The Same, But Different: Teacher and student experiences of partnership

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Abstract

Norwegian Higher Education institutions are increasingly adopting partnership and co-creation approaches, in common with other universities internationally. The Centres for Teaching Excellence (SFU) initiative supports Norwegian Higher Education in embedding these approaches in different disciplines. We explore common experiences shared by students and teachers involved in partnership work in the iEarth network (an SFU). Through reflexive thematic analysis of surveys and interviews, we identify five shared themes: the value of relationship building; voice, agency, and power; the importance of positive past experiences for engaging in partnerships, multiple understandings of partnership; and uncertainty. The 'uncertainty' theme, whilst appearing briefly in some previous studies, is particularly interesting in this study, as our data suggests that students' and teachers' experience uncertainty in partnership differently. Teachers reported reduced uncertainty due to partnership, owing to enhanced relationships with students. Students found partnership increases uncertainty as it challenges their ideas about learning in higher education. We also found participants shared a practical, 'down to earth' approach to partnerships' benefits and challenges, and suggest this is related to the context in which partnership was introduced. Additionally, this study suggests that staff and students who have no positive past experiences in partnership may be a group who find partnership challenging and may need further support. With increasing emphasis on partnership in higher education, it is important to understand and explore shared partnership experiences to align participants' goals and expectations and potentially unlock new benefits.

Introduction

Within higher education, there is a growing emphasis on increasing student participation in their own education through ideas such as Students as Partners (SaP) and related concepts, e.g. student-staff partnership, co-creation and active student participation (Barrineau et al., 2019; Bovill & Bulley, 2011; Healey et al., 2014; Matthews et al., 2018; Mercer-Mapstone, Dvorakova, Matthews, et al., 2017). These terms are sometimes contested, and in other cases, used interchangeably. In this paper, we will use the term partnership when students and staff work together to reach shared educational goals, except where the literature or study participants have specified a different term. Norwegian Higher Education Institutions have been increasingly interested in student-staff partnerships through the establishment of programs and initiatives such as the Centres for Excellence in Education (Senter for fremragende utdanning - SFU) initiative. This initiative was established to stimulate the development and dissemination of innovative approaches to teaching and learning. Engaging students in their education through partnership has been an important part

of the SFU programs from the start (Helseth et al., 2019). A large and growing literature has explored how to practically engage with and overcome barriers to partnership (Barrineau et al., 2019; Bovill et al., 2016; Healey et al., 2014), and a multitude of potential benefits to student and staff participants have been identified (e.g., Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Matthews et al., 2019). Many studies have explored either the experiences of students or the experiences of staff, but do students and teachers experience partnerships in the same way?

In their systematic literature review, Mercer-Mapstone et al. (Mercer-Mapstone, Dvorakova, Matthews, et al., 2017) noted that future research was needed that looks at how partnership translates across disciplines and cultures to look for commonalities and differences of practice and outcomes. Interestingly, though previous studies have explored outcomes of partnership for students and staff, few have focused on whether the experiences are shared or unique. Some of those who have explored both student and teacher experiences, such as Cook-Sather et al. (2014) and Ali et al. (2021) highlight many experiences and benefits that are shared between staff and students during partnership work.

Exploring common experiences of partnership shared by students and staff has the potential to provide insights into motivations for partnership (both initial and ongoing), shed light on the meaning-making of partnership practitioners, and provide valuable information on how to build and support partnership practice. We are all teachers and researchers with many years of experience and interest in partnership in practice. In this paper, we therefore seek to answer the research question: Do students and teachers who engage in partnership share common experiences?

The concept of partnership

The foundation for much current partnership research and practice comes from educational theorists such as Dewey, as well as some more contemporary sources (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2014; Kolb, 2015). Dewey believed that genuine education comes through experiential learning and that this learning experience must be participatory with a shared sense of responsibility (Dewey, 1938). Although not specifically mentioning partnership, Vygotsky's (Vygotsky, 1978) idea of "mediation", where the individual and the social interact in a transformative way, certainly suggests partnership. Paulo Freire also advocated for partnership, calling for pupils to be known as "participants", and seeing genuine student participation as essential to democracy (Freire, 1973).

