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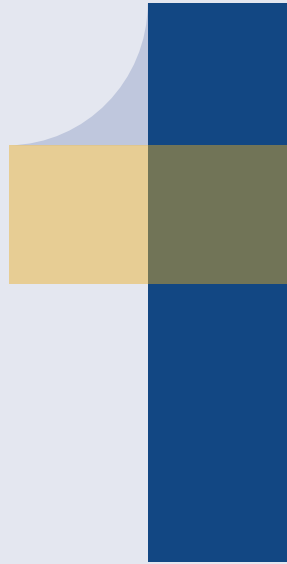
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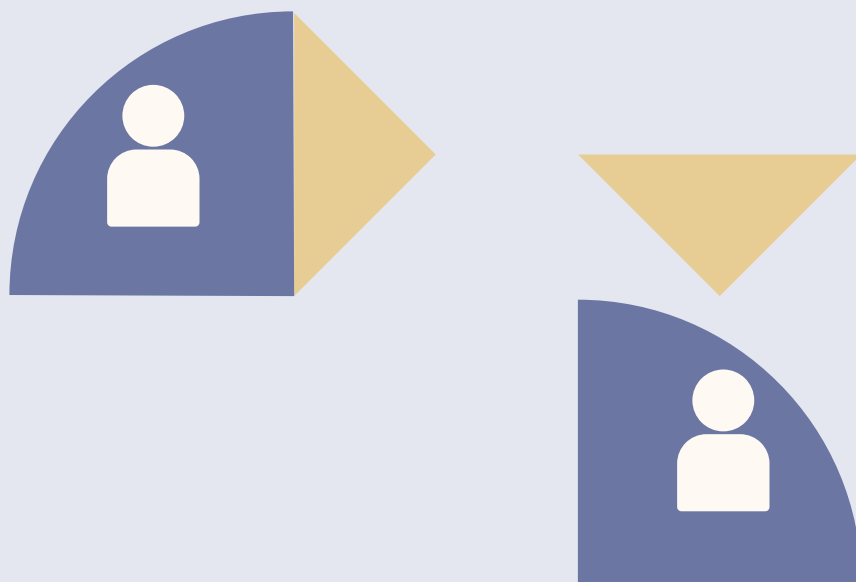
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# Team Teaching and Learning Fellowships 2020



## Participatory mechanisms for reviewing and redesigning curricula with students



## Title

Participatory mechanisms for reviewing and redesigning curricula with students

## Fellows

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“ Long after your students have forgotten the 14 causes of the War of 1812, the Pythagorean Theorem and the sonnets of Shakespeare, they will remember a much more important lesson: how you made them feel about themselves and their possibilities in this life. ”

*John Jay Bonstingl*

## Abstract

Research from a range of sectors indicates the benefits of enabling user participation in service design. In universities, however, questions remain about the usual mechanisms used to obtain student feedback in relation to the quality and utility of the data obtained, the extent to which students participate in feedback processes or experience these as meaningful, and whether academics are willing to revise their teaching based on feedback. This project piloted participatory mechanisms of involving students in the review and redesign of a module. It used processes from the fields of restorative practice and design thinking to enable dialogue and partnership between students and the lecturer on an undergraduate module, LW380 Victimology, after its initial delivery. It was found that restorative and design processes were attractive to students as methods of providing feedback.

It enabled them to articulate the strengths and weaknesses of the module and teaching approach in a sophisticated manner, and to participate in co-creating practical and transferrable ways to meet future students' needs. The benefits for the lecturer were vast, supporting their efforts to design educational and supportive materials and activities, to empathise with students, and to reflect on their teaching practices, as well as opening new avenues for pedagogical learning.

## Project overview

The Project Lead is an early-career researcher with a passion for teaching, but with limited pedagogical training or education. The academic year 2019/2020 was their second-year teaching at Maynooth University, and the first year delivering LW380 Victimology, an optional module aligned with their research, to final-year criminology undergraduates.

