**What Really Matters to Undergraduates on Creative and Media Courses: UK Study into Student Voice.**

The UK National Student Survey gathers student feedback on a variety of different university and course experiences. But it does not ask which, if any, matter most to students. Yorke and Vaughan (2012) acknowledge a lack of research into Creative and Media organisational pedagogies. How can we know what is truly important to students? What do they really care about? A pilot study, utilising UK NSS qualitative open text box comments, has supplied the data for my forthcoming research project, signposting areas within student experience that deserve further attention. A phenomenological approach was used and Q methodology afforded a systematic analysis of students’ ‘insider’ views. The study’s aim was to explore students’ individual subjective beliefs and reveal any shared or contradictory opinions. Thirteen students took part in Q sorts generating a unique insight into each student’s own subjective experience. Three distinct factors, or viewpoints, emerged, identifying those students holding similar views. Innovative yet small and in its infancy, findings from the pilot study may have significant applications; particularly for course organisation and marketing strategies.

Student surveys, voice, HE, Q-methodology.

**Introduction**

Within Higher Education, increased academic attainment and group work are often fused together within a student engagement discourse. Pro-cohort views attribute positive student outcomes to the use of learning communities and long-term groups (Reynolds 1997). Much of the current research into cohorts emanates from America and has been embraced in the UK without thorough evaluation; making this study particularly pertinent as UK educational policies appear to promote cohort strategies that are, in effect, endorsed by an educational system far removed from our own.

Here in the UK, each new year of undergraduates is commonly referred to as a cohort. Typically, students start, proceed through and finish a three year course together. However, on some Film and TV Production degrees students share a common first year but are then divided into smaller long-term groups, or sub-cohorts, during the second or third years of study when they focus on specialisms such as directing, editing or cinematography. For the purpose of my research I call these sub-cohorts ‘cohort specialisms’.

I am interested in how students experience these cohort specialisms. In order to open up the topic my initial approach is explorative and inductive, I am asking how cohort specialisms are experienced by students and need to utilise a theoretical framework that positions cohorts as the focus of interest.

However, before I can ask ‘how do cohort specialisms impact upon student experience?’ I need to investigate how one elicits the student voice.

**Student voice and survey instruments**

There are many ways in which student voice can find expression; I began my research by exploring discourse around formal student survey instruments, in particular the UK NSS and UK NSSE Pilot Study, American NSSE and AUSSE. Richardson (2005), Yorke (2009) and Ramsden et al. (2010) support the use of student survey instruments, Ramsden having developed the CEQ prototype for the UK NSS and Yorke being directly involved in the UK NSSE Pilot Study.

I discovered considerable debate around the efficacy of student survey instruments, are they fit for purpose and can they authenticate the student voice? Many conflate increased satisfaction scores with improvements in student outcomes; concerns are raised by Porter and Whitcomb (2005), Porter (2010), Bowman and Hill (2011), Cheng and Marsh (2010) and even the HEFCE (2014), having discovered a growing trend for students to repeatedly tick the same middle box.

Data from survey instruments claims to represent student views but fails to establish what matters outside of pre-determined topics. The assumption that this research method can evoke the student voice is deeply flawed as there are many agents involved, each with their own interests. Schein (1997) believes surveys cannot decipher what matters to a group within its culture, providing further justification for my research into cohorts.

Most importantly, when compared with other subjects in the UK NSS, students on Creative and Media courses feedback the lowest overall satisfaction scores. This has prompted further investigations. The works of Blair, Orr and Yorke (2012), Vaughan and Yorke (2009) and Yorke and Vaughan (2012) have exposed the difficulties these students face in translating course experiences into a language understood by the NSS. Equally, their experiences may be quite unlike those of students in other fields.

**Discovering Q Methodology**

The UK NSS mainly uses quantitative methods through ‘tick boxes’ that ask students to feedback on pre-determined subjects, far less is known about what is really important to them (Buckley 2013). Yet the UK NSS does produce a rich source of qualitative data that is relatively underused.

