Engaging students as partners in learning and teaching (2): practical guidance for academic staff and academic developers

Bovill, C.[1], Felten, P.[2] and Cook-Sather, A.[3]

[1] University of Glasgow, Scotland, UK, [2] Elon University, North Carolina, USA, [3] Bryn Mawr College, Pennsylvania, USA.

Abstract
There has been growing interest in engaging students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education in the last five years. As a result, many academics seek practical support and advice for working in partnership with students. This paper provides guidance for academic staff wishing to initiate, sustain or extend student-staff partnerships. It also highlights the key role of academic developers in supporting student-staff partnerships.

Introduction

In the higher education literature, there are many different examples of students and staff working in partnership to co-create learning and teaching experiences. These initiatives include examples of students as co-researchers (Healey & Jenkins, 2009), students as change agents (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011); 'student as producer' (Neary 2010), students as consultants (Cook-Sather, 2010) and students as co-creators of curricula (Bovill, 2014). Partnerships are focussed on a range of learning and teaching areas, with examples including: students choosing assessment methods and co-grading (O'Neill, 2011; Deeley, 2014); students co-creating the content of courses (Duah & Croft, 2011; Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014); students co-evaluating courses (Bovill et al, 2010), and students selecting text books (Mihans et al, 2008).

Many of these initiatives have provided evidence of beneficial outcomes for both students and academic staff, namely: an increased level of engagement with learning and teaching; enhanced learning and teaching practices; and a deeper meta-cognitive understanding of learning and teaching processes (Cook-Sather et al, 2014). Intrigued by these findings, many academic staff and academic developers have asked us for guidance as to how to start, sustain, and extend partnership work. In this paper we draw on a recent publication in which we have synthesised research on student-staff partnerships in learning and teaching (Cook-Sather et al, 2014), in order to suggest strategies for supporting academic staff at different stages of partnership.

Guidance for staff starting, sustaining or extending student partnerships

On the one hand, engaging students as partners in learning and teaching is considered by many staff and university senior administrators to be unequivocally positive. On the other hand, some staff are wary of giving over control of elements of learning and teaching to students. Concerns often focus on: students not having enough subject knowledge to be able to contribute meaningfully; professional bodies leaving little room for negotiation of course

learning outcomes; assessment providing a quality assurance function in higher education and therefore not being open to partnership; and the challenge of achieving equal partnership between students and staff.

These real and percieved concerns can act as a barrier to partnership. Different disciplinary and institutional contexts can lend themselves to different levels of partnership, and there may be circumstances where it is difficult to enact partnerships between students and staff. In many cases concerns and challenges can be overcome, and we have developed the following practical guidance based on our own experiences as well as using the literature focused on engaging students as partners in learning and teaching (Cook-Sather et al, 2014).

Getting started

If academic staff are in the early stages of considering engaging students as partners in learning and teaching, handing over some decision-making to students can seem as if things could quickly become out of control. We are not advocating that staff hand over full control of learning and teaching to students; there is still a critical role for teachers' expertise (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000). Partnership involves partners bringing different but equally valued perspectives and knowledge to discussions.

We think it is important to **ensure that participation is voluntary**. Requiring participation creates a tension with the principles of partnership. Partnership challenges many existing conventions in higher education learning and teaching, so staff need to be clear about the purposes and nature of partnership and be welcoming when inviting students into partnership.

In the early stages of getting started, things can feel more manageable if staff **start small**. This is both practical and prudent. The approach needs to be manageable in each particular context. There may be existing practices that could be adapted to include students as partners, such as involving students in collecting and discussing student feedback of courses and then collaboratively acting on the outcomes of this feedback.

Be careful about the **language** you use to describe your partnership. It can often unintentionally reveal assumptions about staff retaining some control over the learning and teaching process.

Academic staff need to **think carefully about which students to involve in partnership**. If not all students are to be invited into partnership, clear criteria will be needed for selecting students. Think carefully about the implications of choosing, and by implication not choosing, particular groups of students. One solution to this issue is to work in partnership with an entire cohort of students.

In the early stages of partnership it is crucial to **create shared aims**, by ensuring that all involved recognize themselves and others as legitimate partners who bring valuable perspectives and expertise to the project.

Throughout the time spent in partnership, it is important to **be patient**. Things do not always go according to plan. Sometimes staff and student expectations of partnership do not match and students and staff may need to take more time to share expectations and jointly negotiate a plan.

Staff who are relatively new to partnership or are in the early stages, can try to **cultivate support** for working in partnership with students. There are usually other colleagues who are interested in, or are undertaking, partnership work. It can be valuable to meet with others to discuss the partnerships and support those who might otherwise be working in isolation.

At all stages but particularly at the beginning, **learning from mistakes** is key to moving on to the next stage of partnership and adapting and enhancing how staff and students work in partnership with the potential for further learning from future partnerships.

