A Framework for Student Staff Partnership in Higher Education

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Introduction and context
This research project set out to explore the lived experiences of staff and students at Ulster University working together in partnership in a national What works? Student Retention & Success Change Programme 2012-2015 (WWSRS) (HEA, 2013). The research was timely for Ulster just as a new institutional Learning and Teaching Strategy (2013/14 – 2017/18) was being rolled out and as the HEA/Paul Hamlyn Foundation funded WWSRS was entering its implementation phase. In addition, the University is developing its learning spaces through an ambitious capital development project and there are ongoing developments towards more interactive pedagogic approaches.

Across the sector, the marketisation of HE has encouraged students to adopt a passive role where HE is viewed as a commodity and a ‘student as consumer’ attitude prevails. Many scholars (for example: Bryson, 2014a; Bryson, 2014b; Levy, Little and Whelan, 2011; Matthews, 2016; McCulloch, 2009) now feel that the time has come to challenge this paradigm and to move away from hierarchical university structures that encourage a ‘them and us’ attitude, to more collaborative approaches where staff and students work together for the mutual benefit of both, in pursuit of deep learning. McCulloch (2009) criticised the students as consumer model, finding at least eight deficiencies with it that reduced the role of the student to that of a passive recipient. He proposed that considering students as co-producers places the student in a more active role and encourages a ‘students as partners’ attitude. More recently, Healey, Flint and Harrington state that:

Partnership is understood as fundamentally about a relationship in which all involved – students, academics, professional services staff, senior managers, students’ unions, and so on – are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together. Partnership is essentially a process of engagement, not a product. It is a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself.
The intention of this study is to contribute to the understanding of shared responsibility and to provide a framework for Ulster to inform partnership working and develop capacity for student engagement relevant to the current HE context. The research outputs are helping to critically inform the ‘how to’ of strategic aim 2 of the learning and teaching strategy:

  
  to provide transformative, high quality, learning experiences through the promotion of meaningful staff student partnerships that engender a shared responsibility.  
  (Ulster, 2013, p4).

**Methodology**

Using a phenomenological approach, one-to-one semi-structured interviews were carried out with staff and students who had experienced working in partnership as part of the What works change programme (n=14).

Focus groups (n=5) were subsequently carried out with institutional stakeholder groups at Ulster in relation to student engagement and (in the main) these groups hold a degree of influence in relation to institutional policies and practices. This evaluation allowed the assessment of the value of the interview findings for the purposes of developing, more specifically, a Guide for staff and students (research output), aligned to the objectives and outcomes for this study.

**Data findings**

A surprising feature of the findings revealed a similar pattern to what students and staff were describing in relation to how their thinking was changing and how this was resulting in a change in practice. Additionally there was an acknowledgment of the challenges presented in ‘doing’ staff student partnership.

Two main themes and 5 sub-themes (see below) accounted for nearly all of the codes identified in the data analysis process.
Thematic map, showing two main themes

**Personal Development**
Theme one of two relates to personal development of the individual and
Aubrey (2010, p.9) defines it thus:

> Personal development covers activities that improve awareness and identity, develop talents and potential, build human capital and facilitate employability, enhance quality of life and contribute to the realization of dreams and aspirations.

The interviews provided an opportunity for participants to reflect on the impact of staff student partnership on them as individuals. It became apparent that they recognised the value of this work in providing an opportunity for staff and students to develop new skills and new ways of thinking.

**Enhancement of the learning climate**
The second theme relates to the context in which student learning occurs.
Ambrose et al. (2010, p.170) refers to the learning climate as:

> the intellectual, social, emotional, and physical environments in which our students learn. Climate is determined by a constellation of interacting factors that include faculty - student interaction, the tone instructors set, instances of stereotyping or tokenism, the course demographics (for example, relative size of racial and other social groups enrolled in the course), student - student interaction, and the range of perspectives represented in the course content and materials. All of these factors can operate outside as well as inside the classroom.

The interviews also indicated the value of this work in developing staff and student capacity to engage. There were numerous references to the
interactions that take place inside and outside of the classroom. Staff and students described how their practice and their approaches to learning and teaching had changed. The data suggests that working together was a catalyst for the enhancement of the learning climate and these are categorised into three sub-themes of: builds relationships, creates a ripple effect, and encourages active learning approaches.

