

Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

Volume 1
Issue 13 Fall 2014

Article 1

October 2014

Introduction: Digging Deeper into Partnership: The Stories Behind the Cases in Engaging Students as Partners in Learning & Teaching

Alison Cook-Sather
Bryn Mawr College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe>



Part of the [Higher Education and Teaching Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Recommended Citation

Cook-Sather, Alison "Introduction: Digging Deeper into Partnership: The Stories Behind the Cases in Engaging Students as Partners in Learning & Teaching," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 13 (2014), <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss13/1>

INTRODUCTION: DIGGING DEEPER INTO PARTNERSHIP: THE STORIES BEHIND THE CASES IN ENGAGING STUDENTS AS PARTNERS IN LEARNING & TEACHING

Alison Cook-Sather, Mary Katharine Woodworth Professor of Education and Coordinator of the Teaching and Learning Institute (TLI) at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges

Introduction

There are many ways to tell the stories of student-faculty partnerships. Each provides a different angle on what is, by all accounts, a complex process of negotiation—around power, around position and process, and around knowledge construction. Third-party analyses can raise these issues from an outside perspective, but ‘back-story’ narratives of the inspirations, experiences, and learnings penned by participants themselves allow for digging deeper. They provide glimpses into the collaborative work that might be most intriguing to those already engaged in or considering partnering in teaching and learning, and they include the affective as well as practical dimensions of partnership that are not as often highlighted in standard publications.

This issue of *Teaching and Learning Together Higher Education* features essays written by students, faculty, and staff involved in a number of the examples of partnership presented in *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning & Teaching: A Guide for Faculty* (Jossey-Bass, 2014). In that book, Catherine Bovill, Peter Felten, and I provide theoretical grounding and practical guidelines for developing student-faculty partnerships that affirm and improve teaching and learning in higher education, and we include a wide range of examples and case studies. The essays here tell expanded versions of the stories only mentioned in our book. Individually, they provide the rationales behind, approaches to, and outcomes of their particular partnerships, and collectively they offer us insight into the complexities and possibilities of such efforts.

These essays are engaging not only for the stories they tell but also for the questions they raise about the inspiration behind and the challenges of partnership. Themes highlighted in *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning & Teaching* are elaborated here: how, through partnership, students sometimes doubt their capacities at first and then empower themselves; faculty sometimes find their assumptions about teaching and learners challenged; and both students and teachers develop new insights, capacities, and commitments. The overarching theme of these essays is the potential for transformation, and the essays detail what forms such transformation can take.

The first two essays offer case studies that span course design and assessment. They provide concrete examples of changes made to courses in response to student suggestions, and they enumerate the benefits to student learning of such changes and the process of making them:

In “Improving Engagement and Learning through Sharing Course Design with Students: A Multi-level Case,” Sarah Bunnell, Assistant Professor of Psychology at Ohio Wesleyan University, and Dan Bernstein, Professor of Psychology at the University of Kansas, offer four brief narratives about the rich collaborations that followed from multi-level exchanges they had across courses. The stories focus respectively on enhancing student connections to course themes,

making the capstone assignment integrative, using out-of-class technologies, and mentoring graduate students in best practices in teaching. As Bunnell and Bernstein remind us in the conclusion of their essay: “While there is great disparity among faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates in their knowledge of their fields, skills in intellectual interactions, and understanding of instructional design, there is wisdom in the experiences that each of those groups have with college level courses and learning environments, and having all those perspectives in a single conversation gives a fuller picture of how learning is or is not taking place.”

In “Learning Through Partnership in Assessment,” Susan J. Deeley, Senior University Teacher and Convenor of Undergraduate Studies, School of Social and Political Sciences, and Ruth A. Brown, M.A. (Hons) Social Sciences (Psychology and Public Policy) Class of 2014, both of University of Glasgow, Scotland, offer two case examples of learning through student-teacher partnership in assessment. Alternating voices, they share both their philosophical perspectives and their experiences, highlighting in particular the ways in which some of their assumptions about what would engage students were challenged. Providing two examples of collaboration within a realm typically considered exclusively the faculty member’s purview, Deeley and Brown illustrate how even assessment can be co-constructed in partnership between teachers and learners, to the benefit of all involved.

