
Article

Enabling student participation in syllabus design through film nominations and voting: an action research project

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Abstract

This article uses the 'students as partners' framework to examine the implications of an action research project conducted as part of a film studies module, delivered at a transnational tertiary education provider, a Sino-British university in China. The action research project consisted of the implementation of a system of film nomination and voting that allowed students to actively participate in one element of the syllabus design, namely, the choice of films to be screened and discussed in a segment of the module's curriculum, spanning 3 out of the total 14 weeks of the semester. Using as a dataset a series of semi-structured interviews with students who participated in the project, the article analyses their attitudes towards the process of nomination and voting, and points to future directions of research. By focusing on the intended democratic stakes of the project, the article argues that although the students evidenced some of the expected benefits of the collaboration, they also discursively privileged the role, the experience and the perspective of the teacher over their own.

Keywords film education; action research; students as partners; student participation; student engagement

Introduction

This article critically reflects on the findings of an action research project conducted while teaching film studies in a transnational educational context at a Sino-British joint venture university based in China. For the purposes of this article, the term 'action research' is understood via Geoffrey E. Mills (2013: 8) as both an evidence-based 'systematic inquiry' into aspects of a teaching practice and a 'problem-solving approach', oriented towards increasing understanding and 'effecting positive changes'. The working definition of transnational higher education is the one formulated by Sally Stafford and John Taylor (2016: 625), as 'the delivery of programmes overseas by a parent institution either operating directly or in association with an international partner'. The transnational nature of the educational provision at the university which hosted this project is evidenced by the fact that its students, while studying in China, are awarded British university degrees, a process underwritten by the quality assurance protocols that the university has in place. I taught two film studies modules at this university, namely, European Cinema for several years – the course that provided the idea for the project discussed here – and Foundations in Film Studies, the module during the delivery of which this action research project was developed.

Given the transnational framework of the project, it is perhaps worth noting that ever since they were first introduced, these film studies modules have been taught to either a monocultural student group (during one academic year, the students enrolled were all from China) or, more often than not, to a student cohort which, for the most part, was culturally and nationally homogeneous, with the host nationals far outnumbering the much smaller international student contingent. At the time when the project was carried out, the latter was the case. In order to counteract the tendency towards what scholars have called the 'geo-cultural segregation' (Johan and Rienties, 2016: 227) which often emerges in classrooms of mixed constituency, the onus is usually on the teacher to create a culturally inclusive environment, and a sense of community and belonging among students of different cultural and national backgrounds, by fostering 'cross-cultural learning links' (Johan and Rienties, 2016: 235). This need to minimise potential segregation legitimises further the collaborative nature of the project that I designed and implemented.

The impetus for the action research project came from the observation of patterns in student feedback on the films selected in the European Cinema module. This particular type of student feedback cropped up regularly in the module questionnaires that students filled in at the end of the semester, which are standardised for the entire university. It was usually volunteered in sections of the questionnaire which invited comments on what students enjoyed about the module and/or on how students thought it could be improved. The opinions ranged from some students finding the films studied in the module 'inspiring' and 'beautiful' to others finding them 'boring'. Although contradictory and mixed opinions of this kind tend to be inconclusive and difficult to translate into actions improving the quality of the teaching, the pedagogical insight they generated in the form of a working hypothesis was that students may have felt slightly alienated from, and ambivalent about, an important element of their learning experience, namely, the films with which they were asked to critically engage on a weekly basis. This lack of student involvement in the choice of films was identified as the problem that the project subsequently sought to address through devising a collaborative model of film selection, whereby, as module leader, I partnered with the students in deciding the films to be screened and analysed in 3 of the 14 weeks of the semester. The project was meant to question and unsettle one of the enduring practices in film studies syllabus design, namely, the habit of structuring classes 'on the basis of our [the lecturers'] individual scholarly predilections' (Tomasulo, 2001: 111) and, in the case of film selection in particular, on the basis of individual aesthetic tastes. As Anne Burns (2015: 188) has rightly remarked, the 'impetus' for action research projects is 'a perceived gap between what actually exists and what participants desire to see exist'. It is a similar type of realm of possibility that this study has ultimately sought to reach, while at the same time raising questions about the effectiveness and limitations of such an intervention. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that 'it is not expected that new action strategies will solve a problem immediately',

and that a more prudent forecast is that what will be generated is a 'new stage of clarification of the situation', prompting 'further action strategies' (Altrichter et al., 1993: 7).

