

Chapter Title: Connecting learning, teaching, and research through student—staff partnerships: Toward universities as egalitarian learning communities

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Book Title: Shaping Higher Education with Students

Book Subtitle: Ways to Connect Research and Teaching

Book Editor(s): Vincent C. H. Tong, Alex Standen, Mina Sotiriou

Published by: UCL Press. (2018)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt21c4tcm.7>

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Connecting learning, teaching, and research through student–staff partnerships

Toward universities as egalitarian learning communities

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1. Introduction

Students and staff engaging together, as partners, in the learning, teaching and research endeavour is gaining prominence internationally. Recent special issues of established journals (e.g. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 21, 1; *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 23, 5) and featured pieces in newer journals (e.g. *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal*, 1, 1; *Teaching, Learning and Inquiry*, 4, 2) present both principles and practices of student–staff partnership as individually and institutionally transforming. While definitions of student–staff partnership continue to evolve as we develop language to name this new form of engagement, there are basic principles

that underpin partnerships. They are manifesting themselves in multiple ways across the globe, and have particular implications for research-based education that embraces student–staff partnerships.

2. Defining student–staff partnerships in higher education

We begin with some working definitions drawing on our experiences, research and practices. Cook-Sather et al. (2014, 6–7) have defined partnership as ‘a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis’. Healey et al. (2014, 12) have defined partnership as ‘a relationship in which all involved – students, academics, professional services staff, senior managers, students’ unions, and so on – are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together’. Thus, ‘the linchpin of partnership’, as Matthews (2016, 2–3) has argued, ‘is a relational process between students and academics/staff underpinned by a mindset’ – what Cook-Sather and Felten (2017) have called ‘an ethic of reciprocity’. Such an ethic embraces the principles of respect and shared responsibility, as well as reciprocity, in teaching and learning (Cook-Sather et al. 2014).

As an idea, partnership speaks to an institutional culture that values students as participants in knowledge construction, as producers of knowledge, within the university learning community. This translates into students being active participants in their own learning in the classroom and engaged in all aspects of university efforts to enhance education. For many universities, this is a radical cultural shift from *staff making decisions to benefit students* toward a mindset where *students and staff are working together* – as colleagues, as partners, as trusted collaborators – with shared goals.

There are a number of classifications in the literature of the different ways in which students may act as partners in learning and teaching in higher education (e.g. Healey et al. 2016). One distinguishes between students as teachers, students as scholars and students as change agents:

Students may take on the role of teachers through peer-learning and assessment or through taking on responsibility for co-teaching

with staff and other students; they may act as scholars through being involved in subject-based research and inquiry; and they may engage as change agents through undertaking scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) projects, co-designing the curriculum and acting as pedagogic mentors and consultants to staff. (Healey et al. 2015, 142)

The advantage of this classification is that it sees ‘students as partners’ as an umbrella term incorporating, rather than separating, their multiple roles as teachers, scholars and change agents. While engaging students and staff together, in partnership, is pushing the boundaries of how universities typically involve students in the teaching and learning enterprise, how participants in partnership conceptualise their roles and share responsibility for teaching, learning and research plays out differently in different contexts.

3. Examples of student–staff partnerships in higher education

Drawing on the classification model offered by Healey et al. (2015) above, we offer some examples of student–staff partnerships in which students take on the role of teachers through peer-learning, engage as change agents and co-design the curriculum, and act as pedagogic consultants to staff.

Peer-assisted learning models actively involve students in an effort to enhance student disciplinary learning. For example, Peer-Assisted Study Sessions (PASS), or peer mentoring, involve upper-level undergraduates facilitating study sessions in first-year subjects, where student facilitators design and implement learning activities in a safe, low-stakes (no assessment) environment (Brown et al. 2014; Meinking and Sweeney 2016). While student facilitators work with staff to design learning activities for the introductory subjects, they also work with students in the sessions offering alternative explanations for course materials while supporting study habits in the crucial first-year transition to higher education. These approaches value the role of students in the teaching enterprise – students as teachers.

New thinking about the roles of ‘students as partners’ in the university community is creating space for students and staff to engage in teaching enhancement efforts together. For example, there are programmes where students and staff partner on designated teaching and

learning projects (Marquis et al. 2016). In addition, student-proposed and student-led projects (Dunne and Zandastra 2011) as well as university centres (Hald 2011) are also emerging, along with institutional partnerships between student unions and institutional leadership (King et al. 2016). These examples of student-staff partnership position students as scholars and change agents.

