

Building trust through student co-creation with Mario Pezzino, recorded March 2024

Intro:

Welcome to the Good Practice in Teaching Podcast from the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Manchester. We talk to academics in the faculty about what works well in teaching, assessment and student support.

In this episode, our Associate Dean for Teaching and Learning, Sarah Dyer, speaks to Mario Pezzino, who is Director of Teaching and Learning in the School of Social Sciences, and a Professor of Economics.

Sarah and Mario discuss the process of co-creating class materials with students, and its effect on student outcomes.

Sarah Dyer: Mario, I wanted to begin by saying a huge congratulations on your promotion because I came to your inaugural lecture, which was fantastic.

And it's such a, yeah, it's such a brilliant achievement. So, so congratulations.

Mario Pezzino: Thank you. Thank you very much. It was lovely to see you, to see you there.

Sarah Dyer: It was, it was really great. And I was thinking in preparation for doing this podcast, about where to focus and I mean, one of the things that was really interesting in the inaugural was the way in which you brought this kind of disciplinary lens to thinking about how to teach.

I was wondering if you'd begin by telling us a little bit about this, peer effect and the kind of behavioural economics lens.

Mario Pezzino: Yeah. This is interesting because, everything started from trying to reflect on what I really wanted the students to learn, the kind of skills I wanted them to develop, but also help the various subgroups of students in the class, because it's a very large class, so with different challenges, different desires, different aspirations, and trying to help support all of them and create a spirit of community in a very large, large class.

So we've been asking ourselves for years now: "what do we want economics students to learn? What kind of skills? Definitely the standard skills are very hard quantitative mathematical kind of skills, statistical skills. But we recognize more and more that our

students need to learn also some other soft skills and developing this, discussing this, motivating and promoting it, is something that's still ongoing.

I started chatting and engaging with students on this.

The interesting thing is that, in part, all this is also connected to my more disciplinary kind of research. So, I work on evolutionary game theory models connected to tax evasion, crime, culture. So how culture or cultural norms propagate in a society in time. If you think of a classroom or a module, a course, as a population with some kind of behaviour propagating, changing, maybe there are some types of intervention that might change this kind of culture.

My hope was to start developing this, developing practice, reflect, but at the same time, perhaps it was helpful to me also to have this under a framework. There was a framework there was a behavioural kind of set up.

Sarah Dyer: Yeah. And I, I think that that's kind of interesting as well, because often people are kind of wanting to start thinking more systematically about teaching and learning and investigating it.

And that, but they feel a bit like, well, you know, I've, I've trained as an economist or I've trained as a geographer. So do I have to go and like redo all of that understanding of conceptual frameworks in education. And actually, I love this kind of, in a sense, no, there's, it's, 'yes, and' we're bringing that disciplinary expertise, the disciplinary interests and frameworks. It's a lovely way to start very authentically engaging in scholarship.

Mario Pezzino: Yeah, absolutely. And at the end of the module last year, we also did a little bit of an experiment.

So we had a treatment group, a control group to see how this peer effects. That I can tell you more if you want. Yeah. Have affected the behaviour, the engagement, the performance of students. And that was also interesting. It was, again, connected to disciplinary kind of skills and interests.

Sarah Dyer: Yeah, I really want to hear about that. So you're looking at how to kind of create a culture within a module. So, what were the kinds of interventions you were thinking about?

Mario Pezzino: Well, basically, essentially at the very beginning, the kind of intervention was to start working with students. So, during the summer, create some resources or plan some teaching so that the year after with the new class, with the new cohort, we could release these co-created activities and resources.

But then I recognize that, you know, just having the resources was okay, in a sense of the lecture can promote them can motivate them. But I've been thinking more and more, I think

is essential here to have, as I was saying, some kind of peer effect. So, it's not just Mario. It's not just me telling "well, you know, guys, it's very nice if you watch this video that I made with a student", but rather the students themselves giving a message showing their face, contacting the students, promoting and motivating what we've been doing together.

Doing that, is in part anecdotal, in part, you can see the interest of students engaging with co-creation, because year after year, you can see more and more students. At the very beginning, I made a big call. And I got only two people who wanted to work with me and co-create with me.

