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Student-staff partnership in learning and teaching

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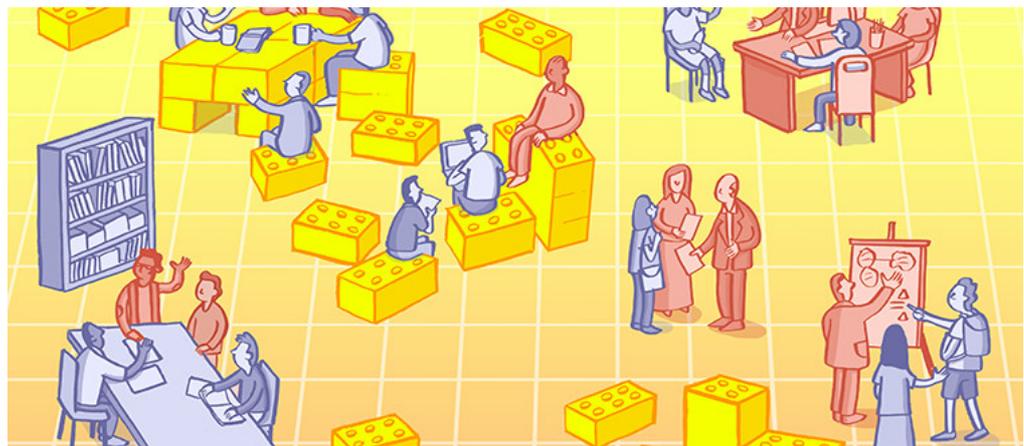
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Abstract

This article focuses on student-staff partnership working in a UK university and draws on literature and practice, particularly from the UK and the US where it is emerging as an approach to educational practice - although the ways in which the concept is interpreted and undertaken vary significantly. The authors describe a range of initiatives undertaken during the past six years and identify some of the challenges, opportunities and learning derived from this work.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to share the learning from student-staff partnership work undertaken in the School of Education and other Schools in the University of Hertfordshire (UH) and to identify current work we are undertaking in this area. The article introduces the concept of student-staff partnership in higher education and then describes the work that has been undertaken in this area within the University of Hertfordshire during the last six years, with a particular focus on the School of Education. It draws on data collected using a range of research approaches - for example, documentation of partnership group meetings, participants' reflective activities and interviews with students and staff engaged in partnership and with other academic colleagues, including those in leadership roles such as Deans of Schools. Based on practice in a UK higher education setting this article contributes to understanding staff-student partnership and provides links to practical resources that can be used to inform and support those working in this field.

Student-staff partnership

Student-staff partnership is a concept that is defined in different ways and has a number of purposes and practices. It generally involves students and staff working together in a way that is different from the established teaching and learning relationship in the institution. It often entails some form of collaborative work which may result in the production of resources for learning, additional education provision provided by students or the co-creation of modules or courses. It can be seen as a way of: engaging students in their own learning through innovative and enquiry-based teaching approaches (Healy et al. 2014); enabling students to work with staff to develop learning and teaching provision and practice (Cook-Sather et al., 2014); helping students develop as learners and gain 'self-authorship' (Baxter Magolda and King, 2004); replacing the concept of 'student as consumer' (Neary and Winn, 2009); hearing 'student voice' (Czerniawski and Kidd, 2011) and having student representatives on advisory and decision-making bodies so that students as well as staff contribute to making the university, thereby enabling students to act as a form of 'change agent' (Dunne and Zandstra, 2011).