Literature review

The responsibility for the choice of films in film studies courses customarily rests with module leaders. To my knowledge, there are as yet no studies exploring areas and modes of collaboration between students and instructors on this element of syllabus design in film studies. There is, however, a relatively wide range of research into cooperative models of syllabus and assessment design in higher education in other disciplines, such as the literature on 'collaborative course development' in management education (Kaplan and Renard, 2015; Downing et al., 2018).

The body of scholarship to which this project is most indebted, and to which it broadly pertains, is the growing literature on 'students as partners' in higher education, which places a premium on the relationality of the educational process (Bovill, 2020). In one of the most representative entries in this literature, Alison Cook-Sather, Catherine Bovill and Peter Felten counterpose this model of understanding the relationship between student and academic staff to the 'student as consumer' model and to the managerial discourses associated with it, defining the student–faculty partnership as a 'collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualisation, decision making, implementation, investigation or analysis' (Cook-Sather et al., 2014: 6). Importantly, as the authors proceed to point out, within the partnership framework, the previously distinct roles of student and faculty are rendered more permeable and more responsive to each other, with both positioned as 'learners as well as teachers' (Cook-Sather et al., 2014: 7). At the same time, the framework does not force a 'false equivalency' between the two, but instead acknowledges that, while equally valuable, the types of insight contributed by each partner are bound to differ (Cook-Sather et al., 2014: 7). This is consistent with Glynis Cousin's (2010) advocacy for 'threshold concepts' and a type of liminality, which she evocatively summarises as 'neither teacher-centred nor student-centred'. The idea of partnership in education has also been fruitfully linked to the notion of 'self-authorship', a 'distinctive mode of making meaning' associated with adulthood, presumed to emerge between the ages of 17 and 30, and which is conducive to forging learning partnerships (Baxter Magolda, 2004: 2).

There are precedents and alternatives for the kind of reconceptualisation of the role of the student in relation to the teacher that the 'students as partners' model proposes. One of them is the concept of 'radical collegiality' (Fielding, 1999). An important component in the case that Michael Fielding (1999: 22) made for this type of 'authentic, inclusive collegiality' was thinking of students 'not merely as objects of teachers' professional gaze, but as agents in the process of transformative learning'. According to Fielding (1999: 23), this type of radical collegiality emerges in the context of 'teaching conceived of and practised as a pedagogy of care', with a 'dialogic imperative which binds both student and teacher in ways which, on occasions and in particular circumstances, begin to disrupt the settled roles and forms of teacher–student interaction'.

The cognate terminology is even richer than this brief overview has thus far indicated. The 'students as partners' model can be subsumed under the more elusive, 'broad church' of 'student engagement', which some scholars have gone as far as considering 'a state of mind' (Brand et al., 2013: 478). Also of note here is the literature on the 'student as co-producer' in higher education (McCulloch, 2009; Streeting and Wise, 2009; Carey, 2013), which is based upon the assumption that 'at the individual level, co-production is already happening all the time because new skills, knowledge and understanding are "produced" through a combination of student effort, pedagogy and the learning environment' (Streeting and Wise, 2009: 3). However, framing the relationship between teachers and students as co-production goes beyond merely acknowledging and making this explicit, towards creating and enhancing opportunities where this type of relationship can flourish. At the same time, scholarship has shown that while 'there is a pull

in the direction of the co-producer and learning communities models' (Little and Williams, 2010: 126), the 'student as consumer' model and its attendant 'complaints culture' is still predominant, and more 'fundamental change' is needed than merely elevating the student 'from an informant to a consultant' (Carey, 2013: 258). Ambitious claims have been made about the potential of the 'student as producer' framework to 'radicalise the mainstream' and mount 'an intelligent resistance' to the 'market-based system of higher education' (Neary, 2013: 588). For all the high-mindedness of these claims, however, it remains unclear how this potential could be actualised on a large scale, beyond the limited success of some institutional efforts and programmes.

