

‘Because you trusted me, I trust me’: A Case Study Exploring the Transformative Potential of Student-Staff Partnerships in Co-Producing Institutional Policy

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Abstract

This small-scale case study explores the transformative potential of student-staff partnerships in the co-production of an institutional teaching and learning plan within a leading open and distance-learning university. The paper is co-authored by the Student Representative and an Associate Dean, employing an approach rooted in narrative inquiry to explore insights into the collaboration. The study centres on the lived experience and reflective narrative of the Student Representative involved in the project, providing rich, nuanced insights into the collaboration and emphasising the empowerment and agency that she derived from this work.

The study resonates with existing scholarship on student-staff collaboration, emphasising the potential of these partnerships to shift traditional power dynamics, foster epistemic confidence, and promote a more equitable academic environment. The study highlights how student co-production, underpinned by a distributed leadership approach, facilitated the development of the plan by intentionally integrating student input 'from the ground up'. The findings underscore the critical need to move beyond tokenistic engagement to create spaces where students are recognised as active contributors who genuinely influence policy outcomes. This approach fosters more inclusive and equitable educational environments, yielding both personal transformation and laying foundations for innovative institutional practice.

Introduction

In contemporary higher education, there is an increasing focus on engaging students in co-creation and co-production, also referred to as student-staff partnerships or students as partners. It extends beyond traditional student feedback or quality assurance processes, positioning student voice as a situated dialogue and pedagogical collaboration (Cook-Sather, 2020). Such opportunities span multiple areas, including learning, teaching, assessment, the scholarship of teaching and learning, subject-based research, and curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2016). While co-creation and production in curriculum planning, development, and enhancement is well-documented (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2019; Bovill, 2020; Sebolao, 2023), it is only in more recent studies that the role of student voice in decision-making around teaching and learning policies has been explored (Dunlop et al., 2023). This case study seeks to build on this emerging area of research.

In 2020, despite being a global leader in open and distance higher education, the university faced a significant gap: the absence of a clearly defined teaching and learning strategy. In

2022, faculty associate deans took on and led the development of a new institutional plan through a distributed leadership approach, one that intentionally created space for collaboration across roles and hierarchies.

Reviewing the Literature

There is ongoing debate about the definitions and boundaries of co-creation and co-production (Brandsen et al., 2018), and these terms are frequently conflated with broader concepts such as collaboration or engagement. Drawing on Brandsen's framework, co-creation refers to early-stage involvement in designing services, while co-production involves shared responsibility in their implementation. Applied to higher education, student co-creation typically involves collaborative activities such as curriculum design or assessment development, where students contribute ideas within frameworks still largely controlled by staff. In contrast, co-production entails a more embedded and sustained form of partnership, where students take on shared responsibility for educational outcomes, including roles in delivery, evaluation, and governance.

This distinction is often blurred in practice for numerous reasons including the fluidity, expansion and overlap of key concepts, the contrasting use of terminology in academic and practitioner fields as well as underlying motivations and narratives (Curtin & McMullin, 2025). Whilst the associate deans instigated the development of a university teaching and learning plan, Bovill (2019) suggests that would not preclude the activity from being co-creative. Brandsen et al. leave open the possibility to position such participation as a continuum with co-creation and co-production placed along a timeline of development, with shared values guiding the ongoing, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial process of staff and students working in partnership to negotiate and share decision-making (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2019).

Key to the development of the plan was the active involvement of student voices from the outset. The timing of such engagement in ideation, agenda shaping and influence suggests that this may be co-creation (Brandsen et al., 2018) however, the transformative potential of this collaboration, redistribution of power and challenge to traditional hierarchies navigates Brandsen's continuum showing hallmarks of co-production (Arnstein, 1969). The engagement of students has been sustained and continues today in the implementation and evaluation of the plan.

