Title of case study
Using public-facing online spaces for meaning-making and collaboration

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Name of course and module (if applicable) case study took place within
N/A

Please briefly describe the activity undertaken for the case study
PsychLiverpool is a bridge between academic and student communities across universities associated with the city of Liverpool and beyond. This psychology-based virtual platform is a place for students to come together and create meaning beyond their textbooks.

Students and staff collaborating effectively as partners in learning and teaching is arguably one of the most important issues facing higher education in the 21st century (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014). The student as an active collaborator and co-producer has more potential for meaningful transformation (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011) and PsychLiverpool is an example of such meaningful collaborative practice. We have travelled in the past five years from being largely led by our founder Dr Alex Forsythe towards an academic-student partnership which enables relationships to be fostered between the PsychLiverpool team (Emir Demirbag, Jasmine Warren, and recently Elliot Webster) and other students. We support students who engage with the project so they feel able to develop and write about their ideas, and these students are then able, in turn, to work with the larger student body. That partnership is represented here by the key students and alumni who make a substantial current contribution to PsychLiverpool.

The HEA identifies subject-based research and inquiry as being one of the four principle student partnership areas. They argue however, that work in this area is normally restricted to final year projects and dissertations and it is often difficult to determine when true partnership in decision-making occurs in this area and full partnership is rarely ever achieved (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014). The PsychLiverpool approach is that students have autonomy to explore what is taking place in their disciplines. Some students will

become editors or producers of that knowledge through content writing, others may engage in research discussions (e.g. via Twitter). This philosophy reflects a shift in focus from the academic-generated material that was a regular feature in PsychLiverpool during 2014–16 towards largely student-generated content.

Beyond these endeavours, students have created a mobile community of practice where they educate one another on their experiences and understandings of wider HE issues. Popular blogs include issues around equality in education, engaging your lecturer and improving teaching and learning, as well as social issues around student consumerism and the proposed changes to the USS pension scheme and what that means. Through the informal connections that students develop whilst blogging, the questions they pose to one another, or the connections they make with academics (e.g. on the related Twitter account), students are acquiring social capital which is known to facilitate superior performance (Forsythe, 2017).

Using social media to advertise the most recent blogs, we have connected students and academics who have further engaged one another by sharing the blog links. Our blogs are disseminated through ping-backs, where others have advertised our blogs on their own websites and blogging platforms. As a result, we are now disseminating our information to various audiences globally.

The newest development that the team manage with assistance from Jon Taylor (TEL) is the associated PsychLiverpool Podcast. In these podcasts Psychology student Elliot Webster has topical conversations with various members of staff which are relevant to psychological research and to student advice.

How was the activity implemented?

The PsychLiverpool website was redeveloped and expanded by recent PhD student Emir Demirbag (Team Software Developer and Content Curator during 2016, progressing to Technical Director 2017/18) primarily using the WordPress.org open source software package. This has enabled a more user-friendly and engaging website for readers on the front-end and a bespoke Content Management System for contributors accessing the back-end.

Whilst founded and maintained at the University of Liverpool, the PsychLiverpool blog has had sustained interest and input in both contribution and editorial forms from Edge Hill University and Liverpool Hope University. We have had a renewed engagement from Liverpool John Moores University and have extended our remit to include the University of Chester. This now means we have a record number of student editors and increased staff engagement from universities across the North West Coast crossing Merseyside, Lancashire, and Cheshire and these contributions have been and continue to be largely managed by recent PhD student Jasmine Warren (Team Editor in 2016, progressing to Executive Editor and Content Curator 2017/18, now Editor-in-Chief).

This initiative has received modest financial support from the School of Psychology. It is largely a labour of altruism undertaken in the contributors', editorial and managing team's time. Blogs and podcasts are advertised amongst the School of Psychology's social media platforms and student newsletters.

Has this activity improved programme provision and student experience, if so how?