An element of overlap between the literature on the student as (co-)producer, the research on employing students as 'pedagogic consultants' (Crawford, 2012) and the scholarship on 'students as partners' is their shared emphasis on student participation. The understanding of participation with which this scholarship often operates is based on Sherry Arnstein's 'Ladder of Participation'. Arnstein (1969) has proposed a spectrum of citizen participation ranging from non-participation and lack of power, through tokenistic forms of participation, and culminating with more authentic forms of empowerment through participation, among which 'partnership' is listed. Catherine Bovill and Catherine Bulley (2011) have cogently adapted Arnstein's (1969) influential model to account for different levels of student participation in curriculum design, with the lowest rung of the ladder being occupied by what the authors call the 'dictated curriculum', where students have no input, and the highest rung, which, by the authors' own admission, is actually extremely uncommon – a theoretical possibility more than anything else – being represented by students being in full control of the curriculum, with the second-highest rung being the partnership of a 'negotiated curriculum'. In between the extreme ends of this continuum, Bovill and Bulley (2011) distinguish between intermediary forms of participation, where choice is circumscribed. The level in Bovill and Bulley's (2011: 6) model which best describes the action research project detailed in this article is a set-up they call 'wide choice from prescribed choices', whereby a specific area of the curriculum is open for negotiation and, within the confines of this area, students enjoy a high degree of freedom.

Research design and methodology

Like many action research projects, this study also broadly subscribes to Kemmis and McTaggart's (1988) highly influential visualisation of action research as a two-phase spiral with four steps (planning, acting, observing and reflecting), with the present reflection happening at the end of the first cycle in this model. In education, reflection is by no means confined to the repertoire of methods and steps associated with action research projects. As Stephen Brookfield (2017: 30) has eloquently put it, critical reflection is an intrinsic dimension of teaching, a 'sustained and intentional process of identifying and checking the accuracy and validity of our teaching assumptions'. The action research methodology only brings this process to the fore, giving it relief and shape.

The action research intervention that forms the subject of this article was to decide the films screened and discussed in a film studies module in Weeks 9, 12 and 13 of a semester, through a transparent nomination and voting system, in response to module questionnaires received in previous years. As module leader, I collaborated with the students on nominating films for these weeks, but I excluded myself from the vote so that the winning films would be entirely decided by the students. In other words, out of a total of 12 films screened in the module, 3 of them were chosen by the students who participated in the vote.

In order to collect and analyse the students' views on this pedagogical strategy, which I implemented in the last section of the module, I adopted a qualitative approach, whereby I gathered data through a series of semi-structured interviews. There were 163 students enrolled in the module, and all of them were invited to participate. Only a fraction of this number agreed to participate, with three interviews conducted face-to-face, and six as online written communication in the virtual learning environment used by the university. *The Sage Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods* (Allen, 2017) mentions

online interviews as a recent method of data collection, which can take the form either of synchronous communication or of asynchronous communication, standardised or non-standardised. While I chose standardised interviews, with all the interviewees receiving roughly the same questions, the in-person interviews were comparatively and unsurprisingly more 'free form' than the others. The face-to-face interview offers obvious advantages, in that it affords a richer, more layered experience, where verbal communication is supplemented by non-verbal communication. As Janet Salmons (2012: 2) has pointed out, 'technology is more than a simple transactional medium', and computer-mediated communications often miss out on non-verbal signals (chronemic, paralinguistic, kinesic and proxemic). On the other hand, during the face-to-face interviews, one of the intrinsic problems of self-reporting data – the aim to please (Burns, 2015) – was experienced by the interviewer to be more present and more noticeable than in the online written communication. In this regard, the fact that both types of interviews were conducted served to counterbalance the advantages and shortcomings of each format.

