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Addressing potential challenges in co-creating learning and teaching: overcoming resistance, navigating institutional norms and ensuring inclusivity in student-staff partnerships

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Addressing potential challenges in co-creating learning and teaching: overcoming resistance, navigating institutional norms and ensuring inclusivity in student-staff partnerships

Abstract

Against a backdrop of rising interest in students becoming partners in learning and teaching in higher education, this paper begins by exploring the relationships among student engagement, co-creation and student-staff partnership before providing a typology of the roles students can assume in working collaboratively with staff. Acknowledging that co-creating learning and teaching is not straightforward, a set of examples from higher education institutions in Europe and North America illustrates some important challenges that can arise during co-creation. These examples also provide the basis for suggestions regarding how such challenges might be resolved or re-envisioned as opportunities for more meaningful collaboration. The challenges are presented under three headings: resistance to co-creation; navigating institutional structures, practices and norms; and establishing an inclusive co-creation approach. The paper concludes by highlighting the importance of transparency within co-creation approaches and of changing mindsets about the potential opportunities and institutional benefits of staff and students co-creating learning and teaching.

Keywords: co-creation; partnership; student engagement; democratic education; diversity

Introduction

The idea of students as partners, change agents, producers, and co-creators of their own learning has been the subject of increasing interest in recent years (see for example Bovill et al. 2011; Carey 2013; Dunne and Zandstra 2011). However, within most universities, decision-making in teaching and learning is generally the domain of academic staff, and students often lack agency and voice (Mann 2008). Recent work on co-creation of learning and teaching challenges these traditional norms and practices regarding the 'academic' and 'student' roles within higher education and advocates a greater democratisation of the educational process. Co-creation of learning and teaching occurs when staff and students work collaboratively with one another to create components of curricula and/or pedagogical approaches.

Emerging research demonstrates that students are a valuable and often unrealised resource in higher education (Gärdebo and Wiggberg 2012) and that academic staff and students derive significant benefits from working collaboratively on teaching and learning (Nygaard et al. 2013). Key benefits for staff, students and institutions include: enhanced engagement, motivation and learning; enhanced meta-cognitive awareness and a stronger sense of identity; enhanced teaching and classroom experiences; enhanced student-staff relationships and development of a range of graduate attributes (Cook-Sather et al. 2014). Positive outcomes for staff can occur at all career stages (Mihans et al. 2008). While a collaborative approach is often promoted uncritically as positive (Arnstein 1969; Ling 2000), and while we have witnessed and researched the benefits of co-creating learning and teaching through partnerships, such work is neither simple nor inherently good. Many staff are intrigued by the possibilities of co-creating learning and teaching, but may struggle with the challenges they anticipate or experience (Allin 2014) as they move beyond and across traditional roles.

In this paper, we outline different roles that students often adopt within co-creation and we acknowledge that co-creation is a broad concept encompassing diverse approaches, but we focus on co-creation through student-staff partnerships. The case studies we include, drawn from higher education institutions in Europe and the United States, provide examples of staff-student partnerships. Through these examples, we present key challenges that can emerge and illustrate some of the ways in which these challenges might be addressed not only to enable co-creation but also to embed a partnership ethos and process within the wider learning community (Healey et al. 2014). We conclude with recommendations for enhancing transparency within co-creation approaches and for changing

mindsets about the potential opportunities and institutional benefits of staff and students co-creating learning and teaching.

Student engagement, co-creation and student-staff partnership

Student engagement is both a requirement for, and an outcome of, partnership. This complex phenomenon encompasses student involvement, excitement and persistence (Ahlfeldt et al. 2005), layered and meaningful participation in, and commitment to, learning (Kuh et al. 2010), and emotional as well as intellectual investment; according to Mann (2008), it is the opposite of alienation. Always situated, student engagement varies across contexts in higher education, for example, within a classroom or in relation to a particular task or assignment, and within and across the course or programme of study (Bryson and Hand 2007). Recognising that student engagement is often a collective enterprise, Healey et al. (2014) argue that student engagement and partnership can be enhanced through shared learning communities.

A significant influence upon student engagement has been the re-conceptualisation of students as ‘consumers’ within a managerialist and marketised higher education environment. Issues of quality assurance and the primacy of student choice often dominate discussions of how to enhance student satisfaction in universities (Nixon 2011). In contrast, if higher education is understood as a cooperative enterprise (McCulloch 2009), then co-creation can be a mainstream approach to curricular and pedagogical development. We recognise that not all co-creation involves partnership—where collaboration falls short of the equality implied in partnership—but all partnership involves co-creation and student engagement (see Bovill et al. 2014 and Healey et al. 2014).