Successful examples of students and staff collaborating to co-create curricula highlight the contributions both groups make to designing and implementing courses (Bovill et al. 2011). Students and staff working together to develop and refine curricular materials and new subjects value the role students can play in curriculum development (Duah and Croft 2014; Woolmer et al. 2016). Structured approaches that position students as consultants enable open dialogue between students and staff about teaching as it unfolds in real time (Cook-Sather 2014, 2016).

These exciting practices value the contribution of students, alongside those of staff, in defining and enacting solutions to enhance teaching quality in ways that extend beyond drawing on students as a source of institutional data. Engaging students as co-teachers, co-researchers and co-creators, they embody 'students as partners' practices and demonstrate how students and staff can work together in non-traditional 'student' and 'lecturer' roles to enhance the core functions of higher education: learning and research.

4. Linking student-staff partnership to research-based education

Whereas seeing students as change agents is relatively new, students have engaged in disciplinary research-based learning for much longer (Fung 2016; Healey and Jenkins 2009). Students and staff collaborating in research, particularly at the undergraduate level, is well established and recognised as a powerful learning model where both students and staff benefit as they work together toward knowledge creation. Research-based education originated as part of educational innovations at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the United States and was expanded with support from the National Science Foundation. These efforts focused on recruiting talented and engaged students to join or lead research activities (Kyvik et al. 2015). A parallel movement has since developed to make undergraduate research available to all students (Healey and Jenkins 2009). However, the language of 'student as

producer' and 'student as partner' has been applied to these practices only recently (Neary 2014; Healey et al. 2014).

In the same way that disciplinary traditions and norms inform the ways that teaching and research are linked (Healey 2005), assumptions about realms of responsibility and the roles of students and staff are informed by long-standing traditions. Student–staff partnerships challenge these traditions. They link realms that have traditionally been the purview of one or another constituency and blur the boundaries of roles that have traditionally been clearly delineated and defined.

Such linking and blurring is manifest in one of the most powerful components of both research-based education and student–staff partnership: an insistence on valuing and acting on multiple perspectives. Research-based education that embraces partnership principles of respect, reciprocity and shared responsibility not only positions students alongside staff as legitimate producers of knowledge, it contributes to a culture shift that moves institutions toward a more collaborative mode of operation. Research-based education that embraces partnership principles takes another step toward transforming universities into egalitarian learning communities.

5. Transformative change for egalitarian learning communities

What are the roles of students in shaping the university learning experience? This is a big question, and engaging students and staff as partners in learning, inquiry and curricular and pedagogical co-creation enacts a vision for higher education that positions the perspectives and contributions of both learners and teachers as essential. In our hyper-competitive, increasingly managerial-orientated university settings where everyone is frantically busy, creating genuine learning environments in which students and staff are able to collaborate authentically, will be difficult. Yet, for universities that believe in the values of engaging students and staff as partners in learning, these challenges are being addressed with long-term planning grounded in cultural change. UCL is an example of such a university.

The broad idea of 'students as partners' offers both a new construct and a new language to encompass existing practices and to present new approaches that value students and staff working together on the shared project of teaching and learning in higher education (Matthews 2017). The terms we use to name our practices are tied to communities and their

culture – habit of minds, values and reward systems, policies and practices, ways of working and thinking. Student–staff partnership is more than a set of practices with new names; it is an opportunity to transform institutional cultures by harnessing the strength of the relationship between learners and teachers working together.

Because they require and are beginning to constitute a new mode of engagement in higher education, the ideas and practices of student–staff partnerships and the terms we develop for them must be unpacked, debated and challenged through multiple forms of research and reflection. Risks will have to be identified and guiding principles and values framed and reframed as these new approaches and the language to name them evolve. Such evolution necessitates spaces for students and staff, together and separately, to contribute to our shifting understanding. A new journal, *International Journal for Students as Partners*, is such a space, dedicated to advancing the research and practice of student–staff partnerships. It is a journal about partnership, developed and conducted in partnership with a student–staff editorial board from Australia, Canada, the UK and the USA.

International interest in student–staff partnerships is growing and universities will continue to have to grapple with how these partnerships work at the local level. The extent to which we value students and staff working collaboratively informs the transformative potential of partnership. This potential applies not only to individual experiences but also to the shift university cultures can make toward egalitarian learning communities. In such communities, students and staff are genuinely co-inquirers in teaching, learning and research. To realise this potential, all members of the university community will have to embrace new ways of thinking about the relationship between learners and teachers in the process of knowledge creation.

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