I was interested in the opinions both of students who chose not to nominate and vote for films and of students who did, and in fact the participants represented both categories. The interviews were collected over the course of two weeks. The research process complied with the ethical protocols of the university: a participant information sheet was provided for the students and they all signed a consent form. Direct quotations were anonymised through the use of pseudonyms (Participants 1 to 9). I transcribed the three face-to-face interviews myself (Participants 7, 8 and 9), and subsequently applied an inductive approach to identify recurrent ideas across all nine interviews, and organised the data according to these emerging themes. To preserve the authenticity of the process, I did not correct the grammatical mistakes and awkward turns of phrase, but kept them as such in the verbatim quotations. These semi-structured interviews were supplemented by participant observation.

The module Foundations in Film Studies is an introductory course which aims to equip students with an understanding of the main modes of filmic expression, enabling them to develop an entry-level command of specialised terminology, which students are then able to apply in the assignments of the course: a shot-by-shot analysis of a film extract and a film review. The segments of the syllabus that were open for film nomination and voting were the weeks where a workshop on the second assignment (the film review) was delivered and the weeks focused on the topics Introduction to Documentary and Introduction to Animation. The films were meant to serve as case studies for these topics. The winning titles were *The Imitation Game* (Morten Tyldum, 2014), *My Octopus Teacher* (Pippa Ehrlich and James Reed, 2020) and *Coco* (Lee Unkrich, 2017), choices that seem to indicate a certain predilection for contemporary, highly conventional film-making. Interestingly enough, although there were Chinese and Japanese films nominated, they did not win the vote in any of the three categories. Several students who engaged in the process informally admitted in class that the winning titles were films that they had watched before, and, in this respect, familiarity seems to have been a factor of decision. Several of the students interviewed for the project said that they had not voted for the films that ended up winning, and so it has not been possible to probe in more depth the reasons why these particular films won and not the other nominated films.

The reasons why the choice was limited to only a quarter (25 per cent) of the total number of films were manifold. The higher education environment is mostly defined by expert input, the assumption being that teachers have in-depth understanding of their field and can deploy this disciplinary knowledge to make decisions that stand to benefit the students. As Kevin Gannon (2020: 87) has rightly pointed out, as faculty, we 'possess a great deal of power', but, 'paradoxically, we use it most effectively when we give it away'. In the co-production model (and, one might add, also in the 'students as partners' model), power is perceived as shared, which can be a daunting prospect for the students (Little and Williams, 2010: 118). Hence, limiting the range of decision making can be reassuring, and can yield more positive results. This hypothesis, deriving from the existing scholarship, was in fact corroborated by the students I interviewed for the project. Student participation is not always desirable or possible, but, when it happens, the students need support in order to feel comfortable about the choices they are given (Bovill and Bulley, 2011).

The research questions that this action research sought to answer were:

1. How did the students experience the nomination and voting activity?
2. How can this activity be improved for future use?

The manner in which students' opinions are made to inform and transform teaching practice is not only a desideratum of the action research approach, but is also in accordance with one of the main tenets of the 'students as partners' model, which regards students as 'legitimate informants' (Feuerverger and Richards, cited in Cook-Sather et al., 2014: 16).

Findings

A subgroup of questions in the interviews was aimed at shedding light on how students perceived an important aspect of the experience of nominating and voting, namely, the dynamic between module leader and students, their respective roles in the process, and the weight ascribed to these roles. Several participants privileged the teacher's role over their own and that of their peers. Participant 1 was the most emphatic on this point, noting:

When I first try to familiarise myself with a certain field like film studies, I need a teacher or expert to ensure that the general direction is on the right track even if it is the part of nominating films, since I'm probably unable to identify something wrong.

Later, in response to the question regarding the number of weeks open for voting, the student reinforced the previously made observations by adding:

The number is three and I think it is appropriate to control the number in a relatively low state. Generally speaking, the module leader should have more power. As I answered above, I need someone to guide me.

This view was taken to an extreme by Participant 4, who went as far as suggesting that students should not nominate films but only vote from a list of nominations decided solely by the module leader:

I feel it would not be a good idea to let student to nominate the film, it is possible we only nominate those we have already watched to save time, if you could just let us vote for the list that offer by module leader, cause I really look forward to some recommendations of new types of film (even those films that are only for education purposes).