This blog offers a designated space for students, as well as those members of the public interested in topical debates in psychology, to write, reflect, and critique. The blog prides itself on a "pro-publishing" outlook, aiming to publish as much material as we receive rather than turning contributions away. One stance always taken is wherever possible contributors are supported to improve their writing, but never to render it unrecognisable.

Students are able to gain valuable skills as editors for the site, including creativity, writing skills, teamwork and public engagement experience. The blogs and podcasts cover topics of student interest as they are increasingly student-led. PsychLiverpool can aid students in coursework requiring them to write a blog-style piece of writing by providing examples. Links to programme topics are found in the blogs and podcasts, where research is discussed by professionals in the field.

The overwhelming impact has been on engendering a sense of community between students across universities, with academics, and engaging the wider population in academic psychology. The initiative has also made an impact with The British Psychological Society, who remain impressed at the PsychLiverpool blog endeavour.

Student Quotes:

"PsychLiverpool has really helped my writing skills and ability to adapt my work to suit the target audience."

"I have had the opportunity to showcase my work which has led to networking with academics in my area of interest."

"I enjoy working with PsychLiverpool as it gives me freedom to explore topics that I find interesting and share them through blogging."

"It has been a fantastic opportunity to work with PsychLiverpool as I have not only enhanced my CV, I have been able to work with a great team who have encouraged me to pursue my interest in blogging."

Did you experience any challenges in implementation, if so how did you overcome these?

The initial promotion of PsychLiverpool was slow but through the use of advertising via social media platforms and email the website has become a well-used platform for students; PsychLiverpool received over 100,000 hits in 2019 with hundreds of visitors each week.

Which Liverpool University Hallmarks and Attributes does this case study relate to (tick all boxes that apply)

Research-connected Teaching
Active Learning   X
Authentic Assessment
Confidence   X
Digital Fluency   X
Global Citizenship

How does this case study relate to the Hallmarks and Attributes you have selected?

Active Learning
PsychLiverpool takes place outside of the classroom, so students are gaining independence to explore their ideas and new knowledge. They can engage with topics that relate to coursework and address them from different perspectives, including with novel research.

Confidence
Students gain confidence in skills such as networking and public engagement which are transferable to a variety of contexts. They also gain confidence in their ability to express their ideas and opinions.

Digital Fluency
Editors use both editorial and audio software to create blogs and podcasts: these are transferable skills for which training is provided. They also interface with the online platform to upload the information. Students who write or comment on blog contributions gain skills relating to the creation of digital content and digital communication/networking.

How could this case study be transferred to other disciplines?
We believe that other disciplines could create their own blogging platforms, podcasts, or both covering research in their disciplines.

This is relevant to any discipline as it will enhance student-staff communication and partnership and the student experience through the sense of community.

If someone else were to implement the activity within your case study what advice would you give them?
- Ensure you have a good team of engaged and enthusiastic staff and students to begin with;
- Encourage students to cover topics that either cover research in your discipline or offer advice for students;
- Proofread blogs;
- Ensure a consistent format of blog posts for professionalism;
- Have a comprehensive guide for students to upload the blogs in the correct format.

References

Dunne, E. & Zandstra, R. (2011). Students as change agents: New ways of engaging with learning and teaching in higher education.

Forsythe, A. (2017). I doubt very seriously whether anyone will hire me; factors predicting employability perceptions in higher education. *Cogent Psychology*, *4*(1). doi: 10.1080/23311908.2017.1385131

Healey, M., Flint, A, & Harrington, K. (2014). Engagement through partnership: students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education.

Additional Resources

- PsychLiverpool website
- PsychLiverpool on Twitter @PsychLiverpool
- The PsychLiverpool Podcast on Apple Podcasts
- The PsychLiverpool Podcast on SoundCloud
- Forsythe, A., Demirbag, E., & Warren, J. (2019). Student voices in academic writing: PsychLiverpool a community for meaning making. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, (16).
- Sergio, S., & Forsythe, A. (2018, January). Blogging as a pedagogy: The award-winning 'PsychLiverpool Blog' and how it is developing a community for meaning-making. *Psych-Talk*, (89), 8-10.