Having built a good relationship with the cohort over two years, the lecturer was keen to obtain feedback on their teaching practices and materials to help them improve these in the future. Yet, despite students' willingness to participate in class and provide ad hoc, verbal feedback in person, the lecturer received few responses to their end-of-module electronic survey – an issue they had experienced previously.

The lecturer is a restorative practitioner and had collaborated with the project partner from the Maynooth Innovation Lab on many activities that year. Having observed similarities between their fields (restorative practices and design thinking share certain principles and incorporate processes that enable participatory decision-making), and conscious of their shared interest in education innovation, they identified the Team Teaching and Learning Fellowship as an opportunity for collaboration.

Restorative practices (RP) are a set of skills and processes that help consciously build positive relationships and facilitate participatory approaches to learning and problem solving. Similarly, design thinking (DT) is an approach to problem solving that uses designers' tools and approaches creatively to integrate the needs of people, requirements for organisational fit and possibilities of technology. It focuses on defining the problem and framing it from a human perspective.

The project piloted RP and DT to enable student participation in the review and redesign of LW380. This module had around 70 students and ran for the first time in 2019/20. Shortly after it finished, the academic partners asked for expressions of interest from the students in participating as research assistants (RAs) and Team partners.

With funding from the Fellowship, they hired four students to help design the project, collect and analyse data, and determine the outcomes. Following COVID-19, the Team decided that the work could happen online and, after a short delay, they went ahead in a manner not far from the original plan.

## Project outline

The project was divided into three phases, which took place between April 2020 and April 2021.

### Phase 1:

We used restorative practices to involve students from the module in an initial round of data collection. A practice known as a circle process – a mechanism of structuring a group dialogue in which a facilitator asks questions, and each participant is given an opportunity to respond to each question or to pass, without interruption – was used to structure four, two-hour, online dialogues, to which 25 students (from 70 on LW380 Victimology) attended in total. The questions asked were:

1. Tell us where you are these days, and your energy levels out of 10.
2. What have you been up to the last week or so?
3. Why did you want to participate in reviewing the victimology module?
4. How did you find the victimology module overall?
5. What was good about the victimology module that I should continue doing? (Open question: Was there anything said that you agreed with or disagreed with?)
6. What was not good about the victimology module that I should stop doing? (Open questions: Was there anything said that you agreed with or disagreed with? What could I do to improve upon anything that was said?)

- If you could add, change, or develop anything about the content, topics, the materials or the way it was taught, what would it be? It could be something another lecturer did.

**Lecturer leaves the room**

- Is there anything else that you found positive about the module?
- Is there anything else that you think could be improved about the module?
- Have you any other ideas for changes to the teaching style, content, or materials?

**Lecturer returns to the room**

- What are your feelings about the circle as a way of getting student feedback?

Two RAs attended each circle to take notes and assist in its facilitation: the lecturer facilitated the start of each group, but left the room for a period (questions 8-10 above).

