

‘I feel like being a student consultant literally gave me a voice’: A cross-context case study of how approaches to engaging the student voice have evolved in three US student-staff partnership programmes

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Introduction

Student voice is one of the foundational principles of student-staff pedagogical partnership in United States (US) institutions of higher education. It draws on the work of US educators such as John Dewey (1916), who argued that students should have a stronger voice in their education, and bell hooks (1994), who called for teachers and students ‘hearing one another’s voices’ to build engaged and inclusive learning communities (p. 8). Pedagogical partnership work in the US has also been informed by scholars such as Paulo Freire (1990) in Brazil, Jean Rudduck and Michael Fielding (2004) in England, Kelly Matthews (2017) in Australia, and Kathryn Sutherland in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Sutherland et al., 2023). We define pedagogical partnership work as, “a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis” (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, pp. 6-7). All three of our partnership programmes include student partners visiting the classrooms of their staff partners and, through regular meetings with their staff partners and/or gathering enrolled student feedback, honoring student experiences, perspectives, and voices.

Recent discussions of ‘structuring student voice into higher education’ amplify enduring acknowledgments of the importance of student voice within pedagogical partnership (Cook-Sather, 2022). This importance is captured as well in the first part of our title—‘I feel like being a student consultant literally gave me a voice’ (quoted in Cook-Sather, 2015)—an assertion made by a student who identifies as Black and female and who worked as a student partner in one of the longstanding pedagogical partnership programmes we discuss here. As local and global disruptions have prompted reckonings with ‘business as usual’ in US higher education, the ways in which student voice is fostered within and beyond pedagogical partnership work have evolved both in the context of individual programmes and across institutions. This cross-context, practice-based case study is co-authored by three staff members who facilitate pedagogical partnership work in two longstanding programmes and in one newer programme, as well as a student partner from each context.

In the following sections, we provide overviews of and reflections on our three programmes, written by staff partners, which include three representative examples of how each programme has evolved over time in engaging the student voice. As part of each case study, both staff co-authors, writing from the position of facilitating these programmes, and student co-authors, who have worked as student partners within these programmes, share their experiences. Staff authors reflect on their roles in fostering student voice, and student authors reflect on how their voices have evolved over the time during which they participated in the programmes. We conclude with a cross-case analysis to identify findings and outcomes that might inform other partnership programmes' approaches to engaging with the student voice going forward.

Case 1: Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT)

The [Students as Learners and Teachers](#) (SaLT) programme is based in the bi-college consortium of Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges in Pennsylvania. These liberal arts colleges are well resourced, each enrolls approximately 1500 students, and both have 'Honor Codes' as part of a student self-governance structure. The colleges strive to enroll a diverse student body: Bryn Mawr reports that 33% of current students identify as students of colour and 13% as first generation, with 78% receiving financial aid; Haverford reports 48.7% identify as a student of colour, and of the 1319 US citizens/permanent residents, 44% identified as a student of colour, with 10% identifying as first generation and 49% receiving financial aid. These colleges are residential, and they are committed to fostering strong collaborative relationships between staff and students.

SaLT has a foundational commitment to equity and inclusion that has, over time, infused student voice into the programmatic, pedagogical, and curricular arenas. Three moments capture this evolution. First, student voice and participation informed the creation of the SaLT program itself in 2006 (Cook-Sather, 2018; Cook-Sather et al., 2019; O'Hara, 2015), with students choosing its name and co-conceptualising its structure: students conducting weekly classroom visits, holding weekly meetings with staff partners, and joining weekly meetings with the programme director. Second, during the sudden and protracted shift in 2019 and 2020 to online teaching and learning, the voices of students displaced by and most vulnerable to the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic racism provided the focus of new partnership forums dedicated to developing equitable, trauma-informed, and anti-racist practices (Ameyaa et al., 2021; Cook-Sather & Bala, 2022). Finally, extending beyond the partnership programme itself and in response to student-led strikes for racial justice, student partners' and other students' voices informed the co-creation of a new college-wide curricular requirement in "Power, Inequity, and Justice" between 2021 and 2023 (Cook-Sather et al., 2021).

