Preface: Students and staff as partners in innovation and change

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The views of the author are her own and do not necessarily reflect those of any organisation.

The launch of this journal, focused specifically on the role of partnership, innovation and change in the context of the enhancement of learning and teaching, comes at an important point in the maturity of the discourse about student engagement. In part, this has been driven by recent UK and international higher education policy directives, which bring to the fore the importance of active participation of students, both in their learning and quality enhancement. It also has scholarly roots in well-documented effective approaches to learning, teaching and assessment and the enhancement of learning and teaching, which draw on decades of pedagogic research and evaluations of practices and policies.

There is now a huge range of publications on and perspectives of student engagement as a field of scholarly inquiry. For a selection of recent edited books alone, see Bryson (2014), Cook-Sather *et al* (2014), Dunne and Owen (2013), Nygaard *et al* (2013) and Solomonides *et al* (2012). However, 'student engagement' remains an ambiguous term, with multiple interpretations and behavioural, psychological and socio-cultural dimensions (Kahu, 2013). Within higher education, it has been articulated as relating to: students' engagement with their own learning; the policies and practices put in place to foster students' academic and social engagement; students' involvement in institutional governance and decision-making; involvement in the enhancement of policy and practice (Trowler, 2010). As student engagement becomes established as a valid field of inquiry within the scholarship of teaching and learning (Fielding, 2004), there is greater recognition of qualitative differences in forms of engagement. For example, drawing on the work of May and Felsinger (2010), the NUS/HEA student engagement toolkit (2011) identifies four qualitatively different forms of engagement: consultation, involvement, participation and partnership - each with increasing levels of active student agency. More recently, there has been increased focus on the latter of these forms of engagement and the notion of students as partners.

The focus and scope of this journal bring together two important and interconnected aspects of the student engagement discourse in which agency is key - partnership and change - and apply these squarely to innovation and enhancement within higher education.

Partnership

Healey *et al* (2014, p.12) define partnership as "fundamentally about a relationship in which all involved – students, academics, professional services staff, senior managers, students' unions and so on – are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together. Partnership is essentially a process of engagement, not a product. It is a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself." Within these relationships, different roles are articulated and evidenced in work describing students as researchers (Healey and Jenkins, 2009), students as producers (Neary and Winn, 2009), students as advisers and consultants (Cook-Sather, 2014) and students as change agents (Dunne and Zandstra, 2011). What unites these is the active role students play (alongside their peers as well as staff) as partners in their learning and the enhancement of learning and teaching. However,

the exact nature of relationships described by partnership will necessarily vary according to the context of the discipline, institution, the focus of the partnership activities and the expertise and experiences of the different partners involved. Rather than a prescriptive definition, these may be better framed by values which are enacted through partnership: authenticity; inclusivity; reciprocity; empowerment; trust; challenge; community and responsibility (HEA, 2014).

Partnership is a particularly useful lens when looking into change agency, as it focuses on the role of staff and students. As a relationship and a dialogic process, partnership presents opportunities to start new conversations and open up new spaces for learning, change and innovation. It offers transformative potential because it prompts us to question the assumptions we make about one another and the learning process, in a way we don't often make explicit. It challenges us to take a step back and critically reflect on the nature of higher education, current practices, systems and processes… and consider: do these enable or constrain the scope of learning that is possible?

Innovation

Dictionary definitions indicate that 'innovation' can mean both a product and a process – it may describe a new idea, device or method *and* the process of introducing these. Within learning and teaching in higher education, innovation may refer to new pedagogic approaches, learning technologies, knowledge, resources and new approaches to bringing about change in learning and teaching. The word 'new' is crucial here – as with the concept of originality in undergraduate research (Beckman and Hensel, 2009) – as it can refer to ideas that are universally new and original or those which are new to the context or even the individuals involved. Within the articles in this issue, the innovations being described include partnership development of technological innovations (White *et al*, 2015), the development of new knowledge and resources (Hack, 2015) and innovation in the way that the enhancement of learning and teaching is approached (Jensen and Bagnall, 2015).

Partnership and change agency enable multiple perspectives, experiences and expertise to direct and inform the development of learning and teaching. As such, they provide potential for innovative knowledge and practices to emerge through the combined imagination and motivation of student and staff partners. Cook-Sather *et al* (2014) describe the transformation through partnership of the understanding of staff, who experience alternative viewpoints and reconceptualise learning and teaching as a collaborative and dialogic process. As Maunder (2015) identifies, through the evaluation of an institutional pedagogic research bursary scheme, the partnering of staff and student researchers can lead to the taking of research in new and exciting directions which would not otherwise have been considered.

