

Developing students' political agency by enabling and empowering them to engage local communities

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Introduction

This article came about because I was involved in facilitating a session in the University of Limerick's Graduate Diploma course on the 'Youth Engage Project' which we created using the UL Practicum curriculum design tool and the commissioning editor, who was also involved in the course, invited me to write about it as part of Creative Academic's exploration of creative learning ecologies.

Institutional context

[UL Engage](#) was established in September 2015, in accordance with the University of Limerick's Strategic Plan. The aim of UL Engage is to integrate civic engagement into the University's core missions in research, teaching and internationalization. UL Engage supports university/community collaborations in all shapes and sizes through a variety of new and existing UL programmes and projects. It serves as the hub for civic engagement activities across campus and works with staff in all faculties to amplify, incubate and co-ordinate the various ways that students, faculty and staff can work to make a difference. The success of this strategy can be seen through the scale of activity over the last two years

<http://www.ul.ie/engage/projects-by-category/24>



So how does the university encourage and facilitate the growth of civic engagement projects?

The UL Practicum

One of the issues in universities is that they lack the curriculum design tools that empower and enable academic teachers to design experiences that enable learners to practice what they have learnt in real world problem solving situations. The University of Limerick has overcome this issue by creating the *UL Practicum - a credit-bearing module framework* (appendix 1) that enables academic staff to deliver their curriculum in collaboration with community partners working on projects that are of relevance to the community and enabling students to achieve the learning outcomes through practical and applied experiential learning.

For communities, UL Practicum projects respond to identified community needs, designed and implemented by teams comprising UL staff, Community Partners and Students. **For students**, the UL Practicum provides curriculum based accredited learning in community projects, combining applied academic work with the development of *transversal soft skills*. In the University of Limerick, these soft skills, like team-work, creativity and responsibility, are referred to as Graduate Attributes that we hope to encourage amongst all our students. **For academics**, the UL Practicum is essentially a project shell. It provides a pre-approved module code that enables students to work on collaborative community projects as part of their credited academic curriculum. **For the university**, the UL Practicum raises the profile of staff / student engagement with communities outside the institution and applies consistent criteria for best practice community engagement.

Transversal knowledge, skills and competences are relevant to a broad range of occupations and economic sectors. They are often referred to as core skills, basic skills or soft skills, the cornerstone for the personal development of a person.

like the ability to work in a team, leadership, creativity, self-motivation, the ability to make decisions, time management and problem-solving.²

Practicum principles

Aside from relevant academic curriculum, all Practicum projects evince three key criteria

- They are based on a *partnership arrangement* that is respectful, reciprocal and inclusive, with clear terms of reference, roles and responsibilities for everyone involved.
- Attention is given to *graduate attributes* acquisition - a means to genuinely develop those 'generic and transversal skills' in appropriately related disciplinary and academic knowledge
- Their impact is *evaluated*- we are agnostic about how evaluation takes place, but we cannot claim that our project is an effective partnership, or that graduate attributes have been attained, or that we have made any impact at all, without some form of project evaluation.

Scale of involvement

In the academic year 2016/17, 108 students successfully undertook a UL Practicum as part of their undergraduate or postgraduate programme. Amongst these, 43 students from the School of Law worked on three community projects, providing clear and accessible legal guides and support to community partners in Milford Hospice, the National Infertility Support and Information Group and Community Law and Mediation. 12 postgraduate students in the School of Languages and Communication delivered three separate English language courses to Limerick refugees and asylum seekers. And 18 students of politics collaborated with local youth services and community groups to provide informative 'flash-debates' and workshops to local schools and organizations, designed to increase political participation and civic engagement. This article is the story of their Practicum project: 'Limerick Be Heard'.

Historical perspective

Practices have a history: a history that is closely linked to context. As teachers we often draw inspiration for new educational practices from the world outside our institutions and the recent history of Irish politics provided plenty of inspiration for a teacher interested in political agency and action.

In 2015 Yes Equality Campaign energized Irish voters and presented a new model for political campaigning and active citizenship in Ireland. The tone of the campaign was deliberately open and conversational, summed up by the campaign message: "I'm voting yes. Ask me why?"



The result was a refreshingly different political campaign which, instead of the usual podium politics and political posturing, was intensely local and personal, staffed by 100s of gay and lesbian canvassers, supported by friends and families and floods of volunteers. Perhaps because the campaign was not run by professional politicians or political parties, it had a very different modus operandi in terms of the areas canvassed and the people who canvassed, and in terms of the mode of canvassing and organizing principles: the campaign was discursive, inclusive, non-combative and non-judgemental. For many voters, the campaign provided a space to talk about ideas they were unsure about, and connected with voters in ways that the traditional parties had all but forgotten about. It was respectful, inclusive and engaging.