Now, already this year, in week two, without making any call, I had 23 students asking straight away, we would like to work with you this summer. Now I'm going to let them do their exam. They finish today. After that, we will catch up and start preparing a little bit what we can do during the second semester and during the summer.

The experiment was to have a little bit more evidence. So, what did we do? We had about a hundred, so let's say a quarter of the class last year deciding to participate into this experiment. We split into treatment and control randomly. Control essentially so the whole class would receive and would see and would be introduced in general to this co-created resources, essentially videos, posters, files, documents created by students and clearly reported as co-created, but at the same time, the treatment group would receive a message With the pictures of the students co-creators and signed by the students co-creators telling them and motivating and promoting these resources.

The control group instead will simply get the same identical message, essentially, but from me. And what we are observing now that we are going through the data in the experiment, is that the treatment group, those who go to, if you want this enhanced peer effects. So, the message directly from the senior students, they did engage more with these resources.

They did engage more with the module itself. But this is not. So again, the sample was relatively small. Still, we're talking about 100 students, but you would like possibly close to four, five hundred. But anyway, even if statistically this increasing engagement is not strongly significant, what we can see, and this is super interesting to me, it is significant data engagement with the formative assessment.

They did all the quizzes every week and they performed better, the students on the treatment group, and they performed better in the coursework, and they performed better in the final exam. This was at the beginning a little bit puzzling because, again, we couldn't see a strongly statistical significance in terms of weekly engagement, but at the same time, a better performance from the treatment group where the only difference was an email directly from the student co-creators.

We had some interviews with them. And this was really interesting to see, basically, when I go to the email, when I go to the content, when I go to the communication directly from the students, the main message here is that they built some kind of feeling of trust, trust in the module, trust in the organization of the module, trust in the lecturer.

And basically, this trust in the module and the organization just turned into following all the requirements in terms of formative assessment, following the feedback and following whatever the lecturer was saying.

Sarah Dyer: I mean, that's incredible, isn't it? That, I mean, incredible, but also in some ways, not surprising, if you think about advertising you know, lots of advertising is the kind of voice of someone like you. Telling you that this is the behaviour um, that that kind of works or is, you know, is sensible. But it is also incredible and, you know, thinking about some of those emotional aspects of learning, you know, feeling like you belong, feeling like, you can navigate the system because others like you are navigating the system and kind of helping you out and it's very powerful.

Mario Pezzino: Indeed. And they mentioned really all these elements here really. And to me, this, this was interesting also because, you know, again, you do not see them engaging directly necessarily more with the co-created resources, but this emotional effect had them engaging more with the whole module, trusting more the module, trusting more the whole organization and effectively performing better.

Sarah Dyer: I mean, yeah. And I guess it's, you know, if you sit down and you sit down with the, with the expectation, this is what I do. This is going to work. I've got this kind of trusted person who's a bit like me telling me that this is kind of how to do things. You sit down and you're then using that time to be learning, or to be engaging with it. Whereas if you're sitting down, you're not sure, is this the thing? Should I be prioritizing this? What about these other things that I've got to do, you're kind of sitting down with it in a very different headspace. Amazing. Fantastic. And so, in terms of kind of your own education practice or others education practice, like where do you want to take this?

Mario Pezzino: I, I think the focus so far has been for me to see whether co created material could improve the experience of the students. You know, I teach every year the new cohorts and and I think this is giving me good signals and I will continue to do that in the sense that, you know, again, my plan is to continue working on this to release more but I would like to focus now a little bit more on the experience of the students who co-create with me.

So normally what I do is to, let them to be completely free to decide on what aspect of the module they want to work with me. And this could be any, any aspect of the module - delivery, assessment, any aspect of the module. But at the same time, what I would like to do a little bit more is to let them reflect on what they want to get out of their experience of co-creating with me. In this sense, I'm thinking really having a little bit of a journal, have a little bit of some reflections on the way, understand their expectations, what they want to develop and why.

