Embracing epistemic confidence, open-mindedness, and co-creation: An exploration of how the psychological constructs of attitudes and intentions can inform staff contributions to successful student-staff partnership

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Abstract

Through developing particular "attitudes" and "intentions"—constructs from the field of psychology—staff can contribute to successful student-staff pedagogical partnerships. We focus in this discussion on the attitudes of epistemic confidence in students and of open-mindedness to students' knowledge and contributions—attitudes consistent with the premises of partnership. We link these attitudes with the intention to co-create educational experiences with students—an intention consistent with the practice of partnership. After exploring their importance to partnership work, we offer three strategies through which staff can nurture these attitudes and this intention. We conclude with implications for future work.

Introduction

There are relatively few explorations of how concepts from the field of psychology can illuminate and inform pedagogical partnership (Cook-Sather et al., 2020; Cook-Sather, Allard, et al., 2021; Cook-Sather et al., 2017; Kaur & Mohammad, 2019). Using the psychological construct of "attitude," we explore two attitudes staff can develop to contribute to successful partnership work. The first is epistemic confidence in students—extending to students Fricker's (2007) notion that all people should be affirmed as knowers. The second is open-mindedness to students' ability to reflect on, affirm, and revise pedagogical practice. Linking these attitudes with the psychological construct of intention, we focus on staff intention to co-create educational experiences with students through shared processes of reflection, affirmation, and revision.

It is essential to nurture staff attitudes and intentions that will make partnership work most likely to succeed because, with some exceptions (Cook-Sather, 2021), it is typically staff who initiate pedagogical partnerships. We therefore offer three strategies through which staff can nurture the attitudes of epistemic confidence and open-mindedness and the intention to co-create. These strategies are: (1) developing conducive epistemic beliefs before embarking on partnership; (2) engaging in opportunities for opening minds through dialogue with a diversity of people and perspectives; and (3) practicing co-creation through cross-constituency conversation in different venues.

Defining our terms

We define attitudes as mental schemas, states, and dispositions informed by strong affective phenomena (feelings, beliefs) and evaluative components (Ajzen, 2001), unconscious bias (Eberhardt, 2019), and culture (Markus & Kitayama, 2001). Formed as a result of intense personal experiences, events, and episodic memories in a person's life (Pajares, 1992)—all of which take place in particular cultural contexts—attitudes inform intentions, which lead to behaviours. Intentions to achieve difficult goals are more likely to be carried out—to be embodied in behaviours—when people form implementation intentions (Ajzen, 2001). The process of forming implementation intentions can be facilitated by embracing particular attitudes.

We define pedagogical 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" (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014: 6–7). The premises of pedagogical partnership are respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014). These premises can be consonant or in conflict with different cultural perspectives. Therefore, part of partnership work is engaging in multiple forms of translation (Cook-Sather, 2018)—of finding words and ways of being with others that respect and respond to their identities, commitments, and practices in context.

Just as teachers' attitudes determine their pedagogical choices and practices (Dweck, 2012) and affect how they assess student capacities and treat them as knowers and beings, staff attitudes determine whether they will consider or embark on pedagogical partnership work. If staff do choose to engage in such partnership, attitudes affect their choices about who participates and how (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2019). Below we discuss why staff embracing the attitudes of epistemic confidence in students and of open-mindedness to students' knowledge and contributions is essential to successful pedagogical partnership.

Open-mindedness to students and their contributions

Open-mindedness, which is related to but more encompassing than epistemic confidence, is "an active disposition to welcome points of view hitherto alien; an active desire to entertain considerations which modify existing purposes" (Dewey, 1916: 175). If epistemic confidence in students is willingness to believe that they have essential knowledge, open-mindedness is the willingness to question the completeness of one's own knowledge—to believe that there is something more or else to know. Dewey's explanation of open-mindedness highlights a readiness to transcend beliefs by challenging, revising, and/or rejecting one's own assumptions and the beliefs and attitudes that follow from them.

Cook-Sather (in Healey & Healey, 2018) argues that to do partnership work, one must be "willing to be uncertain, open, receptive, responsive as well as tentative, humble, courageous, and daring through the give-and-take of developing and sustaining partnership work." As an example, when asked if they had experienced any conflicts or disagreements with their student partner, a staff member asserted: "'I wanted constructive criticism to improve my teaching. So, I welcomed ALL comments to improve my pedagogical

techniques'" (quoted in Abbot & Cook-Sather, 2020: 9). Such a statement demonstrates openness to whatever the student offers in particular as well as an attitude of open-mindedness in general: recognition of the incompleteness of one's own knowledge and the value of others' knowledge. It does not mean that staff need to accept and act on everything students say; rather; it means that staff need to be open to dialogue about and learning from what students say.

Open-mindedness is recognised not only as an intellectual virtue (Kwong, 2017) but also as a moral virtue (Spiegel, 2012). It facilitates the development of democratic values and respect for others' experiences and perspectives in the same way that cognitive justice does: "the equality of knowers forms the basis of dialogue between knowledges," and "what is required for democracy is a dialogue amongst knowers and their knowledges" (Leibowitz, 2017: 101). The manifestation of open-mindedness as a moral virtue is the willingness to listen carefully and to acknowledge and consider seriously others' perspectives.

