Moving from the fringe to the mainstream: opportunities for embedding student engagement through partnership

Dr Abbi Flint
Visiting Fellow, Birmingham City University, UK
For correspondence, please contact: abbi.flint@bcu.ac.uk

Abbi Flint has worked in educational development and pedagogic research for over 12 years, in roles at the faculty, institutional and national level. She has a specialist focus on student engagement and partnership, and a Visiting Research Fellowship in Student Engagement at Birmingham City University.

Introduction

My understanding of partnership in learning and teaching is that it is best framed as an ethos or a way of approaching student engagement through which students (and staff) are active participants in learning and teaching processes and practices. Partners are both co-learners and colleagues, engaging in learning and working relationships, in pursuit of common goals which all parties are invested in and stand to gain from (Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014). Student engagement through partnership may be focused on different aspects of the university experience, and what I focus on in this piece is partnership with strong connections to learning and teaching. This involves multiple areas of practice and is underpinned by partnership values (as articulated in HEA, 2015). The inaugural issue of this journal is an ideal opportunity to reflect on recent developments in partnership in learning and teaching. The approach is deliberately appreciative, reflecting on where partnership has been particularly successful, and exploring how we can learn from and build on these successes.

Over the last five years, the scholarly study of partnership with students has flourished, with numerous edited books, journal special issues, and the emergence of journals with complementary focus: including this journal focused on Student Engagement in Higher Education, the JISC linked Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change, and the forthcoming International Journal for Students as Partners. In Healey et al. (2014) we highlighted under-explored areas of research around the pedagogic approaches and impact of partnerships in learning and teaching across the disciplines, and the evidence base around these is growing (e.g. Crawford, Horsley, Hagyard & Derricot, 2015; Wintrup, et al., 2015; Pauli, Raymond-Barker & Worrell, 2016).

Operationally, there is now a wide range of resources available for practitioners and leaders within institutions. These include: complementary frameworks (Sparqs, 2012; HEA, 2015), manifestos (NUS, 2012) and principles (QAA, 2012; TSEP, 2014;) to help define and develop strategic understandings of student engagement and partnership; online and face to face professional development and support programmes for those putting these ideas into practice; and, a whole host of practical support materials made available on (amongst others) JISC, the NUS, HEA, TSEP and Sparq's websites. Similarly, events focused on student engagement continue to grow and be a regular part of the HE calendar (e.g. the RAISE annual conference now in its sixth year and the JISC CAN annual meeting). Student engagement and partnership has also been a focal theme for many institutional learning and teaching conferences.

The debate is clearly maturing, the evidence base is consolidating, new voices are joining the debate, and the nature of contributions has extended beyond the enthusiastic exchange of ideas and possibilities to considered and critical scholarship. Partnership has developed beyond pockets of enthusiasts, into a regular enhancement theme and a valid field of scholarly enquiry. This is reflected in the incorporation of the language of student engagement and partnership into policy and initiatives at the national level within the UK.

Whilst scholarship and educational development activity around partnership has to some extent moved into the mainstream, the picture around practice is more complex. There are examples of universities and colleges who have embedded partnership across departments, disciplines or the institution. The ways in which these institutions have embraced partnership is, of course, tailored to their own cultures and contexts. For example, the Universities of Exeter and Winchester, and Birmingham City University focus on how students can be partners in the scholarship and enhancement of learning and teaching (as change agents, fellows and academic partners respectively). At the University of Lincoln and University College London the focus is on partnership in subject based research and inquiry (as producers and through the connected curriculum respectively). However, in many institutions partnership is focused in specific modules or on the edges of the curriculum.

Reflecting on published cases, there is a sense that partnership in some aspects of learning and teaching is more widespread than in others. In part, this may be linked to the fact that partnership draws together many pedagogic practices and theories which have a long and well researched heritage. For example, the focus on partnership in subject based research and inquiry is underpinned by the substantial scholarship and practice around research and enquiry based learning, and a desire to bridge perceived gaps between teaching and research in HE. As such, it is perhaps not surprising that this area of partnership is well-represented. However, even here, Gibbs (2016) observes that "in the main it is outside the normal curriculum: most pedagogic practices in taught courses are unchanged". There are other areas with similarly strong scholarly and practice backgrounds: for example, one aspect of partnership in learning experiences is to enable students to take on roles of peer tutors, teachers, assessors and mentors. Again, this often takes place outside of the formal curriculum, through supplemental instruction, peer-assisted study sessions (PASS), or peer-assisted learning (PAL) schemes and programmes. One of the recommendations made by Keenan (2014, p. 44) in Mapping student-led peer learning in the UK is to "mainstream academic peer-led learning schemes within the curriculum". It's interesting to note that both of these areas focus mainly on partnerships between students and their peers, rather than between staff and students. Where partnership in research extends to staff and students as co-researchers, this often takes place through opt-in, extra-curricular schemes.