Alison's perspective: All of the examples shared above build on efforts in which I have engaged for 30 years to structure student voice into education, starting with centering student experience and voice in secondary teacher preparation (Cook-Sather 2002b, 2003, 2009). In all of the examples noted above focused on partnership and co-creation in staff development and curricular revision, I created structures—spaces and supportive processes—within which

students could find words, practice expressing themselves, and see those expressions take form in actual changes. As I argued many years ago, student voice signals not only the literal sound of students' words but also the collective contribution of diverse students' presence, participation, and power in educational planning, analysis, and practice (Cook-Sather 2002, 2006). Integral to this work is my practising a kind of "radical listening" (Bach & Cook-Sather, 2016; Cook-Sather, 2019), which for me means being deeply present, attentive, and responsive to what students have to say. In my experience, such listening to student voice does not diminish in any way my own voice or expertise; it complements and enriches those, and it forges deep affective as well as intellectual connections with students. For me, engaging student voices means engaging students as people with complex and interesting lives, with wisdom that I can learn from, with energy that can keep me energised. That engagement in practice has also informed my approach to publication, where I have consistently invited student voices into scholarly discussions of educational practice, including about student voice (e.g., Cook-Sather, Cott et al., 2023).

Aaniyah's perspective: In my first partnership, I struggled at first to find a middle ground between my typical modes, which are to talk all the time or not talk at all. Having weekly meetings among student consultants supported me in modulating my voice and learning to really listen to what my faculty partner was asking me to focus on. My voice became channeled into asking questions—and also reframing my faculty partner's questions—and responding to her responses to those questions. When I moved into my second partnership, I shifted to using my voice to provide contextual orientation and guidance to a faculty member who was new to the college. Part of that was helping humanise students and share cultural understandings, in particular, to help her learn how to listen to students, especially students who aren't usually heard. My third partnership was co-facilitating our Pedagogy Circle for BIPOC Faculty. This was a shift from one-on-one dialogue to co-facilitating a group. I wanted to maintain the sense of vulnerability achieved by previous student facilitators of the pedagogy circle—the kind that affirms people and then pushes them to change their stances. In these partnerships, I focus on inviting multiple voices into the space and not letting mine be the main one, unless it is to invite everyone to do a reflection. Over time, I've become slower to speak, more intentional, and more skilled at facilitation, including in classes I co-facilitate structured around group work; I am the person who knows how to transition or make sense of an idea that someone doesn't know how to simplify. This work has helped me to be less reactive, more empathetic, and more intentional as an educator. I use my voice to support dreaming together and being together in communities of hope.

Case 2: Students Assessing Teaching and Learning (SATAL)

The Students Assessing Teaching and Learning (SATAL) is based at the University of California-Merced (UC Merced). UC Merced is a public land-grant research-intensive mid-size (10,000) institution and the newest campus within a large university system in the western US. Soon after its opening in 2005, the campus was designated a Hispanic-Serving Institution, conferred by the US Department of Education. Approximately 70% of its students are first-generation college students, 54% are Hispanic/Latinx, and 70% speak a language other than English at home. In

2009, SATAL was conceptualised to respond to the unique needs of this growing institution by gathering the students' perspectives on their learning to create inclusive and equitable teaching and learning within its research-focused environment.

In SATAL, student voice has evolved through different media to create pedagogical resources that are conducive to equitable practices. Early in the programme, student voice informed rubrics student partners developed to support enrolled students in providing focused, descriptive, respectful, and empathetic feedback through mid-semester feedback and/or final course evaluations (Signorini, 2014). Subsequently, SATAL student partners developed a 3-minute video to be viewed before administering midterm or/and final course evaluations to guide enrolled students in providing worthwhile feedback and effectively communicating their learning needs to instructors (Signorini et al., 2020). More recently, student partners have co-developed a validated tool called “O-COPUS” (Pusey et al., 2023), an online version of the Classroom Observation for Protocol for Undergraduate STEM (COPUS) that captured the behaviours of students and instructors in the online environment, such as the use of break-out rooms, polling, and chat, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the SATAL student partners meet with academic staff to provide pedagogical consultations and close the assessment cycle in community. These conversations help student partners provide their perspective as expert students, experienced partners, and cultural guides.

Adriana’s perspective: Student voice means more than feedback or input; it’s about creating meaningful, reciprocal spaces where students shape decisions that affect their own learning and experiences. It’s about honouring their lived expertise and recognising their capacity as co-creators of knowledge and experiences. As programme lead, I centre student voice by inviting student partners to co-facilitate the development and use of resources, serve on events, and design curriculum changes. I also pay attention to how I listen: Am I truly open to their perspectives, and do I learn from their input? I make an effort to name the power I hold and to ask students how they would like to shape our work together, not just how they can contribute to my agenda. I draw heavily on Cook-Sather’s and colleagues’ notion of ‘mattering’ (Cook-Sather, Felten, et al., 2023)—that students must feel that they matter before they can fully engage. I refer to Catherine Bovill’s (2019) typology of co-creation, which is a really valuable tool for reflecting on and planning student-staff partnerships. When SATAL student partners visit classes to gather peer perspectives, they engage with respect, empathy, active collaboration, and listening (REAL). We also emphasise to staff that inviting student feedback comes with a responsibility to respond. Asking students to be vulnerable without following through risks reinforcing distrust. Supporting student voice means acting on their input—with care and responsibility. Our work is ethically grounded in the idea that students must feel their voices *count* to engage meaningfully. To support SATAL student interns, we also started incorporating more structured reflection into our partnership meetings through anonymous surveys, thereby creating space for students to name how they feel about the work and what support they need.