For Participant 5, this privileging of the teacher's role was a matter of trust in their expertise:

It is essential for the module leader to participate in the nomination in my point of view, because she is more professional in this field and she may have a more comprehensive understanding for films than students. Students can trust her aesthetic cognition of films.

A related subgroup of questions concerned other areas of the module where student choice and decision making could be introduced and encouraged. The students were generally reserved and even sceptical about this possibility, once again downplaying or downright dismissing the value of the student contribution. For instance, Participant 8 commented that 'Choosing film is good but if students have too many rights to choose, too many things, maybe it is not good for their study.' Asked why, the student answered: 'Because I think students do not know many things about courses, modules. Maybe something they think is good is not really good.' When provided with an example of other areas of a module in which students could get involved (co-designing the assessment), the student added:

I don't want to participate in this. I am not a person who is very critical thinking. I just [pause], I'm too lazy. I just want our teacher to give me this assessment and I do this.

In a move that was not uncommon in the interviews I gathered, Participant 3 dissociated her reactions and her level of involvement from those of her classmates, when she welcomed the opportunity to have more say in the module, allowing for fluctuations of disposition and interest, but expressed doubts about the overall efficacy of this strategy when applied to the larger student cohort:

Personally, I'm glad that I have the chance to make some decisions in a module. However, it often depends on the topic and my mental and physical status. Nevertheless, I do think that most of the students do not know what they want to learn from the module. Therefore, offering too many choices can be really annoying sometimes, especially during seminars.

Participant 1 was the most positive about the prospect of having options in a module and a chance to partake in the decision making, noting that:

having options enables me to have a sense of learning and being alerted, I mean I can have a substantial feeling that I am doing something meaningful or relevant to my course, instead of being at sea.

However, she also made sure to add that she liked to be involved in decision making, but only on the condition that 'the teacher circumscribes the agenda setting'.

Interestingly enough, this privileging of the teacher's role was sometimes accompanied by a concern with her workload. For instance, Participant 8 was in favour of keeping the set number of weeks open for voting, saying: 'three is okay, if it is too many, maybe it is not easy for you to prepare the lecture'. In other words, the flexibility shown by the teacher, and her willingness to incorporate student choices in the syllabus, were seen as generating more work and causing difficulty. This sentiment was echoed by Participant 9 who, addressing the interviewer directly, remarked that in the process of nomination and voting, 'students don't have a lot of trouble, but you have a lot of trouble'. At least some of the student participants suggested improvements to the process, partly to alleviate this perceived burden or strain on the module leader. For instance, when Participant 3 suggested using a 'statistical system' in the virtual environment rather than the discussion forum, she added that this would be 'a good way to lessen teacher's workload'. She also recommended (similarly to Participant 6) that voting happen not independently and privately in the virtual environment, but in class, either during the break or before the start of teaching activities, so that students could discuss the list with their classmates and provide instant feedback to the teacher.

All student participants were forthcoming with recommendations about how the process could be improved. For Participant 7, what would have potentially increased the number of students participating in both nominating and voting was incentivising them through a reward system, such as an electronic badge for each nomination made and/or vote cast. Participant 2 was adamant that what would have helped was using the WeChat/Weixin polls functionality, rather than the virtual learning environment. Voting through WeChat, China's most popular messaging app, was also endorsed by Participant 9. Additionally, Participants 6, 7 and 8 expressed a desire to see the process streamlined by having students click on film titles rather than typing them in a forum, with an instant display of the final results at the end, rather than waiting for the module leader to tabulate the scores and announce the winning titles.

Regarding the timing of the nomination and voting, several participants (1, 2, 4, 5, 8, 9) suggested that these processes should take place earlier in the semester, in its first half or around mid-term. The reasons given were, as expected, the assessment deadline pressure specific to the end of the semester and the lack of time to invest in the voting procedure, with Participant 1 reporting a 'hurry feeling'. Consisting of 30 and 16 titles respectively, the length of the nomination lists was deemed either fine/appropriate (Participants 3 and 7) or too long (Participants 1, 2, 8). Only one participant (4) tentatively suggested that the lists should be longer. When the nomination lists were judged too long, it was sometimes in correlation to an avowed lack of patience in carefully reading through the lists and researching the films in order to make an informed decision. For instance, Participant 1 remarked:

I needed to search for some films that I hadn't watched in the lists to have a basic understanding, which was essential for me before voting. I felt that sometimes my patience was worn out and I would skip some.