Freire's work forms the foundational grounding of critical pedagogy (Kincheloe, 2008). Kincheloe (Kincheloe, 2008) argues that critical pedagogy is concerned with elements not traditionally focused on in Western pedagogical practice; mainly justice, democracy and ethics. Within the critical pedagogical paradigm, we find an increased focus on solidarity as it pertains to justice and respect, facilitating the empowerment of students and teachers and removing the hierarchy that exists between teachers and students in the classroom (Kincheloe, 2008). This sharing of power and agency, and the blurring of hierarchical structures, form the basis for partnership and are one of its key

tenets. While we choose to highlight critical pedagogy, other scholars have identified other theories and frameworks relevant to partnership (Matthews, Cook-Sather, et al., 2019). Partnership can broadly be defined as "a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all partners have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualisation, decision-making, implementation, investigation or analysis" (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). Any collaboration has the potential to involve different levels and types of student participation along a continuum (Bovill & Bulley, 2011), with partnership around course and curriculum development resting near the highest levels of participation. This idea of a continuum also applies to student agency, with students increasing in agency and voice as they move from active student learners to partners (Bovill et al., 2011).

Agency is central to understanding the partnership and can be interpreted in many ways. As discussed in Cook-Sather et al. (2014), agency contributes to and enables students to take more responsibility in their learning. Penuel (2017) sees increased student agency as an opportunity for students and teachers to challenge the inequalities that exist in education. Within university education, the value placed on the expertise of the teacher in the classroom (any teaching space, whether in person, online, or hybrid) has justified teacher power and agency over students and the creation of hierarchy. Student-teacher partnerships seek to challenge this position by acknowledging the different forms of expertise and agency in the classroom. Partnership also removes the assumed passivity of students and creates shared responsibilities for learning (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). O'Brien (2021) sees agency as possessing a quality that, when connected through conscious practices (such as partnership), can be transformative on a much larger scale than the classroom.

Research into partnership in higher education demonstrates a range of benefits. Cook-Sather et al. (2014) describe benefits shared by staff and students related to enhanced engagement, metacognition and enhanced classroom practices. In addition, Barrineau et al. (2019) highlight the opportunity for students and teachers to gain an understanding of each other's roles, facilitating the implementation of deep learning strategies, and supporting a more critical approach to learning in line with Freire's ideas and the principles of critical pedagogy. Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bovill (2021) argue that some of the outcomes of partnership are transformational, notably students reporting the partnership courses they experienced as their best courses at university and being instrumental in preventing some students from dropping out of university.

There also exists the opportunity for students and teachers to share responsibility for teaching and learning and to experience a collaborative and reciprocal learning process. A systematic literature review of students as partners by Mercer-Mapstone et al. in 2017 found many benefits to the practice of partnership, such as enhanced relationships between students and staff, development of new teaching materials, increased understanding of others' experience (e.g. staff understanding students and vice versa), as well as other benefits.

Methods

After receiving appropriate national research approval from the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (Sikt), data collection commenced in 2023. Data were initially gathered within Geoscience departments at universities that were part of the iEarth network (10 participants from the University of Bergen [UiB], five from the University of Oslo [UiO], two from the University Centre in Svalbard – [UNIS], and one from the University of Tromsø – [UiT]). As an SFU, iEarth is ideally situated to have access to staff and students involved in working in partnership. Two additional participants were recruited from the University of Edinburgh, an institution that has collaborated with iEarth. We recruited students and staff participants who had been involved in partnership and collaborative working situated at or above rung three (limited choice from prescribed choices) of the ladder model referenced in Figure 1 from Bovill and Bulley (2011) (as these participants would have relevant perspectives on the research question). Geoscience department staff who assisted in identifying students (Bachelor and Masters level) and teachers who had participated in partnership work inside their departments. Participants were also recruited at iEarth events such as the annual GeoLearning Forum and through snowball sampling from early study participants. Of those identified who met the criteria, 10 students and 10 staff gave consent and completed an online survey.

Data collection used questionnaires created with nettskjema.no, a survey solution developed and hosted by the University of Oslo (nettskjema@usit.uio.no), consisting of a combination of multiple choice, open-ended and Likert scale questions related to partnership. A selection of Likert scale questions in the survey were adapted from a partnership survey in Martens et al. (2019) to take advantage of validated survey questions from existing student partnership research. Our survey data included open-ended questions to inform subsequent semi-structured interview questions, in addition to providing useful initial data.

The semi-structured interviews were used to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' survey responses and more nuanced information related to common experiences. Out of a total of 20 questionnaires (10 staff and 10 students), 14 individuals consented to participate in semi-structured interviews and of these, nine participated in an interview (six staff and three students). Interviews consisted of both recorded Zoom and in-person interviews that averaged one hour in length. These were subsequently transcribed through the University of Oslo's transcription service Autotekst with follow-on manual reading iterations to anonymise the transcripts and inspect for clarity of meaning.

