

Empowering Student Voices: The Choice, Voice, and Poise Framework for Dynamic Learner-Tutor Relationships

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Abstract

This paper introduces the Choice, Voice, and Poise (CVP) framework, a tripartite model designed to bridge the gap between student engagement theory and the Students as Partners (SaP) movement in higher education. Addressing critiques of tokenism and power imbalances in existing partnership models, CVP integrates behavioural (Choice), emotional (Voice), and cognitive (Poise) dimensions of engagement into a scaffolded developmental progression. Through the reflective case study of "April," a university tutor who implemented CVP in her classroom, we demonstrate how the framework facilitates authentic learner-tutor partnerships—from co-designed rubrics to student-led peer feedback. Findings reveal that structured autonomy (Choice) builds foundational agency, dialogic validation (Voice) fosters emotional investment, and metacognitive leadership (Poise) enables students to steward their own learning. While institutional barriers and cultural hesitancy pose challenges, CVP's iterative approach offers a pragmatic pathway to decentralizing instructor authority and nurturing student ownership. The study contributes actionable strategies for educators and argues for systemic support to scale partnership pedagogies. By redefining engagement as a dynamic, equity-centered process, CVP advances a vision of higher education where students are not merely participants but co-architects of their academic experience.

Introduction

The Evolving Landscape of Student Engagement and Partnership

Student engagement is widely recognised as a critical factor in academic achievement, personal development, and lifelong learning (Klemencic, 2011; Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014). However, traditional educational models often marginalise student voices, reinforcing hierarchical structures that inhibit meaningful collaboration between learners and educators (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014). In response, the Students as Partners (SaP) movement has emerged as a transformative approach, advocating for democratic, co-created learning environments where students and instructors collaborate as equal stakeholders (Bovill 2019a; Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017).

Rooted in critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), SaP challenges neoliberal, consumerist paradigms in higher education (Matthews et al., 2018) and repositions students as active agents in

curriculum design, teaching, assessment, and institutional governance (Healey et al., 2014). Despite its growing influence, empirical research on SaP remains fragmented, often limited to small-scale case studies or lacking a strong theoretical foundation (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017; Healey et al., 2014).

Current Debates and Gaps in Student Partnership Research

While SaP has gained international traction (Bovill & Woolmer, 2019), key scholarly debates persist. First, there is disagreement over the extent to which SaP is sufficiently theorised, with some scholars arguing that it remains underdeveloped (Gravett, Kinchin, & Winstone, 2019), while others emphasise its grounding in critical pedagogy (Bovill, 2019b). Second, many SaP initiatives struggle with institutionalisation, remaining peripheral rather than systemic due to challenges in scalability, sustainability, and inclusivity (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2019). Third, power dynamics within partnerships often constrain student agency, with many models reinforcing ‘conditional’ participation - where students exercise voice only within predefined structures - rather than fostering true autonomy (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Dunne & Zandstra, 2011). Finally, the persistent ‘student-as-consumer’ discourse complicates partnership efforts by framing learners as passive beneficiaries rather than empowered collaborators (Macfarlane, 2020; Partington, 2020).

The Problem: Limitations of Current Partnership Models

Despite its democratic aspirations, SaP implementation frequently falls short of its transformative potential. Common approaches, such as soliciting student feedback on predetermined curricula or incorporating token student representation in governance, often preserve instructor centrality rather than fostering genuine co-ownership (Williamson, 2013). Significant challenges include ensuring equitable participation for diverse student populations, navigating entrenched institutional hierarchies that restrict student agency, sustaining partnerships amid faculty and student turnover, and developing meaningful systems to recognise student contributions beyond superficial metrics.

Research Significance and Aim

This article introduces the Choice, Voice, and Poise (CVP) framework, a structured yet adaptable model designed to operationalise SaP principles by integrating behavioural (Choice), emotional (Voice), and cognitive (Poise) dimensions of engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). Through the reflective narrative of a university tutor, we examine how CVP redefines learner-tutor dynamics by decentralising instructor authority, addresses institutional constraints while fostering sustainable partnerships, and empowers students as leaders in shaping their educational experiences. By bridging theory and practice, this study contributes to the evolving

discourse on student partnership, offering actionable insights for educators and policymakers seeking to cultivate more equitable and dynamic learning environments.

Core Concepts of the CVP Framework: A Tripartite Ladder Model Bridging Student Engagement and Partnership Pedagogy

The CVP framework advances educational theory by integrating Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris's (2004) engagement dimensions with the Students as Partners SaP approach (Cook-Sather et al., 2014), creating the first developmental model that explicitly connects engagement research with partnership praxis. This tripartite ladder addresses two critical gaps: it transforms Fredricks et al.'s (2004) parallel dimensions of behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement into a scaffolded progression while simultaneously providing SaP scholarship with the missing procedural architecture for implementing partnerships (Bovill, 2020).