Change

In essence, the enhancement of learning and teaching is about working with and responding to change - whether that is change in thinking, culture, practice, policy and strategy, or structures and processes. In the literature on partnership and change agency, there is often a focus on cultural change. For example, the NUS (2012) *Manifesto for Partnership* describes cultural shifts in the student engagement discourse and argues for partnership to be framed as an 'ethos', as opposed to a collection of activities. Within learning and

teaching, there is interest in collaborative and participatory approaches to cultural change, often framed through the lens of complexity theory and emergence, where all parties are seen as potential change agents (Oxley and Flint, 2010). Engaging both staff and students as change agents is crucial. This is recognised in recent 'Students as Partners' change programmes offered by the Higher Education Academy (https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/consultancy-services/change/change-programmes/students-partners), which asked that "*each participating team must include at least two students working alongside academic staff, professional services staff and senior managers.*"

Fundamentally, this is about seeing all parties as integral throughout the process of change: from the identification of areas of focus, through research and evaluation of existing practice, to the development and implementation of new ideas and the co-creation of learning and teaching futures.

Creating space for partnership learning communities

Despite increased interest in models of learning and teaching that engage both staff and students as partners and agents of change, the identification of oneself as a partner in learning and teaching is not always automatic. Cook-Sather (2014) argues that partnership may be considered a 'threshold concept' for academic staff: one which is transformative, irreversible and integrative. However, it can also be experienced as 'troublesome' and disruptive - not least because it challenges norms in higher education about identity, roles and the relationships between staff and students and prompts us critically to reflect on and reconceptualise these. Through recognising students and staff as both learners and teachers (as co-inquirers and co-creators; as colleagues and change agents), partnership blurs the boundaries between traditional roles and identities and creates liminal spaces (e.g. Jensen and Bennett, forthcoming; Cook-Sather and Alter, 2011). It is precisely this 'productive disruption' which makes partnership such a powerful lens through which to explore and develop learning and teaching.

One of the major challenges for those engaging in partnerships is how these may be sustained and embedded. There are many wonderful examples of students and staff engaging effectively as change agents within specific modules, projects or initiatives. Focusing on the development of *partnership learning communities*, which involve both staff and students, encourages moving beyond discrete activities to foster an ethos and culture of partnership within a discipline, faculty or institution:

> *This is not simply about inviting students to be partial or temporary members of established staff communities, but creating opportunities for the co-creation of new communities where both staff and students can contribute to the development and sustaining of those communities.* (Healey *et al*, 2014, p.35).

As people passionate about partnership and change agency, we have a role not only in sharing ideas and practices, but also in modelling those approaches and encouraging the development of community. Part of this is developing academic spaces where all partners are encouraged to engage in critical and scholarly debate - to provide fora for dialogue, critique and the development of new ideas and approaches. For example, Abegglen *et al* (2015) explore how vertical peer mentoring, utilising blogs as liminal academic spaces, can empower students to 're-territorialise' academic spaces and contribute to inclusive learning

communities within their discipline. In order for students and staff to contribute meaningfully to the enhancement of learning and teaching, they need to have access to and agency within all aspects of the conversation – including scholarly publication.

The inaugural issue of this journal is timely and creates a valuable academic space for a multi-institutional community of student and staff change agents to share and explore their experiences and practice. The scholarly study of partnership is still at an early stage and there remain many, as yet under-explored, avenues for future research, including:

- how partnership intersects with disciplinary epistemologies and signature pedagogies;
- the development of a robust evidence base to demonstrate the impact and benefits of partnership on learning and teaching (beyond the impact on those staff and students directly involved);
- learning from experiences of unsuccessful partnership and the reasons for its failure;
- investigations, the better to understand the complexity of the practical challenges in applying ideas of partnership and change agency (for example, with regard to inclusivity, identity, power dynamics, sustainability and the ethical dimensions of partnership) (Healey *et al*, 2014).

Finally, it is important to recognise that partnership is essentially experiential. Therefore, the most valuable studies go beyond presenting descriptions of activities and practices to explore, reflect on and make visible the process of partnership and change. This requires attending to how and why certain approaches to change are successful and others not so in different contexts and applying this learning collaboratively to explore the possibilities that partnership can offer.

> *The unique value of a partnership approach lies less in the emulation of existing work than in the possibilities it creates for discovering learning and teaching practices, and institutional structures and working arrangements, that have not yet been experienced or even imagined.* (Healey *et al*, 2014, p. 55)

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