Working in partnership to develop partnership work: evolution of the ASER Facilitator role

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Abstract

Taken from the position of partnership as a relational, values-driven process during which students and staff work together in mutually beneficial ways, this case study explores how students can authentically engage as partners in annual quality assurance within a university. The role of ASER Facilitator (Annual Student Experience Review Facilitator) was created to introduce partnership formally to the action and development plans for departments with low student satisfaction. ASER facilitators are recruited from another department and help student representatives and departmental staff to work together and create dialogue about expectations, experiences and solutions to areas of concern arising out of key data sets like the National Student Survey. The case study looks at how the role has evolved over three years and explores how some of the challenges relating to timeframes and the building of relationships have been mitigated during that evolution. Crucially, the study also includes reflections from the perspective of a student who has worked as both ASER Facilitator and Student Fellow through UCL ChangeMakers, to give insight into what the role feels like to a student and where more support is needed for students undertaking the ASER Facilitator role in the future.

Introduction

'Students as partners' is a relational and values-based process which acknowledges the vital role of students in bringing about educational change and in which all participants are set to gain (Healey *et al.*, 2014; Matthews, 2017). 'Students as partners' transcends student voice by creating collaborative and participatory opportunities to engage students actively and to shape their learning (Dunne and Zandstra, 2011). Partnership goes further than collaboration, since both students and staff set the agenda and both make equal, if different, contributions (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2014). When partnership is viewed through this lens, where the interaction between individuals in learning communities is at the forefront of the endeavour, everyone derives significant benefits (Bovill, C. *et al.* 2016). However, working in partnership is not always easy – it is often messy and is intentionally disruptive in that it challenges traditional hierarchies and roles within a university (Matthews, *op.cit.*). This case study reflects on how the UCL ChangeMakers team has developed the role of ASER Facilitator, which sees students meaningfully engage in our Annual Student Experience Review (ASER), to support both students and staff to take on these transformative new roles and identities. By offering insights into how the role has evolved to enable students and staff to create meaningful dialogues around the student experience and how we have worked with students who have undertaken this role to continue to develop it, this case study explores the importance of reflectivity in designing and implementing partnership activities in this 'age of change'.

Institutional context: ChangeMakers and the ASER process

The UCL ChangeMakers team looks after the ASER facilitators, as part of the University's mission to drive forward students' taking authentic and active roles in shaping their learning at UCL, as articulated in its [Education Strategy 2016-21 Objective 4](#) (UCL, 2015): 'To create cultures of student engagement and leadership'. UCL ChangeMakers itself is an evolving initiative, encompassing a partnership approach that sees students work as innovators on educational enhancement projects, reviewers of teaching engaged in peer dialogue with staff and as 'student fellows' engaged in the scholarship of teaching and learning to develop and enhance education at a strategic level in the UCL Arena Centre for Research-based Education. 'ASER Facilitator' is another partnership role that students can undertake.

The ASER process is an annual cycle where departments and faculties look at key United Kingdom (UK) data sets – for example, the National Student Survey (NSS - https://www.thestudentsurvey.com/) for final-year undergraduate students, Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE - https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/destinations-of-leavers-from-higher-education-survey/) and widening participation data – both to identify areas of concern and celebrate successes. In response to points arising from this analysis, departments write an Action and Development Plan (subsequently referred to here as an 'action plan'). Student consultation is built into the ASER process, with a specific section asking how student input was sought and how it shaped the plan. Departments with particularly low student satisfaction scores are placed in 'ASER Intensive' and given extra supportive measures to help them raise student satisfaction. ASER facilitators – one such measure – are students from outside the department who help consolidate the various viewpoints of staff, student representatives and then the wider student body to inform departmental action plans. The hope is that by working with students in partnership in this context – and recognising the value of engaging with students in the development of their education – will lead to further partnership work between departments and their own students.

