



All actors involved in the action learning experience shared an understanding that the process can trigger a sense of engagement around local social issues, which can develop a collective consciousness of participants as change makers.

Exercise with participatory drawings at St Mary's Priory Infant and Junior School

## Exploring the potential of relationships between university and civil society for meaningful learning and collective action

**What is the potential of action learning relationships between the university and civil society? Under what conditions can these relationships flourish and contribute to advancing social justice? In this research briefing, we would like to present key evidence from research conducted in London, in which we explored an action learning experience between three actors: the MSc Social Development Practice (a Masters programme in The Bartlett Development Planning Unit, University College London), Citizens UK (a UK charity devoted to community enhancement), and 8 schools in different London neighbourhoods.**

Our research shows that in the action learning experience the different actors involved are able to gain a sense of engagement around social issues, which can develop a collective consciousness as change makers. This engagement is possible through a shared learning process and collective co-creation of knowledge that can inform future policy campaigns. We have also identified potential obstacles to this kind of initiative, which are related to structural constraints.

These come from university regulations that fail to recognise the demands of achieving social impact, despite the increasing priority placed on 'impact' by research funders. However, our research shows that relationships based on trust and collaborative attitudes go some way toward overcoming those obstacles. In order to boost the key enablers of this engagement and to diminish the disablers, a set of recommendations are offered to all the actors involved.

## Introducing the main actors of the action learning initiative:

- The **MSc Social Development Practice (SDP)** aims to provide the practical skills and theoretical foundations needed to address the challenges and complexities of social development in cities marked by inequality and social diversity. This requires a planning approach that focuses on the household and community levels, and which is able to build the capacity of people to engage as agents of social change with a range of other institutional actors. The action learning initiative discussed here is part of the 'practice module' of Masters programme, which involved 35 Masters students, one lecturer, two teaching assistants and a visiting researcher.

- **Citizens UK (CUK)** is a UK-based charity that organises communities to act together for power, social justice and the common good. Its aim is to develop the leadership capacity of their members so they can hold politicians and other decision-makers to account on the issues that matter to them. In the action learning, five community organisers were involved, as well as the lead organiser for London Citizens.

- Eight schools, based in different neighbourhoods of London, and all members of Citizens UK, participated: **City and Islington College, Hendon School, St Mary's Priory Infant and Junior School, The Willow Primary, Greenwich Free School, City Of Westminster College, Corelli College** and **St. Paul's Academy**. A total of 100 students and 8 teachers were involved.



## The action learning experience

During the first term of the SDP Master (October- January) and as a part of its practice module, the Masters students conducted participatory research about the impact of housing on learning. Drawing on Amartya Sen's idea of capabilities, the students explored how the housing conditions of school students are affecting their learning aspirations and opportunities. The project builds on concerns about the impact of London's housing crisis on education, which were voiced during the listening campaign that informed the Citizens UK Housing Manifesto in 2015-16.

To answer their research questions, the Masters students applied different research methodologies: participatory photography, surveys, relational meetings, face-to-face interviews and personal narratives.

Also, in each of the 8 schools, potential action plans were designed with the aim of creating potential collective actions that the school students could take to address the issues highlighted by the action learning process.

This initiative reflects and draws from The Bartlett Development Planning Unit's (DPU) critical pedagogical approach, facilitating learning activities that are embedded, collective, reflexive, relational, active and trans-disciplinary (Allen et al. 2015)<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, it is aligned with University College London's (UCL) 2016- 2021 Education Strategy, by putting research and critical enquiry at the heart of learning. It contributes to the implementation of the strategy's commitments towards the Connected Curriculum framework, by helping to ensure that "students have regular opportunities to present their work and to apply their theoretical learning in practical contexts" (UCL, 2016: 7)<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Allen, A., Boano, C., Frediani, A. A., Levy, C., Lipietz, B., & Walker, J. (2015). Decentering Urban Learning: DPU's Pedagogical Project. *Urban Pamphleteer*, 5, 35-38.

<sup>2</sup> University College London (2016) Education Strategy 2016-21, Office of the Vice-Provost, Education & Student Affair, UCL. [https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/sites/teaching-learning/files/migrated-files/UCL\\_Education\\_Strategy\\_Final\\_Web.p](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/sites/teaching-learning/files/migrated-files/UCL_Education_Strategy_Final_Web.p)

## The research

From October 2016 to January 2017, a visiting fellow observed the action learning process described above and explored it through different methodologies and exercises. Thirteen in-depth interviews were conducted, with: teaching staff of the DPU; the UCL Public Engagement Office; school teachers; community organisers and directors of Citizens UK. There were also two workshops with SDP students and teaching staff, and an analysis was conducted of secondary information related to the Masters Programme and UCL public engagement policy.

## What are the most valued goals of the action learning?

For all the actors involved there is a common understanding that this action learning can trigger a sense of engagement around local and social issues, which can in turn develop a collective consciousness among participants of their potential as change makers.

Specifically, for the **SDP students and teaching staff**, some of their goals are related to:

- Applying theoretical frameworks and concepts to practice and acquiring a wider set of skills through practice.

- Experiencing the development environment in the UK (given that the majority of students are from other countries) and understanding the complexity among and within different actors.

- Understanding through practical methodologies how research can be participatory.

- Taking action that is relevant to policy.