Téa’s perspective: Being a part of the SATAL programme throughout my four years at UC Merced shaped who I have become as a researcher, scholar, and student. The training I received from my peers when I first began working at SATAL transferred to my life as a student, where I gained

more confidence in having conversations with my professors and seeking out opportunities to become more involved in other labs on campus. As a SATAL intern, I felt like students and academic and support staff highly valued my work; while I supported students' efforts to provide their instructors with valuable feedback through creating videos and other resources, they expressed gratitude and felt like their instructors cared about their learning and experiences in the class. Furthermore, I found myself more carefully considering the feedback I gave my instructors and how I approached writing in general.

During the closing of the assessment cycle in my SATAL work, I gained experience analysing and summarising classroom data for academic staff members using protocols such as COPUS. This role allowed me to be the voice for students in the classroom and advocate for the changes they would like to see implemented in the class. Moreover, it allowed me to develop my own voice with staff regarding the changes I could see being made in their classes. The relationships I formed through staff-led collaborations to analyse our assessment data allowed me to publish and present our research at conferences. Reflecting on this experience as a graduate student now, I see that working with SATAL influenced me to pursue educational research in graduate school and was the first step in developing my point of view as a researcher and cultivating my voice in transforming undergraduate science classrooms.

Case 3: Students Consulting on Teaching (SCOT)

The Students Consulting on Teaching (SCOT) programme is based at Syracuse University in New York, a private research university with 13 schools and colleges. The University attracts a diverse body of students from all states of the US and more than 100 countries around the world. Statistics publicly available on its website show more than 22k total enrollment, with more than 15k undergraduates. It is also reported that 19% of the undergraduate students enrolled in autumn 2020 were first-generation students. Syracuse University invests in several programmes to create an inclusive environment for its diverse body of students, staff, and faculty, striving to make everyone feel welcomed, supported, and encouraged to succeed.

SCOT provides an example of how a partnership programme can evolve relatively quickly over just a few years to support the growth of student partners. Since its founding in 2020, SCOT has shifted from supporting long-term student-staff partnerships to shorter-term partnerships with fewer classroom visits, which allows more students and staff to participate in the partnership work. The programme has also shifted the structure and focus of the student partners' work to employ proven feedback methods with clear objectives and protocols to collect feedback, which allows enrolled students to share their voices in stress-free, anonymous, and effective ways. Enrolled students' voices are summarised in a final report that is shared with staff partners, with additional student consultant perspectives on possible approaches to solve issues raised in the report. Returning staff partners in the programme have reported an increased professionalism on how student voices are collected and summarised by student consultants over the years. Finally, SCOT has developed student-led learning teams that co-teach each other during group presentations, organise their meeting time with their staff partners, and design and share reports

with their staff partners at the end of the programme. These changes have increased the level of control student partners gain and influenced their growth throughout the programme.

Jacques' perspective: My first contact with the SCOT programme left me with a very positive impression, though it also raised many questions. At that time, the programme was transitioning from a semester-long model, where the instructor oriented the interactions, to a more structured, shorter, and more focused approach. The emphasis on capturing student feedback through proven methods was key. This provided responses to my questions and helped me to centre my efforts on what matters: the student voice. Teaching and learning that prioritise the primary actors' perspectives are powerful. All classroom stakeholders—faculty and students alike—benefit from an open, and especially, well-structured dialogue channel. I've witnessed first hand students' happiness and satisfaction stemming from the opportunity to voice their concerns and affirmations regarding their learning experience. Similarly, instructors displayed the same level of enthusiasm to participate, whether as first timers or returnees to the programme, driven by the constructive feedback they received from their students. At the heart of the SCOT programme lies the deliberate efforts to equip our student consultants with necessary tools and skills to facilitate the dialogue between students and instructors in a very neutral and inclusive manner. The training SCOT provided was designed to enhance student consultants' capacity in this role. The transition from a broad, semester-long, and unstructured consulting model to a more focused and shorter programme empowered our student consultants because they now have a clear understanding of the partnership focus, goals, timing, and path to achieve the goals. The transition proved to be a game changer for all stakeholders, not only for student consultants.

