

# ICED 2020 proceedings:

## Back to the future – Challenging traditional positions and hierarchies in academic development

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### Abstract

With the emphasis on evidence in academic development, it is important to consider *how* research on higher education is conducted, *who* influences its direction and *what* questions are being raised. In this work, I will take a closer look at students' research projects in the "Environments for learning in higher education" course and, based on experiences from that course, explore how to involve students as researchers in higher education and how to provide opportunities for students to influence academic development through research. In the discussion, I argue that challenging traditional positions and knowledge hierarchies at higher education institutions are central for the future direction of academic development.

### 1 Introduction

With the current emphasis on change in higher education (Tagg, 2008), contemporary academic development reveals an interesting ambition to base approaches to teaching and learning on empirical evidence. In the emerging discourse educational research is easily reduced to providing clear guidelines for systematic improvements and to distinguishing effective from ineffective education practices. The emphasis on evidence in education is embedded in a neoliberal ideology that has changed education in profound ways during the last few decades (Giroux, 2002; Olssen & Peters, 2005). By focusing on efficiency in education, education research and development are reduced to finding *best practices* without considering questions as to whether particular interventions are desirable or what means are used to achieve effects. In this way the focus is on education as a technological practice rather than a moral practice that is shaped, interpreted, and negotiated by the people involved in it. Or as Biesta (2007, p. 5) put it: "The focus on 'what works' makes it difficult if not impossible to ask the questions of what it should work *for* and who should have a say in determining the latter."

Empirical studies should definitely inform and are a crucial element in academic development processes, but it is important to consider potential limitations. One main concern with an unreflected emphasis on evidence in academic development is coupled to *how* research on higher education is conducted, *who* influences its direction and *what* questions are being raised.

While students might be involved in academic development efforts as informants, and sometimes even as partners, they are rarely involved in conducting research on higher education during their time as students (Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, Millard, & Moore-Cherry, 2016). In this work, I will explore how to involve students as researchers in higher education and how to provide opportunities for them to influence academic development through research. I argue that it is important to reflect on the practices that are used to drive

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development and change and to reconsider the relationship between academic development, undergraduate teaching and research. By challenging traditional positions and encouraging partnerships between students, teachers, developers and researchers to explore pedagogical practices together, new forms of higher education research and academic development can emerge (King, Potter, & Pitts, 2015).

## 2 One example from practice

Here, I will focus on the course “*Environments for learning in higher education*” (Wallin & Aarsand, 2019), which is given under the Experts in Teamwork (EiT) umbrella at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) (Wallin, Lyng, Sortland, & Veine, 2017). Nearly all students at NTNU are required to take one course under the EiT umbrella during their fourth year at the university, meaning that students from all professions and disciplines are taking these courses. The courses have 20 to 30 Master’s students each from various study programmes working in groups of four to six over a period of 15 weeks on a self-defined research project coupled to the overall theme of the course. During the project period, the students and the teacher meet once a week from 8:00-16:00. Students work on their group projects in a self-defined manner and the teacher acts in a way similar to a dialogue partner and critical friend (Costa & Kallick, 1993) to provide additional perspectives to the students’ ideas and approaches, as well as reoccurring formative feedback.

Over the last four years (2017-2020), a total of 91 students have taken the course and worked on 18 different projects. One central element in the projects is that the students take into account their own experiences and use them as a starting point to define research questions that they deem interesting. Figure 1 shows a rough overview of the different topics that students have covered in their projects. Most project reports are available in Norwegian at [www.patricwallin.org/student-research/](http://www.patricwallin.org/student-research/).