The approach taken to the plan's development, fostered the conditions necessary for meaningful student involvement by building trust, supporting development for all contributors, co-creating clear and shared goals, and establishing robust mechanisms for collective evaluation and feedback (Jones et al., 2017). This offered the potential to empower both staff and students in cultivating spaces where students are recognised as both creators and holders of knowledge, leading to new ways of working for the institution (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2019).

Co-production with students is not without challenge. Boyle et al. (2024) highlight how the power imbalance between staff and students can create discomfort and inhibit open participation, as both parties may struggle with redefining traditional roles. Students may feel

underqualified to contribute meaningfully, while staff may be concerned about losing authority or managing unrealistic expectations. Time constraints, particularly for students who are balancing academic and personal commitments, also present a significant barrier to meaningful engagement. Furthermore, there is a risk that efforts may be perceived as tokenistic, with students doubting whether their input will genuinely influence outcomes.

Drawing on the challenges and potential benefits of co-production with students, this case study seeks to provide valuable insights into the development of the teaching and learning plan and how authentic and transformative partnerships can be fostered. While co-production is not without difficulties, this study highlights the elements which contributed to a positive and empowering experience.

Developing the Plan

Addressing these challenges within the context of teaching and learning involves the direct integration of student voices into strategic planning. The co-author was Vice President Education (VPE) in the OU Students Association (OUSA) at the time and had been working to get student voices front and centre in all the spaces she had access to. It was therefore logical that she joined the project to ensure that the work being undertaken fully considered the student perspective. She had been involved in student voice initiatives and engagement in various forms across the university and was able to bring a range of lived experiences to the project, both from her own perspective and by incorporating input from the large team of student representatives with whom she worked.

The university held a dedicated, two-week consultation period through the Student Consultation Panel forum, explicitly inviting feedback on the aspirational elements of the Teaching and Learning Plan. Over six hundred student comments were gathered during this time and subjected to thematic analysis over the summer, providing a robust evidence base to inform the plan. To ensure transparency and accountability, the university adopted a 'You said / We did' format to map how individual and thematic comments were addressed, giving students clear visibility into how their feedback was both acknowledged and/or acted upon. Importantly, the insights gathered through this process were not only integrated into the teaching and learning plan but also contributed to the development of the wider university strategy, with a commitment to continue involving students in the forthcoming implementation phase.

Methodology

This case study employs a qualitative research approach; utilising inquiry rooted in the reflective narrative of the student representative and her participation in the development of the plan. The use of narrative inquiry also supports the use of a single participant, as the aim is not to generalise but to understand subjective meaning-making within a specific context. As such, a single narrative can provide rich, nuanced insights into complex human experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). As Stake (1995) argues in the context of case study research, focusing on one case allows for a thorough, detailed analysis that may be lost in larger samples. Similarly, Flyvbjerg (2006) challenges the notion that a single case lacks research

value, asserting that well-selected individual cases can contribute significantly to theoretical and practical knowledge.

Clandinin and Connelly (2004) describe inquiry into narrative as both the phenomenon and the method in as much as narrative describes the structured quality of the experience to be studied as well as the patterns of inquiry for its study. Our approach here may provide some incongruity of voice for the reader as we present those patterns of inquiry as co-authors but position these insights and the learning from them integral to people's lived experiences and the stories that they tell (Field, Merrill & West, 2012). Our approach also serves to capture the temporal nature of this experience recognising that such perceptions are framed within a continuity of accounts and episodes and that there exists an inter-connectedness in between. The student representative therefore draws on her reflections to lead the authorship at various points of the discussion and introduces each of the themes with a quote selected from her narrative. This serves to honour her contributions and foregrounding the value of epistemic confidence and mutual respect as foundational elements of successful student-staff partnerships.