One way to conceptualise co-creation is as occupying the space in between student engagement and partnership, to suggest a meaningful collaboration between students and staff, with students becoming more active participants in the learning process, constructing understanding and resources with academic staff. Another approach is to keep the three phenomena—student engagement, co-creation and partnership—in dynamic relationship to one another, allowing for variation in how they interact. We argue that engaging students in partnership, defined 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 conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis” (Cook-Sather et al. 2014, 6-7), is one promising way of challenging the dominant consumerist vision of higher education and allows for variation in how students engage in approaches to co-creation.

When students take authentic responsibility for the educational process, they shift from being passive recipients or consumers to being active agents; at the same time, they shift from merely completing learning tasks to developing a meta-cognitive awareness about what is being learned (Baxter-Magolda 2006; Cook-Sather et al. 2014). That shift fundamentally alters the student role, prompting a related reorientation for academic staff from being disciplinary content experts to also being facilitators of learning and shared enquiry. Some scholars suggest that “...in co-production, power is seen to be shared, which might be too challenging for students” (Little and Williams 2010, 117). However, we believe that adopting context-specific co-creation approaches can help students, and staff, successfully navigate co-creation of learning and teaching.

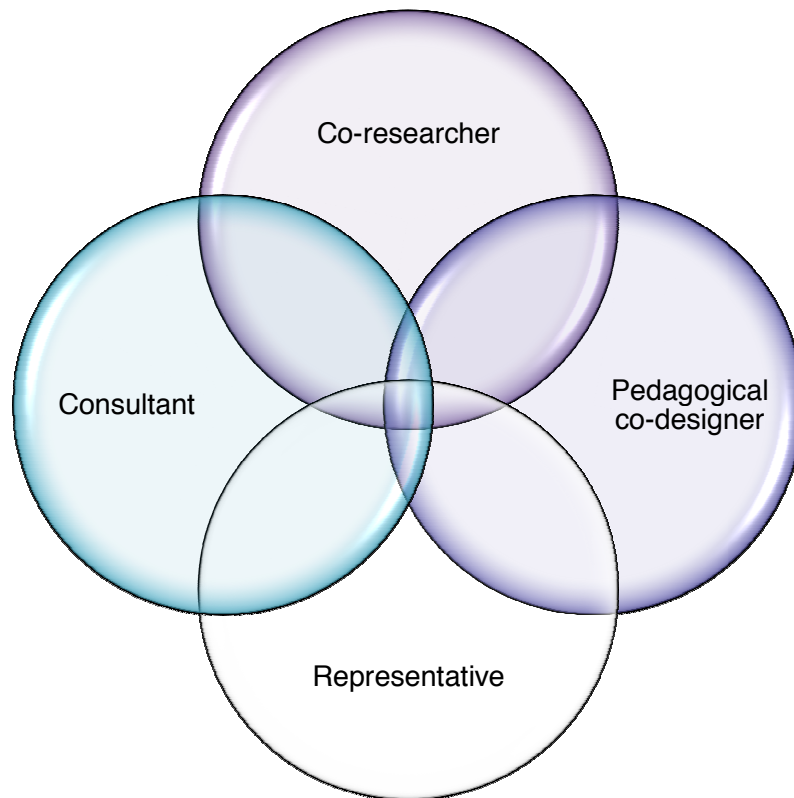
Co-creation can take a variety of forms across different disciplines and institutions. Staff and students may collaborate to: evaluate course content and learning and teaching processes; (re)design the content of courses; research learning and teaching; undertake disciplinary research; design assessments such as essay questions or choose between different assessment methods; and grade their own and others’ work. Likewise, co-creation can occur on different scales including: individual, classroom and course initiatives up to the institutional level addressing pedagogical, operational and strategic goals. At each of these levels, co-creation challenges norms in different ways (see Cook-Sather et al. 2014; Healey et al. 2014; Moore-Cherry et al. In press, for a range of examples).

