Exploring understandings of partnership in higher education using methods from corpus linguistics

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There has been a proliferation of references to partnership in the discourse of learning and teaching policy and practice over recent years (Healey, Flint & Harrington 2014, p. 12). Although the term is more frequently present in higher education documentation and parlance, there is little agreement over what constitutes a partnership in learning and teaching (Healey et al. 2014) and it is recognised that the term is difficult to define (Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten 2014). The documentation that seeks to guide those establishing partnerships in learning and teaching (e.g.: QAA 2012 ; NUS 2012 ; HEA 2014) outlines the values that support effective partnership (such as trust, openness, shared responsibilities, empowerment) and recent research reveals how the values of partnership are played out in practice (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). As Healey, Flint and Harrington note, however, "partnership is multi-faceted and has a number of different meanings and purposes dependent on context" (2014, p. 24). We argue that corpus-based methods can support the formulation of context-specific definitions of partnership by challenging people to reflect on what partnership is, who is involved, and how partnership differs from other ways in which staff and students work together in a particular setting.

A corpus in linguistics is a collection of texts (written and/or spoken) that can be explored and analysed using a corpus query system, also called corpus access software or concordancer (see e.g. Hunston, 2002; McEnery & Hardie, 2011), in our case Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al., 2014). After exploring the absolute and relative frequencies of occurrence of the word 'partnership' in a variety of (sub)corpora (see Table 1), we suggest two corpus-based activities that can support the exploration of the contexts and patterns in which 'partnership is' used.

Table 1: frequency of *partnership* in different corpora (using simple query)

	Corpus	Frequency	Relative frequency
whole corpus	BNC	4,153	36.98 per million
	ukWaC	210,478	134.90 per million
	enTenTen	1,204,510	53.00 per million
	New Model Corpus	6,187	54.00 per million
Sub-corpus	enTenTen – uk only	112,307	4.90 per million
	en TenTen – ac.uk only	5,671	0.20 per million
	ukWaC – ac.uk only	24,966	16.00 per million

As a first step and to familiarise you with the typical output of a corpus search, we discuss how corpus outputs can be used to observe "the 'central and typical'",

"meaning distinctions", "meaning and pattern", and "detail" (Hunston 2002, p. 45-52) by close reading of the concordance lines. This is also a technique used in Data-Driven Language Learning, where close reading of concordance lines can help language learners discover typical patterns of use (ibid). You can explore patterns of usage of 'partnership' by looking closely at the concordance lines from different sets of documents. We used a random sample of 50 concordance lines from: the ukWaC (which stands for 'UK Web as Corpus', a collection of texts from UK-based web domains, see Ferraresi, Zanchetta, Baroni, & Bernardini, 2008); from the ac.uk sub-corpus of the ukWaC, which means texts from academic pages only; from a random sample of UK universities' Strategic Plan, plans that guide universities' work. Figure 1 provides an example of 5 concordance lines from the ac.uk sub-corpus of the ukWaC.

Figure 1: example of concordance lines from the ac.uk sub-corpus of the ukWaC

strategies and Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers. The importance of working	**partnerships**	between the urban poor, local government and other stakeholders is also
recognises the hard work put in by all team members and the successful	**partnerships**	formed with universities, institutions and the private sector both in
CPMs, other Jobcentre Plus staff and local authority staff, childcare	**partnerships**	, and other childcare related organisations. One of the key areas the
inclusion project (1999-2002) Funded by the DfEE This project was based upon a	**partnership**	between the Learning from Experience Trust, Goldsmiths College, Lewisham
schools 14-19 'A Tertiary strategy in every community' 5. Life-long learning	**partnerships**	. 6. 10% of the those entering secondary education are already disaffected

The concordance lines are examples of the different ways and contexts in which partnership is used in everyday language (when looking at the sample of ukWaC concordance lines) and also more specifically within higher education (when looking at the ac.uk ukWaC sub-corpus, and the Strategic Plans). These usages can then be contrasted with your own understanding of what the term 'partnership' in learning and teaching encompasses.

These understandings can be further developed by investigating what using the term partnership offers when compared to other words. The thesaurus function in Sketch Engine yields a list of words "automatically generated based on algorithms that look for words which appear in similar contexts in a text corpus" (https://www.sketchengine.co.uk/user-guide/user-manual/thesaurus/, see also Kilgarriff et al. 2014). The output of this function based on the whole ukWaC corpus shows that in this corpus of everyday web-based language, initiative, collaboration and relationship behave in similar ways. A useful exercise is to ask yourself what would distinguish, for example, a staff-student partnership from a staff-student collaboration, an initiative or a relationship.

What both of these activities do is to bring to the fore the variety of meanings that partnership has both within and outside higher education. In seeing how the term is used in everyday language, in academia more generally, and in the Strategic Plans that present a particular management-focussed view of higher education, we can better see how these differ from our understandings of what partnership means in learning and teaching. We need to find ways to talk about the values, practices and rationale for learning and teaching partnership that help embed this more technical use of an everyday term within higher education and not see the term appropriated, in the minds of people who could potentially use it for purposes that run counter to the rejection of the consumer model that partnership can provide (NUS, 2012).