The data was collected through an in-depth interview undertaken by another associate dean who was part of the project team and initially formed part of a wider research project. The richness of the narrative provided, highlighted new and deep insights beyond the scope of the main project on distributed leadership and was clearly a participatory voice which should be privileged and shared as she navigated the challenges and opportunities of collaborating with academic and professional services staff. This case study brings these first-hand, lived experiences to the fore and through a combination of her stories and our shared experiences, we retell those in a collaborative narrative (Creswell, 2014).

Findings and Discussion

A thematic analysis approach was employed to identify, analyse, organise, and interpret themes within the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This method offered flexibility and accessibility, enabling a comprehensive and detailed exploration of complex data while accommodating both key features and unexpected insights. The analysis yielded five key themes which we then validated as co-authors. We decided to bring three themes forward as part of this case study: authentic voice and partnership; trust and empowerment; and collaboration. We felt that the remaining two themes, the role of women in leadership and institutional change, would merit further exploration outside the scope of the intimate scale of this study. The student co-author introduces each theme with an extract that she has selected from her narrative.

Authentic Voice and Partnership

"The student voice is a powerful dynamic and we are not there to make up the numbers. We are not there to be given the scraps from the table. We are there as equal partners around that table. So that was very much my dynamic and what I was pushing for, something that was not just tokenistic or could be ticked off. It's something that's an active process."

The student representative explicitly highlighted that the project was designed around the concept of student co-production, with the intention of integrating student input ‘from the ground up.’ Her perception that her contributions would be actively expected and genuinely valued was significantly influenced by the individuals involved, whom she believed were interested in student voice and not engaging in ‘tokenistic’ practices. This contrasted starkly with other university experiences where mere student presence was often the sole expectation and she had needed to push for more active and meaningful engagement.

Students were engaged in the review of iterative drafts of the plan, providing their honest opinions and critiques. Significantly, the associate dean established a reciprocal feedback mechanism with the student representatives, articulating which inputs would be incorporated and the rationale for not including others,

“...for the students that engaged with those early drafts, having people willing to tell you the why behind the decision choices was a unique experience.”

The student representatives themselves noted that this level of transparent and honest engagement, where their perspectives were acknowledged and explained, represented a departure from their typical experiences and underscored that student contributions were taken seriously.

Despite the inherent power dynamic in academic settings, the co-author reported that she, ‘never felt that there was a power dynamic at play.’ She experienced a collaborative environment akin to working alongside peers in the ideation process. This inclusive atmosphere differed significantly from experiences where students might feel marginalised or only invited to contribute on specific student-related topics. Instead, she felt encouraged to share broader observations and thoughts.

Her experience of partnership in this project strongly aligns with and exemplifies the theoretical principles of authentic partnership and student voice in co-creation. Lubicz-Nawroka (2019) highlights that collaboration fosters shared responsibility and innovative approaches in higher education. The participant’s experience of this shared, collective responsibility and new ways of working enabled her to feel like an integral part of the team, where she was expected to contribute her insights and networks, directly illustrates this shift away from traditional, passive student role.

Cook-Sather and Kaur (2022) frame co-creative work as a pedagogical partnership grounded in respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility. This is also highlighted by Boyle et al. (2024) where the balance of power is reframed as something shared within a community of inquiry rather than as a zero-sum dynamic. Her account of not feeling a negative power dynamic, her feeling of being among peers, and the inclusive and engaging nature of the process are consistent with these principles. Her reflection vividly portrays this pedagogic partnership:

"It always felt as though this was a group of people that had come together to just brainstorm ideas ... I felt like I was with my peers, even though I wasn't ... That whole process felt so inclusive and engaging that I never felt outside of that structure."

Cook-Sather and Kaur (2022) also underscore the critical role of staff attitudes in the success of pedagogical partnerships. The participant's explicit praise for the project team's attitudes, noting that they never treated student voice as tokenistic, highlights the significance of this factor. The team's honesty and openness in providing feedback, even when student input could not be directly implemented, further contributed to a positive partnership experience. The process of tracking student engagement through a structured and iterative consultation process, helped to not only surface student voices but also demonstrate their tangible impact on the final development of the plan.