Jessica's perspective: When I was initially introduced to becoming a student partner, I didn't know this role existed. I was unaware that I, as both a student and education major, could combine my knowledge of my everyday experience with my area of study to assist professors. I was more unaware of the number of professors on the Syracuse campus who were searching for this kind of partnership, and who respected students' opinions this much. After beginning this journey, I quickly realised that I was going to learn just as much from this experience as each staff member I worked with. With each partnership I have, I not only grow more as a consultant, but as a person, student, and as a future school counsellor.

During my first partnership, I was hesitant to use my voice as a partner, and not just as a student. Previously, I had only experienced relationships with professors with a power imbalance. As a student partner, my voice is valued and my opinions are encouraged. My first partner showed me the importance of this dynamic and ultimately helped build my confidence. Since then, each partnership I've had has only strengthened my ability to use my voice authentically. As my confidence as a partner has grown each semester, I have experienced even more successful partnerships in which I share my perspective and voice. Becoming a student consultant has opened my eyes to the importance of student-staff partnerships and their long-lasting impact on college courses. Not only this but becoming a student partner has helped me to become a stronger communicator and collaborator with each partnership I have.

Cross-Case Analysis

In our cross-case analysis, we identify both structures and outcomes that might inform other partnership programmes' approaches to engaging with the student voice going forward.

The different structures and foci of our respective programmes foster in different ways the development of student voice through student-staff partnership. Through providing a structure for over-time (semester-long) partnership through which student partners build relationships with their staff partners and develop capacities that they carry into pedagogical and curricular development work within and beyond the programme, SaLT positions students as those with essential voices in conceptualising and facilitating equitable spaces and practices for learning. SATAL focuses on developing approaches to formative assessment and has integrated student voices into developing rubrics to guide enrolled students in offering feedback to staff, a video to guide student partners in gathering feedback, and an assessment tool of online forums. As described by the SATAL student partner above, one aspect of the SATAL programme is that SATAL student partners contribute to institutional-level assessment processes by building resources such as observation protocols, videos, workshops, and surveys for instructors to support their inclusive pedagogical practices. The SCOT programme supports short-term partnerships and the use of protocols to collect enrolled-student feedback, and has also developed student-led learning teams that co-teach each how to engage in student-staff partnership work. Supporting student partners in spending as much time to work with one another as with staff partners, SCOT increases the level of control student partners feel over their work.

Student partners' identify similar outcomes of their partnership work with staff. All three student partners describe gaining confidence in using their voices and developing nuanced and thoughtful ways to use those voices as their confidence grows. Aaniyah traces a shift from offering her perspective to posing questions and using her voice to invite others' voices into dialogue. Téa describes the intersection between supporting enrolled students in using their voices to offer feedback and developing a stronger voice in her own feedback to instructors. And Jessica notes how her recognition of staff receptivity to being in dialogue contributed both to her growing confidence and to her use of her voice. All three students also describe the development of professional skills—capacity not only to use their voices but also to have those voices become more sophisticated and powerful. Aaniyah points to her more intentional facilitation skills, Téa notes her increased skill in data analysis, and Jessica describes her growth toward becoming school counsellor.

Our three institutions have different institutional identities—private liberal arts college, public land-grant research university, private research university—and therefore constitute different contexts for student voice to be fostered through pedagogical partnership. Within each of our programmes, we have sought to invite and attend to the voices of students who belong to groups typically underrepresented in higher education, both within their own institutions and more broadly. With attacks on democracy and higher education (Roth, 2024) threatening to exacerbate inequities in society in general and in higher education in particular (INSIGHT, 2024), it is more

important than ever that pedagogical partnership programmes structure student voice into higher education.

To address the key challenge when institutional priorities do not align with the values of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI), implementing pedagogical partnerships becomes not only a strategy for improving teaching and learning but also a critical act of justice. As Cook-Sather, Felten, et al. (2023) argue, engaging students as partners fosters a sense of *mattering*—that one counts, that one is noticed, and that one is important to others—a foundation for equity in higher education. This sense of mattering directly counters the marginalisation that many students, particularly those from historically excluded groups, have experienced in educational systems that have often rendered them invisible or voiceless.

All three of our student-staff partnership programmes structure opportunities for students to have a stronger voice in their education (Dewey, 2016) and for students and staff to hear one another's voices to build engaged and inclusive learning communities (bell hooks, 1994). Our programmes emphasise themes of equity and inclusion, within various structures and through multiple approaches responsive to our different contexts, which can support dynamic and effective learner/teacher relationships. Guiding all of these is a commitment to seeking, in partnership with students, new areas of focus—programme design, pedagogical practice, curricular development, feedback—and media of communication to be informed by student voice.

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