This was similar to the experience recounted by Participant 8, who said: 'When I see the list, I only see half and I have no patience to see the last part.' To the follow-up question 'So you chose films from the first half of the lists?', the participant replied in the affirmative. These observations about the nomination lists being too long were typically followed by the suggestion to add short descriptions of the films or a justification of their selection to speed up the process of deliberation preceding the actual vote. For instance, Participant 7 recommended to 'add some reasons to nominate this kind of film' or to clarify the 'benefit from this film'. Occasionally, a problem was identified but no solution proposed, such as when Participant 5 remarked that 'After the nominations are carried out, the learning aim for each week was not as clear as usual.'

Asked directly whether the nomination and voting system was a good idea and whether it made a difference to their experience of the module, most interviewed students concurred and made appreciative statements. Participants 3 and 8 framed the intervention as a manifestation of the respect shown by the module leader to the students, with Participant 3 adding:

It helps the communication between the students and teachers. It offers students a sense of their opinions are valuable, which is actually something that a lot of students (especially Chinese) need.

Different affects came into play in the students' experience of the nomination and voting, with Participant 1 noting, for instance, that she felt 'sad' when the films she voted for did not win, and Participant 2 saying, counter-intuitively, that he loved documentaries so much that he abstained from nominating any because he would have really 'cared' if they won or not. Intriguingly, after recounting this vivid reaction, Participant 2 also noted that the whole process 'really doesn't matter, because the chosen films for teaching are adequate', with a similar neutral stance being voiced by Participant 7, who stated that it was not 'necessary'. Participant 5 saw the benefits mostly from the perspective of the teacher, rather than from that of the students, when remarking: 'It is a good idea since you will have a chance to see what your students prefer and find their interests, which is helpful for teaching and module structuring.'

One of the things that participant observation added to the insights derived from the interview process was to notice a decrease in student involvement from Week 9 to Week 13, which is consistent with the students' recommendation of an earlier timing for the intervention.

Analysis

One of the demonstrable gains of this process of co-opting students in syllabus design through film nomination and voting, acknowledged in the specialised literature as a desirable outcome, is the development of 'meta-cognitive awareness' (Cook-Sather et al., 2014: 112). As some of the interview quotations have illustrated, the nature of the intervention encouraged students to think of the time and effort required for the design, planning and support of teaching activities, and for the use of technology-assisted approaches. The opportunity to shape the subject material also enabled students to actively reflect on how they learnt, how much choice they wanted, and how they interacted with their peers and their tutor in the process of learning.

From the teacher's perspective, this process of meta-cognitive awareness was already pronounced, as a function of the specific transnational and intercultural context in which this project was carried out. As Betty Leask (2006: 1) has stated, 'transnational programs are complex sites of intercultural engagement' and are 'based on institutional contractual arrangements which are in themselves sites of intercultural interaction'. In addition to these contractual arrangements, there is also an 'unwritten contract' (Leask, 2006: 1) that students have with their transnational educational provider, which materialises in

expectations that teachers be not only knowledgeable in their field and skilled 'managers of the learning environment', but also 'efficient intercultural learners' (Leask, 2006: 6). For Kam Louie (2005: 17), this requirement that teachers become adept at intercultural engagement relies upon them developing and cultivating a mindset which he describes as 'meta-cultural sensitivity and awareness'. This is necessary because 'being the more powerful partner in the teacher–student relationship, the cultural baggage carried by the teachers has a much more dominant effect than that carried by the students' (Louie, 2005: 23).