A typology of student roles adopted in co-creation of learning and teaching

Based on our personal experiences and other models of co-creation in higher education literature (Dunne and Zandstra 2011; Healey et al. 2014; Healey et al. In press), we have identified four roles students often assume in co-

creating learning and teaching : (1) *consultant*, sharing and discussing valuable perspectives on learning and teaching (2) *co-researcher*, collaborating meaningfully on teaching and learning research or subject-based research with staff (3) *pedagogical co-designer*, sharing responsibility for designing learning, teaching and assessment, and (4) *representative*, student voices contributing to decisions in a range of university settings (see Figure 1). These roles are not mutually exclusive; indeed, significant overlap may occur. For example, students engaged as consultants with staff to reflect on teaching practice may also be co-researchers on a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning project.

Figure 1: Student roles in co-creation of learning and teaching



The top three roles in Figure 1 are typically dependent on staff creating opportunities for collaboration. In contrast, the student representative role is often student led and although many institutions work constructively with student unions, these bodies are generally student run and student controlled. This difference in who initiates co-creation can influence the nature and focus of co-creation activity and the degree of access to learning and teaching decisions. We acknowledge the importance of, and the growing literature focusing on, the student representative role in partnership, some of which focuses on learning and teaching (see for example, Chapman et al. 2013; Swedish National Union of Students 2014). However, our discussion in this paper focuses primarily on the three staff-initiated roles of consultant, co-researcher and pedagogical co-designer. The overlapping spheres in Figure 1 highlight that co-creation frequently entails students adopting multiple roles that can require the crossing of different domains of institutional and individual practice.

The challenges staff and students experience in co-creating learning and teaching are sometimes related to very real concerns about boundaries, capabilities and risk. For instance, inviting a student to work as a *co-researcher*, collaborating meaningfully on teaching and learning research or subject-based research, requires a

rethinking of the purposes and processes of research and their relationship to teaching. Similarly, staff are often accustomed to planning and evaluating their teaching practice alone (Barnett and Hallam 1999; Shulman 1993). Thus, opening these processes up to review can be perceived as entailing considerable personal and professional risk. Reconceptualising students as *pedagogical co-designers*, sharing responsibility for designing learning, teaching and assessment, or as *consultants*, sharing and discussing valuable perspectives on learning and teaching, requires rethinking assumptions about teaching, learning, power and knowledge (King and Felten 2012). These are just some of the many challenges faced by those who begin co-creating learning and teaching, and it is to these challenges that the paper now turns.

Key challenges that can arise in co-creating learning and teaching through staff-student partnerships

The challenges we present here by no means encompass all the difficulties that can arise in co-creation work, but we focus on those that are raised frequently, in our experience and in the literature, as real or perceived barriers to co-creation through partnerships. These challenges are typically identified by both staff and student participants, and broadly speaking, they fall into three complex and overlapping themes: resistance to co-creation of learning and teaching; navigating institutional structures, practices and norms; and establishing an inclusive approach.

1. Overcoming resistance to co-creating learning and teaching

In higher education, resistance to change and innovation may be a result of cultural forces including academics' own experiences as students, the expectations of current students and inherited practices from colleagues (Hughes and Barrie 2010). Similarly, Sheth and Stellner (1979, 1) have suggested that "two factors which determine innovation resistance are habit toward an existing practice and perceived risks associated with the innovation."

Custom and common practices alongside the perceived personal and institutional risks of redefining traditional staff-student roles and relationships, inform the challenges staff and students experience in co-creating learning and teaching. Staff concerns may centre on how they can find time for co-creation work on top of already heavy workloads; how students can contribute meaningfully to designing learning and teaching when they do not have subject or pedagogical expertise (a concern shared by students); and whether or not students should have voice in elements of learning such as assessment. Students may also question why they should step out of their (often comfortable) traditional role in order to engage in co-creation and ask how they will benefit from this different approach. While these are valid and important concerns, they often recede when staff and students thoughtfully work together to co-design projects.

When staff and students realise that their existing habits may not be the most effective approach to learning and teaching and that the risks they take in co-creation can have significant benefits, resistance is often eased. Of course students should not be asked to work far beyond their expertise, but students have direct and recent experience as learners—experience that staff often lack or are simply removed from. In addition, students at all levels can gain confidence and capacity when power relations within the educational environment shift to a more collaborative approach through which students have voice and an active role in their own and others' learning experiences (Cook-Sather 2011). Kenney-Kennicutt et al. (2008, 1) argue that "attention to potential sources of student resistance at the outset as well as active listening and response to student concerns" can be important strategies in overcoming resistance to potential change. In example 1 below, we illustrate how student scepticism and resistance to co-creation might be addressed through more effective communication.

