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Growing Partnership Communities: What Experiences of an International Institute Suggest about Developing Student-Staff Partnership in Higher Education

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Abstract

This article explores the perceptions of participants following the first International Summer Institute (SI) on students as partners in higher education, a four-day professional development experience designed to foster student-staff partnerships. Approximately 9 months after the Institute, 10 participants were interviewed to understand their perceptions of student-staff partnership, and what role the SI played in supporting partnership working. We discuss the key themes that emerged from our interviews, and analyze these participant responses in comparison to responses collected during the 2016 SI. In evaluating our data, we consider the general efficacy of the SI and offer ideas for academic developers interested in supporting partnership work more generally.

Keywords: Student-staff partnership; students as partners; international perspectives; educational development; institutional change

Introduction

Students as Partners in Higher Education

Engaging students as partners (SaP) in higher education has the potential to radically transform the relationship between students and staff (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014). SaP is a “metaphor for university education that challenges traditional assumptions ... and makes way for respectful, mutually beneficial learning partnerships where students and staff work together on all aspects of educational endeavours” (Matthews, 2017, p.1). As a values-based process, SaP should be enacted with respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility for learning and teaching (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014). Guiding propositions for good SaP practice include fostering inclusive partnerships; nurturing power-sharing relationships through dialogue and reflection; accepting partnership as a process with uncertain outcomes; engaging in ethical practice; and enacting SaP for transformation (Matthews, 2017). Within this relational process, “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” (Healey et al., 2014, p. 12).

In practice, SaP is “a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis” (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, pp.6-7). The ethos of SaP is realised in ways that allow students to become “active participants in their own learning in the classroom and engaged in all aspects of university efforts to enhance education” (Matthews, Cook-Sather, & Healey, in press). As such, partnerships are enacted in a range of ways in higher education. Healey, Flint, and Harrington

(2016) illustrate that SaP can occur across a range of domains, including teaching, learning, and assessment; subject-based research and inquiry; curriculum development and teaching consultations; and the scholarship of teaching and learning. In other words, students and staff can partner as co-teachers, co-researchers, and co-creators (Healey et al., 2014) and “all SaP projects will look different and involve different actors” (Bovill, 2017, p.3).

Embodying the principles and values of genuine partnership is difficult. While many beneficial outcomes have been reported for both students and staff engaged in partnership (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017), tensions and challenges that inhibit partnership have been documented as well (Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, Millard, & Moore-Cherry, 2016; Matthews, 2017). For example, Marquis et al. (2016) found that although participants reported mutually beneficial relationships from a partnership program, they “experienced difficulties navigating traditional roles, balancing desires for guidance and self-direction, and finding the time to build strong partnerships” (p.13).

As such, supporting staff and students to engage in meaningful SaP is important, particularly as it is becoming a central approach to enhancing student engagement (Bovill & Felten, 2016). Proposed approaches to educational development focused on SaP include co-created institutional communities of practice (Khouri, Oberhollenzer, & Matthews, 2017), induction and ongoing reflection for partners in a teaching consultation program (Cook-Sather, 2014), and institutional change programs (HEA, 2014; Matthews, 2016). This article takes up another avenue for supporting those engaged in SaP, exploring the experiences of participants in an international institute on students as partners.

The International Summer Institute

The first ‘International Summer Institute on SaP’ was held at McMaster University in May 2016. The aim of the summer institute (SI), now an annual event, is to build staff and students’ capacity to develop, design, and implement initiatives to promote the practice of SaP in learning and teaching in higher education. In 2016, over 100 delegates participated, coming from seven countries in roughly equal numbers of students and staff. Participants engaged either in one or two 2-day workshops or in a 3-day Change Institute, at which seven teams of staff and students were supported to plan the implementation of a SaP initiative. The SI was co-facilitated by students and staff from Australia, Canada, UK, and USA.