Data analysis was based on the reflexive thematic analysis work of Braun and Clarke (2022). The method was chosen for its versatility in exploring the diverse voices of the data set, and its reflexive nature allows for an iterative experience with the data. The three authors are all, in different ways, associated with iEarth. We have first-hand experience of how partnership has been introduced and experienced from the perspective of observers, facilitators, colleagues, and teachers. The authors are epistemologically grounded in social constructionism, and the discursive nature of the interviews enabled the first author to build knowledge about the experiences being

described by the participants. The reflexive thematic analysis subsequently permitted him to construct shared meaning from these findings and themes.

After initial data familiarisation, an inductive coding scheme was developed for both the transcribed interviews and the open-ended responses from the questionnaires utilising NVivo software (version 14.23.3) for data management. Initial coding categories were based on the concepts and ideas present in the data (semantic), with this initial coding pass producing 255 codes. This process was iterative, with successive passes through the data set to refine codes by consolidating repetitive codes as well as to identify codes missed during the first coding pass, resulting in 233 unique codes at the end of this stage. Codes were then organised around topics to aid in the subsequent stage of theme development. Both the refinement passes and topic organisation involved using physical copies of the codes, enabling more novel insights than were available through purely electronic coding, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2022).

Initial themes were developed by author one, and then in discussion and collaboration with the other authors. This process was cooperative and digital, with NVivo being used to help map theme concepts through connections between codes and connecting ideas. Themes were refined and finalised prior to the writing stage and are presented in the Results section with selected quotes giving voice to student and staff experiences.

Results

Five overlapping themes were developed, which were experienced by both staff and students, but in different ways. The five themes were: 1. The value of relationship building; 2. Voice, agency and power; 3. The importance of positive experiences; 4. Multiple understandings; and 5. Uncertainty in teaching and learning. We present brief findings from the themes, the first four of which are consistent with existing partnership literature. We offer further exploration of the fifth theme in the discussion section, as the findings in this theme add new understanding to existing partnership research.

1. The value of Relationship building

All student and teacher participants identified aspects of partnership that related to building better relationships with each other as being an important part of partnership. For students, building a relationship with staff was seen as important for their current studies as partnership contributed to removing some self-imposed barriers to interaction with teachers by making the teachers seem more familiar. This effect of familiarity and collegiality lasted even after the partnership ended. One student reported:

> *"…they have like a lot of different students and then they start to noticing you, even if they haven't really had you that much and they know your name. And it's more*

like, like you're a kind of co-workers or been co-workers. So it's more like that relationship, I would say."

For teachers, relationship building was also identified as a key aspect to wanting to engage in partnership. For them, the relationships they built with their students through partnership removed some of the barriers to students engaging in active student learning, as it allowed teachers to feel reassured that students would communicate openly about the experience and be sympathetic of the process. As one teacher states:

"And it was…kind of that individualised attention...like feeling that someone was making time for you. And cared about what you were interested in, what your kind of curiosities and passions were. And I think providing that kind of generosity, in time, in helping someone kind of make the space for reflection and identifying what's important to them, kind of feels the most important thing we can do [as] educators."

2. Voice, agency and power

For both students and teachers, the idea of enabling student voices to be heard and the concept of student agency were seen as important. Both groups felt that being heard and hearing what the other had to say were important. For students, this idea of being heard was an important part of their experiences of the process of partnership and was possibly one reason for the highly favourable feeling they had toward partnership.

"Because we had a really good communication and ...we felt really involved in the process. And we were not ignored and our input was heard and used. I feel like it was an important part of the course."

Teachers also felt that listening to students' voices was important as a way of involving students in the decision-making that happens inside the classroom. They see this student agency as important, not only building relationships, but also for improving the pedagogical outcome of the course, as well as improving their own skills as teachers. As one teacher described,

"I have focused mostly on co-creation in the classroom, and that is partly because this is where the majority of the students can have a voice. […] And then…the idea is to open up for decisions. I don't need to make the decisions, I listen to students and we can have maybe votes, they can use different kind of tools to vote for different suggestions and we can decide things together."

One teacher reflected that:

"By giving feedback and feeling […] that it has an effect [on] what you give as… feedback. […] The student obtains ownership to the course and the teaching activity, and if it becomes part of your own or if you gain ownership, then that

increases the chances, I think, to be constructive and positive and to contribute even further and make it even more your own. Because you see you get into a positive feedback spiral, kind of wanting to contribute more, wanting to make it better."