The term 'partnership' itself can be an issue as assumptions may be made about how this term is used; it could be assumed, for example, that both partners are 'the same' or have equal power. However, partnerships are usually made

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between individuals and groups that are different, and part of the purpose is that they each bring different things to the partnership in order to enrich it and make it more effective. The term partnership does suggest that the individuals or groups involved all have something to gain from the context and that the contribution of each is recognised and plays a significant part in the process and outcome. Partnership is a term that has been used sometimes by university management in a way that implies this way of working is a given and it can then be seen as part of the performativity agenda, thereby alienating staff from the concept. It could also be seen as a way of engaging students to undertake work that staff have not time to do. For example, a project undertaken to develop resources for a science skills course enabled the employment of students to develop materials which were seen as engaging and appropriate due to the students' understanding of the needs of their peers, but it was also noted that the course could not have been created by the staff alone as they 'did not have the time available' (Woolmer et al., 2016:21). In this particular project the university, staff and students gained from the work of the participating students and these students gained in terms of payment, new skills and insight into learning and it is reported that they valued the opportunity to work creatively in a group.

That particular project developed a product and many student-staff partnerships have identified outputs, but most also emphasise the importance of the process of students and staff working together and the gains in mutual understanding and personal and professional development by both groups. This suggests that there needs to be an investment of thought, time and energy in the creation of the process itself and an acknowledgment of the potential difficulties in relation to power, authority and perceived purposes of the partnership work. The importance of paying attention to the process was a factor that emerged during the course of early partnership working in the School of Education at the University of Hertfordshire.

Student-staff partnership at the University of Hertfordshire

School of Education Funded Partnership Projects

Members of staff from the School of Education worked with colleagues from the Schools of Humanities and Law for three years (2010-2013) on student-staff partnership projects which were funded from internal grants (Dean's funding and Learning and Teaching Institute grant) and from the UK Higher Education Academy (HEA). This work was undertaken by small groups of staff and students outside the context of taught programmes. The projects involved staff and students working together to undertake enquiries into aspects of learning and teaching. These included: effective use of feedback on academic assignments; developing reading skills in Law; identifying effective ways of supporting academic writing; and a number of smaller projects based on specific modules. Outputs included student and staff information leaflets, a video on using feedback, materials for developing academic literacy and presentations contributing to understanding in the topic areas, both internally and externally. External presentations included one to the UK network for university pro-vice chancellors (student experience) and another to all HEA staff. A paper describing the work is available online (Jarvis et al., 2013).

While the outputs from the different projects could be useful to others in the sector, the process of working, and ongoing analysis and development of the process, was the focus. This was because we were looking to create ways of working that could enable both staff and students to work together and to learn from the process. We were aiming to develop knowledge, understanding and skills for leadership of learning, of both one's own learning and of other peoples'. In order to create a group working context, the whole group of students and staff involved in the projects met together for two hours each fortnight. In those sessions we identified learning and teaching topics for enquiry, explored research approaches, planned data collection and later analysed data, identified where findings needed to be shared and then created suitable outputs. The way in which these sessions were conducted was crucial if we were to enable both groups (students and staff) to be learners and leaders. We used a 'host' leadership approach (Wheatley and Frieze, 2011; McKergow and Bailey, 2014) in which an identified person or people take responsibility for bringing people together and initiating the agenda, but they then step back to allow others to contribute and lead, finally collating the thinking and identifying shared agreement on the way forward. This requires attunement to conversation in the moment and a holding of the space to allow ideas to emerge, as well as paying attention to the ultimate purpose of the group. The purpose here was two-fold: first the professional growth of the participants; and second gaining and collating knowledge of the particular topic, such as academic writing, that could be shared beyond the group.

A student-staff group is a context of significant power differences and this needed to be attended to. As Brookfield (2013) notes, one cannot remove the power differentials but can use a range of strategies to lessen their impact. We drew on a range of ideas from the 'building learning communities' literature (Stoll and Louis, 2007; Hord, 2009; Bielaczyc and Collins, 2013), which we discuss below, in order to create effective learning relationships. A key factor was that we recognised the context as educative for all of us and this drove the practical decisions we made. Students identified that they had gained a range of graduate attributes while undertaking the partnership projects and we have summarised this elsewhere (Dickerson et al., 2016). They also reported their developing understanding of themselves as learners and what it meant to learn in academic contexts and to contribute to the development of others.