From 'scholars' to 'ASER facilitators'

The ASER Facilitator role has evolved over time. Originally called 'scholars', students worked within their own departments, sometimes in pairs or groups, to undertake an assessment and feedback project. A new title, ASER Facilitator, accompanied a revision of the role. ASER facilitators are recruited from another department and their role is to help student reps and departmental staff work together in developing their ASER action plan. This form of the student role, in the context of the '*Framework for Partnership in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education'* devised by Healey *et al.* (*op.cit.*), falls somewhere between 'pedagogic consultant' (but not curriculum design) and 'Scholarship of Teaching and Learning'. The role was adjusted, largely in response to consultation with the Students' Union, which was keen that the input into the action plan (the ASER Facilitator role) be separated out from the development work (the assessment and feedback projects). The Union felt the ASER Facilitator role could help to strengthen the student reps' role by having a student from another department come in to help the reps get their voice heard. This seems to have played out well:

> *"We found the two* [ASER facilitators] *incredibly helpful. The* [student reps] *who met them were in particular very complimentary about the process and found it very*
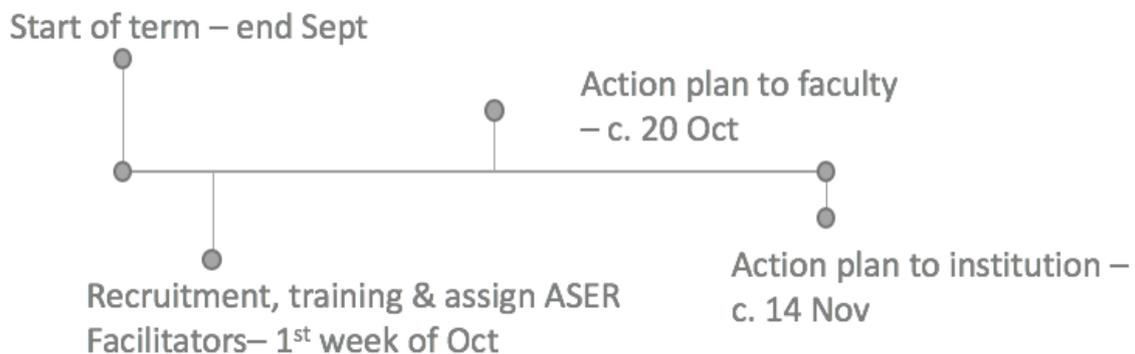
useful to have someone ask questions from different perspectives." Departmental staff working with ASER facilitators

Developments for 2017/18

One of the biggest challenges to the role has been the time frames the ASER facilitators need to work to. Ideally, ASER facilitators need to be trained and working with the department to get input on the action plan by mid-October, ahead of its submission to faculty level by late October (see figure 1). Students struggle both to get to grips with the role and to make any inroads into the department before the action and development plans are due. This has led to a feeling of frustration, as students primarily get involved to make a difference. Similarly, departments have been needing to tackle the usual beginning-of-term activities alongside being placed in 'ASER Intensive', when – suddenly – they have found themselves required to work with a student facilitator:

> *"I think I really just struggled to work out how to use them in that timeframe."*

The tight time frames conflict with the values underpinning partnership work. If partnership is a relational process (Matthews, 2018), then relationships take time to develop. To drop students into a department and expect meaningful relationships with staff to develop has always felt unreasonable. What's more, through engagement with ASER facilitators, departments are being asked to give consideration to the value of working with students in partnership; it is therefore important to ensure that the process of engaging with students in that role enables authentic partnerships to emerge.

Start of term – end Sept

Action plan to faculty – c. 20 Oct

Recruitment, training & assign ASER Facilitators– 1st week of Oct

Action plan to institution – c. 14 Nov

Figure 1. ASER Facilitator role timeframe

For 2017/18, the role has been divided into three stages – to extend it and allow the ASER facilitators to be more flexible in accordance with the needs of the department and stage it's at in developing its action plan – in a bid to mitigate the timing issue. Stage one still focuses on the action plans, but it is more about the dialogue between the ASER facilitator and department and student representatives to find out where the facilitator can be most useful. Often, this is about making sense of qualitative data by exploring student experiences and expectations or helping the department to prioritise elements of its action plan. In this way, ASER facilitators can engage in a more meaningful dialogue, uncoupled from the submission of the action plans. Having been through this research and consultation phase

and got to grips with the history and context of the department, ASER facilitators then move on to stage two – helping to develop the assessment and feedback projects – and, finally, to stage three, which is about closing the feedback loop by exploring the effects of any changes as a result of the ASER process.

2017/18 also sees the introduction of the ASER for 'Postgraduate Taught' students (PGT ASER). The PGT ASER follows the same format as for undergraduate level, but from January onwards. ASER facilitators must be postgraduate students, whether they are on taught or research-based courses.