During the 2016 SI, we captured participants’ views on challenges of student-staff partnership, and the features of the SI they found particularly useful in helping to navigate these challenges (Marquis et al., 2017). The findings from this first phase of our research point to potential features that may be helpful for supporting the development of SaP approaches, including establishing a community of practitioners, providing practical project support, and generating opportunities to model and practice partnership working. In the current paper, we report on follow-up research conducted approximately 9 months after the SI to understand if, and how, participants’ experiences of partnership and their perceptions of features necessary to support it have developed. More specifically, this research explores the following research questions:

- (1) How do participants perceive and experience partnership within the SI and beyond?
- (2) To what extent do participants understand the SI as supporting their developing partnership work and capacities?

Our intention is to contribute to the literature about educational development for SaP initiatives by providing a longitudinal perspective on practitioners' experiences and their sense of the extent to which initiatives like the SI can support partnership work.

Methodology

Like the Phase 1 research, this study was designed and conducted by students and staff working in partnership. Following ethics clearance from the McMaster research ethics board, we sent email invitations to participants from the 2016 SI, asking them to take part in a one-on-one interview of approximately 30-45 minutes in length, which would be conducted by one of the student researchers. These interviews took place in February and March 2017, approximately 9-10 months after the SI itself. Ten SI participants ultimately agreed to be interviewed: two students and eight staff. These participants were drawn from six of the seven countries initially represented at the institute (Australia, Canada, Netherlands, Sweden, US, UK), and included eight people who participated in the SI workshops, and two who had been part of the Change Institute. The majority of the interviews (n=7) were conducted by Skype, given participants' diverse locations. Participants were offered a \$10 gift card in recognition of the time they spent contributing to the project.

Once data collection was complete, the first three authors prepared verbatim transcripts of the interviews and analysed these using constant comparison (Merriam, 2009). All three researchers first open coded three of the transcripts independently, highlighting ideas that resonated with our research questions. We then compared our codes and considered how these related to the findings from the phase one data, and one researcher worked from this process to develop a preliminary code tree. Each transcript was subsequently coded by one person using this tree, with a second researcher checking the analysis to confirm consistency of application.

Once all interviews had been coded and checked, we each reviewed one major branch of the coding structure to confirm that the points coded there were conceptually consistent. Throughout, any points of discrepancy or concern were discussed until consensus was reached.

At the second annual SI in 2017, data were again gathered from participants using the focus group and reflective prompt methodology described in Marquis et al. (2017). While these data are not the central focus of this article, we draw on them where appropriate to further corroborate or complicate ideas raised.

Findings

This study generated a range of data about the experiences of students and staff engaging in partnership. Below, we present some of the key themes from the data, focusing in particular on challenges noted by participants.

Benefits and Challenges of Partnership

The data on the benefits of partnership itself were similar to those generated in the first phase of the study, with participants noting factors like the value of diverse perspectives and the development of agency as positive outcomes of engaging in partnership. Participants also mentioned more concrete and practical benefits such as increased employability for students and the development of communication and interpersonal skills. However, participants also described a range of challenges attached to partnership work, repeating and extending ideas shared in phase one of the study. These challenges included institutional barriers, access and inclusion, and language surrounding partnership. Participants also reiterated the need for more time and funding for partnership projects, as these resources are limited for both students and staff.

Institutional barriers, institutionalisation, and power

Institutional barriers were amongst the most common challenges noted, with participants describing resistance to implementing partnership on their campuses, barriers to entering partnership, and issues of sustainability. Students are typically only present in their institutions for a short time, and as one participant reflected, the partnership process thus has to start over with each new student. This led some staff to believe that it was easier to simply carry out projects by themselves instead of including students in the process. Following from this sentiment, one staff member also noted challenges connected to traditional processes for developing and leading projects in HE contexts. This participant argued, “we need to ... diminish the reliance on [staff members] to come up with the ideas... And for it to become sustainable, it needs to be clearly embedded within the university processes.” The need to counter assumptions and institutional practices that position staff as primary holders of knowledge and leaders of action is evident here, as is the demand for institutionally-embedded systems to sustain partnership projects.