Sustaining and deepening student-staff partnerships
Where partnerships have been established, it is important to try to **integrate partnerships into other work** that is going on. This can really help with partnership sustainability if connections can be made between everyday activity and partnerships. Similarly, try to maximise any institutional opportunities for integrating partnerships into ongoing work.

Another way to help sustain partnerships can be to **offer rewards for working in partnership**. This applies to both students and staff, many of whom may be strongly motivated to work in partnership without a reward. For students, course credit, payment and other incentives can be helpful for sustaining longer-term partnerships, particularly where partnership work is not an integral part of their curricular activity. Institutions could consider whether staff who establish and sustain partnerships with students are rewarded for this work through, for example, promotion criteria or teaching excellence awards.

To deepen existing partnerships it is important to **enhance diversity**. Ensuring that a diverse range of students and staff engage in learning and teaching partnerships and are open to the richness of perspectives that arise from this diversity, can contribute to deepening partnerships and the learning and rewards that arise from partnerships.

Another key strategy for deepening and sustaining student-staff partnerships is to **offer learning development opportunities for staff and students** involved. Often staff can attend academic development sessions and students can receive student representative training, but in many institutions these opportunities are not focused on student-staff partnerships in learning and teaching.

In order to sustain student-staff partnerships, it is important to **value the process** of partnership, and not just focus on what partnership can lead to in terms of outcomes. The processes of negotiating power, learning to work in partnership across traditionally hierarchical boundaries and sharing the co-construction of knowledge with others, can be transformative experiences for both students and staff.

It is also important to plan to **formally end partnerships**, and to build this planned ending into the shared aims of the partnership. This acknowledges to everyone involved that the time and effort involved is not unending, and can make it easier for individuals to agree to participate in partnerships.

Extending student partnerships
Where staff have managed to establish and sustain a partnership and now wish to extend this further, we suggest several areas of guidance. First, **consider your own attitudes to power within student-staff partnerships**. Within higher education classrooms, students typically have very limited agency – although we are seeing traditional notions of the lecturer and the

student being increasingly questioned. Often structures and processes are organised in ways that constrain students in what they can do and how they can behave and lead to them adopting a passive role. Mann (2008) argues that this passivity then "constrains the student's autonomy and the capacity to take responsibility" (p. 61) while simultaneously reinforcing institutional and staff power and authority. Ironically this is taking place in the context of the higher education sector's desire to enhance student engagement.

Second, **develop ways to negotiate with students and colleagues**. Many of us have not been taught explicitly how to negotiate and it can be challenging for both staff and students to learn these skills. It is not desirable to move from staff being completely in control to students being completely in control. Partnership implies a sharing of responsibility, a respect for others' views and a reciprocal relationship. So one key issue is to decide how decisions will be made, such as through majority vote, or listening most closely to the under-represented. Learning to compromise or build consensus may be unfamilar skills and collaboratively setting early ground rules can be a good starting point to discuss how decisions will be taken.

Finally, **be honest about where power imbalance lies**. If there are constraints that mean students cannot have agency over particular curricular decisions, we need to be transparent about these and the rationales underpinning these contraints. For example, students may not be able to decide whether the course is assessed by an examination or another form of assessment, or a professional body may stipulate specific competencies that students must demonstrate at the end of their degree – these may be seen as non-negotiable areas of the curriculum over which staff maintain control. Yet, in in some contexts staff may consider the method of assessment as genuinely negotiable. We must be clear about our rationales and motivations if we are to avoid students experiencing empty claims of partnership that can lead to disillusionment and a sense that we are manipulating students for our own purposes.

Implications for academic developers

All of the strategies above may be directly relevant to academic developers for their own diverse practice, as well as for their role in supporting other staff. For example, in trying to cultivate support for partnerships, academic developers may either offer this support directly or be able to help to identify other academics and students who are already working in partnership.

There are also some specific opportunities that academic developers have where they may be able to help to support and sustain student-staff partnerships. These opportunities include: building on existing good practice among academic staff who have been working in partnership with students; 'practicing what we preach' in terms of co-creating academic development provision with staff and students; offering academic development and training to both staff and students initiating or sustaining learning and teaching partnerships; and acting as a bridge between academic staff and senior individuals in the institution to influence policy and strategy that reflects the critical position of partnership approaches within higher education (Bovill et al, 2011; Cook-Sather et al, 2014).

Conclusions

We offer this guidance for establishing, sustaining and extending student-staff partnerships in order to support those who are motivated to work in partnership, whether by a desire for more democratic classrooms, or to enhance student engagement, or by the extensive benefits that are beginning to be documented from successful examples of student-staff partnerships in learning and teaching. We do not suggest that working in partnership is easy, and our

guidance has been a response to some of the challenges our colleagues have shared with us. However, we have also heard many accounts of the transformative power of student-staff partnerships in learning and teaching and we hope the strategies in this paper help contribute in some small way to others experiencing exciting and rewarding partnership processes and outcomes.

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