# Student-Staff Partnerships in Teaching and Learning

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INTRODUCTION

A radical approach to enhancing teaching and learning would prioritize the creation of collegial spaces for students and staff to work together in partnership to co-create curricula, to (re)design courses, to enhance quality, and to research teaching and learning (Ryan and Tilbury, 2013; Healey et al., 2014).This practice, often referred to as student-staff partnership, has potential to reframe traditional hierarchies and boundaries, offering new spaces for staff and students to interact and engage in dialogic pedagogies (Werder et al., 2010). Partnerships recognise the value gained from working with the different expertise and knowledges that students bring to conversations about teaching and learning. This chapter presents three models of practice to enhance teaching and learning: course design and consultancy, program-level quality assurance and enhancement, and inquiry through Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). Each model provides international examples and a detailed case study from McMaster University's Student Partners Program (SPP), the authors’ home institution.

Why are student-staff partnerships important?

* They provide opportunities for new kinds of conversations about teaching and learning outside of formal committee structures and institutional feedback processes.
* They offer a space to examine an issue from multiple perspectives and experiences, giving opportunity to be inclusive of different voices.
* The process for identifying issues of interest and finding solutions is co-owned, shifting from an often consumerist and transactional approach.
* In their most radical forms, partnerships can disrupt traditional hierarchies and help develop more egalitarian learning communities.

**PARTNERSHIP AS A VEHICLE FOR STUDENT ENGAGEMENT**

As evidenced in policy and national quality assurance frameworks (UKSCQA, 2018), improving student engagement in learning is a key priority for institutions. However, the variety of work that is described as student engagement is vast (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009; Kuh, 2001). It often includes what students do to engage as well as what institutions do to engage them (Bryson, 2014) and encompasses activity ranging from academic policy formation to teaching practices in the classroom. Students want to work collegially with academic colleagues (Kandiko-Howson and Mawer, 2013) and student-staff partnerships offer them the opportunity to do so (Healey et al, 2014) in a value-driven way and based on principles of respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility (Cook-Sather et al., 2014).

MODELS OF PRACTICE

There are numerous ways in which student-faculty partnerships can occur. This section presents three illustrative models for partnerships, followed by examples of how they are enacted in various institutions across the globe and case studies of practice from McMaster University's Student Partners Program.

Model 1) Course design and consultancy

Perhaps the most common starting point for staff interested in working in partnership with students is to look at opportunities within the courses they teach. A primary motivator for focussing on course design and curriculum is it allows staff to examine with students the relevance and effectiveness of what is being taught. Cook-Sather et al. (2014, p.28) advocate starting small when new to this way of working and describe three overlapping areas where partnerships can enhance courses:

* Designing a course or elements of a course, including assignments
* Responding to the student experience during a course
* Assessing student work

Opportunities to involve students in developing courses can vary in scale and focus. Bovill and Woolmer (2018) distinguish between staff and students’ co-creation *of* the curriculum (before a course begins) and co-creation *in* curriculum (during the course), noting that staff conceptualisations of curriculum often influence ideas about how it might be possible to work with students. There are numerous examples of staff working with individual or small groups of students to help redesign existing courses, for example, redesigning assignments (Huxham et al., 2015), designing a rubric to choose a course textbook (Mihans et al., 2008), backward designing a whole course (Duda and Danielson, 2018), and developing teaching materials for lab skills (Woolmer et al., 2016). Examples of students generating content in curriculum include 400 first year students developing case study material on contemporary issues in human geography (Moore and Gilmartin, 2010), students designing content for sustainable development courses (Barrineau and Anderson, 2018), students choosing topics to study in a course on public structures and Confederate statues (Nave et al., 2018), and students developing their own essay questions using keywords (Cook-Sather et al., 2014).

Formalised processes for students to evaluate teaching at the end of courses are common and enable students to provide summative feedback. However, these types of evaluations have been critiqued for their limited usefulness and bias (OCUFA, 2019). To counter this, models of peer evaluation of teaching have been adapted where students working with staff, in mutual agreement, observe teaching and provide formative feedback. This model of partnership focuses on students sharing their insights and expertise on the learner perspective in the classroom. Examples of this approach include the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) programme at Bryn Mawr and Haverford College (Cook-Sather, 2010) and the Student Consultancy Programme at Ursinus College (Goldsmith et al., 2017) in the US, the Students as Colleagues initiative at Edinburgh Napier University (Huxham, 2016) in the UK, and the Student Consultant Initiative at Lingnan University (Pounder et al., 2016) in Hong Kong.

