

CASE STUDY

Passing the (proverbial) baton: Engaging students as partners in module design

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ABSTRACT

Student-staff partnership, understood as the situation when students and staff work together on a project, contributing equally but in potentially different ways, is an innovation that is gaining traction on university campuses worldwide. This case study details my first foray into the partnership arena. I invited undergraduate students from the Schools of Law and Geography, Geology, and the Environment at the University of Keele to partner with me in designing a new optional module—Contemporary Issues in Environmental Law. My aim here is to provide an honest warts-and-all account of the experience, written from my perspective. I will document the positive outcomes for both the students and staff participating, of which there were many, but also some of the challenges faced. Despite these challenges, there can be no doubt that student-staff partnership is a worthwhile endeavour and I hope others can view this as an example that can be adapted to suit their specific contexts.

KEYWORDS

co-creation, curriculum design, module design, partnership, students as partners

Student-staff partnership—defined by Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten (2014) as “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 conceptualisation, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis” (pp. 6-7)—is a relatively new practice in higher education, and certainly for me personally, although research in the partnership arena is gaining significant momentum as the approach is embraced worldwide. To make sense of the many different ways that students and staff may engage as partners, Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014) propose a conceptual model that distinguishes four broad areas—learning, teaching, and assessment; subject-based research and inquiry; scholarship of teaching and learning; and curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy. While they emphasise that “distinctions between the areas are blurred and interrelationships are complex and diverse when put into practice” (p. 8), this case study falls most comfortably within the final category, i.e. I sought to engage students as curriculum co-designers and pedagogical consultants. Specifically, I invited students to partner with me in designing a new optional module—Contemporary Issues in Environmental Law, which aims to critically consider the role played by law in tackling some of the most pressing environmental issues of our time. The design of this new module, for which I had primary responsibility as the module leader, presented an excellent opportunity to make my

first foray into partnership working and to explore in further detail the utility of this innovative pedagogical approach.

I found that the involvement of students tends to fall into two camps, either student-voice which is where students are consulted or their views are represented in some way (Cook-Sather, 2014) or student-action in which students lead by doing something within the partnership themselves (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011). I was able to find practical examples of both for inspiration (Mantzari, 2017; Millmore, 2019), but I ultimately decided that my project would fall into the first camp. It is suggested in the literature that moving towards student-action with students acting as co-producers rather than a consultative body is increasingly effective and becoming more prevalent (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2016). However, I felt that there was scope for me to go beyond existing practice at my institution on the basis of student-voice. At present, student-voice is largely heard following the completion of a module by means of a module evaluation. I wanted to listen to the student-voice before a module by engaging students as partners in its design. I viewed this as vital to designing something successful, but the broader aim was to reflect on the process of partnership and the impact on the students and staff involved.

METHODOLOGY

Following ethics clearance, I emailed all second-year undergraduate law students, introducing the project and its aims, and inviting them to participate in an anonymous, online survey which I estimated would take 10-15 minutes to complete. The survey contained a mixture of multiple-choice, open-ended, and ranking questions about the intended module covering matters including the module description, methods of teaching and learning, assessment and feedback, and module content. There was also a final section about participants' perceptions of the partnership itself.

I took a whole cohort approach as this seemed the most inclusive (Bovill et al., 2016). By offering the opportunity to all students, I hoped it would be perceived as equally accessible and encourage as many of them as possible to get involved. Another way that I sought to encourage involvement was to ask student representatives to help me promote the project through their channels. I hoped this would further enhance awareness, which was important since a lack of awareness of extracurricular partnership opportunities has been identified as a major barrier preventing students from taking part (Marquis et al., 2018). My reason for focusing specifically on the second-year cohort was because the module will be a third-year option and I assumed that the students most willing to become involved in its design would be those able to select it in the next academic year.

As it transpired, however, this was not as much of a motivating factor as I had thought it would be. Because of low response rates, I ultimately ended up broadening my pool of participants to include all undergraduate students from the Schools of Law and Geography, Geology, and the Environment. This was quite disheartening, but I can now see the positives. The first is that it helped me to realise that student-staff partnership is inherently process-oriented rather than outcomes-driven. As noted by Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014), "partnership is essentially a process of engagement, not a product. It is a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself" (p. 7). Another positive of the amendment is that it enabled me to obtain diverse cross-disciplinary views.