For **Citizens UK**, the action learning helps them:

- To be more accountable to their constituencies, providing to the Masters and school students a meaningful space for learning.

- To obtain research-based evidence to inform their own campaigns.

For the **school students and their teachers**, the action learning makes it possible:

- To provide a space for the school students to research, have a voice and obtain recognition, especially through the interaction with Masters students.

- To become aware of how housing conditions affect pupils' learning.

- To translate the research into some practical action in the schools.



Discussing the results of the action learning at City and Islington College

## What are the main enablers of the goals?

- A **network of trusted relationships** between organisations, based on an alignment of visions between the SDP Masters programme and Citizens UK. There was agreement that **collaborative attitudes** based on respect, flexibility, openness and a will to engage with practical action make it possible to initiate and maintain these relationships. Moreover, certain key individuals have demonstrated positive leadership, experience and a sense of optimism which helps to overcome the difficulties intrinsic to a process marked by uncertainty, like this kind of action learning.
- For the academic staff involved, a key enabler is the **peer support** provided by DPU staff, which allows them to engage in this kind of initiative despite some larger institutional barriers. Another positive enabler is UCL's recognition of public engagement as an academic activity.
- Our research shows the importance of giving structured and timely **theoretical and methodological orientation** to the Masters students. This helps often inexperienced students to conduct the research and make it replicable.
- Also, **accompaniment** by academic staff and CUK community organisers was identified as a key enabler to Masters students. Where it happens, this forms a good foundation for SDP students in gaining access and interactions with the school participants.
- The **selection of the research topic** has proved to be crucial. The relation between housing conditions and learning aspirations was relevant for CUK and the schools, and also was attuned with the capacity of DPU staff.
- The good quality of the **research outputs** and their potential to inform campaigns and policies and to bring practical action in schools, were also identified as key enablers of this engagement.

## What are the obstacles to attaining the goals?

- The research shows the **institutional constraints** faced by an engagement of this kind: lack of physical space to conduct the learning activities, the increasing size of the student body and associated rise in the student-teacher ratio and, generally, the lack of institutional norms to recognise the workload of an engagement of this kind. All of this seriously hampers the action learning experience and makes it difficult to replicate. and, generally, the lack of institutional norms to recognise the workload of an engagement of this kind. All of this seriously hampers the action learning experience and makes it difficult to replicate.
- Also, academic staff face **pressure** to obtain more **research** grants and to publish in reputable journals. This can discourage academics from participating in time-consuming public engagement activities and mean that academic engagement relies too much on the commitment and disposition of particular individuals.
- Masters students come from different origins and backgrounds and do not usually have previous professional experience with participatory methodologies. As a result, **limited contextualisation** of the places, institutional context and policy environment in which participatory research is embedded, was identified as a potentially dangerous disabler, particularly when combined with **limited feedback and accompaniment** from DPU staff and Citizens UK community organisers.
- **Timing** is a crucial issue and should be seen as a constraint for this kind of initiative. Masters students have little time to be trained and to engage with the school students, which can make it difficult for the latter to apply the research methodologies properly.
- Our findings show that Citizens UK needs more **economic support** from the UCL, as is provided by other London universities. Increasing of economic resources would allow Citizens UK to provide further support to counteract certain other disablers, such as staff to accompany the Masters students in schools.

## Nurturing and sustaining a university-civil society engagement: Recommendations for all the actors involved

- To maintain an engagement of this kind it is essential to identify a strategic scope of collaboration that **responds to the interests of civil society organisations** and university partners. These interests should shape the collaboration throughout, from the design of the research process to the production of outputs. For this, it is essential to have 1) a common understanding of the goals of this engagement, 2) detailed planning of the activities included to attain the goals and 3) a realistic consideration of the resources that should be involved.

- To make the learning process more meaningful for the Masters students in light of their diversity of backgrounds and origins, it is important that the academic staff **provide a strong theoretical and practical orientation** throughout the module, with **a stronger emphasis on information on the local and wider policy context**. It is also paramount to **provide continuous feedback and support** to the groups of students.

- For most Masters students, this is a challenging exercise which demands an effort to understand a different and complex context, to perform in a different language, and to put (often new) facilitation skills into practice. Students need to **be autonomous and innovative**, while being sensitive in navigating the diverse power relations among stakeholders involved.

- For the university system, it is essential to **recognise that this kind of engagement embodies current higher education pedagogy in a socially meaningful way. This requires and justifies strong institutional support**: adequate physical space; reasonable limits on the size of the student body; appropriate recognition of the time required from academic staff, which recognises the need for additional preparation and contact hours; and sufficient financial support to involve additional teaching assistants.



Final exhibition at UCL

- For the civil society organisation, it is important to be aware that the Masters **students will need support and accompaniment** in their action learning process, which should be considered and planned in advance. Specially important is the role of community organisers who act as gatekeepers in the communities and facilitate the engagement of the Masters students.

- Also, for the civil society organisation, it is important to **understand the potential constraints that the academic staff are facing and align their expectations with the specific expertise of the academics involved** (which include teachers and students). This could make both the process and the outputs of this engagement more fruitful.

- Finally, our research shows the paramount importance of **attitudes** that should be cultivated throughout the engagement: **respect, collaboration, flexibility, openness and a will to engage with practical action** are examples of appropriate attitudes to make the engagement meaningful and to build trusted relations.

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