Fewer examples exist of students involved in the assessment and grading of work, possibly because, as Cook-Sather et al. (2014: p.48) note, ‘it often feels like the most risky approach to partnership for many [staff]’. However, Deeley and Bovill (2017) argue that partnerships offer a way to realise assessment *for* learning and their experience of working with students in assessment and peer feedback demonstrated that students developed their assessment literacy and increased agency.

Case Study 1: A partnership approach to examining issues of equity and inclusion in the classroom

One stream of McMaster’s Student Partners Program focuses on students and staff working together to enhance courses in two ways: (i) designing or redesigning aspects of a particular course, or (ii) providing feedback and suggestions on the delivery of a course as it is unfolding. Student partners typically work with staff over a period of four months, meeting once a week to identify and implement actions for course (re)design.

In 2018, a new stream of the program was developed to focus specifically on addressing issues of equity and inclusion in the classroom, modelled on the existing course design stream and the SaLT program at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges. Staff across the university were invited to identify a course they would like to explore with a specific focus on enhancing equity and inclusion in the classroom. The motivation to develop this stream arose from the university’s commitment “to build an inclusive community with a shared purpose” (McMaster University, 2002, p. 5), and a desire to contribute to McMaster’s emerging Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Strategy and initiatives to advance Accessible Education. The approach taken for this stream was informed by prior research pertaining to issues of equity and student-staff partnerships (Cook-Sather, 2018; de Bie et al., 2019; Cook-Sather et al., in press; Marquis et al., submitted).

The first round of projects focussed on issues such as enhancing accessibility, decolonizing curricula, teaching about intersectionality, addressing equity considerations in group work, and supporting students for whom English is another language. Students who identified as members of equity-seeking groups were invited to apply to work with staff and once selected were remunerated for their time. Biweekly meetings with faculty and students took place to provide space to answer queries, share resources, and build knowledge in topics of shared interest.

The planning and delivery of this stream highlighted the need for specific and inclusive practices in selection and recruitment of project partners, and for specialist input to build capacity.

Interrogating practice

Q1: Of the three approaches to course design consultancy (designing a course, responding to student experience in a course or assessing student work), which do you see as having the greatest benefit for you? For your students?

Q2: What might be one way for you to ‘start small’ in this model of student partnership?

Q3: How might projects be advertised to ensure diversity of perspective and experience in applicants?

Model 2) Program level curriculum/consultancy

Another model of partnership focuses on institutional processes to review and enhance programs, often as part of formalised quality enhancement processes.

The United Kingdom has a long-established practice of involving student representatives in quality assurance and enhancement activities. This manifests in student positions on the majority of academic committees within an institution. While approaches to quality assurance differ across the devolved nations, including students in quality enhancement processes is expected through the various National Quality Frameworks (UKSCQA, 2018). Opportunities to provide feedback as elected course representatives are commonplace as are opportunities to join panels of reviewers for institutional cyclical review. There are a growing number of examples where a partnership approach is used to shift student participation from ‘giving feedback’ to one where students have greater input in quality enhancement processes, for example, by deciding on questions and gathering data for reviews, co-chairing meetings, and shaping institutional statements on student engagement and partnership. In Scotland, for example, SPARQS (student partnerships in quality Scotland), a publicly funded organisation, lists partnership as a key approach in its Student Engagement Framework (2012).

Bovill and Woolmer (in press) call for greater opportunities for students to work with staff in the evaluation of teaching and learning at both course and program levels, noting this is an area where students are currently less involved. This includes, they argue, the need to ‘ensure election processes are robust and inclusive, ensuring reps are representative and mechanisms exist for [them] to engage systematically with whole cohorts’. The case study provided below exemplifies a way in which selected students have such opportunities at programme level.

Case study 2: Enhancing programme quality with Student Curriculum Partners

At McMaster University, each department is required to review its academic programmes according to the Institutional Quality Assurance Policy (IQAP). Student Curriculum Partners were introduced in 2016 to bring student voice and perspective to programme-level improvements in teaching and learning. The initial pilot involved three departments that were keen on partnering with students as curriculum partners. Student partners were invited to get involved in one of two stages: the development of the self-study or the implementation of reviewer recommendations.

With respect to the first stage, the self-study is a comprehensive, reflective and evaluative document that identifies current strengths and opportunities for improvement, while also cataloguing the current state of the programme in terms of outcomes, curriculum, assessments and resources. Typically, this self-study is developed by a team of staff members. The innovation in the involvement of Student Curriculum Partners was to invite student partners to shape, contribute to, and inform the self-study, with a particular focus on giving voice and authenticity to the document’s effort to capture the student learning experience. Student partners were remunerated for conducting student focus groups, analysing focus group data, interviewing staff members on their experience teaching the curriculum and synthesising data, and writing sections of the self-study.