Tied in with questions about institutionalisation are issues of power. The staff member quoted above gestured toward traditional power structures, noting students’ reliance on faculty to come up with ideas as a result of the hierarchy that exists in the university. Likewise, other interview participants noted the need for collaboration between students and faculty, as they aspire to generate more open and equal dialogue. As one staff participant reflected, however, this is difficult work: “Universities are very hierarchical, therefore often the staff member will put themselves in a position where they are higher up than the student.”

Power dynamics thus affect the ways in which people engage in partnership processes, as student and faculty partners often revert back to what is known and comfortable. For example,

staff members noted the tendency to assume a leadership role and remain in their positions of authority during a partnership. Students can also feel intimidated in the partnership process, and thus may rely on the staff partner for instructions or answers. As such examples suggest, destabilizing hierarchies within partnerships is challenging, particularly because of the complexity and resilience of existing power dynamics.

Access and inclusion

Participants also raised concerns about who can access partnership projects. Some noted that engaged, academically successful students are often included in partnership initiatives, and that such students often also have access to other kinds of social privilege. Along these lines, one staff participant mentioned the need to “empower students who traditionally have the least power” in an attempt to include students whose voices are often missing in partnership work.

While some issues of access and inclusion are based on students’ identities and social locations, others are based on experience. One staff participant noted the tendency to include more senior students in partnership projects, suggesting first- and second-year students are often left out. They noted, “another fear is that we don’t think enough about some kind of progression, thinking that first-year students could be partners at a smaller scale and then as third-year or Masters students they can do so much more.” Though potentially difficult to enact, scaffolding partnership in this way could help include more students and diffuse partnership throughout institutions.

Language and understanding

The academic language surrounding partnership can be obscure, especially to those just starting out in this emerging field. Participants noted how their understanding of partnership and of others' experiences changed after undertaking their own projects. Likewise, some explained that differences in language between students and staff could interfere with the development and functioning of partnerships. One said, "it's very easy to get caught up in the jargon, and we actually speak a different language as academics." The language involved in partnership, and in academic disciplines, can be inaccessible to those not familiar with its terms—a fact which again relates to issues of inclusivity. Students may have difficulty participating in partnership when the language is so unfamiliar.

The Role of the SI

Alongside this consideration of their ongoing experiences of partnership, participants also discussed ways in which they understood the SI to connect to this work. The most prominent themes arising from the data are presented below.

Experiences of the SI

In the first phase of this research, participants noted various ways in which the SI helped them navigate some of the challenges described above. The main takeaways included a sense of community, new idea generation, practical project support, and seeing a model of partnership in action (Marquis et al., 2017). One important finding from phase two of this project is that these benefits persisted after the SI. For example, one staff participant described the ongoing sense of community they experienced with SI students from their institution: "what I see with all the six students ... with whom we went to Canada last year ... they're still together. We still have a lot of conversation with each other." Similarly, others suggested they valued learning from others at

the SI, and experiencing a sense of connection and support as they engaged in challenging partnership work.

Moreover, extending the phase one findings, participants discussed the enriched community that came from the SI's diverse international attendance. Many mentioned that connecting with people from other institutional contexts was valuable for generating a broader perspective and illustrating new possibilities:

[An international focus] was just really enriching. ... It allowed us to focus on the practice more. I think when you go to ... higher education events they can so easily become ... moaning around the latest bit of government policy or funding crisis in your country, and it allowed us to focus on the practice.

it just makes you think, well I suppose other people have different challenges and sometimes ... they've got [challenges] we've overcome. And then sometimes the things that they're doing, you know, actually force us to think well is that really a real barrier or is it our ... perceived barrier?

The international component of the SI was thus largely a productive challenge; while many participants noted the difficulty of thinking beyond their own contextual boundaries, they also felt that doing so improved their own partnership practices. On the other hand, participants who had been thinking about partnership very broadly and conceptually also found it valuable to connect with those from similar contexts. One staff participant said, "the higher education structures ... were so different to some other countries, that actually if you wanted to be realistic

and do things that could be done, it was quite good to kind of join forces.” Overall, then, the combination of people from similar and different national and institutional contexts generated a diverse community that supported thinking about both practical issues and broader concepts.

