Picture this: engaging students – improving outcomes

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Introduction:

London Metropolitan University's student body is made up of almost fifty percent “non-traditional” students; our students are often mature (over 21), from working class and Black and Minority Ethnic Communities – and often they are the first in their families to enter Higher Education. In certain courses and programmes the student cohort is as near as possible to 100% “non-traditional” as can be. Students come from a wide range of cultures and backgrounds – and have mixed interests, abilities, expectations and connections.

In our recent Project to Improve Student Outcomes (PISO) initiative, the team wanted to discover what students really made of their first year of study – and how they had experienced the transition into their second. In collecting our data, the team wanted to use a methodology that allowed students to give an holistic account of their experiences, encompassing a wider view of student life. Using image mediated dialogue (IMD), the team engaged with a cross section of the student body, allowing the ‘hard to reach’ students to have a voice – sharing their experiences – using rich pictures to seed their introspection and their discussions (Palus and Drath, 2001). The project’s intention is to allow these students to have a say and an impact on the development of learning and teaching practice at our University. This is in line with our commitment to approaches to engagement, learning, teaching and assessment that excite, challenge and give voice to ‘all’ students.

In a collaboration between lecturers and two postgraduate students, here the team tell the stories of this project within a project in our own images, using the comic book format to highlight both the process of using IMD to collect data, as well as to reflect upon the experiences of the students who conducted the research – the challenges they met during the process, their growth, and their discoveries about the research – and themselves.
The First Year Experience Project is a research proposal by the First Year Curriculum Review Group (FCRG) at London Metropolitan University. The aim of the project is to identify factors which impinge on student perceptions of HE and of the university and to develop strategies...
WE HAD BEES ON THE ROOF...

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Engaging students and staff effectively as partners in learning and teaching is arguably one of the most important issues facing higher education in the 21st century (Healey et al., 2014: 12).

"... IT WAS A DAY LIKE ANY OTHER..."

"THEN, IMAGE-MEDIATED DIALOGUE EXPLODED INTO OUR LIVES..."

"What are we gonna get out of it...?"

"...don't want to be left with a bad nose..."

"Research? Wait that long?"

"Scanning... Measuring... Quantifying..."
"Drawings can both evoke and record insight into a situation, and different visualization techniques such as visual brainstorming, imagery manipulation and creative dreaming have been developed ..." (Garfield, 1976; McKim, 1980; Shone, 1984; Parker, 1990).
Image mediated dialogue (IMD) is the process of putting images in the middle to enhance and focus conversations (McGuire et al, 2015).

"Putting images in the middle of the conversation taps into the whole brain, invites interpretation beyond routine facts, and is a very positive way to get different perspectives on the table" (McGuire et al, 2015: 3)
A CHANCE TO REALLY SEE OUR STUDENTS

PASS scheme were proposed to be utilised as facilitators. Data was to be collated through focus groups of first year students using image Mediated Dialogue (IMD) techniques for the purposes of exploring the research topic. Success stories from the group were proposed to the groups in order to further explore the experiences of each student.

Each participant was then asked to present their groups of first year students using image Mediated Dialogue (IMD) techniques for the purposes of exploring the research topic. Success stories from the group were proposed to the groups in order to further explore the experiences of each student.

There is no such thing as a bad idea. In fact, the worst thing you can do is nothing...
It is possible to develop approaches to teaching and assessment that excite, challenge and give voice to all students.
Conclusion

The students who participated in the research chose pictures that they felt represented their worst and best experiences of their first year of University. They were engaged in the process and the data collected covered a wide range of topics, including the importance of social relationships, feeling part of a community of University students, and having supportive and non-judgemental lecturers. The team believe that the use of IMD allowed each student to give their unique account of their own experience, putting the picture in the middle, and letting it inspire, guide and focus their accounts.

The caged bees in the beginning of the comic are finally released after the team had conducted the focus group and written our report. This aims to signify both the development of the first year students and the release of their potential – and the impact the project had on the students who were involved in collecting data, writing the report – and finally – making this comic book. The team found that doing the project gave them a sense of empowerment. They felt proud for being able to collaborate so closely – in an equal and inclusive manner – with our lecturers, and the fleeing bees represent our newfound independence to go on to engage in the opportunities that await us, both within our University, and outside.

Reference list