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'Partnership' versus 'collaboration': A student perspective

The 'students as partners' approach in higher education has recently emerged as a key strategy for student engagement (Curran & Millard, 2016). It is designed to embed students within their learning, foster a culture of shared responsibility (Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014) and promote positive relationships. Pedagogic approaches that encourage partnerships have been found to improve retention and depth of learning (Kuh, 2009) and strengthen graduate attributes (Crawford et al., 2015). Sitting parallel to this literature is a separate theoretical conversation that discusses *collaboration* in higher education, positioning students as not only partners, but *producers* of and within their education (Neary & Winn, 2009). Whilst conceptually it may be tempting to think of partnership and collaboration as synonymous terms, I propose that the two are markedly distinct, yielding from discrete pedagogical approaches. Indeed, 'student as producer' (Neary, 2010) and 'student as partner' models represent the pedagogic differences between collaboration and partnership, respectively. The differences between the two are subtle yet significant. This paper will explore how partnership and collaboration differ, drawing upon 'student as producer' and 'student as partner' literature. This paper aims to explore how situating students as 'producers' or 'partners' may contribute to institutional culture, staff-student relationships and productivity. The discussion here is unique in that it offers a student perspective on the conceptualisation of higher education strategies of student engagement.

Collaboration is mentioned frequently in discussions surrounding higher education, mainly in terms of its benefits within interdisciplinary research (Kezar, 2005) and education development (Calhoun, 1996). 'Organisational collaboration', as I propose it should be named, of this nature is important for creating supportive learning communities which benefit from the sharing of both resources (e.g. technologies; Sink et al., 2004) and ideas (Friend & Cook, 1992). Collaboration of this kind may be a term reserved for inter-staff relations, where relational dynamics, in terms of power and expectations, have already been well established. How then do we create true, mutually-beneficial and meaningful collaboration between staff and *students?* Moreover, how often do we say 'collaboration' when we mean

'partnership'? The student, as partner model in this sense, may not allow for in-depth collaborative efforts, as are seen in the 'student as producer' model.

Partnerships in higher education tend to relate to student-staff or peer working initiatives (i.e. schemes which require high participation efforts for students and staff working together). This 'student as partners' approach (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014) situates students and staff as equals, creating autonomy, reciprocity and empowerment (ibid, 2016). However, whilst 'students as partners' initiatives may be transformative, the 'student as producer' model provides a complimentary approach to student engagement. From a student perspective, I would argue that collaboration goes further than situating staff and students as equals. Instead, it recognises the distinct positions of the two parties on a much deeper and explicit level. The positions of staff and student are informed and moulded by relational power, context and value. Literature posits that teacher-led learning engages students (Biggs, 2011). However, it should be acknowledged that students have a unique pedagogical perspective on their own knowledge and learning (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999). In this sense, it may not only be helpful to work as *partners* with students, but also to work *with* them, as one would with any colleague. These two approaches derive from conceptually different ideas. 'Student as producer' initiatives serve to bridge this pedagogic divide, offering students the chance to engage in multi-disciplinary learning, whilst working in collaboration. Student as producer models situate students as agents of change within their own education, which, I argue, is both conceptually and semantically different from collaboration-based models.

The difference between collaboration and partnership is largely qualitative and the two do, of course, interlink and inform each other. However, the main difference is this: 'students as partners' models tend to have an overarching theme of *allowing* students *access* and *involvement* in areas and decision-making that they are traditionally excluded from; for example, curriculum design and educational development. As a student, I would argue that the contribution students can make goes beyond this. Students' unique perspective on knowledge and learning means that we are able to work collaboratively with faculty members in a way that is not necessarily always equal. Partnerships offer a robust structure for staff-student interworking, but I argue that collaboration is a more flexible way of working that may allow for a greater appreciation of student's capacity for contribution.

Involving students in curriculum design, for example, is only effective and productive if the unique position (in terms of knowledge and skills) of students is embedded into the practice. If this appreciation is missing, 'students as partners' initiatives may feel somewhat tokenistic and superficial. Collaboration, on the other hand, not only benefits from an appreciation of student's pedagogic insights, it *requires* it.

I would argue that collaboration between staff and student delves deeper into the dynamics unpinning the two very distinct positions of the two parties. In this sense, whilst 'students as partners' strategies may champion student involvement on a potentially superficial level, the student as producer model may be seen to recognise what being a student *means* in different contexts. Cook-Sather and Abbot (2016) discuss this conceptual divide, showing how staff-student collaboration and partnership can be explored using the conceptual framework of *translation*. The authors posit that, through collaboration, students and staff 'engage in never-finished processes of change' (ibid, p.1) that allows them to find new ways of articulating their unique positions. This transformative process differs in both practice and conceptualisation from models that situate students as partners.

In essence, collaboration enables two parties to bring together their unique skills, knowledge and views to embark on a 'mutual search for information' (Gray, 1989, p.7). However, models of collaboration in higher education (e.g. Amey, Eddy & Ozaki, 2007) conceptualise collaboration mainly at a departmental or institutional level. That is not to say that student experience and learning are not at the forefront of these initiatives, but rather that students are very much *indirect* beneficiaries. In this sense, students benefit from interinstitutional or interdisciplinary working through the changes in educational culture and ethos that these collaborations have, or educational syllabuses may be informed by these collaborations and so students benefit from richer course content. However, I would argue that students cannot be merely more direct beneficiaries of collaboration, but are also capable of *driving* collaborative efforts and so staff-student co-working is not only beneficial and insightful, it is a *necessary* activity. Moreover, it may be helpful to position students not only as partners within their education, but as meaningful agents of change at both a personal and institutional level, through 'student as producer' models. As the numbers of staff-student initiatives continue to grow, we must look critically at the

different pedagogic approaches that underpin the conceptualisation of both collaboration and partnership, as the two are markedly different.

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