Experiences after the SI

In this second phase of our research, participants also discussed the various successes and challenges they encountered when engaging in partnership work after the SI. One significant, ongoing benefit of the SI in this respect was that it encouraged follow up and facilitated practical implementation of partnership for some participants after they returned to their home campuses. One participant noted,

my position at the university is such that I go to lots of meetings ... now ... when I'm at those meetings, and we're discussing things which potentially impact students, ... I'm far more likely to ask whether anyone's spoken to students ... or how are we going to get that partnership with students to actually make this genuine.

Similarly, another participant noted that the practical project support provided at the SI set them up to carry out their partnership work effectively: “we wouldn't come as a team [to the SI] in the near future because we almost did enough planning in those three days to cover us for three years.”

The SI also appears to have contributed to encouraging people to expand their partnership initiatives within their own institutions. For example, one participant described working to incorporate SaP into a major teaching and learning strategy at their university, noting, “we will

return [to the SI] with a new group this year to build on that work so hopefully if it will not end like this.” The same participant reported that since the SI, they had established a new course with SaP as a pillar within it. As such examples suggest, the conversations, connections, and activities at the SI were positioned as helping to deepen partnership work at participants’ own institutions. For many, the event sparked new thoughts about future possibilities and how they might be implemented.

However, continuing SaP work after the SI did not come without challenges. One major factor in determining the success of post-SI partnership initiatives was institutional support. One participant stated: “I think the difficulty is always the time and whether it’s the strategic priority of the institution.” On a related note, many participants noted the importance of funding for implementing any project effectively. One participant, who was able to pilot a student partners initiative conceived at the SI using funding from their institution, explained that their project moved forward thanks to the funding they received – and that without that support, the project would likely not have come to fruition. Thus, while the SI offers a range of practical supports, these are unable to counter many of the barriers participants encounter in their home contexts.

Another important challenge raised after the SI was the institute’s temporary nature. Many noted that while at the SI, they felt excited and energised to move forward with SaP activities, but that it was difficult to maintain that momentum once they returned to their own institutions. One staff participant explained that the challenge “is always to move as quickly forward as you would like to because when you’re away you’re inspired and everything is possible, but then you’re back into reality and you have to adjust to all kinds of things.” An aspect of the SI related to the difficulty of maintaining momentum is the networks the event generated. Many participants cited creating connections as a benefit, but some also suggested it

was a challenge to quickly move forward with utilising those connections. One staff participant, for instance, discussed the benefits of “these connections that I will continue to ... have, even though I haven't drawn upon all of them yet.” This raises the possibility that the community generated by the SI might help sustain momentum for partnership practices, but that the motivation to connect with that community can itself falter with the return to day-to-day work.

Discussion

By considering the experiences of participants at an international summer institute, the present study builds on the growing body of literature exploring the ways in which academic developers might support SaP work (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2011; Curran & Millard, 2016). In so doing, it both provides insight into the relative efficacy of the SI itself, and generates significant considerations for academic developers interested in supporting SaP work more generally.

Foremost amongst these considerations is the fact that, on the whole, participants’ perceptions of the challenges related to partnership working remained largely unchanged from those reported in the first phase of our study. In spite of uniformly positive reflections on the SI, issues connected to institutional implementation and support, navigating power dynamics, equity and inclusion, and language (amongst other challenges) remained prominent in participants’ minds well after the event. Indeed, many of these issues were also mentioned by participants in data collected at the second annual SI in 2017. This is not surprising, as similar challenges connected to partnership working have been widely discussed in the literature (e.g., Bovill et al., 2016; Allin, 2014; Delpish et al., 2010; Moore-Cherry et al., 2016). The current study thus reaffirms the centrality of such challenges for a diverse group of international participants, and emphasises that much more than a singular initiative such as the SI is necessary to counter these challenges effectively. While we intend to build on our efforts to support participants in

navigating these challenges within the context of the SI (e.g., by running a two day workshop on questions of power at the 2018 institute), the fact remains that one annual event is insufficient to address these issues fully.