Example 1: Fostering motivation through communication in an urban geography programme: University College Dublin, Ireland.

At University College Dublin, 290 second-year undergraduate students and 13 Masters-level postgraduate students were engaged in a co-creation project. In groups, the postgraduate students were asked to design a fieldwork study for second-year students focused on urban transformation in Dublin and its links to social, economic and cultural processes. The geographical, thematic and temporal scope of the project was outlined to the Masters students, alongside the relevant second-year learning objectives. Each group of Masters students

developed a fieldwork route through the city and devised a research activity for the second-year students. With the module coordinator, the postgraduates tested the routes and made adjustments to better meet the module goals. Fieldwork plans were presented to the second-year cohort who voted as a class on their preferred options and the fieldwork was then undertaken.

Following the in-class presentations a short questionnaire was given to the second-year students eliciting their responses to the idea of Masters students working with the module coordinator and the second years as a team, to help devise an element of the curriculum. The results illustrated a mixed response with most comments being positive. However, a few responses were negative: “*It’s not co-creation, it’s just choice*”; “*It’s a cop-out. Masters students are only two years out from us.*” A small but vocal cohort seemed to consider that postgraduate students should not be doing this kind of work, that they had neither the knowledge nor capabilities to be *pedagogical co-designers*, and that the module coordinator was using this as a way of avoiding work. Having this feedback prior to starting fieldwork enabled the lecturer to identify and address key areas of resistance.

Following the presentation and prior to the field study, the lecturer explained to the undergraduates why the postgraduate students had been invited to co-create the fieldwork exercise, asked students to consider what benefits might accrue to both them and the module coordinator by adopting this approach, and outlined the rationale for giving the second years choice. Talking to the students began a process of encouraging greater meta-cognitive awareness of the learning and teaching process, while identifying and directly addressing their concerns and articulating the broad pedagogical rationale for this approach became an effective motivational tool. The discussion uncovered that much of the resistance was founded on anxiety about the unknown and a worry that the appropriate scaffolding for learning would not be provided. The discussion also enhanced the existing relationship between students and staff involved in the module.

Staff sometimes under-estimate student abilities to contribute meaningfully (Bovill 2014) and interpret student experiences as a deficit rather than an asset in the collaboration (Felten and Bauman 2013). While Errington (2001, 33) argues that “teachers need to be aware that change can be worthwhile and have confidence in their ability to bring about the necessary innovations with appropriate support,” what is clear from example 1 is that students also need to be made aware of the benefits of trying new approaches to learning and that their confidence needs to be gradually built in order to overcome any potential resistance. Recognising these challenges and providing simple interventions, such as developing opportunities for staff and students to discuss ideas or reflect on experiences of co-creation, can foster motivation by articulating visions of the possible (see Goldsmith and Gervacio 2011).

Resistance may also emerge in disciplinary contexts that have associated professional accreditation, where staff may struggle to balance ensuring students achieve specific programme outcomes and professional standards on the one hand, and on the other, the possibility of enhancing student motivation and meta-cognition through co-creating learning. Hutchings et al. (2011) suggest that in such cases, flexibility exists in the pedagogical means even if the ends are fixed, allowing for co-creation in *how* students work toward prescribed standards.

A final source of resistance, particularly from staff, may arise from a cynicism about the goals and values of those involved in co-creation. For example, academic staff may perceive that an institutional initiative about co-creation is driven by senior managers aiming to improve student satisfaction and the overall ranking of the institution in league tables. In such an environment, some staff who are sympathetic to the educational values of co-creation may not want to be involved with what they see as a tainted project. These potential tensions between personal and institutional goals are part of the greater challenge of navigating pre-existing structures, norms and practices that is the focus of the next section.

2. Navigating institutional structures, practices and norms

In some institutions, staff may feel that institutional structures, practices, and norms are in tension with co-creating learning and teaching. Even at institutions where teaching is a high priority, an orientation towards co-creation may be novel since it falls outside traditional views of student and staff roles. In contexts where this work is countercultural, co-creation through partnerships within individual classrooms often seems more manageable and

less risky than trying to establish co-creation across either the disciplines or an entire institution (Cook-Sather et al. 2014). Similarly, staff and students new to co-creation tend to find co-creating small elements of learning and teaching to be more achievable than immediately attempting co-creation of large-scale curricula (Delpish et al. 2010).