3. The importance of positive past experiences

Another area of shared experience among teachers and students who engaged in partnership was the importance of good teaching, as evidenced by positive past experiences. All participants chose to share a positive experience, both in their survey responses and in the interviews. For students, this positive teaching experience was mostly manifested at the university. Even though they had been involved in partnership in secondary school, there was a clear demarcation for them between experiences of secondary education and the partnership experience at university.

"So yeah, we had some of that before. Yeah.

I: But that doesn't give you the same feeling of...[agency]
No. […] No, it doesn't."

Teachers also identified with positive past experiences when they were university students, with these experiences often occurring during fieldwork related to Geosciences and other disciplines. The positive experiences often led these teachers to try to recreate similar experiences with their students once they assumed the role of teachers. One staff member responded:

"I organised a seminar with a researcher that had moved on to a different institute. … I think to me that showed...that, well, it's possible if you can take it, […] in your own hands, […] you can do this and find out something which others don't have the time for or don't care for […]."

Another staff participant highlighted the importance of being given encouragement and support by teachers to take on more agency:

"[…] he said, oh, a few years ago, I went to Tunisia. And that's a great place for exploring this. So why don't you go there? We're like, OK, can we do that? [and he said] And I'm sure we can find a way. And so we just, we, the students, did everything […] And we felt like...superheroes after doing this thing. So that was a really nice experience. And it goes to show that if you just give students access to the tools and the entities you need, of course, we can do it in a way that makes it so much more meaningful for us. So that was an important thing. […] this is something that then colours the way I think about these things."

For some teachers, this idea of positive experiences transcended the classroom space to include positive teaching experiences in other instructional venues, such as coaching and hobbies.

4. Multiple understandings

For teachers and students who engaged in partnership, one common experience was that they found it challenging to define what partnership is. For teachers, these definitions are usually centred around some form of active student involvement.

> *"So I guess examples would be…asking students about areas of interest within a subject area…asking them to, yeah, like... that they can influence the exam form, for example, and also the teaching types."*

While students who had been involved in partnership found this task even more challenging.

> *"Hmm. I'm not sure. Would it maybe work like that if they had to have meetings with the professor?"*
> *"I feel like it's in some ways, it's difficult to define."*

Other definitions of partnership are also present in the data, such as defining partnership based on who benefits, or based on working toward a common goal, and a more broadly shared definition of partnership as a dialogue between teachers and students.

These multiple understandings of partnership carry over to the discussion of why it is important to engage in partnership. While teachers generally viewed partnership as universally beneficial, there were some comments about particular staff and student personality types (introvert or extrovert, for example) that might be better suited for partnership.

The multiple understandings also extend to ideas that students have about what is important in partnership. For some students, partnership was thought to be positive, but grades were also considered to be important. Thus, they become uncertain in their commitment to partnership if they thought their grades may be impacted.

> *"Yeah, because students are more interested in learning the curriculum and their grades than to have the best teaching and learning experience.*

Another student commented similarly:

> *"Because grades are kind of important. Unfortunately. But yeah."*

5. Uncertainty in teaching and learning

How uncertainty is experienced in partnership is largely determined by whether the partner is a student or a teacher. For teachers, the experience of uncertainty is both omnipresent and stems from uncertainty in their pedagogical practice. And while it can be seen as a positive concept, it is most often seen as something that can be overcome, managed or dealt with by building trust between teachers and students

through partnership. One respondent highlighted the importance of sharing the experience of uncertainty in teaching with the students:

> *"So we're trying to deal with this in my teaching, and we're all uncertain. We are uncertain as teachers as how to deal with this. And we are clear and I think at least as honest as possible with the students because we're sitting there with them. As teachers discussing and it's clear to them that we also struggle with how to do things. And the idea is that then we're kind of in the same boat."*

Or, as another teacher put it:

> *"…since I had already such a good two-way communication going with the students, I could just tell them before, look, this is something new. We haven't tried this before. It may be frustrating or it may not work. Let's try it out. And they were ready to try it out and had the mindset like, OK, this is something that could work and where we are asked for feedback. So they were positive […]"*

'Teacher identity' is also linked to uncertainty and is something which takes time to develop and come to terms with. Identity is also impacted by the variation in teacher preparation in higher education:

> *"But I think it's more that I haven't been educated as a teacher. I mean, I took this 200 hour pedagogy course at [removed for anonymity], but I still feel like I've never learned how to be a teacher. I'm basically just winging it all the way through. Whereas being a scientist, this is something that I have kind of prepared for since my bachelor thesis."*

For students, uncertainty is also present. First, higher education just feels different to students from what they experienced previously.