Trust and Empowerment

"Just to be in that space and have somebody ... turn around and say, 'You're here because you're the holder and creator of knowledge.' You're like, 'Oh my God! This is really important. I am around people that value me for what I'm bringing,' even if I didn't myself realise what I was bringing. That empowered me in a lot of different ways."

The co-author's choice of this particular extract from her narrative to introduce the themes of trust and empowerment highlights the crucial role that both play in fostering authentic student partnership. Her trust in the academics had evolved over time in her student representative role, having had prior positive experiences where she observed genuine student engagement. This pre-existing trust was a key element in the authentic partnership alongside the approach taken which she describes as, 'no nonsense, quite straightforward, quite honest' in which she felt secure in making her contributions. The respect that she felt from everyone involved not only helped her feel valued but also raised her own self-respect,

"I was expected and trusted to do the work, to see that student co-creation happened, ensuring that student views and perspectives were always a priority."

The participant repeatedly emphasised feeling empowered to speak up, noting that her contributions were taken seriously, moving beyond a superficial 'tick box' exercise. Being positioned by one of the associate deans as a 'holder and creator of knowledge' had a profound effect on her and the way that she perceived her engagement and contribution. This recognition of students' valuable perspectives and experiences reinforced the idea that she was someone with unique insights to offer, providing an understanding that academics could not directly possess.

Cook-Sather and Kaur (2022) identify respect as one of the key principles of pedagogical partnerships. This aligns with her experience, where feeling respected contributed to her sense of trust in the academics. The honest and straightforward approach of academics that

fostered trust emphasises the importance of staff attitudes as determinant of the successful engagement in pedagogical partnership work (Cook-Sather & Kaur, 2022).

The notion of this shared responsibility implies a level of trust in the capabilities and commitment of all partners and this is also highlighted by Lubicz-Nawroka (2019) who notes that co-creation initiatives involve responsibility held and shared between students and staff. The concept of student voice and agency is identified as a key aspect of empowerment. Cook-Sather (2020) describes 'voice' as a situated dialogue that fosters pedagogical collaboration, conveying a sense of empowerment and agency for both staff and students. This directly connects to the participant feeling empowered to speak up and having her contributions taken seriously. The feeling of being valued and heard shows how co-creation can bridge traditional roles and integrate expertise and lived perspectives in a more democratic way. When students feel their perspectives are valued and integrated, it contributes to their sense of empowerment. The recognition of students as knowledge holders and creators, had a profound empowering effect and this is emphasised by Delgado-Bernal (2002) as fundamental to the mutual and reciprocal relationship of co-creation. This provides a more specific articulation of the mindset required from staff to cultivate trust and empower students which needs to move beyond positive staff attitudes and valuing student contributions to embracing epistemic confidence in students and maintaining open-mindedness to their knowledge and contributions.

Collaboration Through Distributed Leadership

“Don't just tell us about things from the student perspective. Also talk about other things that you've noticed and think. It was never, you know, ‘This is your box. Stay in it.’ We were all in this one box together, and we shook the box to see what happens. We were all in the space, talking and it felt new ... We were all feeding into the same thing because we all wanted the same thing and everybody brought what they could to it to make it happen.”

There are clear synergies between the concept of distributed leadership and the shift towards shared responsibility and more democratic engagement in higher education. Van Ameijde et al. (2009) challenge the traditional top-down leadership model, which positions leadership as the sole responsibility of designated individuals. Instead, they advocate for distributed leadership, emphasising how leadership emerges through collaboration among diverse individuals. This perspective highlights the shared processes and collective actions that shape decision-making and organisational direction. Similarly, Lubicz-Nawroka (2019) argues that when responsibility is jointly held by students and staff, it can bridge traditional roles, enabling more inclusive decision-making about learning experiences by integrating both expertise and lived perspectives in a democratic way.

