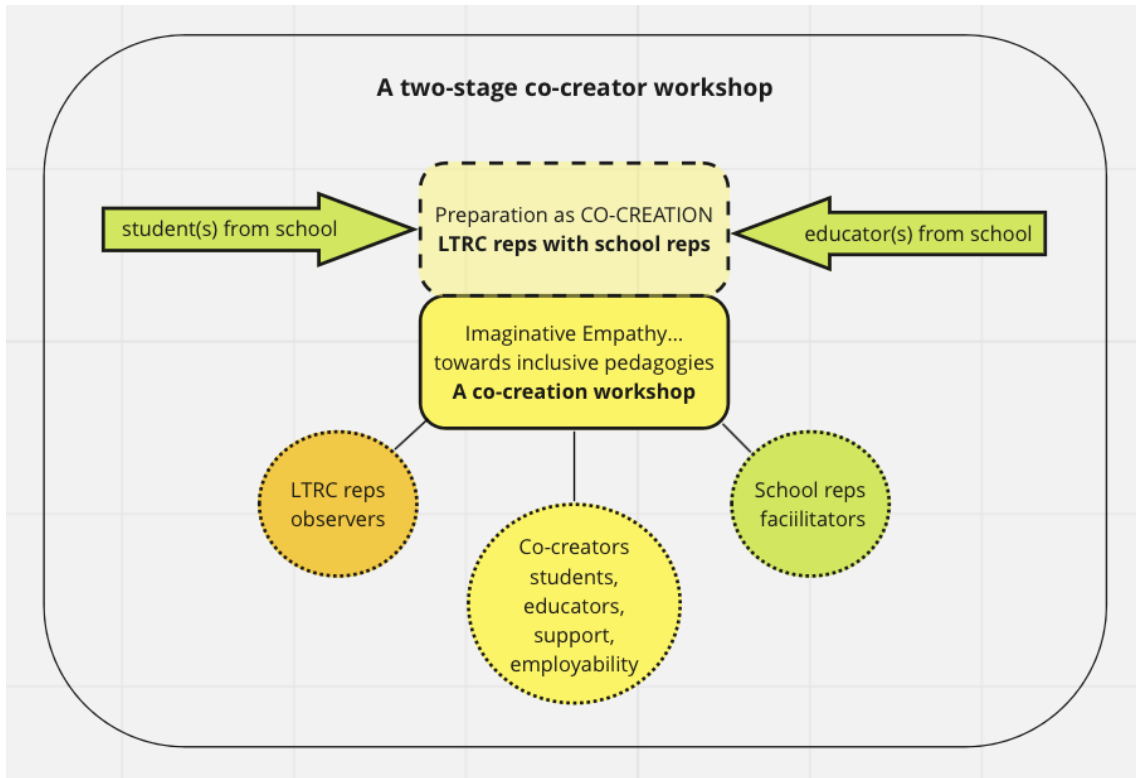


Figure 5: Framework facilitating co-creation and development of long-term relationships and shared altered practices as standard across the University of Westminster.

Group Reflection

Within this project, the academics aimed to foster a truly collaborative experience for the student partners, giving them an opportunity to share their perspectives and to learn as completely from their experiences and feedback as they could. They wanted to understand how the student's felt and to use this to inform their own academic provision, but also to facilitate development of more inclusive practices more widely across the University. Working together on this project enabled all members to communicate in a less-restrictive manner since we could ignore the typical boundaries that exist between academics and students which are restrained by regulations and 'roles' (as student, teacher, support etc.) for example. This shift in roles initiated with the academic partners being told by our student partners what we needed to focus on and learn from. That switch of roles was problematic (though nice!) for our student-co-creators. They found it quite unusual to be telling their tutors what to do – but admirably stepped up the challenge! Realising the opportunity and willingness to share, to listen and to learn throughout the group, as we (all!) relaxed into our collaboration, the real benefit of our weekly meetings was the iterative process of sharing experiences and taking time to understand each other's perspectives – shaking off the constraints that we accept so readily...

Deadlines – a central issue in academic life for staff and students alike – really did impact our collaboration. The student partners were working on finals/ assessments, and when deadlines (e.g., timetabled focus groups, this report!) approached, the openness of our group enabled each of us to say when time was short. No one felt like the pressure was solely on them – we all contributed what and when we could (around exam/ marking deadlines, 11+ tutoring, holidays and even birthday celebrations!) and celebrated one-another's successes. This emphasised support and openness to share fears throughout – in a manner which (the student partners reflected) was easier here than in their learning journey. Simple differences like hearing the same experiences described by students in Architecture and Life Sciences *and* between staff and students was empowering for us all. Meeting people outside our departments and realising that the same pressures impact us all: we all reflected that these were things we'd like to integrate more widely across 'normal' experiences at work/ university.

Overall, this has been a truly transformative experience for all participants. The notion of co-creation from the outside can seem a little unbelievable but from within it has been eye-opening. Working between disciplines, and with students and colleagues from diverse background and subject areas strengthened our opportunities to learn and develop here. As part of the ethical approval process, we discussed the potentially sensitive or traumatising nature of some of the material that we might be sharing as lived experiences. Inevitably this meant that the co-creators group took a little time to warm up, but overall, the students were sharp, succinct and to the point in their descriptions and observations – colleagues less so (we all willingly accept we have much to learn from one another!). At key moments in the project, such as preparation for the focus groups and even writing this report, we tended to default to the colleague partners 'taking the lead', yet editorial comments from our student partners (all within the focus group discussions and Asher predominantly within the report) was invaluable. Time pressures explain much of this (though having recently read one of the co-creator student's final degree essays, Elantha suspects that perhaps they would have done a better job in the report had we pushed them to write it all!). Throughout, we tried to be as fair and inclusive as possible and all work presented is our shared endeavour.

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