At the end of the survey, I included a link to a short form that respondents could use to express an interest in participating in a 45-60 minute long focus group to further discuss the matters raised. It has been recognised as perfectly feasible to run cohort-wide surveys

alongside focus groups and “in fact sharing the anonymous survey responses with the focus groups helps reflection and inspires discussion, thereby incorporating wider views” (Millmore, 2021, p. 93). It also meant that I could offer options for involvement at various levels, i.e. survey only or survey and focus group. This was important since it has been shown that the time commitment associated with student-staff partnerships can deter students from taking part (Marquis et al., 2018). Of the 23 students that completed the survey, 30% (seven of them) expressed an interest in participating in a focus group. Recruitment was therefore healthy, but a few students dropped out at the last minute so I took the difficult decision not to go ahead. This led to further disappointment on my part but, fortunately, did not detrimentally impact the project as there was sufficient data to analyse from the survey responses received.

The participant numbers are therefore small and not everything went ahead as planned, but I argue that the data gathered, framed appropriately, is sufficient for a pilot study. My claim is not that my data is representative of the entire target population, but rather that it offers a window into the experiences of those who participated and that these experiences generate productive, preliminary insights that might be used to guide future practice and research.

FINDINGS

In terms of how students found the experience of being engaged as a partner in the design of a module, 87% reported it as positive and 13% as neutral. Many who found it a positive experience said something along the lines of “it is nice to have an input” and it was clearly appreciated that this input was sought before, rather than after, the fact. As noted by one respondent, “it gives students the chance to be heard and make a difference at the start of the module so that we get to experience what we have suggested.” Even those who found it a neutral experience were still generally positive. For instance, one respondent commented, “I think it is amazing to include students, the survey was just a tad long.” This comment was made despite my efforts to be transparent and carefully manage the time commitment associated with the partnership so I am unsure what more I could have done on this front.

Around three-quarters (74%) of the students who took part in the project said that they would now be more likely to take the module. This suggests that they are more invested in the module as a result. The remaining quarter (26%) said that they were neither more nor less likely to take the module. However, this seemed to be because they were not interested in the module’s subject matter—“I am not too interested in environmental law, in the sense that it probably will not be my field of specialty, and since we don't have many spaces for optional modules, I may not select this one”—or they were in their final year—“I am in my final year so this is not an option for me.”

The project also points to the potential for further student-staff partnership opportunities in future. Over four-fifths (83%) of respondents said they would like to see student-staff partnerships adopted on other modules and the remainder (17%) said they might. Many of those in favour seemed to be motivated by a desire to establish rewarding, collegial relationships with their lecturers—“I think it will allow for a better rapport between staff and students, which will in turn create a more positive environment to learn.” This was similarly found by Marquis et al. (2018) in their study of students’ motivations for taking part in student-staff partnership initiatives. Other respondents were motivated by a desire to increase student engagement. Like staff, it is clear that students have noticed a drop in

engagement levels post-COVID-19—“I think partnerships like this could generate more engagement in modules as I have seen a lot of modules struggling to get full engagement this academic year.” I was perhaps most surprised at the reasons given by those less certain about further student-staff partnership opportunities. Two respondents commented that “some students may push to get an easy module,” which was something I had not contemplated as a student concern.

From my viewpoint as a staff partner, student involvement has facilitated the design of the module in ways that have led to significant improvement. I have developed something as a result of this process that is better than I could have achieved by myself. Unlike Garcia, Noguera, and Cortada-Pujol (2018) who found that students tended to point out problems, but not provide solutions, this was not my experience. Nor, unlike Kupatadze (2018), did I find that students saw the invitation to collaborate as a cry for help and thus assume an air of superiority, although comments made by some respondents were on the borderline in this regard—“lecturers have great ideas, but they sometimes need outside input to make their modules relevant to their students.”