Together at the celebrations of the count in Dublin Castle, from left to right: Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams, Panti Bliss (providing Ireland's alternative to the Queen's speech in Christmas 2015), Fine Gael Minister for Justice, Frances Fitzgerald and RTE broadcaster and presenter, Miriam O'Callaghan.



UL Graduate Attributes



Irish General Election - new opportunities for community engagement

Less than 12 months after the Yes Equality campaign, the Irish General election presented an opportunity to see how this positive political approach might work in the broader political context of a general election. The 'Limerick Be Heard' project was an attempt to 'do politics differently' in a way that was inclusive, creative, subversive, diverse, respectful and even fun!



The UL Practicum project, **Limerick Be Heard #Youth Engage** capitalised on this opportunity. It was designed to capture the creativity and dynamism of Limerick's young people as a strategic resource for the promotion of human rights and political engagement, challenging the prevailing political orthodoxy that *young people* are not interested in politics. The central ambition of the project was to make political engagement more inclusive and representative of the often marginalized voice of young people, combatting stereotypical attitudes towards Young People about their capacity and commitment to be involved in positive political change. In doing so, the project sought to create forums for political engagement where young people could feel confident and comfortable to have their say about what matters to them, supported by co-created educational resources and activities. Through creative Youth Work facilitation methods,

the project attempted to connect Young People across Limerick City and County to build a collective and authentic voice for change. The result was the creation of the Limerick Be Heard #Youth Ambassadors for Democracy programme.

Limerick Be Heard #Youth Ambassadors for Democracy

The design process for this programme was youth-centred, exploratory and inductive - designed by young people for young people - to promote political participation and political agency for justice and inclusion.

Youth led Design - postponing decisions about learning outcomes!

We began with a group of youth volunteers who were keen to work together to 'make a difference'. Working as a team we met fortnightly and used youthwork facilitation methods to illicit the opinions and ideas of young people about the challenges and opportunities for young people interested in becoming more politically engaged. The topics that we addressed and the project tasks that these raised were identified by the young people participating. For me, this was an inversion of my usual approach to teaching. Instead of designing a "learning outcome" and then looking for ways to achieve it, in this process, the young people identified their challenge and then worked towards its resolution. It was only after they had resolved the challenge, and after I had reflected on what we did and what we learned, that I was able to retroactively discern the "learning outcome" that our activity had addressed.

Exploratory

To give an example, in order to explore 'how to make a difference' we decided to invite some politically engaged people to talk to the group about their activism. We encouraged the speakers to explain as much as they could about why they were active as they did about their activities. After their presentations, the speakers joined in our youth group work to explore the questions: What matters to me? What can I do? In the discussions between activists and young people, a primary and recurring theme was how to make a connection between a larger political concern and a smaller local action that people can connect to it.

Inductive

We learned from this session that our activists were motivated by a variety of feelings. For one speaker, activism was a way to prevent frustration, to re-direct feelings of anger and to use this energy positively. For another it was a way to meet people and socialise, to have fun whilst doing something worthwhile. Another speaker revealed that although he had originally thought that he did his work for other people, he had come to realise that he did it for himself: it made him sleep better and feel better about himself as a person. We also learned that quite often large scale political concerns, that might seem overwhelming and impossible to address, may have local dimensions where smaller scale concrete action can be taken. Concern about Europe's refugee crisis, for example, can be addressed by working with local refugees.



Personal reflection

My involvement in this project had a significant impact on my own thinking. Although originally I might have thought the learning associated with this was, 'how do I get involved', reflection illustrated that the more fundamental question we had answered was 'why should I get involved'. This brought political engagement to a personal level which to more tangible teenage concerns like having fun, finding a voice and maintaining good mental health.

Before this experience I might have understood the learning topics to be: 'what is political activism?' and 'why does it matter?' - relating the answer to higher level and more abstract political issues. After this experience, I understood the learning topic to be 'why should I engage politically?' and 'how can I incorporate this into my current way of life?'.

Together with the UL Practicum students on this project, we participated in all of the workshops, transcribed the meetings, and reflected individually, then together on what we had learned. The result was a 6 week programme, combining all of the best parts of our learning, to develop a community / university co-created and co-designed youth programme designed to develop civic engagement and political understanding for the promotion of human rights and democracy.

In an evaluation of the project³ the responses of Young People to a series of #GE16Flashdebates and workshops were particularly notable: the undergraduate students who had helped facilitate the debates and workshops gave enthusiastic endorsements to this alternative and applied way of learning about politics; and the Young People who participated in the workshops found them interesting and informative as well as interactive and engaging. Both sets of Young People were keen to do more, leaving only one question: why wait for another election?

Sustaining community collaboration through a new credit-bearing module

Following UL Practicum students' successful and enthusiastic participation in the Youth Engage project activities, helping to facilitate and record workshop discussions and developing workshop resources, it was decided to create an undergraduate politics module that would run in parallel to the Limerick Be Heard programme.