> *"I was expecting just to sit down [in the] auditorium and listen […] to teachers. […] And because that was also, you know, what everyone was saying, that that's what was happening, that you have to be more autonomous."*

Students' learning and teaching expectations can be challenged by the novel nature of partnership and thus lead to greater uncertainty. This leads some students to want the teacher to revert to their more usual role and to lead the teaching and learning experience, which is at odds with partnership.

> *"I still think it's a bit annoying if it's too much co-creation today, if it takes too much time and I still think the professor should be the boss. And if it takes too much time to decide how should we do this, they should just make a decision."*

Nevertheless, once students experience partnership and the associated enhanced relationships with teaching staff, uncertainty is often reduced, and for teachers and students, working in partnership appears to offer a way to manage uncertainty in teaching and learning. One teacher commented:

> *"Because I think about […] all the push that we have now for student partnerships. And to me, if I think of situations where I can say that I'm working with other people in a way that I would call partnership, it is because it reduces... […] my own uncertainty on how to do things."*

Students find partnership a useful tool to grasp pedagogical practice in education, allowing them a space to deal with their own uncertainty related to learning.

> *"[…] I just find all the questions really interesting, really, about how... how stuff works. And just also like see the teaching side of university […] it's…nice just to have that knowledge. So […] I really, really like it and being part of it."*

Discussion

Across the data, there were common experiences shared by teachers and students who engage in partnership in the higher education setting. The themes in our study resonate with themes within the existing partnership research discourse, indicating that some of our findings from the natural sciences and a mainly Norwegian context are shared with the wider range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary partnership research. However, whereas four of the five themes in our study were experienced by staff and students similarly (though not in exactly the same ways), the fifth theme, focused on uncertainty, was experienced in quite different ways. Although Matthews (2017a) presents a brief discussion about the uncertainty of outcomes for partnership, our research reveals an epistemological uncertainty in partnership that has not been deeply explored within previous literature. The theme was experienced by both groups in this study, but this uncertainty was experienced in profoundly different ways by students and staff. Below, we explore relationship building as a connection between the themes, and we discuss understandings of partnership, partnership as a counter-narrative, and two perspectives on uncertainty.

Understandings of partnership and the role of student-staff relationships

Relationship building is one area that was discussed by students and teachers as a key part of partnership. Both groups see the enhanced relationships with the other as a positive outcome of partnership, though what that means to each group remains slightly different. For students, relationships are important for several reasons, such as facilitating the transition from school to university, increasing student wellbeing, and developing a sense of belonging. To some students, there was also a somewhat more instrumental component, as this relationship was also a way of building connections to teachers who could provide assistance in the future (e.g. writing job references), but most saw this as an opportunity to improve their learning environment. For teachers, this relationship building enables them to ally with the students, allowing them to try new pedagogical approaches with the advantage of students standing with them and potentially not judging them too harshly if these novel approaches do not work out as expected. Some teachers are also aware of the research that demonstrates the impact of positive student-teacher relationships on student success (see Chickering &

Gamson, 1987; Lamport, 1993) as well as the potential positive impact on teachers' own sense of reward and satisfaction from more relational teaching (Bovill, 2020).

In relation to the theme of voice/agency, students reported that being heard was important to them and changed the manner in which they thought about their teachers. It was clear that being heard needed to be clearly signalled by staff – with students looking for more than just lip service from teachers about how they would use student feedback, but instead they needed evidence of teachers enacting their suggestions or discussing their views and suggestions further with a view to taking action. It was interesting that although students had been involved in partnerships in secondary school, they saw the partnerships that happened at university differently, as more real and authentic. Perhaps this reflects a perceived difference in status between university and high school (partnership at university level taking on more importance due to a perceived higher status of the university), a different view of themselves (as adults with more agency than adolescents), or a clash with their expectations of higher education teaching (to "be taught" rather than being involved in creating teaching and learning). Correspondingly, many teachers were motivated to listen to students' voices. Teachers felt that students who expressed their views were more involved in their studies, and for students, having a voice equated to ownership of the course they were taking. There was also a feeling among students that once their voices were heard, they could continue to have productive conversations and give feedback to staff.

In partnership, both the students and the teachers should operate on the same level, even if contributing in slightly different ways. This is perhaps what distinguishes partnership from co-creation – co-creation includes negotiation and shared decision-making (in common with partnership), but co-creation often falls short of the equality implied by partnership (Bovill, 2020). In the interviews, all teachers identified that it would be impossible for them to engage at the partnership level with their students. This was due to administrative constraints placed on teachers by their institutions, or the fact that teachers have to make assessment decisions about students' work and performance (external controls), or the idea that it was necessary to maintain some power over students to ensure that learning goals were met (internal controls). Most of the teachers interviewed felt that they would be unable to get rid of this power difference.