Like the majority of student participants, I can therefore certainly see the potential for further student-staff partnership opportunities in future and I intend to find ways to continue co-creating the module that has formed the basis of this project with each new group of students enrolled. Bovill and Woolmer (2018) distinguish between co-creation of the curriculum—which is co-design of a programme or course before the programme or course takes place—and co-creation in the curriculum—which is co-design of learning and teaching within a programme or course during the programme or course. This project has shown the value of the former, but the latter allows account to be taken of the fact that each group of students will have their own particular interests, needs, and hopes. I will accordingly endeavour to strike a balance between planning the module in advance using input already received from students and continuing to co-create it each time it unfolds. This might involve providing students with a choice of topics for part of the module, to be negotiated by a democratic process, or inviting them, with appropriate scaffolding, to help design some of the quiz questions on which they will be assessed (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014; Cook-Sather, Bahti, & Ntem, 2019).

REFLECTIONS

This project delivered considerable benefits to all who took part, which overlap with the benefits of partnership discussed in the literature (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). However, it is important also to reflect on the challenges faced. As a lead in to this discussion, it is worth considering the interplay between partnership and emotion. As noted by Cook-Sather, Bahti, and Ntem (2019), “anyone who has undertaken pedagogical partnership work knows that it demands intense emotional as well as intellectual engagement” (p. 40) and Felten (2017) has asserted that, without attending to emotions, we cannot fully understand the experiences of those involved. I can certainly say that I experienced a range of emotions as a staff partner. It was exciting to talk in a deep and extended way with students about teaching and learning. However, I also felt a lot of anxiety, specifically about the ability and willingness of students to take the baton that I was passing to them. This links to the concept of resistance, a key challenge identified by Bovill et al. (2016) as arising in co-creating learning and teaching through student staff-partnerships and the main challenge that I wish to discuss here.

My anxiety about the ability of students to take the baton I was passing to them was a form of resistance on my part. I was concerned how they could contribute meaningfully to designing a module when they do not have either subject or pedagogical expertise and therefore whether I was doing the right thing relinquishing control (Bovill et al., 2016). As it turned out, this concern was unfounded. I have already noted that I have developed something as a result of this process that is better than I could have achieved by myself. I would say the key to success was that I followed advice to carefully select the components of the module design that were part of the partnership (Mantzari, 2017). This fits well with the idea that there are many levels of participation that are possible and it allowed me to retain a gatekeeper function (Bovill, 2017). Perhaps if I am more open about this in future student-staff partnerships, it will also help to alleviate the unexpected student concern that some students may use partnership opportunities to try and get an easy ride.

My anxiety about the willingness of students to take the baton I was passing to them was a concern about potential student resistance. I have been honest about the difficulties I had with engagement so it seems likely that there were students who questioned “why they should step out of their (often comfortable) traditional role in order to engage in co-creation and how they will benefit from this different approach” (Bovill et al., 2016, p. 199). While I am unsure of the best solution to this issue, there could be value looking at the role played by student rewards or incentives. I offered no incentives other than the opportunity to get involved in a partnership. However, research by Dianati and Oberhollenzer (2020) stresses the importance of incentives in ensuring the quality of outcomes and for fostering a sense of equality and reciprocity, particularly when a partnership is newly formed (p. 10). It is not clear whether student rewards are as much of a mediating factor with co-creation in the curriculum. I would hope students are more intrinsically motivated in this situation since it is part of their degree programme—for which they earn academic credit—rather than being extracurricular. However, Bovill (2020) speaks of “sticky classes” resistant to engage in co-creation so it may be something I need to explore.

CONCLUSION

Engaging in this project has taught me how important it is to design and think about curriculum in community. I have learned how different my perceptions are to students and I would not have known this without being in conversation with them. This partnership has reminded me how important it is to have a student-centred approach to teaching and learning, and how to do that in a way that is intentional, and I find that I am now more open to letting go of control. It is important to accept that partnership is a fundamentally “messy process” (Matthews, 2020) and that there can be challenges but, in my experience, it is worthwhile.

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NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

Emma Allen is a Lecturer in Law at the University of Keele. She specialises in public international law, but also has a keen interest in the scholarship of teaching and learning. Her pedagogic research focuses on authentic assessment practices, engaging students as partners, decolonising the (international law) curriculum and game-based learning.

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