Exploring intercultural student-staff partnerships: A collective autoethnography

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Introduction

The Students as Partners (SaP) approach moves away from the idea of educational experience as a one-way transfer of knowledge, instead positioning it as a collaboration in which both students and staff have the agency to shape learning and teaching (Cook-Sather et al, 2014). Past studies reported a range of positive outcomes deriving from partnership work including increased engagement, motivation and self-efficacy for students, and the development of new and improved teaching practices and curriculum design for staff (Mercer-Mapstone et al, 2017).

As pointed out in a systematic review conducted by Mercer-Mapstone et al (2017, p 19), 'SaP as a theory, an ethos, and a practice is as complex, nuanced, and multifaceted as the educational institutions within which partnerships unfold'. Taking into account the 'relational and values-based' nature of the SaP approach (Liang and Matthews, 2021, p 29) described as a 'process of transformation of power dynamics between, and identities of, learners and teachers', the role of culture in student-staff partnerships emerged as an important consideration in SaP scholarship (Liang and Matthews, 2020, p 559). As argued by Zhang et al (2022, p 64) 'the careful, critical attention on the role culture plays in the relational work of learner-teacher partnership advances more culturally responsive pedagogical collaborations in higher education.'

Current literature exploring the role of culture in SaP practices focuses broadly on two areas. The first one is the application of the SaP approach in a non-Anglophone context. As highlighted in the scoping review conducted by Liang and Matthews (2020), this body of literature emphasises the impact of Confucian norms on student-staff partnerships, predominantly discussing it as a barrier to their implementation. For example, Dennehy (2015)

talked about a central value of Confucian teachings being the importance of harmony in social relationships translating into an emphasis on student obedience and a teacher figure as the ultimate authority that should not be questioned. This contrasts with SaP's underlying values of mutual respect, reciprocity and shared responsibility (Cook-Sather et al, 2014). However, as pointed out by Liang and Matthews (2021), the portrayal of Confucianism in SaP practices may be related to its politicised interpretation which is used as a 'tool to strengthen uniformity and to discourage any spirit of independent critical thinking' rather than an accurate representation of Confucian teachings (Lu and Jover, 2019, p 431).

The second area highlighting the relationship between culture and SaP practices focuses on intercultural partnerships. An important contribution to this topic has been made by Zhang et al who synthesised the current body of literature. In the scoping review, the authors outlined the positive and negative outcomes of intercultural partnerships reported in the included studies. The results overlapped with those present in broader SaP scholarship with the addition of outcomes specific to cultural awareness such as 'increased understanding of partners' cultural perspectives' or 'challenges in navigating intercultural communication' (2023, pp 1800-1801). Their work emphasises also the themes of power and hierarchy which, although important in SaP practices regardless of the cultural context, become even more complex in intercultural partnerships. They also mention the process of intercultural dialogues and navigating the differences in modes of communication, and a potential for intercultural partnership as a space 'where learners and teachers from diverse cultural-linguistic backgrounds generate new understandings in the process of collaboration' (p 1803).

Context and Methodology

University of the Arts London (UAL) is one of the leading institutions in the world, ranked second for Art and Design according to the 2024 QS World University Ranking (QS World University Rankings by Subject 2024: Art & Design, 2024). It is also a home to 21,092 students from 130 countries (UAL, 2024), making its community a highly multicultural place. Several student-staff partnership projects have been launched at UAL in the past years, focusing on different aspects of learning and teaching enhancement.

Considering the number of international students at UAL, of whom many engage with the partnership programmes, exploring the complexities of building intercultural partnerships is essential for ensuring a truly inclusive and authentic SaP approach. This paper focuses on navigating intercultural partnerships from the perspectives of two Chinese UAL alumni as well as a member of staff partnering with them, originally from Poland. This exploration is a response to the call for 'greater and more explicit attention to the role of culture in (re)shaping the power dynamics that unfold in all partnership practices' issued by Zhang et al (2022, p 76). It also adds to a broader debate and understanding of the inclusivity of SaP practices as pointed out by Matthews (2017, p 2) who says 'without reflecting on diversity and inclusion, a risk is that SaP may be biased in favour of "like students" partnering with "like staff"'.