The moral or ethical dimension of open-mindedness takes the notion of receptivity to others' perspectives, which could be experienced as a passive virtue, into the realm of imperative—requisite as a manifestation of recognition of students as beings worthy of respect as both knowers and contributors (de Bie et al., 2021). Through working in partnership, staff who take the time to listen out of respect can develop "respecting voices" (Cook-Sather, 2020).

The intention to co-create educational experiences with students

We argue above that when staff have epistemic confidence in students, they are willing to believe that students have essential knowledge, and when staff are open-minded, they are willing to question the completeness of their own knowledge. Embracing these two attitudes can inform staff intention to co-create with students through partnership. The intention to co-create through partnership is a commitment to reciprocity, not delivery—to shared and respective growth, not reproduction of existing understandings (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017).

Co-creation can unfold in various arenas of engagement, including: learning, teaching, and assessment; scholarship of teaching and learning; subject-based research; and curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2016). It can conceptualise students in a variety of roles, including: consultant (sharing and discussing valuable perspectives on learning and teaching); co-researcher (collaborating meaningfully on teaching and learning research or subject-based research projects); pedagogical co-designer (sharing responsibility for designing learning, teaching and assessment); and representative (ensuring student voices contribute to decisions in a range of university settings) (Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, et al., 2016). And it can position all students as partners, as in what Bovill (2020) calls whole-of-class co-creation, in which all enrolled students are co-creators of curriculum, or it can position students as collaborators, co-facilitators, and co-inquirers from more liminal positions (Cook-Sather, 2022)—when students are not enrolled or participating in a given forum.

Such a commitment to co-create through partnership "complicates the seemingly one-way reaching out from those in a privileged center to students who are at some perceived remove" and promotes instead a "reciprocal reaching across" the spaces of partnership "to

support pedagogies that turn our differences from divides into possibilities for more life-affirming human connection" (Cook-Sather & Porte, 2017). Pedagogical partnership promotes as well as requires such a commitment to co-creation, but it does not automatically achieve it (de Bie et al., 2021). The exclusive nature of some partnership work based on normative assumptions about identities (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2019) and low scalability (Bryson et al., 2015) can perpetuate systemic inequity (Bindra et al., 2018; de Bie et al., 2021) and reinforce students' sense that partnership is not for them (Marquis et al., 2018). Embracing the ethical imperative that partnership opportunities should be accessible to all students (Bovill, 2019) is an attitude that counters skepticism regarding students' abilities, responsiveness, and readiness to participate (Cook-Sather et al., 2014) and foregrounds inclusion, equity, and justice (Cook-Sather, 2019; Cook-Sather & Agu, 2013; Cook-Sather & Des-Ogugua, 2019; Cook-Sather, et al., 2019). The creation of inclusive partnerships necessarily requires renegotiation of staff's epistemic beliefs about sources of knowledge, the nature of knowledge, and knowing about teaching and learning.

How can these attitudes and intentions be nurtured?

Identifying and analysing the source of attitudes is vital in determining the degree of attitude change or formation of new attitudes necessary. It is also essential to have opportunities to formulate intentions informed by the attitudes we have discussed, which, as Ajzen (2001) notes about the intention-behaviour relation, will make staff more likely to follow through on those intentions. Finally, having opportunities to practice co-creation makes it more likely that conducive attitudes and the intention to co-create will be consistently realised. We offer a strategy for nurturing each of the attitudes and the intention we have discussed.

(1) Develop conducive epistemic beliefs before embarking on partnership

Each potential staff participant in partnership needs the opportunity to unearth, analyse, and identify existing epistemic beliefs and, in some cases, develop new ones that allow for recognising students as knowers. Reflecting on his work with a student partner, a staff member said: "'There's a need to overcome something that I would have thought had I not heard [the students'] thoughtful comments: What do they know?'" (quoted in Cook-Sather et al., 2019: 26). This staff member articulated what became the first threshold concept to pedagogical partnership that Cook-Sather and her student co-authors (2019) identified: Students have valuable knowledge of and important perspectives on teaching and learning. Other threshold concepts include:

- Student partners are not subject matter experts
- Reciprocity in partnership does not mean exchanging exactly the same thing
- Partnership is about sharing power, not giving it up or taking it away

(See this resource for a complete list and full discussion of threshold concepts to partnership.)

To foster epistemic confidence in students, consider engaging in a version of the doubting and believing game (borrowed from Elbow [1973] and explained below) using one or more of the threshold concepts Cook-Sather et al. (2019) identified. Create a worksheet like this for

each statement (the first threshold concept noted above, which is directly connected to epistemic confidence, is included as an example):

DOUBTING AND BELIEVING For the statement below, respond in both the “Believing” and the “Doubting” column.	
Students have valuable knowledge of and important perspectives on teaching and learning.	
“Believing” (What do you believe or embrace about this statement and how do or would you put it into practice?)	**“Doubting”** (What do you doubt about this statement and/or what would prevent you from putting it into practice?)