Reflections from an ASER facilitator

Below is a reflection from one of our ASER facilitators, Manuela Irarrazabal, a PhD student in the Greek & Latin department who explores what it is like to undertake the role:

"I first contacted the head of the department that I was assigned to, introducing myself and asking to have a meeting with them. In that meeting they gave me not only their views on where the main issues resided, but also provided me with some data from the recent evaluations (mainly NSS but also other surveys). They explained to me that they had been working hard on making improvements to the way in which the assessments were conducted and feedback to students was given. These measures had been adopted in response to low NSS scores and a genuine desire to improve the student experience in their department. They also expressed their frustration in this respect: they felt that, despite their efforts, student satisfaction in these areas had not improved. They were unsure if the measures taken were the right ones (and if not, were at a loss about what they could do) or if staff in the department were not really implementing them as they should. I told them that I wanted to have an interview with the student representatives and then run a focus group with the students to explore some of these questions further. I also attended the Student-Staff Consultative Committee (SSCC) where academic staff and student representatives meet to discuss matters arising from student feedback. Here I could explain what I was going to do during the term, and what the main purpose of that was.

"I then interviewed the student representatives. That step was key in order to set the framework, and to know where to dig in during the focus group. Both in the interview with the student representatives and in the focus groups, I asked the students how, in their view, it would be possible to make improvements. In both cases they gave some very practical and feasible solutions to some of the problems. They all were absolutely clear changes the department implemented in previous years to improve their situation (contrary to staff perceptions) were well received and were thankful for that. However, they were also very clear that some of the issues would need structural changes.

"I created a written report for the head of the department, and I outlined an oral report. I was invited to attend a second SSCC meeting to present my oral report to the students and staff. This gave room to an interesting discussion in which students felt they could pick up on the issues I was mentioning and develop or clarify them further and staff could ask questions. The suggestions for improvement I provided the department were not my own. They came almost entirely from students' ideas - my role was only to get to them, understand them, record them and transmit them.

"In personal terms, this process was both challenging and highly enriching. The main challenge was attracting students to participate. The department I was working with is huge and yet only four students attended the focus group. That was not only a bit disappointing, but also made me question if I was doing things right. On the plus side, I felt I gained a lot of insight into the dynamics of a department and on how difficult it can be to see the issues that students face from the perspective of the staff, even when they might have the best disposition to do so. I felt I gained understanding on an aspect of education that is not only very delicate but also highly debated, such as ways of assessment and feedback. I could see the difficulties for both sides, students and staff, that the process of assessment and feedback entails. It was hugely rewarding to learn from students how happy they were after I presented their issues in the second SSCC meeting, and also when I heard from the members of staff that the report I had given had been helpful. At a more practical level, I had never run a focus group, and I felt this was an important skill that is not normally developed in my discipline, but that could be useful for me if I wanted to pursue other interests I have - such as higher education."

Reflections from a UCL ChangeMakers student fellow

Manuela also worked as a UCL ChangeMakers student fellow, involved in developing and supporting the wider ChangeMakers initiative from a student perspective. She was keen to take forward the development of some aspects of the ASER Facilitator role, having undertaken it herself and provided key insights into the challenges and anxieties of students undertaking the role. Here are her reflections on that role:

"My role as Student Fellow, and internship-type role with ChangeMakers, was loosely described as supporting people and creating a sense of community within ChangeMakers, the wider initiative under which ASER Facilitators sits. Within the role, there was room for personal creativity while I also had to coordinate with three other Student Fellows. Here, I will only refer to the role in its relevance to ASER facilitators.

"One of the groups of students that I supported during this role was the ASER Facilitators, who were just starting. All these students were Postgraduate Taught on one-year master's programmes, so their schedule was already pretty tight with their own assignments. I invited them for a hot drink in a café close to university, using coffee vouchers provided by the ChangeMakers team. I emailed all the student who were starting to undertake the role and another student who, like me, had started the role the previous term. I organised these meetings for every Friday at the same time, telling them that there was no pressure to attend them; it was for sharing experiences and asking questions or expressing concerns. I sent a reminder email every week.