Similar to Zhang et al (2023), this paper follows a definition of culture as 'the particular way of life of a group of people, comprising the deposit of knowledge, experiences, beliefs, values, traditions, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, worldviews, material objects, and geographic territory' offered by Liu, Volčič and Gallois (2015, p 55). It also uses the term 'intercultural' rather than 'cross-cultural', as it focuses predominantly on understanding interactions between individuals from different cultural backgrounds, although elements of comparison consistent with cross-cultural studies are also present (Zhang et al, 2023).

The collaborative autoethnography methodology used in this study allows for a 'group of researchers pooling their stories to find some commonalities and differences … to discover' the meanings of the stories in relation to their sociocultural contexts' (Chang et al, 2016, p 17). As autoethnography as a 'research method that uses personal experience (auto) to describe and interpret (graphy) cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices (ethno)'' (Adams et al, 2017, p 1) focuses on cultural context by definition, it was an appropriate tool to be used in the exploration of intercultural partnership experiences. The autoethnographic process of reflecting on personal experiences and connecting them to broader cultural, political, and societal understandings was aided by using the *Autoethnography Toolkit* created by Lin (2023). Each author contributes a section outlining an aspect of their experience and

shedding light on potential practices which may aid students and staff in building authentic intercultural partnerships. These include:

1) Developing critical thinking skills

2) Understanding different communication styles

3) Shared meaning-making

It is important to mention that although this paper describes some of the challenging aspects of building intercultural partnerships, we avoid referring to them as 'barriers', wanting to convey an asset-centred approach in line with the Culturally Sustained Pedagogy Model which emphasises viewing one's cultural background as 'resources to honour, explore, and extend' (Paris, 2012, p 94). This is to encourage perceiving cultural differences as opportunities for further learning and exploration of partnership practices.

Exploring intercultural student-staff partnerships

Developing critical thinking skills (Xi Wang)

As shown in SaP case studies, successful partnership building does not simply entail providing students with opportunities, but also providing them with the necessary skills to fully embody their partnership roles which require analysing, evaluating and questioning current practices (Marquis et al, 2017; Cook-Sather et al, 2014). These competencies align with the description of critical thinking. As a higher-order skill, critical thinking plays a central role in logical thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving (Butler, 2012; Halpern, 2003). Therefore, it is crucial to think about students' ability to think critically when building student-staff partnerships. It is also important to consider that the development of critical thinking may be more challenging depending on one's culture. As argued by Dong (2015, p 351), one of the characteristics of the Chinese tradition is 'the uncritical cognitive disposition'.

My personal experience is that the Chinese education system, focused primarily on a test-based and teacher-centric model, does not nurture critical thinking abilities. The emphasis on finding a single correct answer often leads to the adoption of templated approaches. Consequently, it instils a herd mentality and discourages questioning of authority.

Considering these significant differences in cultural backgrounds, I found it challenging to adapt to the UK educational style and establish a partnership with my teachers.

Within the initial unit of my course, we had been tasked with conducting research on an object from a particular art collection and using the acquired information to formulate a proposal for an exhibition. The object assigned to me was a green teacup. I found it difficult to find sufficient information with the limited instructions provided. When I tried to seek assistance from my teachers, it took some time for them to understand my intention which was not to be given answers but rather help on how the task can be approached. This type of experience is quite common among the other international students I met. During the early stages of comprehending and assimilating new knowledge, it becomes exceedingly challenging to promptly analyse, propose, and engage in discussions with teachers, particularly when it comes to building partnerships with tutors and actively contributing to the course's design. It is disheartening to see international students paying tuition fees that are much higher than those of home students yet not receiving support sufficiently tailored to their background. My postgraduate programme lasted one year which meant that by the time I was able to truly grasp critical thinking and develop collaborative skills, it was time to graduate. I believe that such training could be incorporated into the curriculum before the start of the course. The educational institution could provide relevant critical thinking training in the form of online courses or study groups to effectively assist students from diverse cultural backgrounds. This would facilitate quicker integration and the establishment of stronger collaborative relationships with teachers and the institution.