The importance of positive past teaching experiences was also a common theme reported by teachers and students. For students, the experiences at university were clearly perceived as more important than those in secondary education and were, in some instances, incorrectly recognised as students' first 'real' partnership. Teachers also reported their positive experiences of partnership at university, both when they were students and as teachers. Teachers did not mention partnership in their secondary schooling, but their secondary schooling is likely to have occurred before modern active student learning reforms were the norm. Many teachers highlighted fieldwork as a great opportunity to build relationships and to try out partnership, which might be expected, given the important position that fieldwork has in the natural sciences in general and the geosciences in particular (Boyle et al., 2007), and

the opportunities it provides for closer relationship building in more informal spaces beyond the classroom (Malm et al., 2020).

The theme of multiple understandings of partnership was also experienced by teachers and students in slightly different ways. This is perhaps to be expected given that teachers and students typically approach partnership from quite different positions (e.g. the teacher as a salaried, established scholar and course responsible, and the student as a relative novice, looking to become a disciplinary specialist). It was clear that some of these positions had a strong impact on the understandings of the potential content and limits to partnership (e.g. teachers' duty to grade students; see comments above on obstacles to partnership). Both groups had in common that they struggled to define partnership. Yet, in other parts of the interviews, they discuss the importance of forming relationships, increasing mutual understanding and providing more space for student agency and voice. It is the authors' impression from working in the Norwegian SFU community that partnership has been introduced mainly as something that will "be helpful to both staff and students" and has the "potential to improve teaching and learning", rather than as a means for a critical rethinking of student and teacher roles and relations (cf. Freire). It would seem that teachers and students in this study are at the stage of (re)discovering the practical benefits of partnership, but have not reached a stage of seeing/theorising /exploring the wider implications of this way of working.

Partnership as counter-narrative - a missing theme or a reflection of context?

The themes discussed by teachers and students in our study, resonate with e.g. Matthews et al. (2018) descriptions of students' and teachers' conceptualisations of partnerships at Australian universities. However, other aspects of findings in the wider literature appear to be absent from our data. Notably, the Australian teachers and students explicitly situate SaP as a counter-narrative to a transactional neoliberal agenda and describe resistance to SaP from certain teachers. A plausible explanation is that the differences reflect the different organisation of higher education. For example, whereas higher education in Norway is generally free, university degrees in many western countries (notably Australia, England and the United States) are typically costly due to tuition fees, which may promote a "students as consumers" perspective. Similarly, resistance to partnership from teachers may reflect aspects of the performance management system of Australian universities (mentioned by one Australian teacher in Matthews et al., 2018); in contrast, at the Norwegian departments where most of our interviewee's work/study, responsibility for teaching rests largely with the teachers and performance evaluations will have little impact on the feasibility of partnership work.

Our findings highlight the potential importance of institutional context (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). Lately, an increased interest in partnership globally has triggered publications on the importance of cultural context (e.g. Liang et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2023), suggesting that cultural context may be another source of this diversity of understandings of the nature of partnership. As partnership is a relatively novel

concept in Norwegian higher education, our findings may add another layer of understanding to this existing research.

Two perspectives on uncertainty

Uncertainty is an important theme both in the epistemology and ontology of knowledge and in higher education. For Roberts (2021), this uncertainty in higher education stems from reorientations occurring currently, including technological shifts and developments related to teaching and learning, such as boundaryless learning environments. For Matthews (2017b), an important source of uncertainty in the partnership context relates to "re-imagining the assumed role and implicit identity of what it means to be the 'learner' and the 'lecturer'". In our data, we see traces of both of these forms of uncertainty (Roberts and Matthews) and a different kind of uncertainty. There exists something of a duality of uncertainty with regards to partnership; students are uncertain about their understanding of knowledge and what it means to be in higher education (an epistemological uncertainty), while some staff with limited pedagogical grounding are uncertain of the ways into partnership and what it will mean for students and themselves to open up for greater student agency (a pedagogical uncertainty). This duality of uncertainty parallels the concepts of relational uncertainty and epistemological uncertainty discussed in Hartner-Tiefenthaler et al. (2018) in relation to collaborative learning. In general, staff found that partnership led to a reduced sense of uncertainty in their teaching. In contrast, some students found that partnership added to their experience of uncertainty in their learning experience.