Baxter Magolda and King (2004) have worked over many years in learning partnerships with students in order to enable students to develop 'self-authorship'. They argue that working in a group with staff and students mutually constructing knowledge enables students to move from dependent to independent learning and to develop their own views of the world and ways of acting within it. They argue that partnership working supports self-authorship by '…validating learners' capacity as knowledge constructors, situating learning in learners' experience and defining learning as mutually constructing learning' (Magolda and King, 2004 pp xix). This was enabled in the group context by staff positioning themselves as learners and articulating and showing what they were doing in this role and inviting students to be learners with them. This could be seen to relate to the concept in teacher education of 'modelling practice' by staff not only showing the practice but also articulating what they were doing and why (Lunenberg et al., 2007). In the context of the student-staff groups the process of learning through enquiry became explicit in the actions and the language of the group as people worked together. This was helpful for staff members too, as different perspectives and ideas could be made clear to everyone. Staff from different disciplines would have different understandings of educational enquiry (Cleaver et al., 2014) and these could be surfaced and discussed. In this context, students were learning through the process, as were staff, and members of both groups were able to undertake different leadership responsibilities so were learning how to lead and facilitate groups.

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In order to collate and share our ideas about the process of building partnership we developed a resource containing materials we used, procedures we put in place and ways of dealing with a range of issues that arose. The creation of this resource was part funded by a Diamond Fund Award from the University of Hertfordshire (Jarvis and Dickerson, 2016). In addition we obtained funding from the HEA to create materials to enhance the practice of building partnership learning communities.

Building Partnership Learning Communities

As we developed and shared our projects we identified that the process of building a working group was important and needed to be highlighted so that we could share practical ideas with others. We looked at the work on partnership learning communities because we were focusing on learning within the group and we were looking to create a cohesive and collaborative group context. We undertook a literature search and analysed the themes in the texts which we could relate to our own work. We divided the themes into two key aspects of the process of building a community: learning and relationships. The themes in relation to learning were inquiry, leadership and focus. We saw inquiry as an important approach to take in partnership work as it enables all participants to be learners. Leadership had to pay attention to the purpose of the process, that of the learning of everyone, and had to enable all to take initiative and all to follow at different times. Focus was seen as important in a partnership project and we identified that while we would all have the same focus, for example on reading processes in Law, we might have different purposes for engaging in the project and that this was not an issue.

Relationships are clearly important in any group and we saw paying attention to power dynamics, and developing relevant strategies, was significant to the running of the group. Ethics was one of our key concerns, partly because of the often sensitive nature of what we were looking at, such as other people's teaching, and we saw integrity and confidentiality as vital, as well as a duty of care for each other. In addition, communication was an important area of work and we undertook activities on listening and giving feedback that enabled challenge and support within the group. We identified the principles we developed through our work on process as shared responsibility and co-agency. We worked towards using these principles but the nature of the staff-student relationship meant that in all our projects staff felt the need to take overall responsibility for the wellbeing of all involved, although students also took responsibility for individual aspects of projects and for the care of participants, including staff. Across the three years, staff tended to be leaders of the initial sessions, particularly as the student group inevitably changed as students graduated and left the university. However students gradually took initiative and led the projects in directions that had not been predicted. To enable developing student agency it was important that the purpose of a project was identified early, but the direction it took emerged through co-construction within the group.

As Cook-Sather et al. (2014:2) suggest in their text on students as partners, 'All practice is guided explicitly or implicitly by underlying principles: they are the spoken or unspoken commitments according to which we act'. They identify that the principles that underpin their work in the field are those of 'respect, reciprocity, and responsibility' and they show how these could be developed in the context of different projects. Their text was written as a guide for staff who were beginning to work in a partnership context. We found that when we presented our work at conferences we were asked to identify specific approaches to create the conditions to enable students and staff to work collaboratively together, so we used our learning in this field to create a resource with a number of activities under each of the themes that could be useful to groups starting to work in this way. This was funded by the HEA and is available on their website (Jarvis et al., 2016a).