Understanding different communication styles (Kaiwei Fu)

While Western culture often values the process of debate and honest expression to reach the best idea or solution, Chinese culture places more value on reaching a consensus to maintain group harmony: 'Harmony is one of the primordial values of the Chinese culture. The Chinese consider harmony as the universal path which we all should pursue' (Legge, 1955, cited in Guo-Ming and Starosta, 1997, p 3). This is reflected in a popular Chinese saying; 'Harmony is of the highest value (以和为贵)'. From my experience, harmony represents not a tool, but the ultimate goal in social interactions, and conflict is seen not as a communication

issue but as a disruptor of this sought-after harmony. Thus some mainland Chinese students may experience cultural shock from direct expression styles, which in Chinese communication would be a sign of conflict. People sometimes think of communication as 'the transmission of information' but, as many authors have pointed out, communication also involves 'the management of social relations' (Spencer-Oatey, 2008, p 12). Consequently, varying cultural expressions could impact the dynamics between students and staff during collaborations. Gaining a deeper understanding of each other's communication preferences and employing assertive communication techniques can foster open discussions, which is a cornerstone for building equal student-staff partnerships.

While participating in a collaborative workshop, I initiated a casual dialogue with one of the staff members. Our conversation naturally transitioned towards our multilingual competencies. Given her professional background, I inferred she knew a certain language. When she inquired about the basis of my presumption, I was momentarily disconcerted. This reaction was primarily shaped by cultural nuances from my Chinese background, where sharing personal information is considered a form of greeting and where a counter-question like this can be construed as a subtle form of pushback or contestation. However, I later discerned that her query was characteristic of her forthright communication style rather than a sign of any irritation.

In a different scenario, I disagreed with the facilitator's proposed strategy during one of the student-staff partnership projects I participated in. Instead of aligning with my proposition, she implemented her strategy. I did not feel comfortable with contesting her approach and advocating for my own, largely because I perceived her as an authority in this situation. This perception was predominantly influenced by Chinese cultural paradigms emphasising respect towards seniors. Consequently, even though the concept of an egalitarian student-partner dynamic had been previously elucidated, in that situation I was not entirely comfortable with this approach. We discussed this incident shortly afterwards and she comprehended the disconnection brought by communication nuance and proposed a remedial solution.

As direct expression and challenging communication style are not commonly encouraged in the Chinese culture, I am concerned by challenging others' opinions and triggering resistance or anger, leaving me feeling rejected and offended. In such situations, I

tend to remain silent or make compromises, further exacerbating the issue. Language barriers add to my difficulties in expressing myself accurately. As I engage more with individuals from various cultural backgrounds, I have come to understand that communication extends beyond mere information exchange. Our daily verbal communication is not only about simply conveying the information contained in words but also about our individual life experiences and cultural backgrounds that shape our expressions and socialisation. Therefore, the same words may be interpreted differently by different people. Building an assertive communication style can be a good fundament for opinion-sharing in intercultural spaces. As described by Pipas and Jardat (2010, p 650), 'Assertiveness is the most effective way of solving interpersonal problems. Direct communication, openness and honesty allow you to receive messages without distortion, which maintains relations with others.' This methodology can create a safe zone between passivity and aggression, enabling indirect communicators to confidently express their genuine thoughts, free from the social pressure of causing or receiving harm.