The new module in Political Agency enables students of politics to develop their understanding of political agency - both in the theoretical frameworks used to explain political behaviour and in practical application through their support for, and engagement with, the Limerick Be Heard programme. These two programmes together are mutually supportive, making the collaboration between the University and Limerick Youth Services more sustainable in the longer term, and providing more support for the development of political understanding and civic engagement between a wide range of young people from different backgrounds. Collaboration between an academic institution and pro-active Youth and Community Services facilitates evidenced and evaluated peer to peer learning and enables the creation of practical resources by Young People for Young People. In addition, working outside my own realm of expertise, with youth workers and young people who are experienced in approaching their inquiries quite differently to the way that I have been trained, has opened my eyes to new ways of delivering and co-creating content for my other politics course

Understanding Political Agency

The UL Practicum module, mixed classroom based theoretical insights into the motivations that underpin political action, with practical exercises and workshops in support of the #Youth Ambassadors for Democracy programme. For each week of the six week Ambassador programme, our students must help devise content, facilitate sessions and reflect on what they have learned.

Rationale

Teaching politics to students in a way that is engaging, interesting, informative, and capable of building a range of competencies among students presents an on-going challenge⁴. To achieve a higher level of student competency as 'critical political thinkers', Gorham^{5:346} suggests that political thinking is most likely to occur 'where the classroom experience itself is integrated into service-learning as a public space'. This approach to teaching politics reflects Stoker's⁶ exhortation that we should stop talking about politics and instead create more opportunities to practice it. That is the rationale underpinning the UL Practicum elective module 'Understanding Political Agency'.

Moving the classroom out into the Community

The learning environment for this module is provided by combining the more familiar university classroom setting with an off campus learning platform, made possible by our involvement in the #Youth Ambassadors for Democracy programme.

Lecture content is designed to provide theoretical explanations for political action, including insights from New Social Movements theory and Rational Choice approaches to understanding political behaviour. A great deal of the course content revolves around practical examples and case studies of alternative forms of political action. In contrast to more traditional teaching, however, most of this 'evidential content' is delivered in the applied and 'out of classroom' context provided by the #Youth Ambassadors for Democracy programme. Students on this module facilitate the Ambassador programme workshops and help to co-create workshop resources, artefacts and background materials. For example, the lecture topic concerned with 'Defining political action' is accompanied by practical work for the Ambassador programme concerned with preparation for a workshop activity. In this instance, the Ambassador programme includes a quiz - 'making the connections' - where political artefacts (a

button badge, a petition, a poster, a song, a ribbon, film clips, photos etc) must be matched with the political issue to which they are connected. Our students work to create the artefacts - and the answers - by preparing short briefings on each issue. They work to develop the content and format of the quiz so that it is engaging and fun.

Assessment

There are two points of assessment to this module, each worth 50%. The first comprises the creation of a reflective portfolio to review the Ambassador programme and their own participation in it. The second assessment is an essay. Guidelines concerning the creation of portfolios, and final essay topics are all presented with the course outline.

A full report of the content for both programmes can be found in the project report⁷. There is also a podcast at



Creativity in Communities

Community interactions can be fun and engaging, but sometimes leave open concerns about the extent to which they address the concerns of academic curriculum. Students need the space to explore their ideas, but there needs to be a means to link these explorations to the curriculum content so that they can begin to see the connections between theory and practice and have a more informed knowledge about 'how the world works'. For me, Creativity is about making the connections between the everyday and the curriculum and creating the conditions for autonomous learning - giving a supportive framework, within which students have plenty of room to figure things out for themselves.



The Limerick Be Heard group with their partners Capetown Be Heard October 2017



'Be Heard' goes global

In 2017, with funding from the Irish Research Council, Limerick Be Heard joined together a group of like-minded partners to run 'mirror groups' based on the Limerick Be Heard initiative. Capetown Be Heard was established and we look forward to 'Boston Be Heard' in 2018. Seven Swedish groups are interested in joining. The creation of mirror groups by international project partners enables the programme to transcend the local and develop an international consciousness regarding human rights, global citizenship and the importance of Youth Voice

as a vehicle for change

In Spring 2018, we will begin the third 'Limerick Be Heard' Practicum project with a new global focus enabled by our international network. The #Youth Engage project enabled us to develop synergies and share resources with our international mirror groups, and to plan for a more formal inclusion of the international dimension into our project with shared resources and virtual spaces. The international dimension has enabled us to create a variety of ways for young people taking Limerick Be Heard programmes and modules to connect with each other in order to transcend the local and develop an ethic of global citizenship. Exchange artefacts include postcards, youth exchange briefings, as well as podcasts and videos made by our students and participants. Combining university students with a mix of young people not in education or training gives the programme added educational value, providing peer modelled pathways for third level education to young people and giving a real life exposition of many topics covered in the politics classroom that gain a new relevance when illustrated by lived experience.

Sources

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