The next two essays each focus on a single course and how a faculty member worked closely with an undergraduate student to revise that course. Delving deeply into an analysis of “the pinnacles and pitfalls that await adventurous instructors like us who are willing to ‘let go of the reins’ a bit during the process of course design,” as Hudd and Wile put it, both essays reveal the degree to which participants in such partnerships must be willing to rethink their assumptions and take seriously perspectives that might contradict or at least complicate their own:

In “Constructing Community in the Freshman Seminar: Fostering Autonomy in an Era of Accountability,” Suzanne Hudd, Professor of Sociology, and Alex Wile, Class of 2016, Resident Assistant and Former Peer Catalyst, both of Quinnipiac University, offer their respective perspectives on the syllabus construction exercise they developed in the context of one of Hudd’s courses. Hudd and Wile share both the process of syllabus construction and the concrete results as embodied in the syllabus. Their work highlights the importance of congruence between course content and invitations to participate in course design, and they do not shy away from naming what they call the “unforeseen complexities” of this effort.

In “Students as Teachers: Transforming a History Course,” Alejandro Quintana, Assistant Professor, History Department, and Morgan Zajkowski, student, both at St. John’s University, New York, describe how their collaboration not only resulted in productive revisions to Quintana’s course but also catalyzed revisions of both their perspectives on their roles in supporting student engagement. Quintana and Zajkowski describe their initial hesitation regarding and their subsequent embracing of the more active forms of learning they developed together.

The next two essays take two very different approaches to telling the ‘back story’ of their partnerships. A very personal account of the experience of partnership and a research-based analysis of a particular ‘community of practice’ both offer stories of transformation:

In “Who Are the Teachers and Who Are the Students? Feminism and Freire in Scotland,” Julie Young, a postgraduate research student in sociology, and Eurig Scandrett, a Lecturer in Sociology, both at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, share the story of Young’s experience of working in partnership with Scandrett and others to develop *Gender Justice, Masculinities and Violence*, a module that “seeks to challenge traditional university assumptions about the production and consumption of knowledge, and to contribute in its small way to political change through resourcing counter hegemonic voices in Scottish society (and beyond).” Young’s story of her entry into and navigation of this partnership is a powerful illustration of both the demanding nature and the liberatory potential of such work.

In “Faculty-Student Partnership in Advanced Undergraduate Mathematics Course Design,” Francis Duah, Academic Support Office, The University of York, and Tony Croft, Professor of Mathematics Education, Loughborough University, both in England, use the conceptual framework of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to analyze a partnership with students through which they redesigned two undergraduate mathematics courses. They include quotations from both students and faculty involved in this course-redesign process, and here too the voices of participants clearly articulate the transformation they experienced.

The final two essays look at two institutional efforts to support student-faculty partnership. A program at Carlton College in the United States and a program at the University of Exeter in England take two very different approaches, but they have in common their success in institutionalizing the work of positioning students as partners and change agents:

In “The Student Observer Program at Carleton College: Three Perspectives on Supporting Good Teaching,” Fred Hagstrom, Director of the Perlman Learning and Teaching Center, Humphrey Doermann Professor of Liberal Learning, and Rae Schupack Nathan Professor of Art, Jon Olson, Visiting Lecturer, Political Science Department, and Charlie Cross, Student Observer, all of Carleton College, write from their respective positions on participating in Carleton’s Student Observer program and how, through this program, faculty and students can work together “to make the classroom a place where deep learning happens.”

In “The Story of Students as Change Agents at the University of Exeter: From Slow Beginnings to Institutional Initiative,” Liz Dunne, Head of Student Engagement and Skills, University of Exeter, Derfel Owen, Director of Academic Services, University College London, Hannah Barr, final year student in Theology, University of Exeter, Will Page, Student Engagement Officer, University of Exeter, James Smith, Academic Representation Coordinator, Students’ Guild, University of Exeter, and Sabina Szydlo, Giving Assistant, Alumni Relations, University of Exeter, tell the ‘back story’ of the development and growth of Students as Change Agents program at the University of Exeter.

The weaving in these essays of personal experiences, methodological approaches, steps in building partnership, and outcomes of these collaborations highlights the ways in which this

work is about relationships as much as it is about professional practice. Within that frame, it is about learning to build on points of connection and finding ways of turning differences into resources. The passion, humility, excitement, and findings that are captured in these essays are relevant to all our work in higher education. They reveal some of the amazing work that has already been done and also the work we have yet to do.

References

Cook-Sather, A., Bovill, C., & Felten, P. (2014). *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning & Teaching: A Guide for Faculty*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.