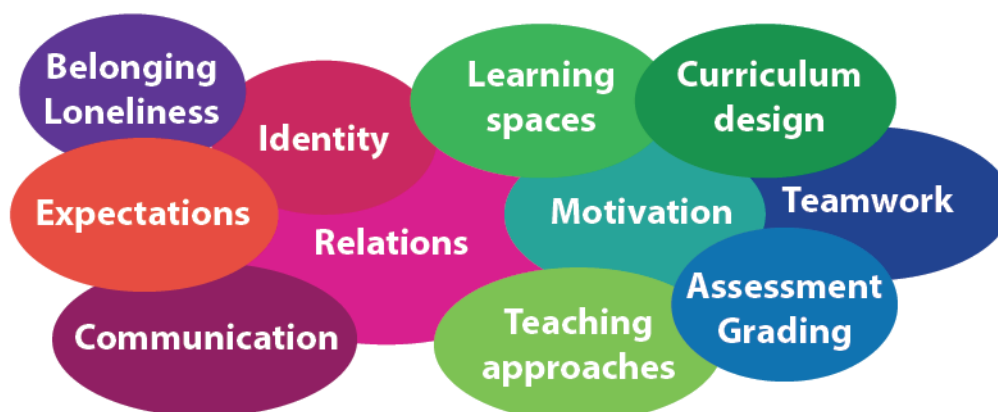


Figure 1: Overview of research topics covered in the projects (2017-2020)

To explore their research questions, project groups have used a variety of different approaches. Four groups both conducted interviews with students, teachers, and other resource personnel at the university and used qualitative frameworks like thematic analysis and affinity diagram analysis to approach their research questions. Six groups designed and distributed their own surveys to collect empirical data from both students and teachers. The emphasis in the analysis of the survey data was on simple statistics for Likert-scale questions and the inclusion of free-text answers to provide additional nuances to the quantitative information. Two groups focused on development projects that took an analytical approach to (1) an already existing study program and (2) existing physical learning spaces. The remaining six groups did not collect empirical material on their own, but focused more on literature work to explore their research questions.

At the end of the semester, students share findings from their projects in the form of reports and short presentations. These are important resources for academic development at NTNU and are highly valued by persons in the central administration who develop and improve learning environments. While reports are obligatory in the course, they can be short and be complemented with other materials. Four groups have to varying extents worked with the development of smartphone applications and websites; three groups have produced podcasts where they explore their topics; and three groups have developed concrete recommendations and workshop designs to take findings from their projects further.

### **3 A pedagogical discussion**

Building upon ideas of dialogue and liberation in higher education (Shor, 1996; Shor & Freire, 1987), contemplative education (Roeser & Peck, 2009), student partnership (Cook-Sather, Matthews, Ntem, & Leathwick, 2018) and the student as producer (Neary & Winn, 2009), the aim of the course outlined above is that by defining, planning and running their own research projects, students can raise questions about university learning environments that they deem important and remain in control of how to conduct and frame their research.

While a course provides potentially conflicting boundary conditions, it also provides unique opportunities for more inclusive and open forms of partnership by involving students who otherwise would not participate in activities linked to higher education research and academic development. A focus on interdisciplinarity means that students from different disciplines such as music, physics, psychology and sociology can work together. On a project level, this means that the work has the potential to go beyond specific course development actions within the contextual boundaries of a single discipline and focus on questions that go across disciplines. On a partnership level, the work's interdisciplinary nature provides a basis for challenging assumptions and reference frames about research paradigms and enables thought-provoking discussion among students and between students and academics about their ontological and epistemological positions.

Through my experience from the “*Environments for learning in higher education*” course and students' contributions over the last four years, I argue that challenging traditional positions and knowledge hierarchies at higher education institutions are central for the future direction of academic development. It is through collaboration between students and academics with the common purpose of co-creating knowledge and meaning (Neary, 2016) that we can initiate, scaffold and maintain change processes and academic development in higher education.

By considering each other as partners rather than in opposition to each other, the aim is for students and teachers to create a space where collective cultures can emerge and flourish. This form of *radical collegiality* genuinely challenges and subverts accepted power relationships and also has an explicit political goal: “it is through radical collegiality that one upholds democratic community” (Fielding 1999, 29). One important element here is that the students' work has meaning beyond the course. By making the reports, presentations and other material openly available, the projects can contribute directly to academic and campus development. In this way, students indeed take positions as knowledge producers by making their work available both to the local community and worldwide.

For my own position as a teacher and researcher in higher education and university pedagogy, it is then central to create a space that allows me and the students to learn and relearn together by acknowledging each other as partners in the education process. It is through dialogue – “a moment where humans meet to reflect on their reality as they make and remake it” (Shor & Freire, 1987) – and building upon everyone's diverse experiences that new practices in higher education can emerge. In addition, I argue that this approach can help students to learn how to ask difficult questions about the status quo and re-imagine a different kind of society and way of being.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the students that have participated in the various projects over the last years, who constantly show me how important academic development at the intersection between teaching, research, and learning is.

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