The student perspective

Teaching and learning through partnership is, by its nature, the result of discussions and negotiations. This can introduce a level of uncertainty compared to more predetermined ways of teaching and learning (Matthews, 2017b). For students, uncertainty is not unexpected or even unwanted, given the novel nature of higher education and knowledge. Barnett (2021) calls this student uncertainty a 'triple excitation', referencing the excitation of the student, the knowledge, and the world that is situated inside the supercomplexity of reality. This supercomplexity encompasses the lived experiences, identities and multiple frames of reference of today's students (Abegglen et al., 2020; Barnett, 2021). Regarding knowledge, this uncertainty has been discussed previously. Perry (1970) sees this as the starting point for the intellectual development of students entering higher education. In Perry's (1970) schema, students initially see knowledge as something imparted to them by an authority (teacher), with a clear idea that there is a correct (right) answer to every question (Perry's position 1 and 2). In our data, students who state that they are mainly interested in their grades – a 'Just tell me what I need to know' idea, would appear to espouse this approach. The first stages would also include students in our data who just want to 'trust the teacher', i.e., the authority. The data also show students occupying the next level of Perry's schema where students start to question authorities, in our case, the partnership approach suggested by teachers (positions 3 and 4). A third group of students appear to have progressed past this position (Perry's

position 5 and upwards). This is evidenced by students expressing the ideas that partnership may allow for more exploration of ideas and that there can be many different didactic approaches suitable for learning.

Initially, it seems that many students new to higher education come with a clear idea of what it means to study at university – lectures and individual work. These ideas are formed either through what they have heard prior to entering higher education, i.e., in secondary education or from friends and family, or through their early encounters with higher education, e.g. word of mouth of fellow students or experiences in their first courses. Partnership challenges these accepted ideas of university study and can, in some instances, make students reluctant to engage in alternative forms of learning. Partnering to create assessments may be particularly provoking for some high-achieving students because it can potentially challenge their view of knowledge as finding "the correct answer" (positions 1 and 2 in Perry's (1970) scheme), as well as their highly developed strategies for success. By building trust in the partnership process and the teachers through shared respect and a collegial approach, these types of negative feelings around uncertainty may be alleviated. This fits with what is discussed in Hartner-Tiefenthaler et al. (2018), that with time, relational uncertainty decreases. Hartner-Tiefenthaler et al. (2018) also find that this decrease in relational uncertainty, through the building of trust, is crucial to students dealing with the ideas related to epistemological uncertainty. Therefore, partnership may provide a liminal moment (along with other pedagogical approaches) to help students move through Perry's (1970) positions and thus grow in their epistemological perspectives of knowledge and their ability to tolerate and thrive in uncertainty.

The staff perspective

Based on our interview data, staff uncertainty is likely to relate to their roles as teachers – a role that, for some staff, was not the primary focus of their position when they began working in higher education. Staff interviewed for this project found it difficult to identify as teachers. They felt they were not prepared for university teaching. Some of them experienced being tossed into the 'deep-end' and having to cope with working out the best ways to teach. It is not unusual for teachers in higher education to feel this way (e.g. Kugel, 1993). Teaching in higher education rarely includes the same level of pedagogical teacher preparation found in secondary education, with some university staff only being offered the option of relatively limited hours of pedagogical courses if their other duties and managers allow for it. This limited opportunity/requirement for preparation in many universities means that many staff teaching in higher education can find themselves at what Kugel (1993) would consider to be Stage 1 of teacher identity, which involves a focus on self, or Stage 2, where teachers focus predominantly on the subject matter they are teaching. Similarly, Biggs (2012) classifies these teachers as level 1, where the focus is 'What the Student Is' (a focus on who the good/bad students are, and on knowing the content and delivering it well) with any variability coming from the student. At these stages, teacher uncertainty is high and likely to remain so without pedagogical praxis or professional development. In our study, it appears that partnership with students can turn teaching from a solitary endeavour to a joint effort between teachers and

students. Through partnership, teachers also get the opportunity to discuss and receive feedback, allowing them to develop both their ideas on teaching and learning, and their views of who the students are.

The teacher's experience of uncertainty may not only come from pedagogical uncertainty but may also include other forms of uncertainty. Bonnet and Glazier (2023) identify disciplinary uncertainty (the probabilistic nature of science in general), curriculum uncertainty (how teachers translate the stated curriculum in terms of uncertain knowledge, application into complex settings, and supporting students' development through meaningful learning experiences for a diverse community of students) and contextual uncertainty (the shifting landscape of bureaucratic norms that govern education). In terms of partnership, contextual uncertainty is significant, as staff try to navigate a range of bureaucratic norms and regulations that govern higher education and the growing agency/voice of student stakeholders in higher education. As staff start to build relationships with students during partnership, this can help to ease this contextual uncertainty (e.g. by reducing the expectation that "teachers should know everything").