Assertive communication can help not only with expression but also navigation of complex cultural rules, particularly when transitioning from collectivist to individualistic environments. For example, some of the agreed social boundaries are more defined and rigid in the UK to protect people's privacy and their freedom of opinion. In contrast, Chinese culture tends to be more collective, where proximity is seen as a sign of warmth and camaraderie. It is common for people, even strangers, to give each other suggestions on personal topics such as career path, family life and marriage. As a way to greet each other people may ask 'Where are you going?' which in the UK could be considered inappropriate. Developing and practising assertive communication can help partners feel secure and freely articulate their true opinions without offending, thus promoting more effective collaboration, fostering belonging and creating a more inclusive environment.
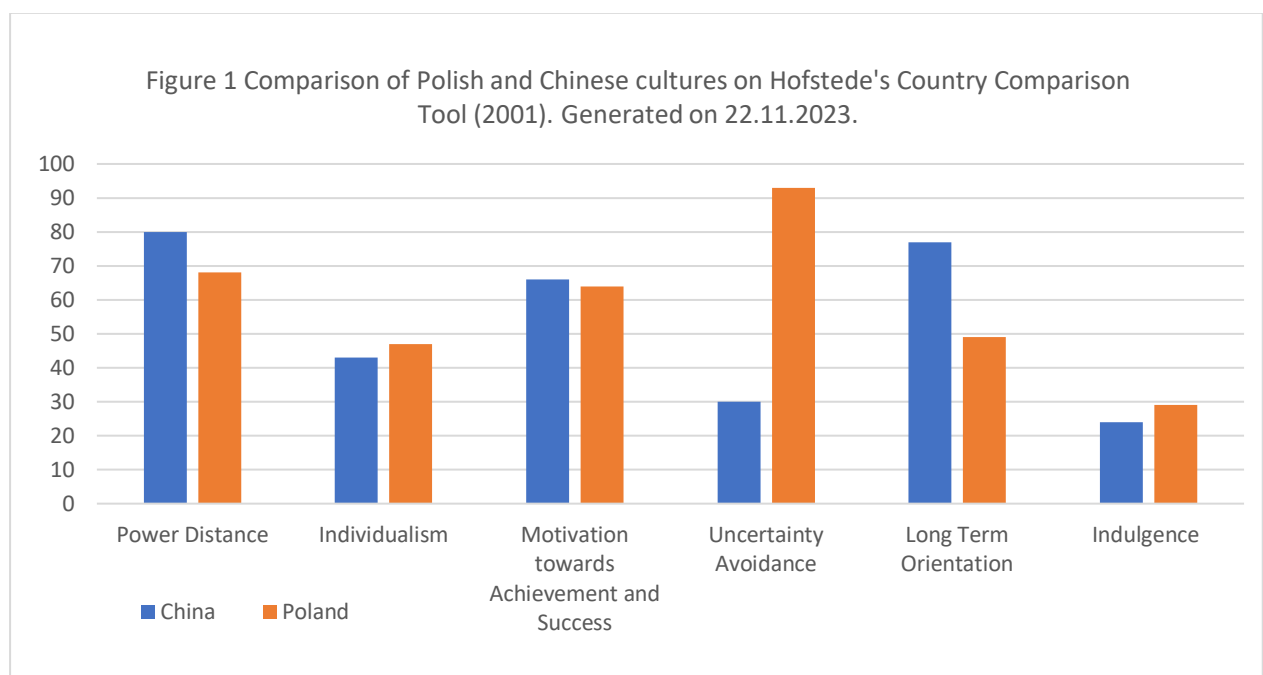
Shared meaning-making (Ania Udalowska)

Throughout my experience as a learner in the Polish educational system, the power dynamic between me and my teachers was prominent. My learning experience focused very much on trying to get 'the right answer'. It was an environment which discouraged curiosity

or exploration and in which teachers were positioned above students in the school hierarchy. I remember an encounter with one of my teachers who asked me to describe a scene from a book we were asked to read. He got openly agitated and shamed me when my answer did not fit 'the right way' of describing the scene. When I tried to explain why I interpreted the scene the way I did, he interrupted and insisted I was simply wrong. This was one of many examples of what I would consider the opposite of the partnership ethos.

Although I was educated in a European country, similar to Xi and Kaiwei I did not feel that my critical thinking skills were developed or encouraged nor that open and honest communication was appreciated. I used a cultural dimensions tool developed by Hofstede (2001) to compare Chinese and Polish cultures on the dimensions of Power Distance, Individualism, Motivation towards Achievement and Success, Uncertainty Avoidance, Long Term Orientation and Indulgence (see Figure 1). As shown in the graph below, both cultures scored similarly on several dimensions including the power distance, defined as 'the extent to which the less powerful members of organisations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally' (Hofstede, 2011, p 11). This points to the complexities of intercultural student-staff partnerships going beyond the emphasis on the Confucian versus western-heritage paradigm, dominant in the literature on SaP and culture (Liang and Matthews, 2021).

Figure 1 Comparison of Polish and Chinese cultures on Hofstede's Country Comparison Tool (2001). Generated on 22.11.2023.