Jude Carroll (2005) in many ways complements the work done by Louie, in that she also emphasises the importance of teachers' self-awareness when dealing with students from a different culture and educational system. This self-awareness can be undermined by teachers' tendency to 'not see themselves as carriers of culture' and to consequently take for granted things that they would be better served to make explicit, such as 'the appropriate way for students to interact with teachers' (Carroll, 2005: 27). As an antidote to this tendency, Carroll (2005: 29) recommends not only providing clear instructions at each step of the way, but also a committed effort of 'moving beyond spontaneous first reactions to identify what you were assuming would happen', searching, in other words, for hidden assumptions about what constitutes 'normal' student behaviour. This constant vigilance for things that might require explicit explanation is imperative in transnational settings, where cultural miscommunication can be exacerbated by the language difficulties that students who are non-native English speakers regularly experience. In terms of the cultural assumptions I brought to the process of voting, I was careful not to do things that could be perceived as interfering in any way with the results. For instance, I did not introduce the nominated films to the students beyond providing basic information such as title, year of release and name of director, because I thought there was a potential for a particular choice of words to sway them in favour of certain films. However, based on the interviews, it seems the students would have welcomed such an interference and in fact felt the need for it. Moreover, some of them recommended that the process of voting be reconceived as a communal experience in which they would get to discuss the nominations with their peers in class before casting their vote. These responses made me question my own preconceptions about how voting should take place, and inspired me to consider adapting it in the future in the manner suggested by the students. In terms of Carroll's (2005) call for becoming more explicit, there was once again a positive takeaway from the interviews, in that they revealed the students' need to have their choices more clearly integrated into the overall conceptual structure of the module. Although I take responsibility for this unmet need, it is also possible that the student who commented that during the weeks when the films voted for by the students were discussed, the learning aims were less clear than before might have reacted from an unjustified fear that student participation would somehow jeopardise the module structure, as the plan for those weeks did not fully originate from the teacher.

The findings of this article could be examined further in light of the project's specific transnational framework. Although some international students participated in the process of nomination and voting, none of them volunteered to be interviewed; therefore, the findings exclusively reflect the views and experience of the Chinese students, who constituted the module's overwhelming majority. Therefore, the intercultural dynamic of the project mainly played out between myself, an academic educated in the UK and using British standards of teaching and assessment, and my Chinese students, speaking for and from within their own culture. While there are indisputable cultural variables in learning and teaching, I tend to agree with scholars who argue that paying attention to 'contextual factors' which have an impact on learning is not the same thing as postulating that 'students' approaches to learning are culturally determined' (Richardson and Sun, 2016: 116). In accounting for the difficulties inherent in intercultural teaching, as well as for its opportunities, scholars and practitioners often fall back on the notion of 'cultures of learning' (Cortazzi and Jin, 2013). Lixian Jin and Martin Cortazzi (2006: 9–10) have produced useful insights into aspects of Chinese learners' 'linguistic and educational socialisation', including a culturally specific form of acquisition of literacy that has resulted in a common learning cycle in Chinese education being 'demonstration-mimesis-practice-performance', with the classroom interaction very much teacher-

centred. The comments made by the participants in the interviews I conducted would seem to confirm at the very least a level of ease with teacher-centredness, which is likely to be a legacy of the students' Chinese secondary education.

Another finding of this research is that students' perception of the voting and nomination process aligned well with my intentions of embedding into this pedagogical intervention, and emphasising through it and beyond, a key professional value, namely, respect for individual learners. This value holds a central place in the 'students as partners' model, alongside reciprocity and shared responsibility, and it is generally understood as a mixture of openness to other perspectives and a 'withholding of judgment' (Cook-Sather et al., 2014: 2). Coupled with the inbuilt inclusivity of the project, this has allowed for a more democratic dynamic between students and the teacher to emerge, one that interestingly triggered mixed reactions.