The table below summaries the impact of the partnership working on students and staff under each of the sub-headings of the two themes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary of impact of staff-student partnership (SSP) on engagement</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Development</strong></td>
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<td><strong>New ways of thinking</strong></td>
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<td>SSP encourages dialogue and mutual respect. For students; it provides an insight into the complex world of HE and challenges them to question the adequacy of a passive role in their own learning.</td>
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<td>For staff, SSP provides an insight into what it’s like to be a student in today’s world and challenges them to think about; assumptions that they make about students; and the effectiveness of their current practice.</td>
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<td><strong>New Skills</strong></td>
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<td>Students report that skills such as note-taking, being reflective, team working, writing and presenting have got better and with this brings increased confidence, motivation and readiness for different learning situations.</td>
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<td>Staff report that SSP prompted them to stand back, solicit ideas from the students and to take on the role of a facilitator. For some staff SSP mimics the profession, which enhances students' readiness for employment.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Enhances the learning climate</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Builds Relationships</strong></td>
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<td>SSP breaks down barriers which can impede learning. For students; getting to know staff within and outside of the classroom reduces student anxieties and prompts them to approach staff for support and guidance.</td>
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<td>For staff, SSP helps to see students as individuals with different goals and aspirations. Knowing their capabilities better allows guidance and feedback to be better targeted. It also gives staff ongoing feedback on their teaching practice.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Creates a</strong></td>
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<td>SSP not only benefits staff and student directly involved in initiatives or projects. Students report that when enthused student partners are more active in the classroom; it rubs off on the other students and promotes more collaborative learning for everyone.</td>
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Staff report that when learners get to know staff and each other outside of the classroom through course-based opportunities such as; pre-entry contact, induction activities and field trips, the ripple effect is felt back in the classroom through a sense of a cohesive team with everybody learning together.

Encourages active learning

SSP breaks down the ‘them and us’ situation and promotes active engagement. For students, they are more likely to ask questions and put forward ideas and suggestions which leads to taking responsibility for their own learning and a better understanding of staff expectations of independent learning. For staff, SSP has provided the impetus to take more risks in the classroom – in the sense of ‘letting go’ complete control. It has freed staff up to be innovative in their approaches to suit their contexts, which ultimately leads to a growing sense of a ‘discipline community’.

Discussion

It has become evident through this research study at Ulster that the findings generated through the lived experiences of the participants are similar to the benefits of partnership working, as described in the literature. However, this research brings new understanding to stakeholders at Ulster in relation to how this can help us think more holistically about student engagement particularly in relation to its three dimensions: behavioural, cognitive and emotional. Whilst it became apparent that the participants’ thinking had changed as a result of their involvement, quite often the catalyst for this change was in relation to how the participants were feeling. The findings speak specifically to elements of the framework identified by Kahu’s conceptual framework of engagement, antecedents and consequences (Kahu, 2013). In particular, the psychosocial influences which include staff and student attributes and the relationship between them, which are depicted as having a clear impact on student engagement. The theme of personal development discussed above enables us to appreciate, and build on the role that this plays in developing staff and student capacity to engage.

It also became evident that for those that participated in a partnership approach it can lead to more motivated learners and enthused academic staff. Students talked about the breaking down of barriers and how they
experienced a better classroom experience. Students felt the benefit of being able to sit down around a table and discuss issues with the staff that make decisions. As indicated by the results, students felt that partnership is very beneficial in bringing staff and students closer together. Similarly for staff, they described their increased engagement as a result of getting to know the student cohort better. This is potentially very powerful and we need to consider how staff and students could be supported to initiate and sustain change through this dialogue, and not just some students who happen to be involved in a partnership initiative but all students. This is very much in keeping with an active learning climate, desired by the University and being progressed through the learning landscape projects. This is underpinned by previous research which asserts that in order to promote deep learning for all students, it is desirable to move from a content-focused, teacher-led climate to learning situations which focus on what the student does and engages students in active learning (Biggs and Tang, 2011; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Entwistle, 2009; Thomas, 2002). The experiences felt by staff and students in this study also relate to research, which demonstrates that teachers and institutions create a certain learning climate through interactions with students which in turn has a strong effect on students’ learning (Gardner, 1993; McGregor, 1960; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002).

**Challenges**

Staff-student partnerships are not without their challenges and these are also documented in (Bovill, 2013; Cook-Sather, Bovill and Felten, 2014; Crawford et al., 2015; Curran and Millard, 2015; Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014; Little et al., 2011). In this research study, they included issues such as: time, resistance, and capacity (for both staff and students) and how these challenges are addressed can differ across the disciplines. Students in particular referred to their busy lives and the struggle to find time to get the balance right between their studies and other activities such as their involvement in partnership activities. For part-time students, involvement in daytime activities was particularly difficult when holding down a full-time job. Staff described resistance to partnership as problematic and in this study this was felt in respect to course teams who were involved in partnership activities.
in which they didn’t have the full buy-in from their colleagues. Staff described this as unsustainable going forward and that if the University wants to promote a culture of partnership then perhaps reward mechanisms for staff developing effective partnership may be one way in which it this might be achieved. In relation to capacity, students described that sometimes they lack the confidence to know when to speak up or come forward. They also feel that it can be hard to make a judgment as to whether an idea or suggestion is worthy of consideration. Some students also described a feeling of pressure from being a student partner - pressure to do well academically. Staff described the struggle with letting go – in the sense that they had to know when to give some control to the students, this was something that didn’t happen naturally perhaps after years of ‘being in control’ in a learning and teaching context. It was also suggested in the focus groups that partnership working in different disciplinary contexts e.g. professional bodies and students involvement in designing curricula etc. needs to be considered and this aligns to concerns expressed by Weller (2016) and Brint, Cantwell and Hanneman (2008), that the discipline-specific nature of student engagement can be overlooked even though the discipline can determine how students engage differently even within institutions.