Nevertheless, it is also notable that participants continued to reiterate many of the benefits of the SI nearly one year after its completion. Unlike academics who abandon ideas learned in educational development initiatives upon returning to their day-to-day work (Fanghanel, 2013), some participants reported implementing partnership projects developed at the SI, initiating new ones, and inviting new people in their home contexts into the process (including some participants at the 2017 institute, who noted they had been engaged in partnership initiatives by colleagues returning from the 2016 event). While the specifics of participants' contexts impinged on whether and how they followed up, they generally reported that the SI was an energising experience that generated ideas for moving forward—even when institutional climates might feel inhospitable and change might be slow and uneven. With that in mind, initiatives like the SI may be especially valuable for supporting and catalysing local champions who could subsequently play an important role in developing SaP on their own campuses (see Miller-Young et al., 2017 and Kezar, Bertram Gallant, & Lester, 2011 for information about the role of such champions in other types of institutional change).

Given both the present data and our phase one findings, the sense of community offered by the SI may be the most important factor in its ability to support SaP work in this way. Participants noted how connecting with a community of partnership practitioners (both students and staff) at the SI helped them to reconsider and think through barriers, allowed them to gather new strategies for embedding SaP in institutions, and provided a sense of emotional support and connection that could help to sustain them through sometimes taxing work. In this sense, the

community generated by the SI might be understood as a key piece in a larger puzzle seeking to counter some of the recalcitrant challenges to partnership work noted above. Importantly, such comments were again reiterated by participants at the 2017 SI, affirming the centrality of community for participants working to develop and implement SaP in higher education.

Participants' reflections on the international nature of the SI figure especially interestingly in this discussion. The data underline that participants valued the opportunity to connect *both* with people from different contexts and with those from contexts not unlike their own. This diverse mix of participants was seen as key to stretching participants' thinking about the possibilities for partnership, while also providing them with familiar anchor points and more immediate sounding boards for ideas about implementation. Moreover, the broad community facilitated by international participation in the SI was seen by some as a key part of building the sense of support and connection participants positioned as significant to sustaining their partnership efforts. As a participant in the 2017 SI put it, "this is like the United Nations ... It's like you have allies. You're connected to something bigger." With such considerations in mind, educational developers interested in supporting partnership might explore further ways of connecting local communities of practice (Khoury, Oberhollenzer, & Matthews, 2017; Cook-Sather, 2014) with broader, international networks. At the same time, as some participants' comments about not yet following up with colleagues from the SI suggest, the benefits of these networks—like the benefits of the SI more generally—are not easily sustained. While many people noted progress and a dedication to continue in their partnership efforts, it nonetheless remains true that a sense of flagging momentum was prominent in many participants' reflections. Finding ways to maintain and activate features of the SI that participants found motivating in the

months following the event itself—including opportunities to connect with other institute attendees—is thus paramount.

Conclusion

As our findings suggest, an event like the SI is only a small piece in a bigger program of supports that will be necessary to continue to grow SaP in higher education. Moreover, the limitations of the present study (including its small participant group) underline the need for further research to determine how broadly shared the experiences reported by our participants might be. Nevertheless, by emphasising—across multiple phases—key issues experienced by SaP practitioners, this work offers new insight into how SaP might be further supported and fostered at colleges and universities. In particular, it positions the following factors as especially worthy of further consideration and research:

1. Continuing to develop ways to support SaP practitioners in navigating intransigent challenges, such as institutional barriers, concerns about inclusion, and the influence of power dynamics
2. Exploring the ways in which the development of both local and international community might help to address these (and other) challenges
3. Integrating initiatives like the SI, which might offer compelling preliminary support for people interested in partnership, into larger programs for SaP development

By contributing to ongoing efforts to explore these issues, educational developers stand to contribute significantly to further realizing SaP's transformative agenda.

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