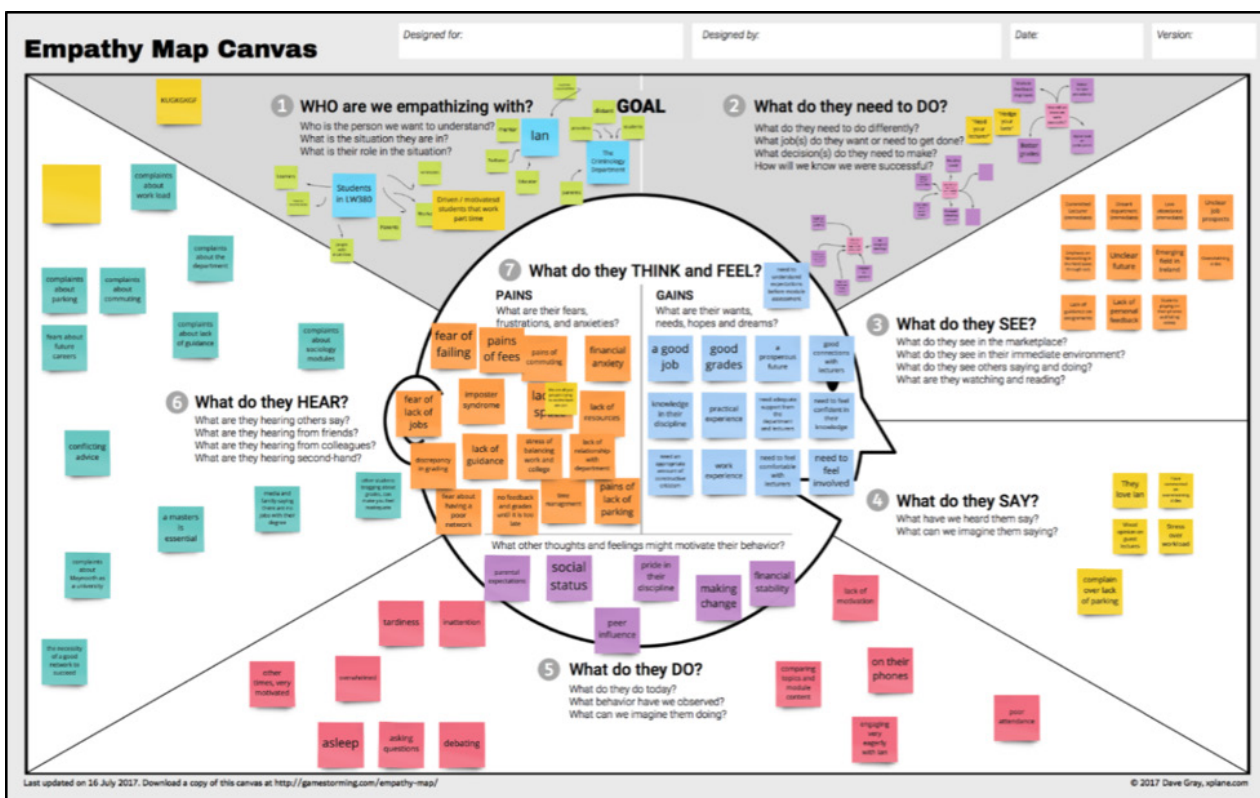
After the four circles, the RAs analysed the data collectively and identified emerging themes. They also sent a survey to students from the module, which asked about experiences of the criminology programme more widely, receiving 13 responses.

**Phase 2:**

The team underwent a four-step design workshop to capture, make sense of and make actionable the insights gained in Phase 1. This was undertaken using the online design tool Miro.

**Step 1** used an empathy map (Figure 1) to put the RAs ‘in the shoes’ of a student from the module. This provided a framework to discuss and capture observations and quotes from Phase 1. It helped the group organise the data in such categories as ‘What does the student: see, hear, do, say, and need to do?’, and asking ‘What they are thinking and what they find painful or want to gain, from the module or otherwise?’

**Figure 1:** Empathy map



**Step 2** involved voting on the most important data from the empathy map. Five themes emerged: class climate/discussion; assignments; guest lectures; module presentation; time management. A design process reframes themes into questions, starting with ‘How might we?’, to support creative approaches to ideation. Three questions emerged: ‘How might we maintain class climate in blended/online learning?’; ‘How might we ensure that all topics are covered while also having time for a class discussion?’; and ‘How might we make the assessment more accessible for students?’ Following a further vote, they selected the first question for analysis in Step 3.

**Step 3** used a decision-making tool to identify and vote on the enablers and barriers to maintaining a positive class climate online. Three key issues emerged: that students prioritised grades over learning; that it is difficult to enable group work online; and that the lecturer had several modules to plan for online delivery in September 2020. These were reframed into more specific questions for Step 4:

- How might we provide sufficient clarity about assessments so that the students can dedicate the remaining class time to learning about victimology?
- How might we help students form bonds and be comfortable with open communication?
- How might we offload some of the lecturer’s work to the RAs?

