



Storying Sheffield: setting up a new module in which UG students work alongside people from the city to produce narratives about Sheffield life and their experiences

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What's the issue?

The school of English recognises that the lack of social diversity among its student body (students are predominantly white, female and middle class) may have an impact on students' learning and their preparation for life beyond the University. It also feels that this might discourage people from more diverse backgrounds from applying to study at the School.

What happened next?

Undergraduate students began a module in which they worked alongside people who have tended to be socially excluded and whose voices are less likely to be heard and studied. This year, the 'non-undergraduates' have been long-term users of mental health services. The university waived their fees and they were registered as students for the duration of the course.

There were 32 students studying on the module; 17 short course (external participants) and 15 long course (undergraduates). Initial sessions covered many areas: narrative as a research method; listening skills; representing life stories using creative means; using images to represent narrative; telling stories through objects; and the history of the imagination. These sessions were led by a wide variety of speakers from within the University, providing short-course and long-course students with the *same* academic input.

After this, both sets of students worked *together* to produce works of narrative drawn from the lives and imaginations of the external participants. Outside of the seminars, the undergraduate students organised and promoted an exhibition at which the creative work was showcased and the short-course students received their university certificates. www.storyingsheffield.com has been set up to tell the story of the module and to host students' work.

What did the students say after the project?

Long Course Students:

"We value the opportunity to study in a very different way from the majority of other modules – in particular, the creative and group work aspects of the module"

"The course has removed some of the stigma about mental health for me. It helped me to realise that they are people just like anyone else."

"Working with people from very different backgrounds from ourselves and with very different experiences to our own, was a challenging but valuable learning experience."

"We developed skills that make us more employable, especially putting on the exhibition. We can show that we are organised, can think for ourselves and can lead a group."

"This course really allows you to think without limitations creatively... you're not told off for the way you think, you're praised for it."

Short-course students:

"Having a student card was another boost to your confidence; a feather in your cap."

"University gives young people confidence and a bit of that confidence has rubbed off on us"

"This experience has given me the confidence to do a counselling course."

"Storying Sheffield has given me the confidence to apply for jobs and I have been successful. I start my new job three days after the exhibition. It's been six years since I last worked."

"It's helped me to start to mix again."

"Made me think differently and look at Sheffield differently"

"Gets you out of a rut of being down – helps you to realise that creative aspects exist in you."

What can we learn?

- It is crucial to consult colleagues in a variety of academic and professional areas, particularly in mental health services.
- It is difficult logistically to register students on short courses. Make sure a procedure is in place.
- There should be a role for a Key Worker, who has a pre-existing relationship with the service-users on

the course, in order to provide support and expertise.

- Undergraduate students should feel prepared for the unstructured approach to the course. They need the right level of guidance at the outset to ensure that they can approach their work creatively while being reassured that they are on the right track.