Student-staff partnership across the University

We were aware that other Schools in the University of Hertfordshire were also undertaking student-staff partnership work. The School of Computer Science, for example, had won an award from the HEA in this area in 2014. So we applied for the opportunity to be part of an HEA strategic enhancement programme which gave support for building projects into a wider context and embedding them into institutional ways of working. We wanted to identify similar work in the University so that we could share ideas and build capacity. Having been successful in becoming part of this HEA programme, we then undertook a scoping study across UH to find out more about practice that students and/or staff were labelling as 'partnership working'. A questionnaire was sent via email to ask students and staff for definitions of partnership working, its benefits and challenges, and examples that they knew about or had been involved in. Respondents noted that the term itself was difficult to define and some preferred the use of 'collaboration' as being more realistic. They perceived the benefits of this type of work to be in terms of outcomes (better practice or resources for example), the development of skills by all participants and increased understanding of each other's perspectives. Challenges involved time and space to meet, developing collaborative working relationships and the negative views of some students and staff towards this type of work that might stop people getting involved.

We interviewed individuals who had identified as having experience of being involved in staff-student partnership groups and documented each example in a short case study. As can be seen in the case study collection we created (Jarvis et al., 2016b), the examples are very different in terms of time-frame, numbers involved and purposes. Currently we have examples from seven Schools within the University and from one central unit. Most involve extra-curricular activities around learning and teaching but some are based within the curriculum or have a disciplinary subject focus. We are continuing to collect more case studies. We have brought together partnership project leaders from across the University and we have agreed to work together to share this work more widely, starting with a campus-based event in the next academic year.

New student-staff partnership work in the School of Education

New partnership work is being undertaken within the School of Education. Graça Martins (Student Experience and Peer Mentoring Co-ordinator) and students working in partnership with her are preparing a piece for the next edition of LINK which explores their partnership approach to peer mentorship and student leadership. Chris Collins and Claire Dickerson are working with a group of students in Year 1 of a BA Early Childhood Education programme to explore aspects of their learning during their first semester. Lewis Stockwell, Karen Smith and Philip Woods have obtained funding from the

Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain to undertake a project entitled 'A philosophical investigation of partnership in higher education'. They intend to create a philosophically informed framework of partnership, which highlights the different types of partnership in higher education and critically reviews how current partnership models in higher education policy and practice can be mapped onto their moral/philosophical underpinning. This can then be shared in order to inform policy and practice.

Implications for practice

The concept of student-staff partnership working has been acknowledged as challenging, particularly as it changes the relationship between students and staff (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). Published work on partnership tends to be celebratory and to emphasise the positive, ignoring issues and less successful projects. This is partly due to the difficulty for researchers and teachers in publishing work about their own contexts which may not show their institution in the way it would like to be seen. Additionally, as Pesta et al. (2016: 63) note, partnership working can appeal to those interested in social justice and to those pursuing marketisation which can mean that '…working in partnership with students is not a straightforward commitment for universities..' or, we would argue, for individual staff and students hoping to engage in partnership and explain their engagement to others. Part of the issue is that universities are struggling to work out their role and the way they see their students, staff and the process of learning.

Student-staff partnership as a concept is part of the current shifting, contradictory messages about the purpose of universities, of degree courses, and how students and staff should act. Our experience of the way we have acted within this context is that it is a challenging way of working with great rewards in terms of personal and professional learning. Colleagues in other Schools in the University are also identifying their own ways to engage students and staff together in collaborative contexts based on their own purposes. For the time being we are all working at a local, small group level and making connections with others which energises our practice and helps its articulation. This enables us to be part of a 'significant network' (Roxå and Mårtensson, 2009: 215) where we can develop our practice and also connect to scholarship in the field. The extent to which this network, and others created by the individuals within it, can influence our institution will depend on how they relate to disciplinary learning and teaching cultures and the ways in which they connect with educational practices in the wider University.

Further details on Staff Student Partnerships can be found on StudyNet (login required).

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