In example 1 above, the postgraduate students were involved in co-creating one fieldwork experience, not the entire curriculum. Another case of a smaller scale change comes from the University of Glasgow, Scotland, where students studying the Masters in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education design one of the intended learning outcomes for their dissertation. Although established learning outcomes exist for the postgraduate level dissertation, encouraging students to articulate one of their own learning outcomes enables them to develop a sense of voice in their education and contributes to students cultivating graduate attributes including, for example, self-awareness. All students negotiate the wording and content of this learning outcome with their supervisor, and students are assessed against their self-defined outcome as well as the established outcomes. Co-creation does not mean that all standards are up for debate, but rather that structures are modified to address the challenge of balancing institutional requirements with efforts by students and staff to co-create additional opportunities for learning and engagement.

No matter the level of institutional commitment, in the current economic climate, one of the major issues facing universities is the need to maximise recruitment of students despite resource constraints. These pressures frequently lead to large class sizes, often cited as a barrier to co-creation. In example 1, a small group of Masters students were involved in co-creating the curriculum, but the large group of undergraduate students were involved in enhanced dialogue with staff that contributed to changing views of learning and teaching. In another case from the same university, the large first year Introduction to Human Geography class of 400 students has moved towards co-creating learning and teaching through harnessing the interactive potential of virtual learning environments. In the classroom, the students were divided into small tutorial groups of 15 students led by graduate students and then were asked to complete tutorial activities. Similar activities were completed by students in small groups working together online via discussion boards in advance of each lecture. Completed work from both settings was submitted to the lecturer who used students' work in the next lecture to frame discussions. In this way, students contributed both to lecture content and structure (*co-creating with the teacher*) but also began to collaboratively and subconsciously 'figure out' major ideas and concepts in advance of class (*co-creating with their peers*). This just-in-time collaborative teaching approach (Simkins and Maier 2010) not only promoted good learning behaviours and higher levels of engagement, but also addressed three of the main drivers of student success: student-student interaction, student-faculty interaction and time on task (Astin 1993).

Although challenging, shifting towards co-creation of learning and teaching in large classes is possible and in some instances, similar processes can unfold at the institutional level. Birmingham City University Student Academic Partners scheme, described in example 2 below, exemplifies institutional embrace of co-creation. This scheme has been successful because it built upon existing institutional commitments to learning but pursued those through a new approach involving students in a range of innovative ways spanning three of the co-creation roles outlined in Figure 1: co-designers, co-researchers and consultants.

Example 2: Improving courses, mentoring students and changing mindsets through students working as academic partners: Birmingham City University, England.

Students have been employed as academic partners at Birmingham City University (BCU) since 2008 when, in collaboration with the Students' Union, BCU created its Student Academic Partners (SAP) scheme. Originally, SAP sought, through funded partnership projects, to place students within pedagogic and research communities to reinvigorate the curriculum and enhance the learning experience. Students and staff were invited to apply for paid student time, where students were employed to work in partnership with staff to co-create learning resources and changes to the curriculum across selected projects (around 50 projects per year). The number of applications has increased every year and institutional support continues as the projects deliver a range of quality enhancements.

In 2010 SAP won the prestigious Times Higher Education (THE) award for outstanding support for students. The strategic partnership with the Students' Union in co-creating the initiative was important in gaining the THE award, and this external recognition was significant in persuading managers, staff and students of the wider institutional benefits of partnerships. SAP is now an integral part of the University's corporate plan contributing to BCU's distinctiveness as "an exemplar for student engagement, working in partnership with students to create and deliver an excellent university experience and achieve high levels of student satisfaction and graduate employment."

With institutional support, the SAP scheme has evolved to include an additional student academic mentoring programme (20 projects per year) and a cross-departmental initiative (20 projects per year) that seek to employ students as the instigators of inter-disciplinary work. There is a new 'Student Jobs on Campus' service that, in its first year, offered over 1,000 student jobs in all forms of university activity, and which provides a further avenue through which students can become engaged within the work of the University. Most recently students have co-authored *Student Engagement: Identity, motivation and community* (Nygaard et al. 2013), a book that showcases the work of the BCU SAP scheme.

This institutional-level commitment to the ethos of 'students as partners' is becoming part of the fabric of the organisation and means that student engagement is now seen as a state of mind for many staff and students. The continuing challenge is to increase the number of students and staff who engage in these pursuits and ensure inclusivity for all sections of the student population (something we explore in the next section). Current discussions are focused on the role of partnership prior to, and within, the first-year experience and the desire to create a greater sense of student belonging within the BCU learning community.