**Step 4** involved brainstorming around the three questions. Ideas were created, voted on and ranked, and the RAs developed an implementation plan based on the top ideas. This plan was presented to the lecturer, who made 20 commitments in relation to the module, based on the students’ observations.

### Phase 3:

The Team organised a 1.5-hour workshop with the criminology teaching team (over 20 lecturers from six departments). Ten lecturers from four departments attended to hear the findings and participate in experiential learning in restorative practices, supporting reflection on their values, on the findings, and on student participation in reviewing modules and providing feedback generally.

## Findings

Based on the data and the process, the RAs identified four key themes: assessments, class climate, class discussion, and learning materials. In terms of assessments, they noted that students valued expectation clarity and choice in the assessments available. For class climate, observations included the importance of empathy and open dialogue in building trust and an informal, respectful relationship. This linked to the third theme, class discussion: the students enjoyed participating in discussions, so lecturers should build opportunities and time for this into their classes. The risk, however, is that classes become unstructured and run out of time; games or quizzes can help ensure that this does not happen. Relatedly, with respect to the materials, they found that the organisation and quantity of slides caused undue stress for students, particularly those who missed class or began with the slides when revising for their exam. The four themes linked closely to the themes of the 20 commitments:

1. **Assessments and guest lectures:** maintain guest lectures but align these better with class content; maintain essay linked to guest lectures, but revise assessment so that students write fewer, longer pieces; RAs to draft assignment FAQ; and RAs to draft and review next year’s essay questions.

2. **Lecture slides and materials:** divide slides into even documents; reduce words on slides; indicate which slides relate only to class discussion; revise the warning at the start of the module to reflect the goal of validating feelings; RAs to draft a slideshow to help the lecturer reflect on materials; provide varieties of media with which to engage (e.g. podcasts); work with RAs to record a lecture on researching for assessments.
3. **Community building and participation:** take steps to maintain class climate online during COVID; adopt a more structured approach to community building and class participation; include a game or quiz; bring RAs into a class to speak about assessments and reassure students; ask students for their input into which guest lecturers they would like to hear.
4. **Miscellaneous:** recognise core importance of class climate; review literature and concepts in this area; find more ways to involve 'past' students in module review; organise RP training for RAs.

The above commitments were virtually all implemented, with the exception of those (e.g. guest lectures) which were made more difficult by the pandemic. For example, the FAQ was written and the lecturer felt they had far fewer of the common questions they tend to receive about the assessment. They reduced the number of words in their lectures by 19% per slideshow and by 26.9% per slide; the slides which only had images increased from 2.4 to 4.5 per lecture. The lecturer shared a range of podcasts to complement or replace between-class readings and worked with RAs to record a video on researching for assessments, which students viewed 121 times this year. (Screenshot 1)

**Screenshot 1:** 'Researching for assignments' video

The screenshot shows a Zoom meeting in progress. On the left, a Google search for "police culture" is displayed. The search results show several relevant items:

- [BOOK] Understanding police culture** by JP Crank - 2014 - books.google.com. Description: "Police culture has been widely criticized as a source of resistance to change and reform, and is often misunderstood. This book seeks to capture the heart of police culture—including its tragedies and celebrations—and to understand its powerful themes of morality, solidarity ...". Cited by 1105.
- Changing police culture** by J Chan - The British Journal of Criminology, 1996 - academic.oup.com. Description: "This paper reviews the concept of police culture and its utility for analysing the impact of police reform. The persistence of police culture has been considered a serious obstacle to reform, but the concept itself has been poorly defined and is of little analytic value. Drawing ...". Cited by 897.
- [HTML] Taking stock: Toward a richer understanding of police culture** by EA Paoline III - Journal of criminal justice, 2003 - Elsevier. Description: "Police researchers have long speculated on the importance that culture plays in the everyday functioning of officers. Most characterizations of police culture focus on describing the various elements and facets of a single phenomenon among occupational members (eg ...". Cited by 632.
- [BOOK] Police culture: Themes and concepts** by T Cockcroft - 2012 - books.google.com. Description: "Police culture has for over half a century attracted interest from academics, students, policy-makers, police institutions and the general public. However, the literature of this area has proven to be diverse, sprawling and prone to contradiction which has led to an entraining ...". Cited by 220.