Open text boxes invite students to feedback on any issues that matter. Handling these large amounts of qualitative data is certainly challenging and can become the domain of tutors trying to fathom low quantitative feedback scores. However, computer software can aid the process. Scott’s research into Australian universities (2005) utilised CEQuery providing a systematic analysis of open text box data, and a catalyst for my own study. But although he discovered and rank ordered five domains in terms of their popularity, that is number of ‘hits’, I needed a different approach that looked more deeply into students’ subjective experiences.

I had already chosen a phenomenological approach for this study when I was introduced to William Stephenson’s Q methodology (Watts and Stenner 2012). It offers a systematic way of analysing qualitative data while capturing individual subjectivity (ibid). In addition, Shinebourne and Adams (2007) advocate Q methodology as a phenomenological research method predominantly as a starting point for research design that includes qualitative methods and a case study; making it particularly apt for this project. I drew inspiration from Bradley and Miller’s (2010) study into the views of school aged children. It demonstrates how Q methodology can identify mutual opinions by highlighting pupils’ attitudes towards going to university.

Q methodology explores different perspectives and identifies those participants that share particular viewpoints. It begins by gathering a range of views on a particular phenomenon, made up from a variety of sources such as texts or images: the Q concourse. Q sets, produced from the Q concourse, are arranged by participants into Q sorts according to pre-determined conditions, for example, statements that participants agree with most. These present the researcher with schemata, based largely on past experiences, which model a participant’s belief systems. Correlation and factor analysis of Q sorts identifies these specific views and enables us to see patterns and meanings behind the data, highlighting similarities among individuals experiencing a phenomenon.

**The Pilot Study**

Prior to conducting research into cohort specialisms I wanted to trial my methods and increase my understanding through a pilot study. I intentionally chose participants from a film production course that did not utilise cohort specialisms to ensure that non cohort-specific issues were also included. Conducting research into any institution is potentially invasive and raises ethical concerns (Schein 1997); especially when involving organisational pedagogies and student experience. Steps were taken, where possible, to ensure that the course and institution could not be identified and that participants were anonymised.

The Q concourse was based on UK NSS open text box data from creative and media production courses at two HEIs. Following an inductive approach, using NVivo, eight themes emerged: course structure and content; lecturers’ attributes and communicativeness; quality of lecturing and teaching methods; issues regarding industry, professional qualifications, employment and placements; assessments, feedback and assignments; students’ own experiences of learning and socialisation; university facilities and course resources; first, second and third year experience.

Unlike Scott’s study (2005), each theme was allocated equal weight as students themselves would later give them importance. Six statements were chosen from each theme. Where possible, more ‘contentious’ ones were included as they were more likely to engage students and elicit strong responses. For example, one statement that tutors treated students like naughty school children provoked some highly animated reactions.

Forty-eight statements were put onto cards to make up the Q set. Thirteen final year film production undergraduates rank ordered Q sorts according to statements they agreed or disagreed with most, these were then factor analysed and correlated. This showed similarities and differences in opinions between the participants, identifying those sharing common viewpoints.

***Data Analysis and Findings***

I used PQMethod; Centroid factor analysis was followed by a Varimax rotation as it automatically rotates the factors allocating a single factor to each student. A three-factor solution was deemed best to represent the data. This compared participants’ Q sorts and identified students that had arranged their Q sorts in similar ways, highlighting those sharing the same attitudes and underlying beliefs, as represented by either Factors A, B or C.

Three viewpoints were identified: participants 1, 6, 9 and 13 had loaded highly on Factor A; participants 4, 10 and 11 on Factor B and participants 5, 8 and 12 on Factor C. The remaining three participants did not show significant loadings on any single factor but held views that could be attributed to two or more.

Data gathered through interviews conducted simultaneously with Q sorts was used to triangulate and clarify findings; providing further insights into students’ responses.