Foundational Rung: Choice as Behavioural Engagement & Partnership Initiation

Student choice, as the first tier of the CVP framework, aligns with behavioural engagement through structured autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000) while innovating SaP practice by specifying how to begin partnerships without assuming student readiness (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). Educators design bounded choice opportunities, while students exercise preference within scaffolded parameters. This rung theoretically bridges self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) from engagement research with gradual responsibility transfer (Bovill, 2017) from SaP scholarship.

Connective Rung: Voice as Emotional Engagement & Reciprocal Partnership

Moving upwards, student voice is initiated to develop emotional engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004) through validated participation and systematises relational dialogue in SaP to prevent tokenism (Neary & Winn, 2009). Educators implement structured feedback mechanisms (Carless, 2019) as students contribute authentic perspectives. The theoretical underpinnings combine relational pedagogy (Baxter Magolda, 2004) with co-creation principles (Cook-Sather, 2018).

Culminating Rung: Poise as Cognitive Engagement & Shared Leadership

The poise, seen as a format of students' ownership and leadership, elevates cognitive engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004) to metacognitive leadership (Flavell, 1979) while defining clear pathways to genuine student stewardship in SaP practice (Healey et al., 2014). Educators scaffold peer leadership opportunities (Wood et al., 1976) as students mentor others and influence curriculum (Matthews, 2017). This stage links Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development with communities of practice (Wenger-Trayner, 1998).

This integration matters significantly for both theoretical and practical reasons. For engagement theory, it answers calls for dynamic models of engagement development (Reschly & Christenson, 2022) while providing actionable steps between engagement types. For SaP practice, it solves implementation challenges (Bovill, 2020), prevents tokenism through developmental sequencing (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017), and offers clear assessment benchmarks (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011). Both fields benefit from replacing abstract ideals with measurable progression, clarifying evolving power dynamics (Matthews, 2017), and integrating scaffolding theory (Wood et al., 1976).

Table 1 demonstrates the framework's practical applications demonstrate its integrative value:

Stage	Engagement Focus	SaP Activity Example	Assessment Metric	
Choice	Behavioural	Co-designed assignment menu	Selection frequency/reflection	
Voice	Emotional	Peer feedback panels	Quality/impact of contributions	
Poise	Cognitive	Student-led workshops	Leadership evaluation	depth/peer

Table 1: Practical applications of the CVP framework

The CVP framework achieves what neither engagement nor SaP literature has accomplished alone. It provides engagement scholars with the developmental mechanism connecting engagement types while offering SaP practitioners the structured pedagogy missing from partnership ideals (Bovill, 2020). For both fields, it introduces role-specific scaffolding that respects power dynamics while promoting growth (Felten et al., 2013). This integrated model moves beyond descriptive frameworks to provide actionable, theoretically-grounded strategies for transforming student engagement into meaningful partnership, and partnership into transformative learning experiences.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to examine the implementation of the CVP framework in an authentic educational setting. The research focused on a single participant, an experienced English tutor pseudonymously referred to as April, who had eight years of teaching experience prior to the intervention.

The research context centered on April's participation in a six-month professional development experience designed to integrate CVP principles into teaching practice. This experience consisted of structured workshops and individualised coaching sessions that guided April through the theoretical foundations and practical applications of the framework. The study specifically examined April's post-intervention teaching practices to understand how the CVP framework influenced her pedagogical approach and classroom dynamics.

Data collection utilised a multi-method approach to ensure comprehensive understanding and methodological rigour. The primary data source consisted of April's 1,500-word reflective narrative composed after implementing CVP in her classroom. This narrative provided first-person insights into her implementation experiences, perceived challenges, and observed student outcomes. To validate and contextualise these reflections, the study incorporated one additional data source: comparative analysis of her instructional materials before and after the CVP intervention.

The analytical framework employed three complementary approaches to interpret the collected data. First, narrative analysis techniques were applied to April's reflection, with particular attention to emergent themes corresponding to the CVP framework's core dimensions. This analysis identified and coded instances of student agency (Choice), validation of student input (Voice), and development of student leadership (Poise). Second, a critical ethnographic lens examined power dynamics within April's narrative, focusing on how she positioned students and described shifts in classroom authority structures. Third, cultural artifact analysis compared April's pre- and post-intervention lesson plans and syllabi, documenting concrete changes in instructional design.

The study adhered to rigorous ethical standards throughout the research process. All identifying information was anonymised, with the participant's identity protected through use of a pseudonym. References to student work in April's narrative were aggregated and de-identified to maintain confidentiality. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained prior to data collection and analysis.