This relationship allows me to know very closely, very deeply the co-creators. And of course, in this relationship, there is always, you know, the promise. I'm very happy to guide them, support them if they want to talk and discuss, for example, postgraduate applications and something like that.

Sarah Dyer: Do you think this partly works? Cause it's only you doing it in your course unit? Do you think you could kind of have too much of it in a, in a kind of year or in a program?

Mario Pezzino: That's a very good question. And I haven't been thinking a lot about that, but now really I feel like if you were at a program level, it would require a little bit careful thinking and design and when it will take place in what form and there will be definitely some kind of necessary input there that has to come from a programme committee, from a group of people. Of course, there is a part of me that, you know, the exciting part of what I've been doing so far is because really, I am, if you want, at the centre of all this engagement and relationships with the students. But definitely I think if this can be extended or again, well organized within a program, maybe it could be something worth considering.

One thing to keep in mind, and I remind myself and I remind colleagues who are a little bit curious about, you know co-creation is that it takes a lot of effort. It takes a lot of effort on the part of the instructor who wants to put it in place. And this means if it took place at a program level, it would take effort in managing, organizing, guiding, coordinating these efforts.

And it takes a lot of effort and some of them are incredible. They are amazing, on the part of the students. So, I think it's essential and that's what I do with them. I try to remind them continuously and repeatedly that the summer is there for them to relax or to have other experiences. Co-creation could be an experience that could enrich their experience, their CV, and so on. But at the same time, priority here for them is to be a student. If this was introduced at programme level, we will need to think very carefully what are the expectations on our part, in terms of what we are expecting the students to do, when, and how.

Sarah Dyer: Do you think it takes bravery? On the part of the, the lecturer?

Mario Pezzino: This is a little bit, yeah, no, no, absolutely. I mean, this is a little bit also in the literature, in a sense, there is this kind of emotional cost. There is an emotional cost on the part of the lecturer.

Well, there are various costs, because, you know, if you think of it, one is the emotional one, you need to release some power. Because the moment you tell them we have a partnership, but then I choose everything that you do, the little task that I give you. It's not partnership, it's not co-creation. No. The moment you allow the possibility of having a frank, honest, and balanced discussion you need to accept that, yeah, Mario, I don't think that worked and I think I can do it better than you. And that's absolutely fine.

And I think again, I think it's a very equal relationship with one big caveat. Ultimately, I think it's the instructor who's the professional, who's the one who's responsible for the experience of the new cohorts of students.

So it is essential that, you know, the co-creators are guided, supported, directed, but ultimately they need to be free to tell you what they want to do, how they want to do it, within the parameters that make you confident and comfortable that the delivery and the material and the ILOs are all made of the right quality.

It's really, it's really pleasant and enjoyable to plan, design, discuss, whatever it is, whether it's a lecture or whether it's a video or whether it's a poster with the students and and see how they engage with all this. And yeah, so there is a benefit for the, for the instructor too.

You learn what is on their minds. You know, again, in a class with 400 students, it's very difficult to know the names, to engage with them directly. We have a lot of very effective ways like a discussion board and so on. But the truth here is sitting down with a person and discuss what they think that worked in their module or what they think that didn't work and they would be excited to change with you.

Yeah, it's, it's, it's really lovely.

Sarah Dyer: And if, if someone's listening to this and kind of hearing both, yeah, there's the cost, but there's also all of these payoffs and there's the kind of emotional reward.

How would you suggest they think about kind of starting out?

Mario Pezzino: So well, I would suggest, you know, first of all, start small, very, very small. So even if maybe you are in this very lovely, lucky scenario where you make a call for you co-create something with you at some point to your class and you get many students interested in that. Maybe again, select just a few of them. It is not easy. But if you have a few students quite interested in that, one of the things is that to me using some select Teams helped a lot. Yeah, you have a group on Teams, you share ideas, you share resources, you share guidance there and you have a little bit again at the spirit of a group.

It hasn't happened very much where students wanted to do something together, create something together. With me, yes, but not with other students. So, this is something, again, that I want to do it a little bit more in the future. But again, to colleagues, really start, start small, have a little bit of a plan because, you know, again, it is correct to let students be free to choose, but at the same time, trying to have very clear in this relationship, what your responsibilities are.