*Viewpoint/factor A: Fairness*

There is evidence of a shared theme around fairness; the viewpoint conveys the need for things to be fair*.* This is reflected in students’ beliefs that tutors did not show bias and were just as enthusiastic when teaching all year groups. This factor supports a strong opinion that money does not provide advantages within the university experience; there is a level playing field. Students felt they had been challenged; had grown within a supportive environment. They did not want the first year to count towards the final degree.

*Viewpoint/factor B: Specialisation and Objectification*

Students sharing this viewpoint are concerned about issues they face after university. It matters that the course content meets employment needs; they care about specific skills and future careers. This feeds into cohort specialisms or specific learning pathways. These students frequently use the word ‘professional’, suggesting a paradigm shift in identity from student to professional film maker. They also value teaching and how lecturers embrace professional attitudes and behaviour.

*Viewpoint/factor C: Overall Support*

This viewpoint can be described by the need to feel supported. These students want visible and working support systems in place and are the only ones to have strong feelings about course equipment and facilities. Technicians and librarians matter. Students notice how lecturers interact with each other, they believe this impacts upon the learning environment and provides positive role models. Students value the support they receive from tutors, peers and facilities.

All three factors demonstrated some consensus; agreeing that the course is creative, disagreeing strongly that lectures were unoriginal and dull. All viewpoints were largely indifferent about having to pay for graduation films and agreed to a small extent that the third year had been better than the first two. It mattered that lecturers were supportive and kind and are happy to be teaching students. There were very few concerns regarding assessment and feedback.

However, viewpoints differed regarding lecturers showing any bias towards students, with Factors A and B agreeing very strongly that lecturers did not, while Factor C disagreed only slightly. Interestingly, Factor A students agreed most strongly that the course had forced them to try new things, while this only mattered slightly to Factor B and C students. As the Factor A viewpoint supports a belief in fairness and equal opportunities this raises further questions around student perceptions of their own abilities and responses to challenges.

Factor B students felt they had not been overworked, while this mattered less to Factors A and C. The focus on careers may impact upon student expectations and work ethic. The course did not use a specialist cohort model and some worried that specialising too soon could lead to poor career choices whilst others would have welcomed the opportunity.

All students agreed that there should have been a work placement but this mattered most to those sharing the Factor B viewpoint; being particularly concerned about skills and careers. However, these students were not particularly interested in whether tutors had industry experience. Instead, this mattered most to Factor C students who need support mechanisms in place. It is unclear whether Factor B students simply assumed lecturers would have this knowledge *a priori* or were themselves more adept and skilled than others.

**Reflection and further research**

As anticipated, carrying out the pilot study had enabled me to test research methods indicating where adjustments and improvements could be made for the next stage. On a practical level, conducting simultaneous unstructured interviews during Q sorts had provided further insights into participants’ subjective responses but had also proved too time intensive. In future, participants will be interviewed straight after each Q sort affording more in-depth participant observations. Although I had been somewhat concerned, my status as a lecturer had seemed to make students more forthcoming and conducting Q research was enjoyable for all involved.

Most importantly findings had confirmed the focus for this project; pointing to areas relevant to cohort specialisms and helping to refine research questions.

Although findings are unique to this particular course and cannot be generalised they do support the work of Tomlinson (2014), Revell and Wainwright (2009) and Scott (2005): tutors’ personal attributes and knowledge matter to students. Significantly, results also indicate that some students care deeply about having the opportunity to learn specialist, industry-based skills. This supports my initial thoughts that the use of cohort specialisms within creative and media Higher Education deserves further exploration. The little that we do know about how students experience cohort organisational pedagogies is based upon an educational system very different from our own. My research study exploring student experience within cohort specialisms on a UK film production course will add to that discourse. It will also address earlier criticisms of cohort studies (Umbach and Porter 2001) by investigating at the individual and group level.

The next stage of this project will use a Q concourse drawn from cohort specialism data. Students from different cohort specialisms will each take part in the same Q sort, helping to reduce potential bias and avoid the pitfalls of assuming that all members of a particular cohort have the exact same characteristics.