'Students as partners' has become a core theme of scholarly discourse about learning and teaching, with a growing research evidence base and support for the development of policy and practice from sector agencies and educational development units. However, in practice, many partnership activities and initiatives take place on the margins or outside of the formal curriculum: in discrete (often non-core) modules and in extra/co-curricular schemes and programmes. If we (as educators and learners) are serious about partnership as a process of student

engagement, and want to make the benefits of partnership open to all, it may be useful to reflect on why partnership flourishes in these contexts. In doing so we unlock the potential to build on these successes and integrate 'inclusive partnerships' across the curriculum (Moore-Cherry, Healey, Nicholson, & Andrews, 2015).

Reflections and opportunities
Firstly, I think there is a potential tension with the broad umbrella terms used in scholarly discourse (e.g. student engagement, students as partners) and how these ideas are conceptualised and implemented in practice. Student engagement and partnership are broad and 'fuzzy' concepts. In part this is what makes them powerful, as there is room for contextualisation and adaptation. However, it also means that individuals engaged in partnerships may have different rationales, motivations and understandings. In these situations, it may be understandable that different kinds of partnership emerge around individual practices. The opportunity for those wishing to take a more collective and holistic approach is to draw individuals together to unpack their definitions and rationales, and to develop a collective approach based on areas of commonality.

Cook-Sather (2014) has suggested that partnership can be framed as a threshold concept; it can be troublesome and transform the way individuals perceive learning and teaching relationships and the construction of knowledge, and in doing so can be perceived as disruptive. As such, it may be that both staff and students seek low-risk opportunities to explore these new ways of learning and working, outside of the formal curriculum. That new approaches and ideas need time to be experienced, piloted and evaluated before they build momentum and tip over into the mainstream. However, many of the pedagogic ideas grouped under partnership have been in use for considerable time, with a solid evidence base for their individual efficacy (e.g. active and collaborative learning, experiential learning, and research-based learning). What is more novel is employing these collectively within an ethos of partnership. It may be that staff and students are focusing on projects and activities that are within their individual sphere of control. The opportunities for those wishing to mainstream partnerships are (a) to demonstrate a commitment to the systematic evaluation of partnership activities to build the evidence base (b) to explore how low-risk spaces can be created within the curriculum to trial elements of partnership approaches, and (c) to bring individuals together to develop a collective ethos and community of practice around partnership. Connected with this is the potential tension between what constitutes excellence in learning and teaching from a pedagogic perspective, and how teaching quality is evaluated and measured. There are well established and evidenced descriptions of effective and engaging practices in HE learning and teaching (e.g. Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Kuh, 2008), however it's less clear whether all of these are reflected and valued in current measures of teaching quality. This has been a theme in the wider debate around the proposed Teaching Excellence Framework (Stoakes, 2016) and Learning Gain (TSEP, 2016). The spaces where these activities take place (outside and on the edge of the curriculum) can be described as liminal. They are also on the edges of traditional (often hierarchical) roles and relationships that dominate learning and teaching in HE. As such, they may be just the kind of environments that are more open to partnership. In its very practice, partnership can be disruptive; challenging assumptions and blurring boundaries between roles and identities (Jensen & Bennett, 2016). These environments may offer spaces where traditional roles are

less well-established and the potential for sharing of power and responsibility is greater.

I am reminded of a comment a student shared with me when describing their enthusiasm for an extra-curricular partnership initiative: "It's because I don't feel like a student in this room". The implication here is that there are certain assumptions that are made about the labels we use to describe roles within HE, and that those assumptions may not always be perceived as compatible with partnership. It also emphasises that labels of 'student' and 'staff', potentially over-simplify complex identities. We can all be learners, employees, colleagues, researchers, consumers, leaders and teachers in different aspects of our HE practices, but the labels we use to describe our positions within HE do not always reflect this. The opportunities for those wishing to explore different roles and relationships within learning and teaching are (a) to reflect on how current ways of working and learning may reinforce certain perceptions of student and staff roles, and (b) to take time to collectively surface and question assumed norms about roles and responsibilities.