This methodological approach provided multiple perspectives on CVP implementation, combining reflective practitioner insights with observable changes in teaching practice. The triangulation of narrative, observational, and documentary evidence allowed for comprehensive understanding of both the practical challenges and transformative potential of the CVP framework in authentic educational settings.

Findings and Discussion

This section explores the impact of the CVP framework on April's pedagogical practice, focusing on a formative speaking coursework task in which students were invited to co-construct rubrics for their individual presentations before applying them in peer review. Drawing on April's

reflective narrative and comparative analysis of instructional materials before and after the CVP intervention, this section discusses how CVP principles were enacted through the rubric design project and how these principles influenced students' engagement and evolving roles. The findings are organised by the three core dimensions of the CVP framework and reveal both empowering shifts and subtle challenges in redistributing classroom power.

Choice: Negotiating Autonomy in Learning

April's implementation of Choice fundamentally reconfigured her pedagogical approach, marked by a stark contrast between her pre- and post-CVP lesson designs. Where her pre-intervention teaching adhered to a teacher-directed format—fixed outcomes, timed segments, and predetermined pathways—her post-CVP plans embraced open-ended architectures: flexible negotiation periods, multiple resource options (e.g., sample rubrics alongside student-generated criteria), and sessions framed as exploratory spaces rather than task checklists. This structural shift embodied CVP's foundational rung, where Choice cultivates behavioural engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004) through structured autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The rubric task exemplified this transformation. By requiring a final product while leaving the process open-ended - students could work individually or collaboratively, adapt templates, or create new rubrics - April operationalised Bovill's (2017) 'gradual responsibility transfer' model. Her reflection - "They weren't just completing a task—I could see them negotiating, prioritising, and questioning" - captured the resulting shift from compliance to ownership, a core tenet of SaP (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). One group's decision to design a visual poster rubric, for instance, demonstrated how choice fostered creative problem-solving beyond prescribed formats.

Yet this autonomy introduced tensions. April's admission - "I had to plan for uncertainty. That was new" - revealed the pedagogical mindset shift required by CVP. Her discomfort with time management and consistency mirrored critiques of minimal guidance (Kirschner et al., 2006), underscoring that student agency demands intentional scaffolding, not abdication of teacher responsibility. Her solution - replacing rigid timelines with flexible negotiation blocks - struck this balance, ensuring structure while decentralizing control. This approach aligned with Healey et al.'s (2014) vision of shared authority, proving Choice could be both liberating and pedagogically rigorous.

Voice: Expressing Perspectives Through Dialogue and Critique

The dimension of Voice was especially evident during and after the rubric creation process, where students were encouraged to express opinions, provide feedback, and justify their decisions. April facilitated a gallery walk in which student-designed rubrics were displayed as posters or PowerPoint slides. Students were invited to view each group's work, write

comments, ask questions, and critique the rubrics based on clarity, fairness, and usability. The gallery walk activity marked the transition to CVP's second rung, where Voice fostered emotional engagement through relational dialogue (Baxter Magolda, 2004). This shift from passive recipients to active co-authors of evaluation was particularly evident when typically quiet students became spokespersons for their work - what April described as their sudden "authority" when defending rubric choices. This transformation embodied Neary & Winn's (2009) anti-tokenism principle, moving beyond performative participation to genuine integration of student perspectives, as groups revised their rubrics based on substantive peer feedback.

To systematically cultivate this dialogic culture, April fundamentally restructured her lesson planning by replacing content-heavy frontloading with student-led discussions and structured feedback circles. She introduced anonymous peer feedback tools - including post-it notes and online forms - to address emerging cultural hesitancy while preserving critical engagement. Dedicated time for open-ended dialogue and negotiation ensured students could grapple with divergent perspectives, while built-in reflection moments created intentional pauses for learners to process and reconsider peer input.

These design choices operationalised Carless's (2019) inclusive feedback principles while addressing the equity gaps Mercer-Mapstone and Bovill (2019) identified in partnership models. The anonymous tools, for instance, created safer spaces for critical engagement, particularly for students from cultures valuing harmony over confrontation. Meanwhile, the scheduled reflection periods ensured feedback wasn't merely exchanged but metabolised—a crucial distinction that elevated Voice from a classroom activity to a sustained practice of mutual respect and collective meaning-making.

April's iterative adjustments -responding to students' comfort levels while progressively deepening their engagement -demonstrated Voice as both process and outcome. The gallery walk's success wasn't just in its immediate products (revised rubrics) but in how it reshaped classroom dynamics: students began viewing critique not as confrontation but as collaborative refinement of shared work. This emotional investment in collective outcomes, scaffolded through deliberate lesson planning, marked the true measure of Voice's transformative potential.