Findings may, or may not, show that some viewpoints are common to particular cohort specialisms. But the primary focus will be to explore students’ subjective experience of cohort specialisms *per se*. Essentially Q will identify individuals sharing viewpoints and beliefs; allowing individual subjective expression while recognising similarities and differences between all participants within the context of cohort membership.

**References**

Blair, Bernadette, Susan Orr, and Mantz Yorke. 2012. *'Erm, that question....I think I probably would've just put something in the middle and sort of moved on to the next one, because I think it's really unclear': How art and design students understand and interpret National Student Survey.* Report by GLAD for HEA. York: HEA.

Bowman, N., A. and P. L. Hill. 2011. “Measuring how college affects social desirability and other potential biases in college student self-reported gains”. *New Directions for Institutional Research,* Summer 2011, 150. Wiley Periodicals Inc.

Bradley, J. and A. Miller. 2010. “Widening participation in higher education: constructions of 'going to university'”.  *Educational Psychology in Practice*. December 2010. 26 (4) 201-413

Buckley, A. 2013. *Engagement for enhancement: report of UK survey pilot. April 2013.* York: Higher Education Academy.

Cheng, J., H. S. and H. W. Marsh. 2010. “Are differences between universities and courses reliable and meaningful?” *Oxford Review of Education*, 36 (6) December 2010. 693-712

Higher Education Funding Council for England. 2014. *UK review of the provision of information about Higher Education. National students survey results and trends analysis 2005-2013*. London: HEFCE.

Porter, S., R. 2010. “Do college student surveys have any validity?” Paper presented at *Association for Institutional Research 2010.* Chicago, IL. 2010.

Porter, S., R. and M. E. Whitcomb. 2005. “Non response in student surveys. The role of demographics, engagement and personality”. *Research in Higher Education*, March 2004, 46, (2), 127-152.

Ramsden, P., D. Batchelor, A. Peacock, P. Temple, and D.Watson. 2010. *Enhancing and developing the National Student Survey. Report undertaken by the Institute of Education University of London for the Higher Education Funding Council of England.* London: IOE

Revell, A. and E. Wainwright. 2009. “What makes lectures ‘unmissable’? Insights into teaching excellence and active learning”. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 33 (2), 209-223.

Reynolds, C., 1997. “Post secondary education in cohort groups: does familiarity breed learning?” Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. Chicago IL, March 24-28, 1997.

Richardson, J., T., E., 2005. Instruments for obtaining student feedback: a review of the literature. The Open University UK. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, August 2005, 30 (4), 387-415.

Schein, E., H. 1997. *Organizational culture and leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass (2nd Ed).

Scott, G. 2005, *Assessing the student voice: using CEQuery to identify what retains students and promotes engagement in productive learning in Australian higher education.* Final Report 2005, Department of Education, Science and Training.

Shinebourne P. and M. Adams. 2007. “Q-Methodology as a Phenomenological research method”. *Existential analysis 18.1. January 2007.*

Tomlinson, M. 2014. *Exploring the impact of policy changes on students' attitudes and approaches to learning in higher education.*  York:HEA.

Umbach, P., D. and S. R. Porter. 2001. “How do departments impact student satisfaction? Understanding the contextual effects of departments”. Paper presented at *The Annual Meeting of the Association for Institutional Research 2001.*  Long Beach, California, USA. June 2001.

Vaughan, D. and M.York. 2009.  *I can't believe it's not better: the paradox of NSS scores for Art and Design.* York: ADM-HEA.

Watts, S. and P. Stenner, 2012. *Doing Q methodological research. Theory, method and interpretation.* London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Yorke, M. 2009. “ 'Student experience' surveys: some methodological considerations and an empirical investigation”.  *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*. December 2009, 34 (6), 721-739.

Yorke, M. and D. Vaughan. 2012. *Deal or no deal? Expectations and experiences of first-year students in Art and Design.* Report to HEA and HEAD June 2012. England: HEA.