The student co-author felt that this was a new way of working. She described feeling like part of a team where everyone was working towards a shared goal and that she was expected to contribute, drawing on her networks and experience to have an impact. She recounts the process of participating in the project as, ‘so inclusive and engaging,’ never feeling positioned outside that structure by the group nor by herself due to feeling empowered to contribute.

This demonstrates a move away from a hierarchical model towards a more distributed one where students share responsibility. Her repeated emphasis on feeling valued, empowered to speak up, and having her contributions taken seriously indicates a shift in the distribution of agency and influence.

The concepts of respect, reciprocity and shared responsibility and key tenets of pedagogical partnership, as framed by Cook-Sather and Kaur (2022), inherently suggests a distributed leadership approach and her description of the feeling of being amongst her peers in the group exemplifies this. “It didn't feel like there was a ‘them and us’” suggests a flattening of the traditional leadership structure in favour of a more distributed model.

Conclusion

The approach to the development of the university's teaching and learning plan offers further empirical evidence for the value of co-production with students. The extensive engagement with over six hundred student comments, systematically thematised and mapped to specific elements of the plan, demonstrates how student voices directly influenced institutional policy and practice particularly with regard to the clarification and explanation of terms, improvement of tutorial provision and the challenges of digital exclusion. This resulted in expanded commitments to strengthen academic communities, embed peer support, and improve digital accessibility.

Moreover, student feedback not only shaped the content and tone of the plan's principles but also informed the development of a detailed implementation strategy. Suggestions on technology use, accessibility needs, and assessment design were not simply acknowledged, they were actively routed to relevant operational teams for action. Similarly, student input on the ethical use of learning analytics and the need for clearer, more inclusive career development pathways led to explicit commitments within the plan and its delivery infrastructure.

The findings from this small study show that student engagement in the creation of the learning plan was perceived as both innovative and deeply empowering by the individuals involved. From the student co-author's perspective, being valued and treated equitably by those you are tasked to work with, can grow feelings of self-worth. At a personal level, the experience of being recognised as a ‘holder and creator of knowledge’ was incredibly empowering, validating the unique insights and lived experiences that she brought to the work. This space of trust and empowerment, where students felt that their perspectives were genuinely integrated, allowed them to speak up confidently, knowing that their contributions would be taken seriously, fostering a sense of agency and moving beyond superficial exercises. As the student co-author articulated, her experience was ‘joyous’, underscoring the profound positive emotional impact of being genuinely valued in the co-creation of institutional policy. This environment fostered a sense of ownership and pride in the resulting work. From the collective viewpoint, the knowledge that that student representatives and the student leadership team had been engaged throughout the process gave the plan an authenticity that enabled them to promote its value with confidence.

This personal narrative emphasises the transformative potential of student-staff partnerships but also underscores the need to move beyond tokenistic engagement to create spaces where students are recognised as both creators and holders of knowledge and genuinely influence the outcomes of policy development. This requires a critical shift in both individual and collective mindsets not only to value student contributions and demonstrate positive attitudes, but to actively cultivate trust by embracing the epistemic confidence that this can bring and remaining open-minded to their knowledge, perspectives, and insights (Cook-Sather & Kaur, 2022).

The work laid the foundations for a more reciprocal and innovative approach to student engagement and demonstrates the transformative potential of these practices in creating more inclusive and equitable educational environments. Broader implications for institutional practice include developing knowledge of areas of participant interest, building trust, openness and honesty in communication and feedback, the importance of diverse leadership and how authentic staff-student partnerships can be fostered at a cross-institutional level. Actively supporting distributed leadership models to facilitate the integration of diverse voices in policy creation recognises that leadership and influence can emerge from various individuals and teams across the institution.

Although the scale of this study is self-limiting, it provides insights into how genuine partnerships between students and staff can transcend traditional hierarchies, empower student voices, and lead to more impactful educational practices.

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