Poise: Performing Leadership and Cognitive Ownership

April's most powerful demonstration of Poise emerged when students began using their co-created rubrics to conduct peer evaluations -a process made possible through deliberate lesson plan restructuring. Where traditional peer review might have used instructor-designed checklists, April's revised approach embedded rubric application into regular sessions, allocated structured reflection time after each review for students to critique their own rubric's

effectiveness, and scaffolded meta-evaluation through prompts such as, "Which of our criteria proved most useful? Where did our rubric fall short?"

This intentional sequencing - from creating assessment tools to using them professionally - allowed students to experience what Flavell (1979) termed metacognitive leadership. When one typically reserved student justified a low score by saying, "Your slides do not match our 'visual clarity' standards we all agreed on last week," it demonstrated internalised ownership of the evaluation process. April's design addressed two critical challenges. First, the developmental pacing - the weeks-long progression from rubric creation to application - respected the fragility of emerging Poise (Matthews, 2017). Second, it supported authentic transfer: by using their own (not instructor-designed) rubrics, students engaged in what Vygotsky (1978) would recognise as authentic zone of proximal development, stretching skills within self-created frameworks.

Intersections and Challenges

While analytically distinct, Choice, Voice and Poise functioned as an interdependent system in April's classroom, with each dimension scaffolding the next through deliberate pedagogical design. The foundational Choice in rubric creation - where students determined formats, criteria, and workflows - established the ownership necessary for authentic Voice to emerge during gallery walks. April's lesson plans intentionally sequenced these experiences, first building behavioural engagement through structured autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000), then creating dialogic spaces where students defended their choices using the anonymous feedback tools and reflection protocols she had implemented. This progression culminated in Poise as students transitioned from creating assessment tools to leading their application. The metacognitive leadership (Flavell, 1979) students demonstrated when voluntarily using their rubrics to evaluate peer work showed how Voice activities had fostered the confidence for cognitive stewardship.

The ecosystem that emerged transcended the sum of its parts, fundamentally reconfiguring students' relationship with assessment. Where traditional models position learners as passive consumers of criteria, CVP's interconnected dimensions—actualised through April's pedagogical redesign - cultivated three distinct yet overlapping identities: co-designers of assessment tools (manifesting Choice through behavioural engagement), critical interlocutors in quality debates (exercising Voice via emotional investment), and pedagogical leaders in evaluation processes (demonstrating Poise through cognitive stewardship). This developmental progression, carefully scaffolded through April's phased lesson plan adaptations, realised what she described as "assessment literacy in action" - a transformative dynamic where students moved beyond encountering evaluation systems to actively constructing their frameworks, negotiating standards through dialogic critique, and ultimately administering assessments as legitimate pedagogical authorities.

Yet the process was not without friction. April encountered challenges in time management, uneven group participation, and ensuring all students engaged meaningfully. Some students remained hesitant to speak publicly or defaulted to passive roles. Nonetheless, April's reflections framed these challenges as part of the learning curve: "Not everyone became a leader, but everyone moved forward in some way. And that's enough."

Conclusion

April's implementation of the CVP framework demonstrates how the SaP approach can be operationalised as an organic, relational practice rather than a prescriptive model. Her experience reveals both the profound potential of student empowerment to transform learning dynamics and the persistent institutional constraints that challenge such pedagogical shifts. The nuanced interplay between Choice, Voice, and Poise in her classroom underscores how partnership is cultivated through iterative practice rather than imposed through static frameworks. Future research should expand this understanding by integrating student voices alongside educator narratives, particularly to examine how CVP's developmental ladder functions across diverse cultural and institutional contexts.

For educators, the CVP framework invites a reimagining of classroom roles, beginning with structured autonomy in assignments and progressing toward shared intellectual leadership. Institutions must create enabling conditions for such pedagogy through revised reward systems, professional development programmes, and policies that recognise partnership work as central to teaching excellence. Meanwhile, researchers have a critical role in investigating how empowerment frameworks like CVP influence long-term outcomes, from academic achievement to students' professional identities.

Ultimately, CVP reframes engagement as a dynamic ecosystem where behavioural, emotional, and cognitive growth reinforce one another. By treating choice as the foundation, voice as the connective tissue, and poise as the culmination, educators can design learning experiences that honour students as legitimate partners in knowledge creation. In an era where higher education must balance efficiency with equity, CVP offers a compelling vision—one where empowerment is not merely aspirational but systematically scaffolded into the fabric of teaching and learning. The framework's power lies in its simplicity: when students are trusted to help steer their education, classrooms become spaces where agency and accountability flourish together.

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