Considering that the SaP practices have been described as disrupting the 'traditional dynamic between faculty and students that has been based on inequality' (Center for Engaged Learning, no date), engaging in truly equal student-staff partnerships can be a concept difficult to make sense of and embody for educators and learners coming from a cultural background that emphasises societal hierarchy. Taking the time to explore the concept of 'partnership' is a necessary prerequisite for building authentic partnerships, particularly when considering cultural differences. As pointed out by Green (2019, p 85) who facilitated an exploration of the concept of partnership among students from Ireland and New Zealand: 'by inviting participants to bring concepts of deep cultural significance into the pedagogical space they became quickly engaged', and the process of exchanging cultural and linguistic knowledge was 'in itself a profound learning experience'. This shared exploration needs to go beyond a simple explanation of the concept's definition and focus rather on what that concept means to the partners in relation to their identity and cultural background. This way, the co-creation and collaboration aspect of the partnership can start at the point of meaning-making, deeply influenced by one's culture (Ting-Toomey and Chung, 2012) allowing it to be more authentic to the parties involved. This seconds a need for 'ongoing intercultural dialogue [which] provides learners and teachers a space to share cultural meanings and negotiate capital' emphasised by Zhang et al (2022, p 75).

Conclusion

This paper has explored the topic of intercultural student-staff partnerships using collective autoethnography. The authors drew on personal experiences to emphasise three practices which may aid in building authentic intercultural partnerships. Xi Wang reflected on providing students with the necessary critical thinking skills to equip them to fully embody their role as partners in learning and teaching. The second practice, described by Kaiwei Fu, refers to challenges in communication styles deriving from differences in cultural backgrounds. She suggests the application of an assertive communication style as a way of enabling open and honest expression between partners. Lastly, Ania Udalowska discussed the need for partners' shared exploration of the concept of partnership, its values and meaning in the context of their relationship and the unique cultural capital they bring to it. This practice

encompasses those mentioned by Xi and Kaiwei, as fully realised meaning-making cannot be accomplished without sufficient critical thinking skills and open expression.

Similar points are made by Zhang et al (2023) who connect partnership practices with intercultural communication theory defined as 'the symbolic exchange process whereby individuals from two (or more) different cultural communities attempt to negotiate shared meanings in an interactive situation within an embedded societal system' (Ting-Toomey and Chung, 2012, p 24). They emphasise the importance of effective intercultural dialogue as a way of enabling 'shared meaning-making and shared decision-making that reshapes power dynamics' and suggest the communication accommodation theory (CAT) as a potential interpretive frame for exploring intercultural partnerships (Zhang et al, 2023, p 1808).

As previously emphasised, SaP is a complex and context-specific concept (Mercer-Mapstone et al, 2017). Although this article offers some suggestions, they aim to serve as points for reflection rather than universal solutions. As pointed out by Healey et al (2014, p 9), the pedagogical student-staff partnerships describe a process rather than an outcome that is '(radically) open to and creating possibilities for discovering and learning something that cannot be known beforehand'. This paper emphasised exploring the cultural aspects of partnerships as one of these possibilities.

Originally, this study was to involve accounts from the student co-authors as well as other international students at the University of the Arts London. Including a broader perspective from various individuals would have added complexity and depth to this paper which was not possible due to budgetary and time limitations. Furthermore, although the contributions made by the student co-authors were an integral part of the article and the idea for the paper stemmed from shared exploration from all authors, the majority of the content was written by staff. This echoes the limitation of SaP literature suggested by Mercer-Mapstone et al (2017) who point out the staff-centric nature of SaP scholarship. Creating opportunities for student contribution to the SaP body of literature is a valuable way of 'extending co-inquiry' and amplifying students' equal position in shaping learning and teaching (Little, 2011 as cited in Mercer-Mapstone et al, 2017, p 14). In the context of intercultural SaP practices, it can also be a unique opportunity to include students whose

native language is not English and who may view their linguistic skills as a barrier to authorship. Ideally, this article would have included equal contributions from all authors.

Lastly, this paper highlights a need for further analysis of the partners' experiences deriving from their specific cultural backgrounds. The anecdotal evidence presented seems to suggest that there may be some parallels between Polish and Chinese educational experiences which may bring attention to the complexity of the intercultural debate going beyond a focus on the Confucian versus western-heritage paradigm. As discussed by Liang and Matthews (2020, p 563), 'future research can move toward offering nuanced insight that acknowledges, names and integrates, as appropriate, the values of differing educational cultures to enrich theorisations of SaP that embrace the creative translation of partnership values as an array of practices that are culturally situated.' We call for further examples of practices supporting authentic intercultural partnerships which acknowledge partners' specific cultural backgrounds. In light of the previously highlighted limitations, we would also like to emphasise the importance of fully realised student authorship voices in further explorations of this topic.

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