On the right side of the screenshot, a grid of Zoom participants is visible, showing several students and staff members engaged in the meeting.



It was also found that students – both those involved in Phase 1 and the RAs – appreciated the opportunity to participate in a meaningful way in providing feedback. To provide some quotes about the circles from those involved in Phase 1:

*“When you said you can pass, I thought I’d pass on each question, but I ended up speaking every time.”*

*“I like being able to bounce off of other people’s ideas.”*

*“People don’t say anything if you ask ‘who wants to talk’ because... that’s just how it is.”*

*“You always get a turn, even if you’re a quiet person in a room full of loud people.”*

*“It’s a very respectful process.”*

*“Even if you have a quiet thought that you’re not super passionate about, you’ll share it.”*

*“I might incorporate it on my friend’s zoom chat, it would be good for family feuds.”*

## Key reflections

- Having students as partners leads to better materials and ideas for additional materials that meet students’ needs. The FAQ, the inclusion of podcasts, and the motivation to improve the slides, all emerged from this. The above recommendations may or may not suit every context, but the point is that the recommendations perfectly suited this module and lecturer because of the student participation.
- Partnering and listening deeply to students provides an opportunity to build understanding and empathy in both directions. The students who were involved got a better sense of the wide range of activities that lecturers do when they are not teaching classes. For the lecturer, it was a chance to better understand what was important to students and how they experienced his teaching. The lecturer expected the feedback to focus mostly on topics, but this seldom came up. Rather, students wanted to praise class climate, participation, and guest lectures, and to express concerns with unstructured materials and their intimidation by assessments.
- These methods and the structured review of the module created an opportunity – or, perhaps, a requirement – that the lecturer reflect deeply on their practices. Like many university lecturers, they had little pedagogical training, and spent limited time reflecting on successful teaching. As a social scientist (a criminologist) with high expectations of the public professionals they study, the lecturer realised it was hypocritical not to invest time in reflecting on their own practices.
- Student participation was much higher than in end-of-module surveys. One interpretation of this relates to Lundy’s Model of Participation: while surveys give students space and voice, if they are not convinced that lecturers look at them (audience) or use them (influence), they will not see it as a meaningful opportunity to participate. Students may have participated here because they knew the lecturer would listen to them in the circles and trusted that they would make changes. In other words, these methods allow lecturers to be held fully accountable to students and may enable greater participation as a result.

- The prominence of class climate in the data opened new avenues for pedagogical learning for the lecturer, for example, situated learning, relational pedagogy, and group cohesion

## Recommendations

- Assessments should adhere to the principles of 'fair process': engagement, expectation clarity, and explanation.
- Build more dialogic forms of student participation into end-of-module feedback, for example, by appointing students to engage with lecturers, to collect data from other students, to review materials and to answer lecturers' questions.
- Lecturers should obtain training in restorative practices and design thinking and engage with those in Maynooth University who have these capacities.
- Build opportunities to support relationships, understanding, and empathy between students and lecturers into modules and programmes.
- Reflect on the questions you have about your teaching that only students can answer, and the assumptions you make about students' motivations, goals, and needs. Talk to your students about these.

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**Find Out More:** To find out more about this fellowship project, please contact Project Lead Dr Ian Marder, [ian.marder@mu.ie](mailto:ian.marder@mu.ie).



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