The second stage, responding to reviewer recommendations, requires departments to articulate a concrete “implementation plan” for responding to a broad set of recommendations aimed at improving the programme(s) they offer. In this stage, Student Curriculum Partners worked with staff members to lead and complete key components of the implementation plan. For instance, in the pilot, partnerships redeveloped lab materials, created webinars, and revised course offerings in response to the specific recommendations of the external reviewers.

Since this pilot, all departments are now provided with access to funding so that they can include Student Curriculum Partners in the review and improvement of their academic programmes. Including Student Curriculum Partners in the IQAP Orientation Session has proved a fruitful approach for demonstrating the value of this partnership for enriching the IQAP process and for ensuring that the student experience of the curriculum is alive in the process.

Interrogating practice

Q1: Curriculum development or improvement work often spans many years. How might you sustain student engagement in curriculum enhancement work? How might changes in student involvement from one phase to another be taken up as an opportunity rather than a drawback?

Q2: What potential barriers exist for the involvement of students as partners in this area for you or your institution? How might you overcome these barriers?

Student-Staff SoTL Co-Inquiry

Engaging students as co-inquirers in research is increasingly understood as a strong practice with the potential to yield positive outcomes for both students and staff (Healey et al., 2016). Research documents the benefits of inquiry-based learning, for instance, where students are given opportunities to learn by exploring and responding to researchable questions, rather than through more didactic methods (Healey and Jenkins, 2009; Hodge et al., 2011). Indeed, undergraduate research and inquiry has been framed as a ‘high impact practice,’ with the capacity to enhance student engagement and foster meaningful learning and development (Shanahan et al., 2015; Spronken-Smith et al., 2013).

In many institutions, attention is also being paid to engaging students as co-inquirers in Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) initiatives (Werder and Otis, 2010; Werder et al., 2016). SoTL, which involves the scholarly exploration of questions pertaining to teaching and learning in higher education, constitutes a meaningful form of professional development for staff (Fanghanel, 2013). When it is conducted in partnership with students, it can also have a number of further benefits, ranging from enhanced work (made stronger by the integration of student and staff perspectives), to increased student confidence and feelings of belonging within an institution or discipline (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). Recognising these benefits, Felten (2013) positions partnership with students as a fundamental principle of good SoTL practice.

Individuals and institutions across the higher education sector engage students as SoTL co-inquirers in several ways. In some cases, this involves individual staff inviting students, or students inviting staff, to participate in teaching and learning inquiry (Felten et al., 2013). In others, institutional schemes have been established to support this work. At the University of British Columbia (Canada), for instance, graduate students are paired with instructors across disciplines who are conducting SoTL projects through the university’s Institute for SoTL (https://isotl.ctlt.ubc.ca/). Conversely, at the University of Western Australia, the Undergraduate Learning and Teaching Research Internship Scheme provided training and stipends for undergraduates to work, alongside staff supervisors, on research of relevance to institutional priorities (Partridge and Sandover, 2010). Extracurricular schemes at University College London (Marie and McGowan, 2017) and University of Winchester (Lowe et al., 2017) likewise provide funding and support for students and staff to work together on scholarly projects that enhance teaching, learning, and the university. At North Carolina A&T University (USA) students enroll in a credit-bearing course in which they co-develop and explore SoTL questions with staff, while at Western Washington University (USA) students engage in co-inquiry with staff on a volunteer basis or as part of a course requirement through the institution’s ‘Teaching-Learning Academy’ (Werder et al. 2016). The following case study illustrates one way SoTL co-inquiry is supported at McMaster University.

Case study 3: SoTL Partnerships through the McMaster Student Partners Programme

Teaching and learning research projects are amongst the most common initiatives supported by the Student Partners Programme at McMaster. For example, staff receiving a major Fellowship supported by the teaching and learning institute are encouraged to work with at least one student partner on their grant funded projects. Students and staff from across campus are also invited to submit relevant research proposals to the programme three times a year, and project submissions are reviewed by a committee of students and staff with experience working in partnership.

Selected projects receive funding that pays students for the time they spend working on the research. While project teams largely work independently once they are constituted, the teaching and learning institute also provides consultation, support, and resources as needed (e.g., advice about research ethics clearance, support on conducting qualitative research). Each year, there is also an annual symposium, at which students and staff have an opportunity to present their work (in progress or completed) to members of the campus community.