The above exercise can serve as a tool for uncovering competing commitments—a psychological dynamic that explains subconscious goals of individuals that conflict with their stated commitments and render them subversive or resistant to change (Kegan & Lahey, 2001). Through conscious efforts, those inner conflicts can be brought to the surface, identified, and analysed to uncover the sources of those conflicts.

This approach can also be used to support students in developing epistemic confidence in themselves. For example, a student partner expressed how ready students are to participate in student-staff collaborations "because they want to help their professors and because their professors have faith in their abilities." However, the self-doubt students experience in the role as a student partner, which make them feel "unqualified and unable to even begin looking for solutions" (Wildhagen & Jenkins, 2020, p. 27), reveals a conflict about students' epistemic beliefs in themselves. Through staff's support and creation of dedicated space for affirmation, student partners are able to reassess their epistemic beliefs, as another student partner Yong Bing, explains: "I was convinced that my experience as a student could be helpful…So, with Dr. Amrita's persuasion, I agreed to take on this new role" (Kaur, & Yong Bing, 2020: 63).

Describing the mechanism of epistemic changes, Kerwer and Rosman (2018) propose cognitive disequilibrium as the driving force behind epistemic development, which in the case of pedagogical partnership focuses on staff developing epistemic confidence in students and students developing epistemic confidence in themselves.

(2) Engage in opportunities for opening minds

Once staff have unearthed assumptions and identified epistemic beliefs, the next step is opening their own minds through dialogue with theory and with other people with diverse professional, personal, and cultural experiences. One barrier to open-mindedness is misunderstanding or misperception. Engaging with others who have experiences of working in student-staff partnership in diverse contexts and cultures can break down barriers. The hermeneutic research tradition suggests that to be able to understand how others construct meaning is actually constructing an interpretation of the other's interpretation—a point related to the necessity of perpetual translation in discussing and practicing pedagogical partnership (Cook-Sather, 2018). This work is especially important as partnership work spreads from the Global North to the Global South (Cook-Sather, Ho, Kaur, et al., forthcoming; Green, 2019).

Perhaps begin with staff reading groups or individual reading focused on texts such as those published in *Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change*, *International Journal of Students as Partners,* and *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education* that support exploration of alternative views. Evidence in cognitive psychology suggests that new information that contradicts prior knowledge often leads to deep and effortful processing and sometimes motivated reasoning, and thus contributes to modifying old schemas and even building the new ones (Erisen, Redlawsk, & Erisen, 2017).

Developing open-mindedness is a consequence of these complex cognitive functions (Lambie, 2014) that we feel can be created with conscious efforts. Academic development centres can play a significant role by offering talks, symposia, and academic development programs on facilitating discussions on such practices.

(3) Practice co-creation through cross-constituency conversation in different venues

Building on the approaches above, consider creating reading groups or workshops that bring staff and students together to explore threshold concepts to partnership. For instance, invite both staff and students to wrestle with the threshold concept "student partners are not subject matter experts" through reading student partner Daviduke's (2018) discussion of how she, as a student of the social sciences, partnered with three different STEM professors and a STEM faculty member's argument that his non-STEM student partner's feedback was "not rooted in field-specific content or engrained practices" but rather enabled "big picture assessment of the course" (Cook-Sather, Hong, Moss, et al., 2021).

Through discussing such texts together, staff and students can at once develop attitudes towards students as knowers and open minds toward student knowledge about teaching and learning through practicing co-creation of knowledge. Such discussions can unfold in open forums for students and faculty to exchange experiences and perspectives (Cook-Sather, Addy, DeVault, et al., 2021) or through expanding existing student-staff connections (Gauthier, 2020) within specific socio-historical contexts.

Implications and future directions

The three strategies we offer provide structures through which staff on their own and staff and students together can develop the attitudes of epistemic confidence in students' knowledge and open-mindedness to students' capacity to reflect on, affirm, and revise pedagogical practice and the intention to engage in co-creation. Applying the doubting-believing activity in relation to threshold concepts to partnership uncovers competing epistemic commitments and supports staff (and students) in working through those toward expanding whom they consider to have valuable knowledge about teaching and learning. Engaging in spaces for dialogue and exploration informed by a diversity of experiences and perspectives affords staff opportunities to encounter and wrestle with misunderstandings, misperceptions, others' interpretations, and new information that complicates and contradicts prior knowledge—engagement that can lead to modifying old schemas and developing new ones. And finally, participating in forums that support both exploring and engaging in partnership give staff and students the chance to practice attitudes and intentions that they can then apply in other contexts.

Further research into developing, implementing, and evaluating these practices can add new knowledge and outputs to the growing body of partnership scholarship and impact the field. How might directors of teaching and learning centres and individuals or groups of staff members use and expand on the strategies we offer to explore the particular attitudes we have focused on and also other attitudes? What insights might emerge from using the doubting/believing activity to explore other threshold concepts to partnership, such as that student-staff partnerships are productively disruptive for both staff and students and that student-staff partnership is transformative for both staff and students? What other sources of articles and essays on student-staff partnership might staff and students draw from—and contribute to? And what other spaces might be co-created to support staff and students in practicing partnership work?

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