"The meetings were normally attended by two or three students. All the students were really happy about starting their ASER roles, they expressed excitement about the idea of helping other departments to improve. They were also happy that I was organising these weekly informal meetings and were enthusiastic about the idea of meeting regularly. However, I think I never had the same two students in two meetings. I wanted to create a network of ASER facilitators, but that proved too difficult due to the number of commitments that each student had, especially when doing a one-year master's degree.

"Students were most interested in 'how did you start?'. Although the role is well defined in the introductory training, they wanted to know how I had experienced the role - they wanted to hear my impressions. All of them, in different weeks, wanted to hear what exactly I had done. The other student with experience in the role was also asked and seemed happy to enter into the details of his own experience.

"At a more concrete level, they expressed doubts about not knowing how to write the initial email contacting the department they were working with, being unsure about how to write to a head of department, and about how to produce a final report. They also expressed anxiety about not knowing if they were going to be able to make suggestions to the department they were trying to help. I then produced templates for the email and the report that they could use as a guide. I could also tell them that I had not come up with solutions for the department, I had mainly pushed the students to provide them and digged a bit into them.

"In personal terms, this experience was a bit harder than the other one. While I enjoyed meeting with the students, my own aims were a bit too ambitious (to create a network). At some points, I felt that my job had been a bit useless. It was here that the feedback from staff members of the ChangeMakers team were really important for me as they made me see that what I had been doing had a value. I think this role was a bit trickier because I had little parameters to know what to expect. It was nevertheless very enriching to see that students wanted to share, and listen to, different experiences. It made me realise how important it is for students to hear first-person experiences from other students taking on such roles. This struck me as one of the most important components in our meetings, and somehow marked a need for having more of this in higher education."

Reflection from staff project lead

Below is a reflection from Abbie King, manager of the ChangeMakers initiative and ASER Facilitator project lead:

"What I feel we have now is a role that makes sense based on our aims. It makes sense to those undertaking the role and is more flexible to the needs of students and staff in the departments. It has been a three-year process to reach this point, and there is still quite a bit more the team need to do. For example, I wonder if in our quest to get the role fitting right, the values have been dislodged in place of a process that works. Reintroducing the values – the why – back into the training and briefing to departments will show partnership as being a relational process that evolves through the work instigated by the ASER Facilitators. This will then segue into the assessment & feedback project that departments will undertake with their own students and beyond. In this way, partnership will begin to weave through the fabric of the department. Whether the ASER Facilitator role is leading to this sort of cultural change is yet to be established.

"By far, this has been the most challenging of all our strands of activity. On reflection, I think this is largely because it was something ChangeMakers has been directed to do rather than an initiative that has organically arisen from our growing expertise as student partnership practitioners. As such, it has always been a negotiation between the needs of the ASER process and the values we place in why partnership work is important. That said, embedding partnership work within the processes of the University has a lot of value, especially for the longevity of working with students as partners.

"I've greatly benefitted from Manuela's expertise as both an ASER Facilitator and ChangeMakers Student Fellow. It has provided important insights into how the role functions from the student perspective and further developing the role to suit the expectations and needs of students who undertake it. As staff, it is easier for us to see the macro problems, like the impact tight timescales are having on how the role functions, but much harder to recognise the difficulties and what being an ASER Facilitator really feels like as a student. We have always worked hard to keep an open dialogue with our ASER Facilitators to develop the role in partnership with students, but having Manuela working with us across the dual roles has really brought this closer together.

"Manuela's work has led to a number of immediate changes that I am already seeing the benefit from, particular in terms of ASER Facilitators supporting each other. For 2018/19, ASER Facilitators are now working in pairs and ChangeMakers is investing in a supportive infrastructure between the pairings like offering coffee shop vouchers so they first build a partnership with each other before approaching departments. I think working in partnership with students to develop the opportunities for them to engage meaningfully with the university will be as important as the opportunities themselves in this age of rapid change."

Conclusion

Getting partnership to work is not easy, particularly when balancing the values of partnership against the constraints of the internal processes the institution wants students to engage with. The ASER facilitators are a step towards helping staff in departments see the value of working with students in partnership, and further research needs to be carried out to see whether it leads to further partnership activity with their own students. When creating opportunities for students to work in partnership, it is important to ensure provision of adequate time and space for relationships to develop and enable both sides to contribute and work together. It is also important to draw on students' experience of and feelings about that role, in order to continue to develop the role to ensure it is meaningful and impactful.

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