As example 2 illustrates, the key to mainstreaming co-creation within diverse institutional contexts is resolving perceived tensions between institutional structures, practices and norms on the one hand and innovations on the other, through developing structures and cultivating practices that reflect staff and student needs and interests. Flexibility is also essential because co-creation practices will evolve as structures and norms change at an institution.

3. Establishing an inclusive co-creation approach

A third common challenge that emerges in the early stages of co-creating learning and teaching is how to strike a balance between inclusion and selection (Felten et al. 2013). At the start of a co-creation project, staff typically invite students to join the work. This raises difficult questions of how they determine whom they will invite, and which students have the capacity to contribute. In some cases staff aim to include all students in a particular course. In other situations, staff intentionally choose those who have often been excluded from, or underrepresented in, higher education communities. In either case, staff should consider whose voices are heard and whose are not, whose participation is invited and whose is not, and what the implications are for co-creation projects, the larger institutions of which they are a part, and the individual and groups of participants involved. Example 3 demonstrates how some of these challenges have been addressed.

Example 3: Opportunities for co-creating teaching approaches with a diversity of students: Bryn Mawr College, Pennsylvania, USA

Bryn Mawr College first piloted student-staff partnership programmes in 2006 with support from The Andrew Mellon Foundation to introduce academic development to the College. The initial goal of the programme was to explore what would happen if undergraduate students were positioned as pedagogical consultants in semester-long, one-on-one partnerships with academic staff at Bryn Mawr and nearby Haverford College, two selective liberal arts institutions in the mid-Atlantic United States. During that pilot year, five academic staff members approached the coordinator of the programme, indicating that they wanted help in making their classrooms more welcoming to a diversity of students. The coordinator invited students who had participated previously in diversity initiatives or in courses on multicultural education to help her design the pilot.

Based on the recommendations of those students, the first five student consultants were students from underrepresented backgrounds, recommended by peers or staff for the role. Each consultant met with his/her staff partner at the beginning of the term to agree upon guidelines for their work together; observed one class session of the focal course each week and took detailed observation notes; met weekly with the staff member to discuss the notes; and met weekly with the coordinator of the programme and other consultants to discuss how best to support academic staff in these explorations. All consultants focused on what the staff members were already doing to create classrooms that were welcoming to a diversity of students and what those staff members could do to make their classrooms more welcoming. Student consultants were paid by the hour for their participation.

That set of student consultant responsibilities became the permanent model for the partnership programme, now in its ninth year, and developing classrooms that are more welcoming to a diversity of students has, in one form or another been the focus of the programme's work. Each semester there has been an intentional effort made to invite and include students from underrepresented backgrounds and from the increasingly international population at the College. Some projects have sought students with particular identities and others have recruited students across dimensions of diversity. The experience of co-creating teaching approaches in such partnerships appears to inspire greater openness to, and appreciation of, differences and to foster deeper connection and empathy across student and staff positions, perspectives and cultural identities (Cook-Sather 2015).

In these partnerships and in associated research projects focused on how to learn from and support a diversity of students (Cook-Sather and Li 2013), student consultants report that their experiences and knowledge are viewed as resources rather than deficits: the students are seen as “holders and creators of knowledge” (Delgado-Bernal 2002, 106). Through the pilot and in subsequent partnerships, these students have not only helped staff reconceptualise and revise their pedagogical practices but also built their own confidence and capacities and increased their sense of belonging and importance (Cook-Sather and Agu 2013). Students have also contributed meaningfully to researching partnership projects and the scholarship of learning and teaching.

Taking an inclusive approach to partnership often requires staff and institutions to reframe their perceptions of students (and colleagues) who have traditionally been marginalised. For instance, deafness is commonly understood as hearing loss. As a result, deaf people are seen as needing to be ‘fixed’ or ‘cured’ before they can be full participants in the community. That belief, however, is often at odds with the life experiences of many deaf people. Instead of considering deafness as a loss, it also can be recognised as “an expression of human variation that results in bringing to the fore specific cognitive, creative, and cultural gains that have been overlooked within a hearing-centered orientation” (Felten and Bauman 2013, 370). In this conception, hearing loss gives way to ‘deaf-gain’ (Bauman and Murray 2010). Rather than focusing on real or perceived deficits of certain groups of students, adopting a ‘deaf-gain’ perspective highlights the distinct capacities, assets and valuable perspectives that different students bring to co-creation of learning and teaching, through for example, sharing of classroom experiences from a range of perspectives to enable thoughtful pedagogical redesign for the benefit of all students and staff.