Other studies describe similar challenges, risk was described by Bovill (2013), in relation to participants involved in co-creating curricula, as being nerve-wracking and tutors feeling threatened by students being in control of elements of the curriculum, professional bodies might too be resistant to such a move. Little et al. (2011) refers to transience as a barrier to staff student partnerships, for staff involved, who are often a constant in partnership activities, trying to engage and involve a constant stream of new students can be frustrating. Participants in this study also alluded to large class sizes, which can also seem like a deterrent to staff-student partnerships but it’s worth remembering that students can learn nearly as much through facilitated conversations with their peers as with their teachers (Falchikov, 2001; Thomas, 2012). However, where resistance prevails, strategies may need to be employed that address this at an individual or school level. Flint (2015) describes this succinctly and advises that staff and students may not
automatically see themselves as a partner in learning and teaching. Cook-Sather (2014) also points out that partnership challenges HE norms and may require staff and students to step outside of their comfort zone. Indeed, in this study at Ulster, staff and students described feeling surprised at the impact of partnership working on their own practice which was not something they had expected to happen, it had prompted them to feel and think differently about HE and the traditional roles within it. Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014) describe specific tensions and troublesome questions a partnership approach in learning and teaching raises and offer some suggestions as to how to create conditions for enabling fruitful change through learning and working in partnership. These relate to specific areas such as: differences in staff and student perspectives, policy and pedagogy, cognitive dissonance, students’ unions and institutions, and fundamental purpose and structure of higher education.

Staff-student partnership may also be considered a ‘threshold concept’ for some academic staff and students and perhaps one that doesn’t get priority in the busyness of academic practice. The construct ‘students as partners’ may in itself contribute to some of the resistance to staff-student partnerships particularly in certain disciplines. It can threaten staff in terms of their position as ‘experts’ in their field by them assuming that it means handing over complete control to students. The issue of power can prevail and it has to be acknowledged so that both staff and students can collaborate in meaningful ways that suit their context. Students may feel that it is not their job or their right to criticise academic practice or to make suggestions as to how HE should be organized.

**Recommendations**

In promoting a staff student partnership ethos, I believe that the recent HEA framework is particularly useful in situating partnership working (HEA, 2015). I see the benefits of partnerships as articulated by this research study to be mainly located in the learning, teaching and assessment and curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy areas of focus and the research output ‘Staff and student Guide to Engagement through Partnership’ that I have
developed recommends starting small and that staff and students engage through partnership through students being welcomed into a discipline community and cast as active participants in their learning. This provides the opportunity for staff and students to develop personally and to build capacity for active learning where student and staff interaction builds trust relationships, which enhances student engagement. This also creates a level playing field for all students, in that it creates opportunities not just for a few super-engaged students, such as those who might naturally put themselves forward e.g. student representatives, it offers each student an opportunity to engage in a community of practice which is predicated on a partnership ethos. This may then provide a basis for engaging students as partners in the other three areas of focus of the HEA framework. Bovill et al. (2015) state that they ‘have found that breaking down traditional teacher–student boundaries, while simultaneously recognising and maintaining the professional standing of academic staff, opens possibilities for redefining and broadening understandings of academic expertise in the rapidly changing world of teaching and learning’ (p12).

The overall aim of this research study was to develop a framework for effective staff-student partnerships in a higher education institution that can inform staff and student relationships and engender a shared responsibility in HE. I believe that the framework in the form of the research outputs and the ongoing implementation and dissemination is, and may slowly, break down the ‘them and us’ attitude that still prevails in some areas. Across the disciplines involved in the WWSRS change programme, it has been shown that interventions that foster early belonging and build student confidence through staff-student relationships allow our students to adapt to an unfamiliar educational environment. This is critical to addressing retention and it provides a platform on which meaningful student engagement and success can be realised.

Partnership should be an ethos or a process of engagement; it works best when it becomes a mind-set not just at individual level but at module, course, discipline and institutional level. I believe that partnership working between
staff and students in HE should be conceptualised as partnership with a small ‘p’ rather than conceptualising it as a ‘project’ or with a capital ‘P’. In my role as academic developer, working with staff and students grappling with this concept, time needs to be taken to allow both to consider what it means to them individually and collectively. My own thinking about staff-student partnership has changed considerably over the life of this research study, whilst I had always believed that it was a ‘good’ thing, I now appreciate further the emotional side of student engagement and how powerful relationship-building between staff and students is to promote belongingness, build confidence and optimise learning. This is, I believe, a precursor to student engagement.

Research Outputs

- Contribution to the development of the Ulster Learning Model, which is integral to the Ulster Student Learning Experience Principles: See http://
- Staff and Student Guide to Engagement through Partnership. Available at http://
- Case Study: Building capacity for student engagement through a staff-student partnership approach (Curran, 2015).
References


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