The partnership model in higher education was designed to challenge a situation in which students are treated by teachers as 'the people we teach to, not the people we are in class with', and to replace it with a relationship that encourages 'curiosity and common inquiry' (Cook-Sather et al., 2014: 10). However, although the intervention discussed in this article attempted to disrupt the rigid hierarchy of higher education, the hierarchical boundaries were often re-established and reinforced discursively by the students in some of their comments quoted in the previous section. Paradoxically, this could be seen as an unconscious move to revert to more traditional, and thus 'safer', modes of interaction, by asserting and justifying the power imbalance between the students and the teacher. There are various ways in which this move can be conceptualised. It could be seen as a manifestation of lingering support for what Mano Singham (2005) has called 'the authoritarian classroom'. Pointing to instances of 'legalistic' wording frequently used in syllabuses, to a language of 'edicts' and orders, Singham (2005: 52) remarks that 'students don't seem to be offended by being ordered in course syllabi' and goes on to interpret the 'authoritarian syllabus' as 'just the visible symptom of a deeper underlying problem, the breakdown of trust in the student-teacher relationship'.

In his discussion of capitalist realism, without explicitly referencing Singham, Mark Fisher (2009: 30) continued this train of thought, by vividly describing the impossible position that teachers are asked to occupy as somewhere in between 'being facilitator-entertainers and disciplinarian-authoritarians'. The irony for Fisher (2009: 30) resided in the fact that teachers are still 'interpellated by students as authority figures', despite the fact that 'disciplinary structures are breaking down in institutions'. A less pessimistic take would be that, as Philippa Levy, Sabine Little and Natalie Whelan (Levy et al., 2011: 3) have noted, there is still 'considerable tension between the ideal of partnership and the effects of consumerist discourse and academic hierarchy', and this tension is by no means an easy fix or something that can be dealt with appropriately in the context of any one course, but rather something, one could argue, for the mitigation of which constant efforts have to be made.

Given these persistent challenges, the action research project discussed in this article, and the lessons learnt from it, can perhaps best be understood using James Lang's (2016) notion of 'small teaching'. Lang's inspiration for this term is a sports analogy ('small ball'), referring to a style of tactical play in baseball characterised by incremental, methodical advances. In coining the term 'small teaching', Lang (2016: 26) started from the following realisation, to which many teachers can relate: 'As much as I frequently felt the urge to shake up my teaching practices with radical new innovations, I mostly didn't.' He proposed instead an approach that emphasises the value and 'potency of small shifts' (Lang, 2016: 27). This is how one might also think of this project, as a pedagogical intervention meant to unlock 'small' ideas for how to gradually and meaningfully improve.

Conclusion

This action research project adds to the literature on engaging students as partners, and provides analysis of an example of student-teacher co-creation of an element of syllabus design (the film choice)

in a discipline (film studies), in which this topic does not seem to have inspired much discussion. The pedagogical intervention analysed in this article has revealed that while students are generally aware of the positive connotations and implications of entering a partnership with the teacher, they maintain a clearer allegiance to a model where they defer to the teacher's judgement and decisions, and do not fully invest in collaborative alternatives. The latter could be due, in part at least, to the procedural shortcomings inherent in any first trial. Many of the suggestions for improvement made by the students, primarily related to convenience of use and assistance with the deliberation involved in the process of voting for films, are not only valid but also entirely actionable. The number of students voting at the beginning of the project was higher than at its end and, based on this observed waning of interest, it would seem advisable – if the experiment were to be repeated at the same institution with similarly large student cohorts – to concentrate on increasing the number of participating students through a more carefully guided set-up, while reducing the number of weeks in which the films are decided collaboratively.

The intervention discussed in this article illustrates the dual understanding of student engagement as 'a process' and, at the same time, as 'an outcome' (Dunne and Owen, 2013: 2), as it was something that I did with the students in order to boost their participation in classroom activities. Key areas that could be explored further in future cycles of this project include devising ways of counteracting the students' tendency to undervalue and even devalue their and their peers' views in the process of collaboration with the teacher, organising and framing such initiatives in a manner that ends up galvanising participation to a larger extent than has been the case in the initial iteration of this experiment, and exploring ways of harnessing motivations to greater engagement.

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The author declares that research ethics approval for this article was provided by the Educational Development Unit of Xi'an Jiatong-Liverpool University.

Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

Filmography

Coco (US 2017, Lee Unkrich)

The Imitation Game (US 2014, Morten Tyldum)

My Octopus Teacher (ZA 2020, Pippa Ehrlich and James Reed)

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