And again, responsibilities means your commitment, your involvement, your time in guiding, because you know, again, everything you're going to do in terms of co-creation, if you use it, if you design it so then you will use it in your teaching the following year, it will have an impact on your cohorts of students.

So, it has to be meaningful. It has to be well connected to your ILOs. It has to be also meaningful to the particular kind of audience that you're expecting to have in your course. I think, I think this is, this is something I will keep in mind.

Don't be offended. Don't take it personally, if you start with amazing projects and decisions and in some cases, it will not be delivered. It's okay.

Sarah Dyer: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. No, that's good. And in terms of starting small, are there kind of particular like timeframes I've already heard you say give yourself the option of selecting.

So, I assume when you make the call, you have to kind of say. You know, there may be a, but like, do you put timeframes or?

Mario Pezzino: There are, there are, there are, yeah, no, that's a good point. I mean small in this sense means first possibly not too many students. It means not too many projects. But at the same time sometimes you need to reign in the desire, the of the passion of some students who want to do something that you know it cannot be done in the limited time that they might have.

So, if a student came to me and it did happen, I'm going to write in a particular piece of software, all the tutorial questions, all the tutorial exercise that you will do in a semester. No, maybe let's do only one and let's do it well. And let's learn. And ideally, again, what do you student co-creator want to learn out of it? So, expecting to do massive things it would be possibly too onerous on the part of the student and most likely it will not produce any output.

Sarah Dyer: Yeah, that's really useful. And is it the kind of thing that would work well for a couple of academics to be involved, when they're starting out to, support each other and...

Mario Pezzino: I think so. I mean, I mean, I feel in general, if any colleague wanted, for example, to have a chat with me, I feel, you know there is a little bit of learning here that could be easily shared and applied in other, in other modules, in other disciplines, I think. At the same time, and this is possibly connected to what you were saying in terms of programme level kind of co-creation or yeah, just expanding a little bit the scope.

In some cases, you have some modules. This is, this is the case in my program, in my discipline where in economics modules tend to have prerequisites and they follow a very clear structure. So, in this sense, my module is micro three, but you already know that there is a micro one and micro two, and there is also micro four.

So, potentially having some kind of co-creation discussions and activities that take place in this compulsory and gradually increasing, progressing modules so different type of co-creation depending on the level of the student. If again, a well discussed designed and coordinated across four potentially different lecturers, it's something exciting.

Sarah Dyer: I'm very glad that there's micro one and micro two. I think the fact that there would have been micro three, but no one and two might've really upset me.

Mario Pezzino: No, no, plenty of micro, plenty.

Sarah Dyer: Thank you so much, Mario, for sharing well, for doing the work, but also coming and telling us about the work and yeah, it'd be good to hear how things progress.

Mario Pezzino: Thank you very much to you. Thank you very much for having me. It's been a pleasure and I'll keep you in the loop if there is any, any future developments.

Sarah Dyer: Yeah, definitely. Fantastic.

Outro:

You've been listening to the Good Practice in Teaching Podcast from the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Manchester.

In the description, you'll find links to help you further explore this topic, including a link to Mario's blog post on the Good Practice Library.

Links

Co-creating and co-delivering resources with students, blog post by Mario Pezzino on the Good Practice Library: <https://sites.manchester.ac.uk/humteachlearn/2023/11/07/co-creating-and-co-delivering-resources-with-students/>

Elizabeth Cleaver "Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: Disciplinary Approaches to Educational Enquiry" <https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/teaching-and-learning-in-higher-education/book254155>

Bovill, C., Cook-Sather, A., Felten, P., Millard, L. and Moore-Cherry, N. (2016), Addressing potential challenges in co-creating learning and teaching: overcoming resistance, navigating institutional norms and ensuring inclusivity in student-staff partnerships, Higher Education, 71, 195-208. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-015-9896-4>

Mario Pezzino and Andrea Enrico Riganti, 2022, Co-creation of teaching resources and co-teaching, <https://doi.org/10.53593/n3523a>