Substantial benefits can arise from viewing diverse and often excluded students as valuable *co-researchers*, *consultants* and *pedagogical co-designers*. Where it is possible for staff to work with an entire cohort or class of students, this offers an immediate solution to some of the challenges of selecting students to collaborate. Where selection has to take place, it becomes critical for establishing and maintaining trust that selection criteria are transparent.

Discussion

Directly addressing challenges in the three areas above as well as others—embracing and wrestling with, rather than avoiding or dismissing them—opens the way for rethinking resistance, institutional structures, practices and norms, and how we might more often establish an inclusive co-creation approach across our universities. The benefits of co-creation appear to be worth trying to overcome any apparent risks (see, for example Cook-Sather et al. 2014; Healey

and Jenkins 2009). As has been shown in some of the examples presented, through co-creation, students and staff engage more deeply in learning and teaching and with the institution as a whole. Furthermore, co-creation supports in students and staff the development of an enhanced meta-cognitive understanding of learning and teaching processes (Cook-Sather et al. 2014). Through working in partnership to co-create teaching and learning experiences, students develop a range of graduate attributes, and employability is maximised (Jarvis et al. 2013). Co-research, co-design and consultancy processes and outcomes can dissolve the barriers between teaching and research, thereby countering some of the existing tensions between these academic practices (Barnett and Hallam 1999).

Our exploration of the challenges of co-creation through student-staff partnerships throws into relief the roles staff and students adopt within higher education. Recognising that these are socially constructed and changeable can help both staff and students begin to think in fundamentally new ways about teaching and learning. The shift from a “narrative of constraint”, which focuses on obstacles and limitations, to a “narrative of growth”, that expects challenges in the learning process, not only enables new practices but also opens up new visions of the possible (O’Meara et al 2008). Once mindsets about partnership begin to change, other challenges may be overcome by considering several guiding principles for co-creating learning and teaching such as: starting small rather than undertaking co-creation of an entire programme curriculum; making clear that entry into co-creation is voluntary; ensuring that collaboration is meaningful and not an empty promise; and regularly questioning motivations and practices (Cook-Sather et al. 2014). Some evidence also suggests that effective use of technologies to support co-creation, particularly at the course level, can reduce the challenges experienced by staff (Moore and Gilmartin 2010).

Based on our experiences, one of the most important issues in effectively co-creating learning and teaching is good communication: clearly articulating what co-creation means and requires as well as outlining the broader benefits and complexities involved. At the institutional level, challenges can be reduced by explaining that co-creation often leads to more engaging and effective classroom practices, and may shift the culture at departmental level to a more collaborative one with a sense of shared responsibility for teaching and learning. Similarly, providing institutional backing in the form of small-scale funding can facilitate further co-creation and curriculum innovation.

Concluding comments

Taylor and Robinson (2009, 71) remind us that “...student voice itself is a project of ethical responsibility,” something that can be overlooked in many university initiatives. This ethical imperative underscores the importance of transparency in building trust between staff and students within partnerships: in the recruitment of students; in sharing and co-creating goals; and particularly in any remaining areas of teaching and learning where staff still hold authority, such as assessment. The challenges of working in partnership ethically suggest co-creating learning and teaching within a course (co-creation *in* the curriculum) may be easier than students and staff working together to design an entire programme (co-creation *of* the curriculum), at least until an institutional ethos develops that values student-staff partnership.

Cultivating this ethos among staff and students, and across an entire unit or university, remains one of the biggest challenges to co-creation through partnership. Some institutional drivers may help to change teaching and learning practices since these shifts align with commitments to enhancing graduate attributes and employability, to deepening student learning and engagement, and to adopting scholarly approaches to learning and teaching. Evidence strongly suggests that co-creating learning and teaching can contribute to these high-level aims. At the same time, a growing body of research demonstrates that partnerships can change individual staff and faculty, too. When personal and institutional goals and practices resonate, transformation becomes possible.

We acknowledge that many of the challenges arising within co-creation are based on reasonable concerns about why co-creation may not be the most suitable approach in some contexts. At the same time, we 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.

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