These liminal spaces are powerful sites of partnership, however, if they stay on the margin limited numbers of staff and students stand to gain. As Gibbs (2016) points out, although there is evidence to suggest that engaged students tend to engage with both in-curriculum and extra-curriculum activities, this has sometimes led to the assumption that engaging students outside the curriculum leads to greater student engagement within the curriculum. Whilst partnership is only one approach to learning and teaching, and one that "might not be right for everyone, nor is it possible in every context" (Healey et al., 2014, p. 60), it is important to embed a principle of equality of opportunity. Where partnership exists solely in optional and additional activities for students, the tensions around inclusivity, reward and recognition, and sustainability (Ibid.) will remain. Furthermore, evidence suggests that one of the key factors for developing student engagement (and thus retention and success) is developing a sense of belonging, especially within the academic sphere (Thomas, 2012). One way to address this is to mainstream opportunities for building community, among students and between staff and students, through partnership across the curriculum; so that the benefits of partnership are open to all. This does not necessarily mean that all pedagogic approaches are employed through partnership, but that it is one of the approaches students will experience during their studies.

There are huge opportunities to learn from examples of partnership in liminal spaces, and apply that learning to mainstream and integrate partnership in the curriculum. For example, exploring how we can build connections between curricular and extra-curricular partnerships to develop models of partnership rooted in strong academic communities. Through considered reflection on where and why partnership and a sense of belonging flourish, with attention to roles and responsibilities, collaboration and a commitment to evaluation, we can create potential to extend the benefits of partnership to more students and staff.

References

Chickering, A.W. & Gamson, Z.F. (1987). Seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. *American Association of Higher Education Bulletin, 39*(7), 3-7.

Cook-Sather, A. (2014). Student-faculty partnership in explorations of pedagogical practice: a threshold concept in academic development. *International Journal for Academic Development. 19*(3), 186-198.

Crawford, K., Horsley, R., Hagyard, A., & Derricot, D. (2015). Pedagogies of partnership: what works? [HEA]. Retrieved from https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resource/pedagogies-partnership-what-works

Gibbs, G. (2016). Student engagement' is a slippery concept: Idea number 42. 53 Powerful Ideas. SEDA. Retrieved from http://www.seda.ac.uk/53-powerful-ideas

Healey, M., Flint, A., & Harrington, K. (2014). Engagement through partnership: students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education. [HEA]. Retrieved from https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/engagement-through-partnership-students-partners-learning-and-teaching-higher-education

Higher Education Academy (HEA) (2015). Framework for student engagement through partnership. [HEA]. Retrieved from https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/enhancement/frameworks/framework-student-engagement-through-partnership

Jensen, K. & Bennett, E. (2016). Enhancing teaching and learning through dialogue: a student and staff partnership model. *International Journal for Academic Development, 21*(1), 41-53.

Keenan, C. (2014). *Mapping student-led peer learning in the UK.* [HEA]. Retrieved from https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/Peer_led_learning_Keenan_Nov_14-final.pdf

Kuh, G. (2008). *High impact educational practices: what they are, who has access to them, and why they matter.* Washington, DC: AAC&U.

Moore-Cherry, N., Healey, R., Nicholson, D., & Andrews, W. (2015). Inclusive partnership: enhancing student engagement in geography. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education 40*(1), 84-103.

National Union of Students (NUS) (2012). *A manifesto for partnership.* London: NUS.

Pauli, R., Raymond-barker, B., & Worrell, M. (2016). The impact of pedagogies of partnership on the student learning experience in UK higher education. [HEA]. Retrieved from https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resource/impact-pedagogies-partnership-student-learning-experience-uk-higher-education

Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) (2012, September). Enterprise and entrepreneurship education: Guidance for UK higher education providers. (Report). Retrieved from: http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/enterprise-entrepreneurship-guidance.pdf

Sparqs (2012). Student engagement framework for Scotland. Retrieved from http://www.sparqs.ac.uk/culture.php?page=168

Stoakes, G. (2016). Students get out what they put in – TEF must measure this. [WONKHE Blog]. Retrieved from http://wonkhe.com/blogs/analysis-students-get-out-what-they-put-in/

Thomas, L. (2012). Building student engagement and belonging in higher education in a time of change: a summary of findings and recommendations from the What Works? Student Retention and Success Programme. [HEA]. Retrieved from https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resource/building-student-engagement-and-belonging-higher-education-time-change-summary-findings-and

The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP) (2014). The principles of student engagement. London: TSEP. Retrieved from http://tsep.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/gravity_forms/2014/09/The-Principles-of-Student-Engagement.pdf

The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP) (2016). Learning gain and student engagement: opportunity or threat? [Enhancing student engagement policy and practice]. Retrieved from http://tsep.org.uk/learning-gain-and-student-engagement-opportunity-or-threat/

Wintrup, J., Nascimento, J., D'Aeth, A., Philips, L., Wheeler, L., Laosebikan, P., Adams, J., & Truman, J. (2015). Purposeful partnerships and practices: an international education collaboration in global health. [HEA]. Retrieved from https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/purposeful_partnerships_and_practices.pdf