In all this uncertainty come opportunities for teachers and students who are willing to seize them. For Mangione and Norton (2023), embracing uncertainty as a teacher means embracing vulnerability in teaching. Through partnership with students, teachers learn to trust students while forming more open and honest relationships with them (Mangione & Norton, 2023). The focus on relationships ties in with what Karen Gravett (2023) discusses as "connectedness to others". This connectedness or relationality can become a catalyst for change that could have implications for broader change in higher education that leads to a more collaborative experience for all involved (Gravett, 2023). As our data suggests, teachers therefore experience less uncertainty in pedagogical practice when they, as Mangione and Norton (2023) state, 'dare to be vulnerable'. Students also benefit from vulnerability. Gravett (2023) argues that vulnerability allows for relationality to build between students and teachers, as well as offering opportunities to model how to deal with uncertainty. Gravett (2023) points out that this can be useful for helping students deal with critical feedback as well as modelling resilience – something that can support university students to progress through Perry's (1970) positions of intellectual development.

Limitations

This research is based on staff and students at Norwegian higher education institutions and one UK university, potentially limiting the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. The sample size of 20 questionnaire participants and 9 interviewees is comparable with other qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2021) and fulfils the idea of information power (information richness as it relates to the aims of the study) as discussed in Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora (2016). The research primarily focused on Geoscience students and staff engaged in study and research. This is a STEM field with different epistemological foundations than other disciplines, which may influence student and staff responses to partnership.

A common limitation in partnership literature is the (near) absence of students and faculty for whom partnership is not seen as a positive endeavour, but rather something to be avoided (Barrineau et al., 2019; Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Mercer-Mapstone, Dvorakova, Groenendijk, et al., 2017; Mercer-Mapstone, Dvorakova, Matthews, et al., 2017; Munevar-Pelton et al., 2022). This study was able to capture some student voices who were critical of partnership, but not enough to enable these voices to influence the main themes we found. The study also lacks staff voices who were negative toward partnership. While this absence makes sense, students and staff who don't feel comfortable participating in partnership or who haven't had the opportunity to participate in partnership are unlikely to be drawn to participate in research about partnership, their voices are necessary to gain a fuller understanding of partnership.

Conclusion

This study identifies five shared, recurring themes in the experiences of students and teachers who participate in partnership-based pedagogical approaches. These are: the value of relationship building; voice agency and power; the importance of positive past experiences; multiple understandings; and uncertainty.

All themes are present in the literature, however, the uncertainty seen here differs from previous studies, both in that it is experienced in quite different ways by students and staff and that one component of epistemological uncertainty has received little attention in the existing partnership literature. Uncertainty, within higher education, represents a juxtaposition of something that can be experienced as both profoundly uncomfortable as well as representing a liminal moment. Our data suggests that both can operate at the same time. Including partnership as part of initial pedagogical professional development for teaching staff in higher education is a way to cope with and overcome some of the uncomfortable pedagogical uncertainty faced by new teaching staff. Additionally, teachers are likely to offer access to partnership approaches to learning and teaching earlier in students' academic journey, providing students a safe place to explore their own uncertainties around education, knowledge, and the world.

Both teachers and students appeared to share a practical, down-to-earth approach to partnership, identifying positive aspects of partnership as well as (potential) challenges. However, the benefits and challenges the students and teachers discussed were somewhat different, perhaps because teachers and students approach partnership from quite different starting positions. In contrast, the view of partnership as a counter-narrative to "education as business" is missing. We hypothesise that this reflects how partnership was introduced to the mainly Norwegian participants in the study, as well as the institutional contexts.

Resources should be allocated to help foster student/teacher relationship building as well as creating schemes that amplify student voice/agency. The importance in this study of positive past experiences for getting involved in SaP can enable us to identify students and teachers who are receptive to this pedagogical approach. Conversely, if

the absence of positive past experiences represents a barrier to engagement, it is important to identify and support students and teachers for whom partnership may present a challenge. Finding and engaging these participants, who are largely missing from the literature, is an opportunity to make higher education more inclusive so that all voices are heard (Bovill et al., 2016; Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Mercer-Mapstone, Dvorakova, Matthews, et al., 2017).

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The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Ethics

Approval to carry out research was obtained through and in accordance with the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (SIKT).

Consent

Informed consent was provided by all study participants. Data was anonymised and identifiable information removed.

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