Research funded through the programme has taken up a wide range of topics, and has afforded students and staff an opportunity to work on projects deploying a variety of research methodologies, including Social Network Analysis, critical analysis of media texts, assessment of learning materials, and interview, focus group, and survey approaches. Students and staff have co-presented their research at local, national, and international conferences, published in a range of journals, and drawn on their work to enhance courses and programs on campus. Although participants have experienced many of the typical challenges attached to working in partnerships (e.g., navigating power imbalances and unfamiliar roles), they have also reported a range of positive individual outcomes, such as the development of personal and professional skills, the establishment of meaningful and empowering relationships, changed approaches to teaching and learning, and enhanced understanding of others’ perspectives (see also Marquis et al., 2016; Marquis, 2017; Marquis et al., 2017; Marquis et al., 2018).

Interrogating practice

Q1: Who at your institution or in your network do you talk with about teaching and learning research questions? When and how do you engage students in these conversations?

Q2: What would you need to do in order to begin co-inquiry with students in research?

Q3: How might power imbalances between staff and student be navigated in research partnerships?

CONCLUSIONS

Student-staff partnership can be practiced in many forms (Healey et al., 2016). While many of these may be facilitated by large scale institutional schemes such as McMaster’s SPP, partnership can also be initiated by individuals at the micro-level of their own courses and research projects. As Matthews (2016) points out, partnership is as much an ‘ethos’ as it is a particular set of practices--a way of thinking and engaging in the university that understands students and staff as co-producers of teaching, learning, and knowledge. To the extent that this ethos takes root, it has the potential to contribute to transforming universities into more democratic learning spaces (Cook-Sather and Felten, 2017; Matthews et al., 2018).

In spite of the numerous benefits of partnership, scholars acknowledge that it can be difficult and uncertain work to do. Individuals considering partnership should be attentive to the challenges of navigating non-traditional roles and sharing power, the potential for individual or institutional resistance, the importance of clear communication, and the need to ensure that partnership practices are inclusive and equitable (Bovill et al., 2016; Jones-Devitt et al., 2017; Marie and McGowan, 2017; Marquis et al., 2016; Ntem and Cook-Sather, 2018; Seale et al. 2015; Kehler et al., 2017). The literature suggests several strategies for navigating these challenges, including establishing spaces to reflect on the process of partnership and engaging in supportive discussion with others involved in such work (Cook-Sather, 2015; Marquis et al., 2017; Marquis et al., 2019). Existing scholarship also provides some reassurance by affirming that, while partnership often feels challenging and risky (Woolmer, 2018), it nonetheless frequently leads to positive outcomes (Matthews et al., 2018).

Equity has been a topic of particular concern in recent partnership literature, as scholars have noted that some partnership opportunities may primarily involve students who occupy positions of privilege or are already particularly engaged (Bindra et al., 2018; Felten et al., 2013; Moore-Cherry et al., 2016; Marquis et al., 2018). To the extent this is true, partnership might inadvertently contribute to exacerbating inequities and reproducing the marginalization of particular knowledges in the academy. To counter this, some advocate ‘whole cohort’ approaches that embed partnership practices within the taught curriculum to ensure that all students have an opportunity to take part (Flint, 2016; Moore-Cherry et al., 2016). At the same time, others have illustrated that if attention is paid to ensuring a diverse range of students can participate, partnership opportunities can contribute to institutional equity by affirming marginalized knowledges that, in turn, can promote institutional transformation (Cook-Sather and Alter, 2011; Cook-Sather et al., 2019; de Bie et al., 2019; Stanway et al., 2019). Consequently, it is important to ensure that a broad range of students are invited to participate in partnership, and--if decisions must be made--that selection criteria are transparent (Bovill et al., 2016; Bell, 2016). Emerging research also calls for consideration of the social locations of *staff* participating (or not participating) in partnership, acknowledging that questions of power and marginalization do not only affect students (Marquis, 2018; Marquis et al., 2018; Kupatadze, 2018). While student-staff partnerships have significant potential to enhance many dimensions of teaching and learning, the practice needs to attend to such complexities to ensure it does not undercut its own potential to support justice and transformation.

Interrogating practice

Q1: How do other learning approaches (e.g., inquiry-based learning, peer assessment, student selection of assignment topics and formats, research mentorship) compare to partnership approaches? What might be gained or lost by viewing these learning approaches explicitly through a partnership lens?

Q2: How might student partnership programs be established to increase diversity and minimize inequities?

Q3: Shifting institutional culture is challenging work. How might you assess whether the ethos of student partnership is taking root in institutional culture?

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FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

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Curated bibliography on Students as Partners and Change Agents, available at

<https://www.mickhealey.co.uk/resources>

Short videos

Student views on partnerships at McMaster University, Canada

*Their experiences*:<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9aC3yv6RFOM>

*Their learning*:<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GoLZ8F2kBHA>

Centre for Engaged Learning, Elon University, USA

<https://www.centerforengagedlearning.org/category/student-faculty-partnership>